

# HOW-TO-BRIEF

The “How to” series of briefs is for the use of Pillar 1 project managers (and future managers of R&I projects), to guide them with tips on possible ways forward for upgrading their five core capacities to manage for impacts.

## WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE? (C1. CAPACITY FOR REAL-TIME MEL)

### About this brief

A theory of change (ToC) is a visual and narrative depiction of how a project team expects change to happen in a real-world situation. Its advantage over other tools is the emphasis on assumptions on the causal relations between changes and the conditions under which change happens. Assumptions acknowledge the many factors and circumstances needed for each change along a trajectory to be confirmed. ToCs exist in multiple visual formats and are often a complement to logical frameworks or logframe. A ToC is also a good reference document for the design of a monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plan.

Carol Weiss (1995), one of the earliest proponents, described a Theory of Change as “a theory of how and why an initiative works.” A major contribution of ToC is visualization: “Diagrams are capable of succinctly summarily representing multiple parallel and intersecting causal pathways in ways that a textual narrative cannot.” (Davies, 2018: 2)

We don’t all see the world through the same lens: farmers and government officials may use the same language but with different mindsets. When one is working among different stakeholders, the expression of assumptions can reveal unexpected differences in interpretation that may otherwise not be revealed.

**Keywords:** theory of change, evaluation, monitoring, learning, decision-making, collaborative evaluation



## TOC PURPOSES

ToCs can be developed for different purposes:

- **To improve the intervention strategy** by making the expected changes and interactions explicit so that implementers understand what they are working towards and how, and to identify knowledge gaps.
- **To communicate the story and the logic behind an intervention;** to encourage dialogue among stakeholders interested in the project.
- To help primary MEL users to formulate and update the **logic framework** (logframe) and define their **MEL** plan.

ToCs may have different times of use:

- A ToC can help to design a project during the formulation
- A ToC can help with adjusting the project strategy (adaptive management) during the implementation
- A ToC can help summarize the achievements and strategies of a completed project

There is consensus that the basic elements of a ToC include the following (Vogel, 2012):

- The context for the project or initiative: summary of social, political, and environmental conditions
- Long-term change: the ultimate goals that the initiative seeks to achieve
- Process/ sequence of change: the trajectory of activities, outputs, and outcomes
- Assumptions about how the changes will happen
- Illustration/diagram complemented by a narrative summary that shows the trajectory of change

## BASICS OF TOCS

*"To be applied well, theory of change demands an institutional willingness to be realistic and flexible in programming responses, both at the design stage and, more importantly, in implementation and performance management." (Vogel, 2012: 5)*

How is a ToC different from a logframe?

- A ToC is a visual representation of the logic behind a project, while the logframe is in a matrix format. A ToC can use a linear format similar to a logframe, or a more dynamic layout to illustrate interrelationships and feedback loops
- A ToC is often developed together with project partners; it is not only a representation (a product), but it is also a process of developing an underpinning logic of a project together with different people
- A ToC introduces assumptions between each link in a causal trajectory, while most logframes give less emphasis to assumptions, and oftentimes only focus on results
- A ToC can shed light on the complex processes and systemic changes that a logframe cannot capture
- A ToC can focus on a specific component of a project, on the interconnections among the components, and/or on the global project (a ToC can be 'nested' into a larger scale ToC)
- ToCs can support various learning uses relative to a logframe that tends to focus on monitoring and reporting on accountability

## IMPORTANCE OF ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions are expressions of how we expect change to unfold in reality. They are a form of acknowledgment about existing risks, and factors needed for change to happen, and how the project expects to unfold.

*“The central idea in theory of change thinking is making assumptions explicit. Assumptions act as ‘rules of thumb’ that influence our choices, as individuals and organisations. Assumptions reflect deeply held values, norms and ideological perspectives. These inform the design and implementation of programmes. Making assumptions explicit, especially seemingly obvious ones, allows them to be checked, debated and enriched to strengthen programmes.” (Vogel, 2012: 4)*

Expressing assumption is akin to policy insurance where one states the factors or conditions that need to be in place for the intended outcomes to become a reality.

## TYPES OF ASSUMPTIONS

There are several typologies of assumptions in the literature. The following is a summary of three main types:

- **Worldview assumptions** refer to deeply-held beliefs or paradigms; what we take for granted, and how we view the world (e.g. that stakeholders will behave in a lawful manner, that policy-making will be based on evidence)
- **Contextual assumptions** refer to environmental, economic, social, and political factors (e.g. that intense flooding will not happen, that there will be peace and quiet during elections)
- **Pathway assumptions** focus on implementation mechanisms (e.g., women participants will find childcare to attend a workshop; farmers will change practices based on on-farm demonstrations). In the example (Figure 2), John Mayne provides a breakdown of pathway assumptions including reach, capacity change, behaviour change, direct benefit, and wellbeing.

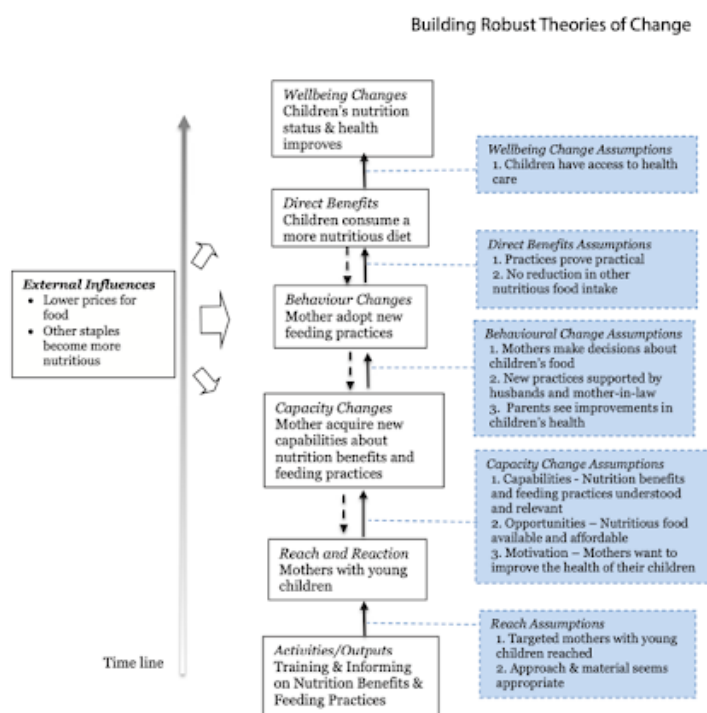


Figure 2. A Nutrition Intervention Theory of Change

## PRACTICAL TIPS IN TOC DESIGN

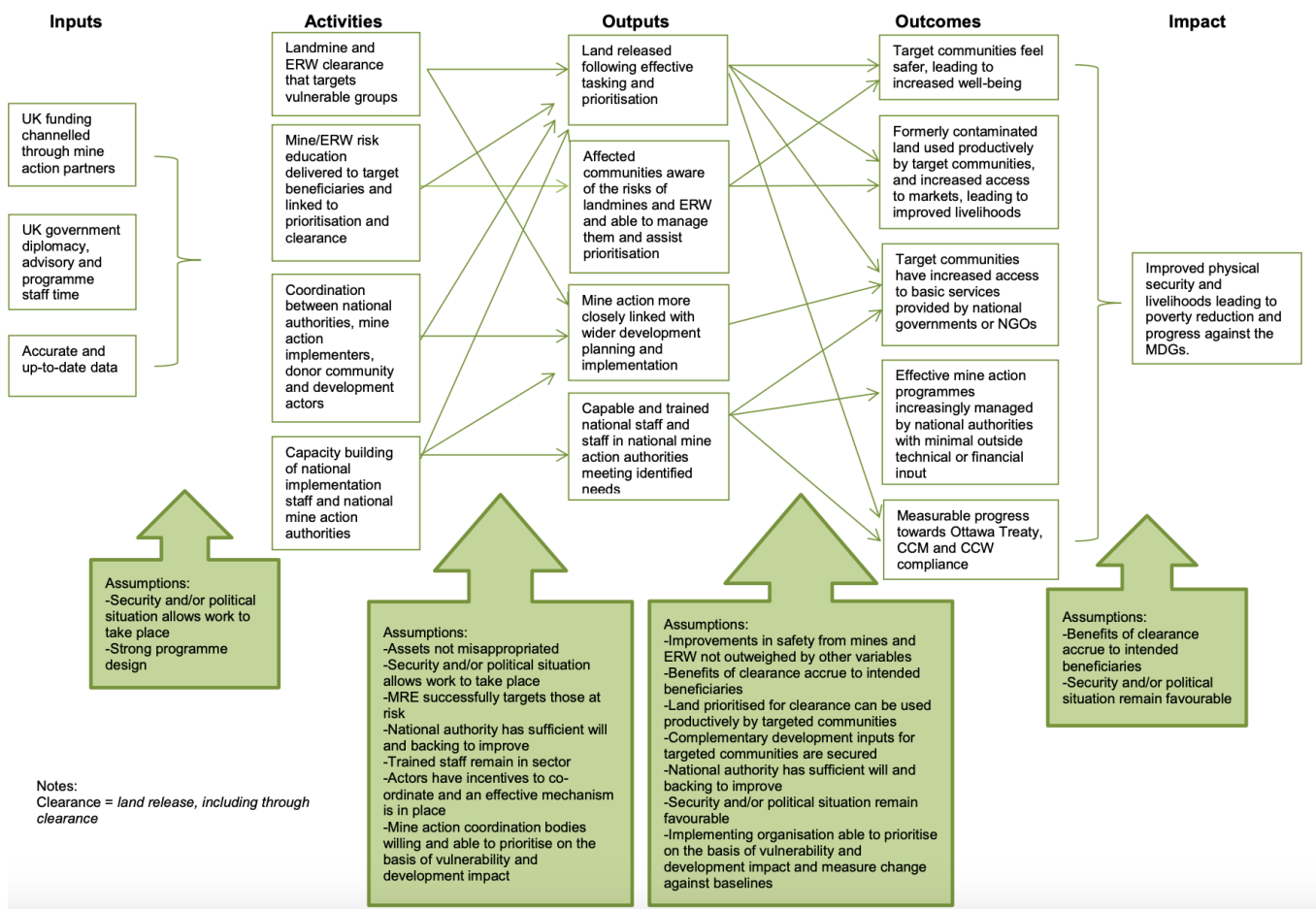
### ToC preparation

- It is desirable to develop ToCs in collaboration with various project stakeholders
- Post-it notes of different shapes, sizes and colours can be used for activities, short-term outputs, mid-term outputs, assumptions, and impacts or results
- The movable parts allow for a regular updating of the ToC as project conditions change
- It is possible to integrate concepts or theories about how change happens into a ToC (for example by illustrating different stages of policy change from the literature)

There are software packages available through [theoryofchange.org](http://theoryofchange.org) for online design.

The example below shows the basic components, with assumptions shown in green along each stage of the change trajectory (DFID, 2013).

### Annex 1: UK Theory of Change for Mine Action



## TOCS FOR COMPLEX CHANGE

Many projects are grappling with capturing the complexity of their work in logframes. Innovation and system change are hard to capture with logically linked measurable results. There is a growing recognition of the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of development work, involving complex political and social change in dynamic country contexts. "*Theory of change thinking is viewed as one approach to help people deal positively with the challenges of complexity*" (Vogel, 2012; p. 8).

Because of the complexity of developmental work, donors are starting to work with a more adaptive management approach. Adaptive management has gained a lot of attention over the past decade. It requires review and reflection of the project throughout implementation. The ToC and its assumptions are a useful tool in this review process.

## RESOURCES

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