



Using a Theory of Change Approach, Incorporating Gender Sensitivity

What is a Theory of Change? How should it be used to develop a Pathway to Impact?

A Theory of Change (ToC) approach is now widely used in international development by bilateral donors, multilateral agencies and international non-governmental organisations. UKRI are also increasingly using this approach for grants funded as part of Official Development Assistance (ODA), such as the Global Challenges Research Fund, where applicants must set out their 'pathways to impact'.

This document builds on the University of Edinburgh's [theory of change guidance](#) and includes pointers on how you can consider the relevance of **gender** within it. UK government funded ODA research (in particular GCRF, Newton Fund¹ and NIHR ODA funds) legally requires attention to gender equalities and began in 2019 to include a compulsory gender equality statement in all applications. Other funders such as the EU Horizon Programmes and Marie Curie Actions or the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation also emphasise the relevance of gender in their funding programmes. GenderEd, the University of Edinburgh's hub for the study of gender and sexualities, has several resources on gender sensitive research which you may find helpful².

What is Theory of Change?

Part of the confusion surrounding Theory of Change comes from the fact that the term is used to describe both an actual product and an overall approach.

As a **product**, a ToC can be defined as a description of how and why a certain change is expected to happen in a particular context. It often takes the form of a visual illustration, accompanied by a narrative. In this form, 'Theory of Change' is at times used interchangeably with 'Pathway to Impact'.

As an **approach**, a ToC is a structured way of thinking that recognises and embraces the complex and non-linear pathways through which change happens.

¹ See <https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/gender-equality-and-international-development-research-and-innovation/>

² <https://www.gender.ed.ac.uk/gender-sensitive-research/>

What can Theory of Change do for us?

A ToC helps us to:

- shift our starting point from ‘what we can do’ (our activities) to ‘the change we are aiming to contribute to’.
- fill in what has been described as the ‘missing middle’ between activities (what a project actually does) and the achievement of the desired goals.
- unpack and critically examine assumptions about how change is expected to happen in a particular context at a particular time.
- broaden the picture to consider who are the other relevant change agents in a particular context, and how synergies can be strengthened;
- map project achievement against a pathway to impact.

DFID’s guidance on ToC states: ‘ToC is at its best when it works as a method to map out the logical sequence of an initiative from inputs to outcomes. [And] when it [combines this with] ... reflecting on the underlying assumptions of how and why change might happen’³. When things do not go according to plan, having a ToC helps to understand whether this is a ‘design failure’ (for example, our assumptions about how change happens do not hold true in this particular context), an ‘implementation failure’ (i.e. we may not have implemented all components of our ToC the way we intended), or due to changed circumstances that were not foreseen at the design stage.

How do we develop a Theory of Change?

There is not a single way to develop a ToC: both the process and the resulting product can look very different from one organisation to the next. In order for a ToC to be useful, it should not be seen simply as a box to tick on an application form, or something to just ‘get done’ to please the funders. The process of developing a ToC is as valuable as the actual product.

Own your Theory of Change. As a research team, the ToC represents your combined understanding of how change will happen, and how you will contribute to it. It is therefore important that the ToC is not just developed at somebody’s desk, but truly springs from team discussion. While in some cases it may be a good idea to bring in an external facilitator to support this process, outsourcing your overall ToC development to external experts will, almost inevitably, affect the team’s ownership of the final product, and thus its usefulness to guide your research and impact journey.

Be participatory and inclusive. Your final product will be stronger if the process has reached out beyond the project team to include consultation with relevant stakeholders in LMIC countries. This will help to broaden your perspective, and sense-check your assumptions about how change happens in a particular context.

³ See (2012) *DFID review of the use of ‘Theory of Change’ in international development*. http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/pdf/outputs/mis_spc/DFID_ToC_Review_VogelV7.pdf

Make sure that your ToC guides project management, not just at the design phase. Your ToC will not be useful if forgotten in a folder somewhere! Make time to discuss progress against your ToC regularly when your team comes together.

Use the ToC to design your Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning framework. This will ensure the data you are collecting to assess progress against your indicators will actually tell you how you are progressing against your ToC.

See your ToC as a compass, not an instruction manual. By ‘using’ your ToC regularly, you’ll be able to assess on whether the pathway you had envisioned is actually coming true – and, if needed, you’ll be able to re-calibrate your intervention. A ToC should enable flexibility and adaptive management, rather than prevent it.

Developing your pathway to impact

The process of developing your Theory of Change will allow you to simultaneously identify what is often referred to as an intervention’s **pathway to impact**, connecting your activities with your impact through various levels of results.

Guidance on terminology

Researchers applying to ODA funding are generally asked to indicate the ‘impact’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘outputs’ of their intended ‘activities’. This terminology can be confusing, especially as these terms are often used in different ways by various organisations and funders.

Results	a generic term to indicate the outputs, outcomes or impact of your intervention.
Impact	the ultimate development change that your intervention will contribute to.
Outcomes	all the intermediate development changes that your intervention will contribute to, and that, combined, will enable impact to emerge.
Outputs	the immediate results of your activities – these can be products, services, or short-term changes that will contribute to bring about outcomes.
Activities	the things you will actually do in your interventions.

Ultimately what matters is that your application shows a clear pathway to impact, with a coherent narrative that connects your activities to the desired development change through a logical sequence of intermediate results. Whether these are called ‘outputs’ or ‘outcomes’ will often depend on the specifics of your project.

A pathway to impact is visualised in the figure below. It is recommended that you write your pathway to impact from right to left: starting from your problem statement, then defining your impact, then working backward to define your outcomes, outputs, and finally activities.

At every stage, you'll ask the question **'how?'**, or 'what should happen for this result to emerge?'. You can then test your pathway to impact from left to right, asking at every step: **"so what?"** or "what is the purpose of this activity or intermediate result?"

Pathway to Impact



How to write your pathway to impact

1) Start by stating the problem

The best way to start writing your project's pathway to impact is defining the problem that your intervention is trying to address. While this probably appears obvious to you, and may feel like an unnecessary extra step, you will find that having a clearly defined problem statement makes the rest of the process much easier. It also ensures that the whole team is 'on the same page'.

For ODA funded research, it is important that this is a development problem, rather than an academic question. A good problem statement for an ODA research is corroborated by evidence and will take account of relevant social or cultural conditions that may mediate the distribution of benefits and losses resulting from a project (such as poor governance or gender inequalities). This helps your project to conform SDG aspirations to '**leave no one behind**'⁴.

In relation to aspirations to 'leave no one behind', many ODA funders such as the Newton Fund and the GCRF, ask applicants to include a Gender Equality Statement in their application, to ensure that benefits and losses resulting from a project are equally shared among people of all genders.⁵ For tips on gender sensitive research and a full explanation of how to respond to these requirements in GCRF and Newton Fund see the University of Edinburgh's Toolkit and Guidance which helps PIs to complete this requirement sufficiently and quickly.⁶

Example of problem statement

The Covid-19 pandemic has put a significant strain on health care systems. As medical procedures generating aerosol have become higher risk, many routine or minor surgical treatments have become subject to more stringent infection control measures. In addition to personal protective equipment (PPE), high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters may have a role to play in reducing air borne virus transmission.

However, upgrading HEPA units in LMIC countries to the higher standards required to eliminate Corona virus can require expensive imported parts, draining local health care budgets. Cleaning, maintaining and repairing upgraded HEPA units can also be difficult and can require skills-upgrades for maintenance technicians.

⁴ As the United Nations Committee for Development Policy noted in its 2018 publication 'Leaving no one behind' it is important to take into account, in the implementation of technological innovation policies, that while technology has great potential to advance inclusive development it can also be at the root of national and international exclusion and inequality' (United Nations Committee for Development Policy, 2018)

⁵ See <https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/gender-equality-and-international-development-research-and-innovation/>

⁶ <https://www.gender.ed.ac.uk/gender-sensitive-research/>

2) Write a realistic impact statement

Your impact statement will be the direct response to your problem statement.

While 'impact' is beyond the direct control of your project, a good impact statement is more specific and realistic than simply a 'vision'. You have to show that your project (if successful) can contribute to this development change. While impact may only be visible after the end of your programme, you should avoid statements that are timed so far in the future that nobody can know whether your project made any difference at all.

An important aspect of impact for many GCRF projects is the contribution of fair and equitable partnership to the development of local research institutes and Higher Education institutions. To ensure that no one is left behind, it is also important to consider what factors might affect how benefits and losses resulting from an ODA project are distributed.

Example of impact statement

More routine and minor surgical treatments can be performed, despite new risks from COVID, because locally manufactured and well-maintained HEPA units are used to maintain stringent infection control standards. Local manufacture and maintenance of HEPA units will benefit the local economy and local people will gain new HEPA maintenance, manufacture and design skills. The country's technological dependence on the Global North for HEPA units will be reduced. These benefits will be distributed as equally as possible amongst the population in line with SDG commitments to leave no one behind.

Note: Resist the temptation to over-promise: your impact statement should be commensurate to the scale, resources, and timeframe of your intervention. For example, for a small educational project, the ultimate impact may be "Girls in the rural district of Afambo district in Ethiopia benefit from quality education". However, a larger, longer-term project or programme may have a higher level impact statement (such as "Children in rural areas of Ethiopia have improved quality of life and opportunities") and the statement about girls in Afambo may be one of the outcomes.

3) Identify outcomes

Once you have your impact statement, your next question will be: “what needs to happen for this impact to emerge?” The answer to this question will give you outcomes. Typically, you will have a number of outcomes converging towards your ultimate impact: however, there is no rule about this, and the ‘right number’ is what is right for your project. Good outcome statements are specific, measurable, and realistic, rather than merely aspirational.

Examples of outcomes

- A local network of manufacturers and technicians is established that can build, and maintain, a sustainable number of effective and locally manufactured HEPA units;
- A manufacturing protocol is created for an effective HEPA unit, that can be locally manufactured and maintained;
- Benefits of all outcomes are distributed as equally as possible amongst the relevant population in the LMIC country in line with SDG commitments to leave no one behind.

4) Identify outputs

Outputs refer to short-term results. It is common to express outputs in terms of physical products, e.g. peer reviewed articles or policy briefs. While this is not wrong per se, it is more useful to express the short-term change that is associated with that particular product. For example, instead of just saying ‘policy brief’, you could say ‘key policy priorities identified through an iterative process with policy-makers and summarised in a policy brief’.

Examples of outputs

- Local environmental conditions which affect the effectiveness and maintenance needs of HEPA units are identified;
- LMIC based manufacturing capacity (skills, technology and materials) are identified;
- A prototype, locally manufactured HEPA unit is designed and lab/user tested for effectiveness;
- Local people are trained in HEPA manufacturing skills. The benefits of this knowledge are distributed as equitably as possible;
- Local HEPA unit technicians are trained to maintain units, in local circumstances. Access to this training is distributed as equitably as possible

5) Gender sensitive situational analysis

A thorough ToC **takes existing local inequalities into account and includes actions and activities to ensure that they do not exacerbate or perpetuate local socio-economic hierarchies or inequalities**, so that no one is left behind and the benefits of the project are equitably distributed.

Identifying the relevance of gender inequalities is especially relevant before you plan your activities, (especially in GCRF and Newton Fund project's which now include a compulsory Gender Equality Statement). Development practitioners often consult with communities and use a 3-dimensional gender sensitive situational analysis to achieve this. This involves reflecting on the following:

- **Decision-making.** Are women and men, and where relevant trans and non-binary people, equally represented in *decision-making* related to your project's goals and themes in LMIC countries? (e.g., in urban planning decision making structures; local/national agriculture systems; health care planning; disaster relief, as appropriate. Do social attitudes, vulnerability to violence or discrimination limit access to these arenas?).
- **Access to resources.** Do women and men, and where relevant transgender and non-binary people have equal access to *resources* related to this theme? (e.g. If your work focuses on agriculture, energy or health - do women, men and where relevant trans and non-binary people have equal ownership of and access to livestock/land/equipment and training/energy /food/healthcare?).
- **Division of labour.** Do women and men, and where relevant transgender and non-binary people, perform the same *labour* in relation to the social/economic/political theme of your research? Are different social groups performing, or assumed to perform, distinctive tasks and responsibilities? Are they performed in different spheres or locations (domestic/private or public)?

Example responses

- **Decision making.** In our target country, the healthcare system is extremely male dominated. Men occupy powerful positions in the medical professions, dominating decision making procedures. Women work in supportive and auxiliary roles such as nursing, or cleaning and have little or no access to decision making. The technology and manufacturing sectors are marked by the same gendered distribution of power. Women are often subjected to gendered harassment when they attempt to participate in decision making processes
- **Access to resources.** In our target LMIC country, women have less access to and control over medical and manufacturing knowledge/skills and less access to healthcare;
- **Division of labour.** In our target LMIC country, the division of labour in relation to HEPA units is marked by a stark gender hierarchy. The existing medical practitioners who will rely on units for infection control during medical procedures are over-whelming men. The existing technicians who repair auxiliary medical devices are men. The existing staff who clean auxiliary medical devices such as HEPA units are women.

6) Define your activities

Activities refer to what your project team will actually do, and are (by and large) within your sphere of control. Your gender situational analysis will allow you to ensure the activities you propose take into account, and mitigate against, gender inequalities.

Examples of activities

- Identify all parties involved in the use, maintenance and repair of HEPA units in health care settings;
- Consult with local trade unions and women's groups to: ensure equal access to consultation procedures; and to identify cohorts for training in HEPA unit maintenance and manufacture;
- Consult all parties using, maintaining and repairing HEPA units in health care settings, including medics, existing technicians and cleaners to ascertain local environmental conditions affecting the effectiveness and maintenance requirements of HEPA units;
- Design and test both in lab, and with all users (medics, existing technicians and cleaners) a prototype effective and locally manufactured HEPA unit, ensuring that 1) the unit is effective 2) the new unit will not create unsustainable work burdens for maintenance or cleaning staff;
- Identify local manufacturing capacities in consultation with local partners;
- Design, test and refine a locally appropriate manufacturing protocol for a HEPA unit ensuring thorough consultation with local partners that the manufacturing process is profitable and sustainable;
- Provide unit manufacture training for local people. Collaborate with local trade unions and women's civil society/employment organisations to ensure both men and women can access training and benefit from new skills and employment benefits

Further Resources

- How is Gender Relevant to [Development](#)? GenderEd Briefing
- Feed the Future [Gender Integration Framework](#)
- [University of Edinburgh's Theory of Change](#) guidance developed by the Institute for Development Studies
- [Research to Action](#) have free webinars, podcasts and blogs on how to create a ToC
- Examples of ToCs are available from [DFID](#)
- [Nesta](#) have produced a ToC toolkit
- [The Centre for Theory of Change](#) also have some useful guidance
- THET (Partnerships for Global Health) also has a [project planning guide](#) which uses Theory of Change and provides examples.
- [ESPA](#) have developed guidance on using a Theory of Change approach