A practical guide for Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

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**Theory of Change (ToC)** has become a common buzzword in climate adaptation circles in recent years. As a growing number of donors and financing entities require theories of change it can feel like yet another hoop to jump through, especially for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) where resources are limited and staff are often overstretched. So why should busy adaptation practitioners respond positively to ToC and why does it matter? And what does ToC mean anyway, and how do you start developing one?

In this Briefing Note we will highlight some of the most common features of ToC and examine how, if used appropriately, it can be a useful tool for SIDS in planning and evaluating climate change projects. In doing so, we hope to demystify ToC and the jargon which often surrounds it. In our conclusions, we reinforce some key messages for those developing ToC for climate adaptation projects. We have also included a useful Jargon Buster at the end of this Briefing Note to help you navigate through the various terminology.

# What is a Theory of Change?

One of the greatest challenges for practitioners is that there is no single definition for Theory of Change (ToC); it can mean different things to different people. Consequently, expectations about how it should be used also differ. So, let us start with where there is agreement. There is broad consensus in ToC literature that it is *a planning process which articulates how change can be achieved*. It begins by defining the long-term goal or vision statement ('the change we want to happen') and works backwards to systematically laying out each step along a 'causal pathway' – a series of steps which lead towards the long-term goal.

For many people, 'Theory of Change' is not a very helpful term; it sounds academic (theoretical) and vague. Because of this ToC is often rephrased. It is sometimes described as a roadmap as it helps in defining a 'destination', how you expect to get there, the challenges that may be faced and assumptions made about the nature of the journey. Critically, it also acknowledges that, like any journey, you may face unexpected challenges and need to reroute. This is consistent with adaptation planning which is often described as an iterative process where continual adjustment is required.











People talk about ToC in different ways, which often leads to confusion. van Es et al. (2015) identify three different ways of viewing ToC: 1) as a way of thinking or an overall approach 2) a process (or enquiry) and 3) a product (usually a diagram). Often donors and practitioners focus solely on the need for a diagram, however the end-product will only be useful if you have an effective process in place. Further problems arise when ToC diagrams are developed for a proposal then abandoned; ToC only becomes useful if it is revisited and used to consider and evaluate progress. Think of it this way, would you plan your route up a mountain and then leave your map at home?!

#### Box 1: Useful Definitions of Theory of Change

"Essentially an explanation of how a group of stakeholders expects to reach a commonly understood long-term goal" (Anderson, 2005)

"The theory of change approach is a process of project planning and evaluation which maps the relationship between a long-term goal of a project and the intermediate and early changes that are required to bring it about. It encourages a project team or group of stakeholders to explain how the project is understood to reach its goals, and the process through which changes will occur. The approach emphasizes the theory and assumptions underlying the pathway of change from the implementation of selected interventions and activities to intended outcomes." (Conservation International, 2013)

## Why is ToC useful for climate change adaptation projects?

ToC is well suited to complex, multifaceted and long-term issues as it helps the user to focus on the question "how do I make change happen?" rather than "what should my project do?" It can help us avoid falling into the trap of designing activities we are familiar with rather than those most relevant to the change we want to achieve. For example, we often consider workshops as a means of stakeholder engagement. Yet if a desired outcome is to "sustain ongoing awareness of climate related disaster risks in coastal communities" then a range of alternative activities might be considered such as training local wardens, teachers or members of the local church. Bours et al (2014) highlight a number of other reasons that ToC is a useful tool for climate adaptation planning:

- ToC encourages contextual analysis how can change happen in a given location, sector or social group, what are the barriers and assumptions in this context which is consistent with adaptation planning. Climate change is a global issue but adaptation is context specific.
- ToC can connect diverse projects and programmes and enhance linkages across Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) sectors and scales. This is valuable given the multisector nature of adaptation and the growing array of adaptation investments being made in SIDs.
- ToC is designed to be iterative and flexible and allows projects to respond to changes in the social, political, or natural environment. This is vital for adaptation programmes, which need to accommodate dynamic and emerging conditions. This makes ToC a valuable tool for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as well as adaptation planning.
- There is a strong focus on the assumptions that underlie a programme and thresholds that identify what is needed to advance towards the desired change. This provides valuable markers against which the process can be assessed (and where necessary, adjustments to strategic direction made)













- If used as part of project or programme planning with stakeholders it can encourage • a more open dialogue regarding perspectives and values, leading to a shared vision and stronger relationships with partners and stakeholders.
- By discussing the underlying logic and the change stakeholders wish to see, different • views and perspectives are revealed at an early stage. This helps to establish shared expectations which can avoid misunderstandings.
- ToC can be a valuable M&E tool. Due to the long-term nature of climate change, it can • be difficult to determine whether outcomes are achieved. ToC provides a means of identifying 'lessons learned', which is a crucial way to build the evidence base on climate change adaptation.
- The flexible nature of ToC can better account for uncertainties that are inherent in • adaptation processes. By monitoring assumptions ToC is agile and provides evidence of where changes may be needed at key points in the project process.

On this basis, ToC would appear to be a valuable approach for those working on climate adaptation issues, yet it is often greeted by confusion and frustration. In our experience, there are two reasons for this 1) the jargon and quasi-academic terminology applied to ToC (including the term itself) and 2) people not knowing where to start. We will try to address these issues in the remainder of this Briefing Note.

# How do you start developing a ToC?

The key to developing a good ToC is to start simple and from the over-arching vision statement or change that you wish to see. Knowing who to involve and when is also essential. Try to avoid becoming too worried about developing the diagram, this will be a much easier task if you have prepared well and invested time in the process. If possible, use a facilitator with experience of ToC when discussing it in a group context; they will be able to guide you through the steps and provide a critical eye without getting lost in the content. The key is to 'start simple'.







**IMPACT** SCIENCE BASED IMPLEMENTATION OF 1.5°C COMPATIBLE CLIMATE ACTION FOR LDC AND SIDS

The steps in figure 1 are explained in greater detail below, along with an example to illustrate the steps in practical terms. Our example is a hypothetical community-level coastal resilience project in a small island nation comprising a mix of atolls and low-lying islands. This project is looking to increase resilience in 20 communities which are highly exposed to direct and indirect impacts of climate change, including coastal inundation and flooding, coastal erosion and saline intrusion, biodiversity loss, loss of livelihoods and climate-related disasters such as cyclones.

## 1) Leadership and participation

The best theories of change are developed in a group involving different stakeholders. This provides alternative perspectives on the problem, the possible responses, definitions of success and assumptions. By revealing differences in views, it can lead to a genuinely shared vision of where you want to go with your project and what is required to get there. However, it can be expensive and unwieldy to involve too many people at all stages, so compromises often need to be found. You will therefore need to think of who to involve and when. For

Box 2: Viewing the world differently...

By involving a variety of stakeholders, it will be possible to dig deeper into the questions of 'What change, for whom, why – and who says so?'

example, you may decide to have a core group to develop the ToC with broad representation, then involve a wider group to examine and test the draft ToC at a particular point. Leadership is also important – consider carefully who will lead and coordinate this process.

For our hypothetical coastal resilience project, we might consider which government ministries will take a leading role and how to involve communities from the design stage onwards. This should include identifying who can best represent different community groups (with full consideration gender issues) and when, and how, to involve them. We should also consider consultation fatigue; a balance needs to be struck between positive engagement and over-consultation. This includes being sensitive to the many commitments of stakeholders. As the ToC develops the strategy for engagement of stakeholders will need to be amended and updated.

### 2) Describe the problem (situation analysis)

Understanding the problem(s) is a critical part of developing a ToC. This stage provides the rationale for change; if everything was working perfectly and conditions were entirely stable there would be no need to do anything. If our proposed solutions don't address the root causes of the problems, our work will fail to affect the change we wish to see, so we really need to start with a sound understanding of the situation and the problem.

Studying the problem can involve reviewing previous policies, research, vulnerability assessments and other sources of information. You will rarely, if ever, be starting this process from scratch, but it will require some synthesis of information and, in some cases, updating. For example, you may have a document that summarises the main climate change impacts for your island, but this work does not reflect the latest science. It is unlikely that the existing









work is wrong, but may require more recent information on coral bleaching or sea level rise projections to be incorporated. Once you have studied the problem, you need to describe it, ideally in a succinct form, backed up with evidence. This should be easy to understand and can be used when engaging stakeholders. It will form an important part of the rationale for any project proposal.

It is worth remembering a 'problem' does not have to be a *negative*, for example, the 'problem' may be that an intervention is working well but there is a lack of capacity to scale it up so that more people can benefit.

In our example, we need to understand the problems which coastal communities currently face and the challenges which climate change will generate in the future. The situation analysis should draw upon existing evidence including climate science, risk and vulnerability assessments (who is most vulnerable to what and how) and related to this, the socio-economic situation at national and community level (for example the breadth of the economic base, employment and income data). The climate rationale (how the project relates and responds to climate change challenges) needs to be clearly articulated and linkages to non-climate drivers identified. In this case, sea level rise, storm surge, rainfall intensity and sea surface temperatures might all be considerations. Other environmental stressors should also be considered (agricultural run-off, deforestation, over-fishing) and the socio-economic drivers of these stressors are also important to record. Gender and cultural factors need to be considered, especially in terms of roles, responsibilities and access to opportunities at household level.

### 3) Map a pathway of change

A **pathway of change** (sometimes called an 'outcomes pathway', 'impact pathway', 'outcomes chain' or 'casual pathway') illustrates the assumed cause-and-effect relationships between the long-term goal, penultimate, intermediate and early outcomes. This pathway is central to the rationale for the choice of activities, the justification of resources and the development of indicators. There are a number of ways to develop a pathway of change, but ToC usually involves backwards mapping, i.e. working backwards from a 'big picture or ultimate outcome' then identifying the objectives that will get you there. These outcomes can also be considered 'preconditions' (things that need be in place to make the next outcome possible or more likely).

#### **Box 3: Assumptions**

<u>Activities:</u> Actions undertaken which help achieve outputs and outcomes (e.g. community stakeholder workshop held)

**<u>Outputs:</u>** Results, products, goods or services which result from an intervention. (e.g. community map and report outlining stakeholder priorities produced)

**<u>Outcome</u>**: The likely or achieved effects (results) of an intervention's outputs. (e.g. adaptation actions implemented reflect stakeholder













An easy way to map backwards is to start with the ultimate outcome or change you wish to see. Ask yourself (or your group) "in order for this to happen what needs to be in place?". These will form your next level of outcomes. For these outcomes ask again: "in order for this to happen what needs to be in place?" and so on. A good way to test your pathway of change is to read it ' forwards' i.e. from early outcomes to ultimate outcome, inserting the phrase "if then" between outcome levels. This should flow logically, showing that if one outcome is achieved it is reasonably logical that the next is attainable.

Once you have mapped out your outcomes and preconditions you may wish to group them under particular themes. This should not disrupt the flow between outcomes but may provide greater clarity when communicating the outcomes of the project to different groups.

#### Box 4: Developing pathways in groups

Setting out your pathway of change on pieces of card can be a great group exercise as in enables you to re-order and adjust your ideas. Use cards with *"in order for this to happen..."* written on them and place them in between your outcomes/preconditions to test the flow of your ideas. You can also add in some interventions, assumptions and indicators (steps 4, 5 and 6) on cards to build up a more complete ToC. This can also be a fun exercise



which increases understanding on the process of developing a ToC. You may wish to start with a warm up exercise by developing a simple *pathway of change* for a daily activity such as 'getting to work on time'. This get help people to understand the logic of the approach before dealing with more complex climate change-related tasks.

Climate Analytics and SPREP recently used this approach with in the Pacific to help countries to develop GCF Readiness proposals.

For our coastal resilience project, we know we want to focus on change at household and community level therefore at the broadest level an overarching outcome could be that "coastal communities on the six most populated islands are more resilient to climate change". However, this is a very general statement; we need to break this down into more specific outcomes. To do this we need to understand what resilience means to local communities, which vulnerabilities we are seeking to address and which people are we aiming to support and involve? ToC can help us to answer such questions. In mapping out the project using our ToC we should aim to address the underlying factors which lead to vulnerability to climate change – i.e. tackling the problems not just the symptoms. In this example, the pathway of change might consider physical resilience to climate-related disasters but also socio-economic resilience, for example in response to reduced income from inshore fisheries due to reef degradation.









## 4) Define interventions

Once you understand how your intermediate outcomes contribute to your ultimate outcome and vision you can begin to consider the activities or interventions that can help to achieve each outcome. Having already developed a pathway of change it is easier to ensure that your interventions are targeted towards the change you wish to see.

Perhaps because we have a natural tendency towards "getting on with things" there is a tendency amongst some project planners to start with interventions rather than outcomes. This can mean that we do not think clearly how the intervention will help us meet our short, medium and long-term objectives. This can mean than interventions lack focus or are not placed in the correct sequence. This is particularly important when engaging stakeholders and communities. For example, there is little point in investing in a detailed appraisal of an adaptation option which is not acceptable to stakeholders. Equally, communities may be best placed to provide feedback on an option once the concept has been sufficiently developed and some aspects of feasibility can be reported back.

The interventions in our example project will depend on the situation analysis, how resilience is defined and the outcomes we wish the project to achieve. We should consider where and what type of change is required to achieve our desired outcomes. This could range from strengthening national policies to behaviour changes at household level. Timescales should also be taken into account; it may be important for communities to see some short-term benefits as well as considering long term impacts and responses. In our example project, we may decide that mangrove restoration is a valuable intervention which can bring benefits in the short, medium and long term.

### 5) Identifying assumptions and barriers

The assumptions we make (about just about everything we do) are influenced by our personal values, professional experience, the evidence we are presented (Vogel 2012), our cultural background and many other factors. It may not be immediately evident, but the pathway of change, interventions and indicators that you will develop will be shaped by assumptions about how change happens, and what and who people in your group think are important in affecting change.

So, what has this got to do with designing a good project? If the assumptions we make about how outcomes will be achieved are wrong, then they

#### Box 5: Assumptions

"Every programme is packed with beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses about how change happens – about the way humans work, or organisations, or political systems, or ecosystems. Theory of change is about articulating these many underlying assumptions about how change will happen in a programme."

Rogers (2008)

become unstable steps on our pathway of change, just as if a road was blocked we might find it impossible to reach our destination. Assumptions are time sensitive; we can't know how circumstances may or may not change in the future so we have to make some realistic assumptions about what we think will happen, ideally backed up with evidence to justify them.













By clearly identifying your assumptions it is possible to test and monitor them. We might assume an intervention which worked on one island will work in another, but by testing this assumption with community leaders in the design phase project we may find that the activity is culturally appropriate in one place but not in another. As well as assumptions, it is also useful to list the **barriers** that you feel you will face in achieving each objective. This may lead to you revisiting and adjusting the proposed interventions.

In our hypothetical example, we may <u>assume</u> that local communities recognise the importance of mangroves as a form of ecosystem-based adaptation because they have valued a previous mangrove restoration project nearby. However, if there is an unexpected economic shock, the same community may begin to destroy the mangrove for firewood. If we are monitoring the assumptions we have made during the course of the project, we can spot where and when the assumptions are no longer valid. With this monitoring information, it may be possible to introduce activities to remediate problems within or outside of the project scope. For example, we could increase economic diversification activities within the existing project or work with another project to improve the short-term economic situation for local people. In turn, the evaluation of the project should highlight that, in this case, it cannot be assumed that communities will continue to value the longer-term ecosystems services created by mangrove restoration if they face greater short-term economic hardship.

## 6) Identify indicators and thresholds

ToC is a valuable tool for M&E climate change adaptation as its inherent flexibility is well suited to long-term issues where uncertainties need to be acknowledged. The overt recognition of underlying assumptions enables learning to be prioritised; it can help us to ask "what works, in which contexts and why?" This is especially important for climate change, where we are still learning what effective adaptation looks like. Too often, conventional project M&E leads us towards questions such as "have we done what we said we would do?" which focusses strongly on accountability and can limit learning that might benefit future adaptation efforts.

When considering M&E, it is important to remember that factors outside of a given project can contribute to the success (or not) of a project or programme. These should be considered when examining barriers and assumptions.

Working in groups, it should be possible to identify **indicators** that demonstrate progress towards a specific a precondition/outcome or progress along a pathway of change. It should also be possible to identify thresholds. **Thresholds** are subtly different from indicators in that they identify the point at which an outcome is met. It is important to remember that ToC thresholds may be beyond the scope of what a single programme can achieve, whereas log frame result targets should be realistically within the reach of a project. Both indicators and thresholds will need to be discussed within your group as they are subjective.

In our example project, if one of our objectives is to "reduce losses from flooding and coastal inundation" should we define success as a) no losses at all (is this realistic?) b) a percentage











reduction in losses, if so, by how much and for which farmers? Should we include noneconomic losses such as loss of knowledge or cultural value of land? Such discussions are closely linked to assumptions that underpin climate adaptation work – we all have different expectations of how change may happen and what success looks like. ToC can help expose and resolve these differences before and during implementation.

## 7) The diagram

ToC is often discussed purely in terms of the end product – usually a diagram which illustrates the connections between interventions and outcomes, as well as the barriers and assumptions. If viewed purely as a diagram, the ToC is little more than a summary of interventions and outcomes. If it has been developed quickly, with limited engagement and at the end of the project or proposal development process, the benefits of ToC will not be realised. Ideally, a ToC diagram should be a summary of a detailed ToC process.

There is no single way to construct a ToC diagram but at a minimum it should clearly illustrate the ultimate outcome (the change we want to happen), the flow between outcomes/preconditions, how specific interventions support these outcomes, the key assumptions and the barriers that have been considered. Like all good diagrams, it should be clear, as simple as possible with a clear logic (remember, you can test the logical flow by placing the phrase "in order for this to happen" between your outcomes).

If more detail is required, include a narrative explanation of the diagram, including who was involved in developing it. This can help avoid an over-crowded or confusing diagram.

## Conclusions

ToC can be a valuable project and programme design tool that also supports effective M&E. In order for its potential to be fulfilled, it needs to be considered as a process (or even a way of thinking) rather than just as a product or diagram. It requires commitment and careful planning and should involve key stakeholders.

The greatest strength of ToC is that it enables reflection and adjustment during the course of a project; effective ToC involves a tacit acknowledgement that the process of change rarely happens exactly as we plan it. Too often ToC is thrust upon ill-prepared, over-stretched project staff as a 'donor requirement' and therefore it becomes viewed as 'management jargon' or a hoop to jump through. Donors who promote the use of ToC as a flexible approach must reciprocate by showing flexibility in their approach to project M&E; if ToC reveals a change of direction or approach is needed, then such changes must be supported (and not blocked by bureaucracy). In short, for ToC to be truly useful, it requires an environment which values learning, appreciates complexity and supports adaptive management approaches. This responsibility falls upon those financing climate adaptation as well as those designing and implementing climate adaptation projects.

For those in the process of developing theories of change, remember:











- Keep it simple. Focus on getting the ultimate outcome right and work back from there using "in order for this to happen..." and "if then" logic
- Try not to get bogged down in the jargon. Use terminology such as 'roadmap', 'project map' or 'story' if people are confused by the terminology. Use the Jargon Buster if you are unsure.
- Involve stakeholders, but keep it manageable. Establish a group who have the time to think this through and then have a plan to engage more widely later on.
- Never present a ToC as a finished product. Conditions change, assumptions change, projects change...so your ToC should be a 'living' framework.
- ToC should connect short-term actions to a 'bigger picture' of change we wish to see (the ultimate outcome). That said, avoid bold but vague vision statements as it can be hard to connect these to practical actions.
- Focus on your assumptions. These are really important and help avoid individuals or groups becoming wedded to ideas or preconceptions.
- Don't dump your ToC once you get your funding. Remember, discarding your ToC is like forgetting your map on a long journey.













# **Theory of Change Jargon Buster**

**Assumptions:** What we assume about how change might happen (e.g. how the public will react to an idea, the affordability of an action etc). This can include assumptions about environmental and socio-economic conditions (rate of sea-level rise, economic stability etc). Understanding assumptions is key to a good ToC process.

**Backwards mapping:** Working backwards from a 'big picture or ultimate outcome' then identifying the objectives that will get you there in reverse chronological order. An easy way to map backwards is to start with the ultimate outcome or change you wish to see. Ask yourself (or your group) "in order for this to happen what needs to be in place?".

**Barriers:** Factors that may hinder the implementation of the project and which may disrupt the logic between outcomes, thus stalling or preventing change from happening. By recognising a barrier, either before or during a project, activities can be adjusted to mitigate this. An example of a barrier might be cultural resistance to change. When this barrier is identified more emphasis might be put on community sensitization and engagement or on engaging community leaders.

**Indicator:** Indicators that demonstrate progress towards a specific a precondition/outcome or progress along a pathway of change. For example, an indicator of improved management of climate-related risks in the private sector might be the "percentage of businesses that have joined a climate impacts insurance scheme".

Other useful definitions of indicators include:

- "An indicator provides evidence that a certain condition exists or certain results have or have not been achieved and can be either quantitative or qualitative." (Biesbroek and Swart 2014).
- Indicators provide "clues and direction on how change is occurring and if outcomes are being achieved" (Climate-Eval Community of Practice, 2015).

<u>"In order for this to happen..." and "if then" logic:</u> These are useful ways of testing your outcomes pathway. Working back from the ultimate outcome or change you wish to see, place the phrase "in order for this to happen..." between each precondition/outcome. You can also test your logic by reading 'forwards' i.e. from early outcomes to ultimate outcome, inserting the phrase "if then" between outcome levels. This should flow logically, showing that if one outcome is achieved it is reasonably logical that the next is attainable.

**Outputs:** Results, products, goods or services which result from an intervention. For example, an intervention might be to hold a public consultation. The output could be that 200 people participated and were consulted on climate change adaptation options. The outcome (see below) might be greater community commitment to the selected adaptation option.

**Outcome:** The likely or achieved effects (results) of an intervention's outputs. These results occur after shorter term outputs are achieved and sometimes long after project activities are completed. Outcomes might relate to improved knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, skills,











behaviours, access, policies and environmental conditions. In ToC, these outcomes can also be considered 'preconditions' (things that need be in place to make the next outcome possible or more likely).

<u>Ultimate outcome</u>: The high-level outcome you wish to achieve. This sits at the top of your ToC diagram (or just below the vision statement) and should articulate the main change(s) you wish to achieve.

**Intermediate outcome:** An outcome which contributes to the achievement of your ultimate outcome and, as such, is a precondition for the ultimate outcome.

Pathway of Change/Outcomes Pathway/Impact Pathway/Outcome Chain/Causal Pathway: These closely-related terms are often used interchangeably and refer to a way of showing each outcome in its logical relationship to all the others, as well as chronological flow. These approaches illustrate the (assumed) cause-and-effect relationships between the long-term goal and the penultimate, intermediate and early outcomes.

<u>**Preconditions**</u>: Conditions that need be in place to make the next outcome possible or more likely. A precondition is therefore an outcome for a nearer point in time.

**Theory of Change (ToC):** Variously defined but generally refers to a planning process which articulates how change can be achieved. Other definitions include "an explanation of how a group of stakeholders expects to reach a commonly understood long-term goal" (Anderson, 2005) and "a process of project planning and evaluation which maps the relationship between a long-term goal of a project and the intermediate and early changes that are required to bring it about" (Conservation International, 2013).

**Theories of Change:** Sometimes used in place of 'Theory of Change' (some people state that there is never a single theory about how change happens). In other cases (and in this Briefing Note) we simply use this term as the plural of 'Theory of Change'.

**Threshold:** A threshold is different from an indicator as it identifies the point at which an outcome is met. For example, an indicator of improved management of climate-related risks in the private sector might be the "percentage of businesses that have joined a climate impacts insurance scheme" but the threshold might be "75% of businesses have joined a climate impacts insurance scheme". As such, a threshold requires discussion and agreement on what constitutes success.

<u>Vision statement</u>: An idealistic description of the desired outcomes achieved after successful completion of a project or programme. It is a vivid description that is designed to inspire the project beneficiaries, funders and those implementing the project.













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### Other useful resources

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