
Summary sheet

THE THEORY OF CHANGE (ToC)

Abstract

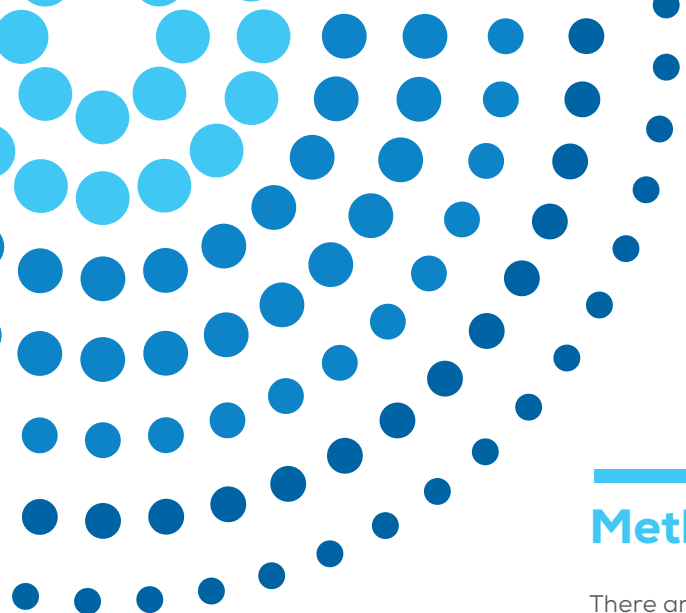
The theory of change¹ is “an explanation of how a group of stakeholders expects to reach a commonly understood long-term goal” (Anderson, 2005, p. 3). It is not a method designed specifically to measure impact, since it is primarily used as a tool to help develop solutions to complex social problems (Anderson, 2005, p. 1). That said, such an approach, used at the planning stage, generally facilitates evaluation (including impact evaluation) later on. It is from this perspective that this summary sheet presents the concept of the theory of change.

History

According to Vogel (2012, pp. 9–10), the notion of theory of change is derived from program theory in evaluation (of which the logical framework analysis is a part) with an added concern for participation and learning. It was formally proposed by Carol Weiss in 1995 (Weiss, 1995). The technique then became popular in the 2000s with the publication of guides and resources by, among others, the Kellogg Foundation (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004) and the Aspen Institute (Anderson, 2005).



¹ There are several synonyms or concepts similar to the theory of change such as change pathway, social transformation pathway or outcome pathway (de Reviers, 2012, p. 2).

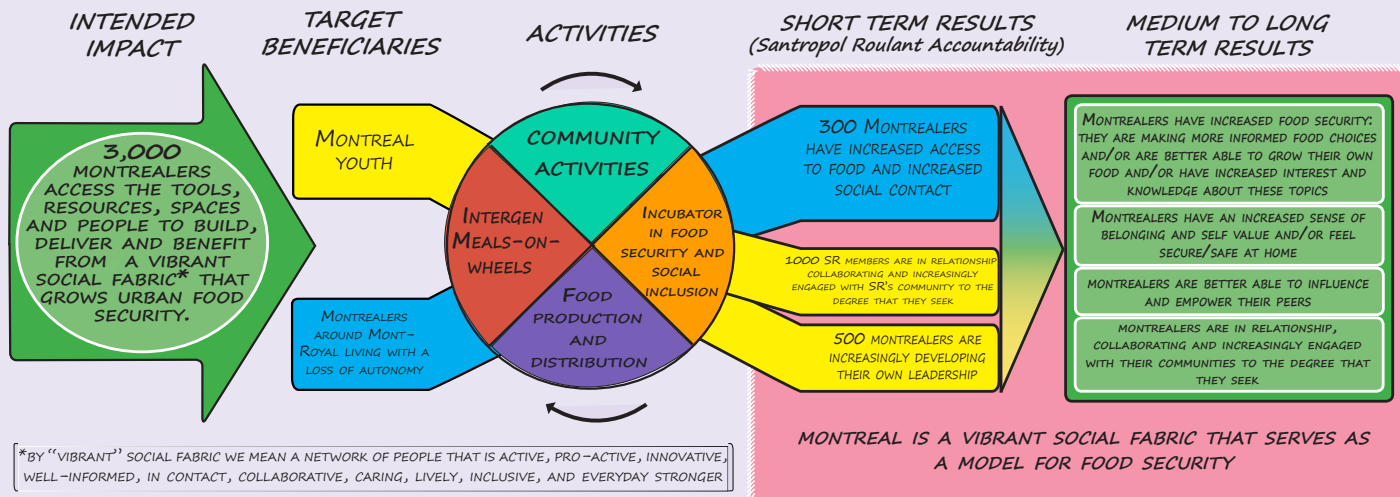


Method

There are a number of definitions and descriptions of the theory of change approach. At the heart of all of these definitions is the notion of linking inputs, activities and outcomes, and of explaining how and why these changes should be observed (Anderson, 2005, p. 3). The approach therefore goes beyond the logic model by requiring that each hypothesis and causal link be made explicit (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2012). This exercise facilitates the identification of appropriate indicators and prepares for subsequent evaluation. Furthermore, this approach goes beyond planning and evaluation in that it must involve stakeholders (Vogel, 2012, p. 3) and enable them, through an ongoing process of reflection, to understand how they can contribute to complex long-term changes (de Reviere, 2012, p. 2). This process results in a graphic representation of the activity, as illustrated in the following example:

SANTROPOL ROULANT 2013 'GOOD ENOUGH' THEORY OF CHANGE

[OUR APPROACH IS TO CREATE A CONTINUUM OF SERVICES THAT HELPS AND INSPIRES MONTREALERS.
WE NURTURE CREATIVITY, COLLABORATION AND CARING.]



THE THEORY OF CHANGE (ToC)

Source: Santropol Roulant



Thus, for the Treasury Board of Canada (2012), a theory of change has four essential elements:

- a logic model or results chain;
- assumptions, risk identification and sometimes mechanisms associated with each link in the logic model or results chain;
- a discussion of the external factors that may influence the projected results;
- empirical evidence to support assumptions and the identification of risks and external factors.

The training offered by Innoweave on the topic of impact and strategic clarity emphasizes defining an intended impact statement that mentions the desired changes (what?), the target audience (for whom?), the timeline (when?) and the strategies to be prioritized for achieving all of these components (how?) (Innoweave, 2016). This exercise is similar to defining a ToC.

De Reviere (2012, p. 3) identifies four steps in developing a theory of change, which he summarizes as follows:

1. Define the desired, long-term change;
2. Specify the various changes that must occur beforehand for the ultimate change to make it possible;
3. Explain the assumptions and values underlying the reasoning;
4. Clarify the relationship between this reasoning and the intervention.

In his review of the literature on the subject, de Reviere (2012) also proposes a more complete 8-step method as well as a synthesis of the steps suggested in most other guides.



Scope and limitations

Although it is not its primary focus, the theory of change facilitates the evaluation and measurement of social impact (Taplin, Clark, Collins, & Colby, 2013). It simplifies the selection of appropriate evaluation questions and indicators. It also distinguishes, by comparing desired results with results achieved, at least three reasons why a result was not achieved: 1) errors were made in implementation; 2) assumptions about the linkages between activities and the targeted changes were erroneous; 3) these assumptions were not sufficiently developed and tested (Taplin et al., 2013, pp. 17–18).

The approach also helps to clarify the organization's action, communicate it better and possibly mobilize partners around the project (Innoweave, 2016). Finally, we note its flexibility as well as its capacity to make more explicit not only the hypotheses but also the underlying values, norms and ideologies, thus facilitating debates and potential improvements (Vogel, 2012, p. 4).

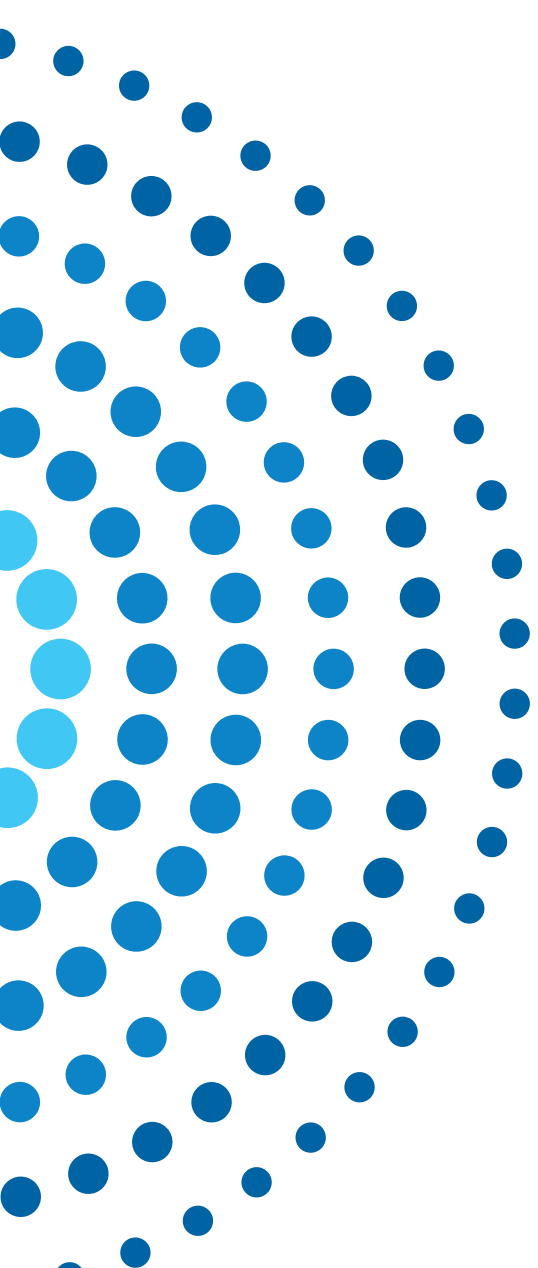
That said, that advantage can also be seen as a limitation, in that organizations using it must be open to taking a “reflective, critical, and honest approach to answering difficult questions about how their efforts will bring about change” (Vogel, 2012, p. 5).

De Reviere also points out that “ToC is not an absolute truth about how change must (or will) happen [...] nor is it a magic bullet that eliminates uncertainty about complex social processes” (2012, p. 3).

Finally, Innoweave cautions that it may take much longer than originally anticipated to do this exercise properly and recommends that care be taken to avoid the following pitfalls:

- confuse accountability with wishful thinking;
- create a mirror rather than a target;
- lack of accuracy, which prevents measurement;
- confuse evidence with plausibility;
- ignore the external context;
- not being true to his theory.

(Innoweave, 2016, p. 29)



Uses

The use of the theory of change appears to be widespread in the international development (Vogel, 2012, p. 3) and community action fields. Indeed, several foundations are promoting its use. Examples include the Kellogg Foundation in the United States (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004) and the McConnell Foundation in Canada, the latter through the Impact and Strategic Clarity module of its Innoweave program (Innoweave, 2016). In Quebec, the Centre de formation populaire, through the Évalpop initiative, encourages organizations to develop a theory of action and impact that considers the context and the links between each stage. This is also the case of Centraide and Dynamo in the context of the support to PIC-funded “tables de quartier.” Finally, the Esplanade, through its Impact 8 acceleration program (in collaboration with the MaRS Centre for Impact Investing), also covers, among other things, the notions of business model, logic model and theory of change.

References

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W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (2004). *Logic Model Development Guide*.

Websites and resources

The website www.theoryofchange.org offers basic information on the concept, many examples and a software to design your own theory of change (TOCO software).

For more information, the literature review *Repères sur les théories du changement* by Bruno de Reviere (F3E) (2012) is a very good starting point.

For an introductory video on the subject, see *Measuring Your Social Impact: Theory of Change by Social Investment Business* (2014) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpb4AGT684U>

This series of summary sheets is produced by Territoires innovants en économie sociale et solidaire (TIESS) as part of a project on evaluation and impact measurement for social economy organizations. Each summary sheet presents a brief description of a tool or method in circulation in the field of social impact measurement in Quebec and elsewhere in the world.

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Contributions

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