

Theory of Change: An Introduction

Establishing a Theory of Change model

Introduction

The following document provides a short introduction to the Theory of Change model that will be explained in more detail during the workshop. You can follow the content and the complete below template as we progress through the session.

The workshop will:

- (i) To train and upskill you, as stakeholders with an interest in evaluating your widening participation and student success activities, in building feasible and ambitious evaluation plans for your own initiatives.

When to evaluate

An effective evaluation is not an event that occurs at the end of an intervention, but an ongoing process that helps you understand how your intervention is working, what effect it is having on stakeholders and systems, and how it is influenced by both internal and external factors. Although evaluation is generally more effective and credible when it is built in from the beginning, evaluations can also be retroactively applied to existing or completed initiatives.

Types of evaluation

Some work draws the distinction between process and impact evaluations. It is possible and useful to run both types of evaluation, either together or in sequence.

- In a **Process Evaluation**, initiatives are typically assessed during developmental stages or early implementation and enable you to assess whether the initiative is being implemented as intended. This type of evaluation provides information about how best to revise and modify for improvement and is often helpful for pilot projects and new services and schemes. Process evaluation can also be used to monitor the progress and delivery of ongoing initiatives.
- In an **Impact Evaluation**, initiatives are assessed at the end of an operating cycle. Findings are typically used to help decide whether the service or scheme should be adopted, continued, or modified for improvement. It is TASO's ambition that over time all its projects will have high-quality impact evaluations set in place.

Establishing a Theory of Change model

The first step when thinking about your programme evaluation should be to establish a clear and logical narrative string on how your programme is going to achieve its desired impact(s). As a lot of in- and outreach-programmes are operating in a complex – and often not completely predictable - environment, it is helpful to map different components of your programme ahead of its roll-out and describe how these are envisioned to achieve the intended outcomes and impact.

This is known as a Theory of Change – your theory of how you predict your intervention will bring about the desired change.

What is a Theory of Change

Whilst a variety of names are used for this type of model¹, arguably emphasising different elements in the programme and evaluation design- the different names are broadly used interchangeably. For the scope of this framework, we refer to a Theory of Change as “a visual representation of a programme’s inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, [...], impacts and underlying causal mechanisms”².

A Theory of Change describes the underlying assumptions about how planned activities will lead to intended outcomes. By developing a model setting out your Theory of Change, you can understand how different aspects of your programme fit together to achieve your final goal. This is best done collectively, drawing on the experience of those who will work on the service or scheme’s implementation.

A Theory of Change model allows you to:

- describe the need you are trying to address
- the changes you want to make (your outcomes); and
- how you plan to achieve these changes (your activities)

Establishing your Theory of Change before you start to deliver an intervention allows you to set out the aims, context and resources required, processes and intended impact.

Why do I need a Theory of Change?

Theories of Change serve to integrate process and impact evaluation into the same process whilst also clearly distinguishing evaluative activities relating to process and

¹ These include, but are not limited to 'logic model', 'theory of action', 'causal chain', 'intervention logic', 'logical framework (logframe)', 'outcomes line', 'programme logic', 'programme theory', 'results chain'.

² Drawing on: Coldwell & Maxwell, 2018; Cooksy, Gill, & Kelly, 2001; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Kaplan & Garrett, 2005; Knowlton & Phillips, 2012; Renger & Titcomb, 2002.

those focusing on measures relating to impact(s). The evaluation of a programme's inputs, activities, and outputs forms the process and implementation evaluation, which then logically feeds into the outcomes and impacts of a programme – the impact evaluation.

Theories of Change demonstrate the logical progression of the intended relationship between the different aspects of a programme, from inputs to impact as well as the context and rationale underpinning the programme. By providing a formative map that lays out the intended mechanism behind a programme, in the event of a negative or inconclusive result, a good Theory of Change provides you with the tools to distinguish why this was the case. For instance, this may be as a result of theory failure (the programme does not work as theorised to achieve the intended outcomes), implementation failure (the implementation of the programme was not as intended), or methodology failure (the evaluation methodology was inadequate).

How do I develop a Theory of Change?

Developing a Theory of Change is straightforward when you approach it using the following steps in sequence (steps 1-8), rather than mapping from activity to impact.

Doing so will structure your thinking, starting broadly with the current state of play (steps 1&2) and identifying the outcomes (step 3) which will enable you to get where you want to be (step 4), followed by the specific things that need to happen to get you there (steps 5-7). Then you can consider the assumptions (step 8) underpinning your Theory of Change – this will help you to understand whether you can achieve your intended impact within the context you are operating. Theories of change are best developed as part of a group discussion, preferably with an external facilitator – as we will demonstrate in the upcoming webinar.

What questions does my Theory of Change answer?

It's important to consider how much you already know about how the initiative under evaluation operates. Looking at your Theory of Change, consider how many of the assumptions you are confident of, and how much you already know about whether inputs lead to activities, leading to outputs.

This influences the relative emphasis you would place on measuring impact versus understanding process.

- For instance, if it's a brand new initiative, you might classify it as a pilot because you don't yet know whether it is technically possible to run, whether people will engage with it, and so on. In this case, you might shift the focus of the evaluation more towards understanding the process of delivering the initiative.

- Likewise, if the programme is very complex, and contains multiple elements, you might want relatively more process evaluation to understand how the different elements fit together.
- An established, relatively straightforward service with a high volume of interactions might need relatively more focus on the effectiveness of the service, thus measuring the impact.

Over time, the goal is to be confident that each stage in the Theory of Change flows on to the next; however, this is a process that will occur over multiple years and multiple phases of evaluation.