

Developing your Theory of Action

A facilitation guide



A Theory of Action maps out simply, in a logical order, what we think needs to happen in order to reach long-term, sustainable change in communities.



A Theory of Action is a method organizations use to plan their work around the outcomes and impact they want to achieve.

Mapping out your **Theory of Action** is an essential part of clarifying strategies for change. It tells the story of how communities and conditions will change because of your organization's work, as well as how progress will be tracked and measured. The process of creating a **Theory of Action** will help you identify key assumptions underlying the work you do while also helping the entire organization get on the "same page".

A Theory of Action differs from a Theory of Change in that a Theory of Change identifies all the processes through which change is expected to occur, while a Theory of Action is more focused on a specific pathway and an organization's role in achieving a particular change.

This **Action Evaluation Collaborative** facilitation guide will help you design a **Theory of Action**. However, the result of this effort should not be considered a fixed "answer", or a final product. Instead, this process can become part of your regular organizational planning practice. Facilitating your own **Theory of Action** meeting is a way for you to understand the process and see first-hand how your work can be strengthened. This guide will support you to facilitate the process within your organization. It is our hope that you will continue to use this guide and the Theory of Action process as a basis for evaluation to strengthen planning, learning, and reflection.



A Theory of Action is an organization's story of how and why the world would be different because of its efforts....

A **Theory of Action** is your organization's "theory", or story, of how it will make change in the world. A theory is an explanation, supported by research and other evidence, of why certain things happen. The fundamental component of a Theory of Action is a diagram that maps at the most basic level:

- Your intended impact on the world and how communities will be different because of your work - called **long-term outcomes**.
- What changes are necessary now in order for these impacts to come about, called **short-term outcomes (or preconditions)**.

As we build the connections between short and long-term outcomes, we ask ourselves the following questions to check the validity of our thinking at each stage of the process:

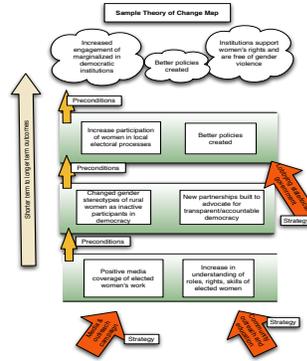
- *Why do we think a short-term outcome will lead to longer-term outcomes?*
- *Are there any major barriers to the outcomes that need to be considered in our planning?*

A Theory of Action eventually includes indicators, which are simply signs that we would observe when and if we are making progress.

How can working with Theory of Action help your organization with evaluation and working with funders and other potential allies?

It is important for social change organizations to be able to explain what impact they expect to have, over the short term, and how these earlier outcomes set the stage for longer-term impact. A **Theory of Action** map is an excellent communication tool and supports case-making for your work.

The **Theory of Action** map provides the important framework for monitoring and evaluation. Through the process of designing the map, you will have clarified and specified the shorter and longer-term outcomes that you need to measure. The process helps you differentiate between outputs/activities and outcomes, so that you focus monitoring and evaluation efforts on those changes you **really** need to track. In short, it should make evaluation more effective, relevant, and easier!



How is Theory of Action Different from a Logic Model?

A Theory of Action is best suited to:

- Understanding the rationale/logic behind why an organization does what it does (*how and why certain changes are expected to come about*).
- Tracking contributions to complex change processes and outcomes shared among multiple actors.
- Testing assumptions and thereby gaining a realistic understanding of the work and resources needed.
- Learning and building evaluative thinking capacity within an organization.
- Achieving clarity and transparency of means and purpose among stakeholders.
- Providing a means to communicate the compelling story of your initiative to funders, board members, and outside constituents when summarized.

A Logic Model or Logical Framework

(logframe) is best suited to:

- Illustrating inputs, activities, outputs, quantitative indicators, short-term outcomes.
- Simple, linear program logic.
- Clarifying the purpose of a project.
- Identifying information needs.
- Reporting upwards to donors.
- Looking at the work of a single organization.
- Providing a basic chart (project matrix) that someone can understand at a glance.

Some common Theory of Action terms...

- **INPUTS** – the resources that are provided for an initiative that are necessary for its implementation.
Example: Money, people, materials.
- **ACTIVITIES** – what the project/program does on a regular basis, as part of its overall strategies.
Example: Women’s empowerment workshops, after-school program clubs.
- **OUTPUTS** – what the project/program produces through its activities.
Example: # of women trained, # of trees planted, # of youth participants served.
- **OUTCOMES** – changes in conditions, capacities, institutions, and relationships that effect, or have the potential to effect, people’s lives. It is a state or condition – what you want to see happen – as a result of the work you do.
Example: Changes in behavior, knowledge, institutions, skills, relationships, attitudes, policies, conditions.
- **INDICATORS** (of success) – Things that you can see, measure, and document to determine whether you are making progress toward and/or achieving an outcome.
Example: A certain % of women are in decision-making positions in local government, two new donors provide funds for your organization’s work.
- **RATIONALES** - explain why one outcome is a precondition or necessary for another, and why you must do certain work to produce desired outcomes.
Example: We conduct workshops with men as part of women’s empowerment, as men’s acceptance of women’s participation is crucial in reaching our outcomes.
- **ASSUMPTIONS** – Key beliefs that underlie your chosen program strategies. Your assumptions should be supported by research, or evidence from other similar interventions, etc.
Example: Men’s attitudes towards women’s roles can be changed.

Building your own Theory of Action – Meeting Basics...

Who should be involved?

The more members of your organization and community you have participating, the better. But, the number needs to be manageable! At the very least we suggest director's of organizations, people responsible for M&E/evaluation work, a few program staff, and if possible, participants and/or a few members of community groups that you work closely with and that you expect your organization's work to benefit. It is important to get different perspectives and opinions.

A few things to keep in mind...

You are not looking for the “right” answer. We are not interested in you creating a “perfect” theory or map, but rather starting a process of thinking critically about your work and asking important questions. Building a map is just a way to facilitate this, and should be something “living”, that grows and changes with time.

Given this, everyone's opinion has value and needs to be heard. The goal is to get people talking and to learn and listen.

Roles: *Who does what*

Designate one person as facilitator and another as note taker. The facilitator should not be the group's most dominant person (such your organization's director), but instead someone who you think will do a good job of keeping the group on track and making sure everyone has a chance to talk.

The note taker should be someone you know to be a good listener and detail-oriented, who can be responsible for reporting back to the work group.

Your Theory of Action Work Process

Your Theory of Action meeting process will have six steps:

- (1) Your vision
- (2) Your long-term outcomes
- (3) Your short-term outcomes
- (4) Key actions
- (5) Linking actions and outcomes
- (6) Your change partners

We have provided a series of worksheets at the end of the facilitation guide to help you keep track of your work.

We strongly encourage you to use post-it notes and markers to map out your change strategy on a large surface (like a wall) and to facilitate the sharing of knowledge. The “final” version of your work can be written down on the worksheets (but remember, this is not a static document or process, you will have to update and reflect on your organization's work).

This is the first step to developing an evaluation framework and an evaluation plan. Action Evaluation Collaborative has developed the *Evaluation for Change* tools that include a mini guide and three worksheets to help you develop an evaluation framework and plan.

These materials, along with a great selection of resources, can be found on our site:

<http://actionevaluation.org/resources/capacity-building-resources/>

Step One: Your Vision

How will your community, your clients, and your members be different – *how will they change* – as a result of your organization's work?

This section starts with a HOT AIR BALLON ACTIVITY:

Imagine that you are flying over your community in a hot air balloon (and brave enough to look down).

What changes would you see on the ground if you were able to realize your vision?

NOTE:

You should describe your changes in terms of outcomes/impacts (changed situations that can be described and measured) not outputs! You don't need to describe everything! Just choose those changes that you feel are most important and unique to your organization.



Questions to generate

a vision statement

1. What material conditions have changed in the lives of the communities you are working with?
2. How are participants and communities taking leadership in their own development?
3. How have relationships changed between groups/institutions that you are working with?
4. How has your organization changed over time in this community?

An example of a vision statement...

The text doesn't have to be perfect....just communicate the most important ideas.

Remember, communities are able to generate their own resources and make decisions over how resources are spent. Community members also have understanding and awareness of the needs, interests, and values in their community and they type of development that they would like to see.

You can write down your organization's vision statement on the worksheet at the end of the facilitation guide.

**Step Two:
Your Long-
Term Goals**

In the next 5 to 10 years, what are the most important changes or outcomes in your community (and beyond) that you expect your organization will contribute to?

Identify some longer-term organizational goals. These goals that you feel are realistically achievable over a 5-10 year time frame and that you can describe in terms of concrete, visible changes.

1. To start, describe a timeframe that you feel you'll be able to see some concrete changes in (somewhere between 5-15 years).
2. Describe the geographic scope (a community, communities, region, etc.) where you imagine you'll see the concrete changes (outcomes).
3. Describe the beneficiaries or stakeholders in the work.

In the next 5 to 10 years, what are the most important changes or outcomes in your community (and beyond) that you expect your organization will contribute to?

You can write down your answers on the worksheet at the end of the facilitation guide.

**Step Three:
Your Short-
Term Goals**

What changes do you expect need to happen NOW in order to reach your long-term outcomes?

Through a "Theory of Action", you map out the changes that you can EXPECT will need to happen, in order to reach those long-term outcomes mentioned above. We refer to the expected changes simply as **short-term outcomes**.

Often these short-term outcomes are changes in:

1. **Conditions** - greater access to education
2. **Capacities** - better knowledge, greater understanding
3. **Relationships** - new connections, partnerships, and alliances
4. **Laws, policies, and institutions** - Right to equal education - Brown vs BOE - is passed, corporations enact diversity requirements, government agency changes its policy, and etc.

NOTE:

These are outcomes, not outputs! Outputs are the results of activities and are often easy to count so people tend to focus on them when thinking about evaluation. An example of an output would be the number of people attending a workshop. While certainly a first step to achieving change may be getting people to attend a workshop, this in itself is not an outcome. These people could have attended the workshop, but spent the entire time reading their email. In developing your Theory of Action, you are interested in mapping actual changes that you feel are linked to your long-term outcomes. So in this case, a likely outcome would be "people attending a workshop to gain new knowledge of XXX, and foster new relationships xxx). **So try and think beyond outputs!**

Step Three: Your Short- Term Goals (continued)

What changes do you expect need to happen NOW in order to reach your long-term outcomes?

For this section, you will need large post-it notes, markers, and wall space. We strongly encourage you to use large post-it notes of various colors to complete this portion of the Theory of Action work. This will facilitate the sharing of knowledge and the logical and clear development of your change strategy.

Write down your organization's long-term goals.

Although these types of outcomes may seem difficult to measure, there are many credible methods for tracking these shorter-term outcomes. To help you think through this task, begin by reviewing the longer-term outcomes you listed in the previous section. Write each outcome on an individual post-it note and position them high on the wall or board.

Next, write down your organization's short-term goals.

Now, think about what specific changes need to happen or might be important in order to achieve the longer-term outcomes. **Specially, what changes do you expect need to happen NOW in order to reach your long-term goals?** Remember, think about changes in conditions, capacities, relationships, laws/policies, and institutions. You don't have to list everything! Write each short-term outcome on large post it notes and position them in columns below the corresponding long-term outcomes. As you work through the process of building-up your map, you may decide to add, remove, or



Step Four: Your Key Actions!

How does your organization contribute to the changes you want to see?

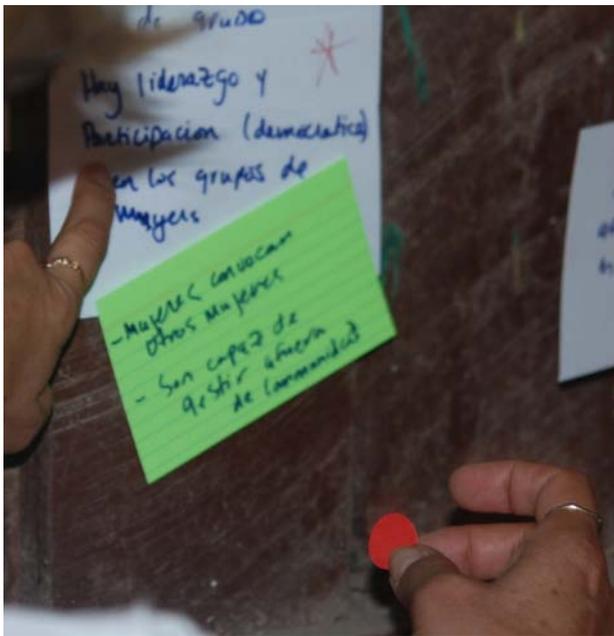
What are the key actions for reaching your short-term outcomes?

Key actions are what your organization is doing to achieve desired outcomes. Examples of key actions might be voter engagement work, educational/training workshops, or providing community-based health services for children and their families.

Outcomes are changes in conditions, capacities, institutions, and relations that effect or have the potential to effect, people's lives. Outcomes are desired results of these actions.

For example, you have identified a short-term outcome to be local governments giving women more decision making power. Key actions used in support of this change are voter engagement work, and activities could be capacity building workshops.

You can write down your key actions on the worksheet at the end of the facilitation guide.



**Step Five:
Linking
Actions to
Outcomes**

How are your key actions linked to outcomes and why?

Linking actions to your short-term outcomes

Remember that **key actions** are what your organization is doing to achieve desired **outcomes**. Here, we'd like you to think about HOW actions are linked to specific outcomes and WHY you think that is. This step is important to the Theory of Action process and will inform the development of your evaluation framework and plan. First, it will facilitate a discussion around assumptions. Assumptions are key beliefs that underlie your chosen actions. Your **assumptions** should be supported by research or experiences from similar programs or initiatives. Second, when it comes to developing an evaluation framework*, this step will help you to easily identify your **indicators**, that is, the measurable evidence that your organization is meeting its social change goals.

For each key action, answer the following two questions:

1. What change do you hope will happen as a result of implementing this action?
2. Why do you think this action will lead to the outcome you have identified?

NOTE:

- The WHY question: here you should discuss the evidence you are basing your response on. It can be based on what you have seen and heard in the community (anecdotal), or what has worked with other projects in similar contexts, or research, etc.

You can write down your responses on the worksheet at the end of the facilitation guide.

** If you would like to work on your evaluation framework, please refer to the Evaluate for Change Workshop materials that include a mini facilitation guide and three worksheets. These materials can be found at: <http://actionevaluation.org/resources/capacity-building-resources/>*

**Step Six:
Your
Change
Partners**

Who else do you need to work with in order to reach your organization's outcomes?

Who else do you need?

Complex social change work, like meeting the needs of families and the wider community, cannot be achieved by one organization. It requires the efforts and collaboration of a large number of actors. In thinking about how your organization is making change happen, it is important to consider relationships with these other actors.

What other actors (organizations, institutions, etc) are necessary to help your organization reach the short-term outcomes you've just mapped out? Mention those most important to your work. Examples of actors might be parent teacher coordinators, unions, politicians, etc.

Name up to 5 organizations or types of organizations that are important partners in helping your organization achieve its outcomes and explain why.

You can write down your responses on the worksheet at the end of the facilitation guide.



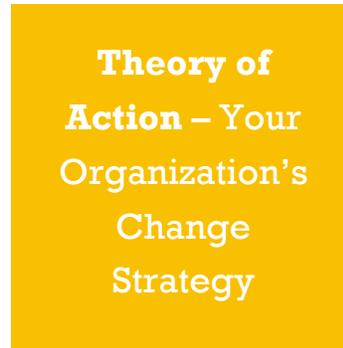
What's Next?

Now that you've developed your Theory of Action, you have the foundation for your organization's:

- **evaluation framework** – a map of your key outcomes and how you will measure progress (indicators), and
- **Planning process** – the ToA provides guideposts and direction for planning, which in conjunction with other tools can help you refine and strengthen strategy and put your Theory of Action into action!

We've created and assembled tools to help you, they can be found at:

<http://actionevaluation.org/resources/capacity-building-resources/>



activating knowledge for social change

www.actionevaluation.org

This facilitation guide was developed by Catherine Borgman-Arboleda
and revised by Julie Poncelet

The following section includes the worksheets for Step One through Step Six. These worksheets are designed to help you keep track of your collaborative work designing your Theory of Action. Although we recommend that the entire guide be distributed to all participants of the Theory of Action meeting, the worksheet can be separated from the guide to facilitate note taking.

Theory of Action Worksheet

These worksheets are to help you record your group's responses as you develop a Theory of Action.

A few things to keep in mind...

You are not looking for the “right” answer. You are not creating a “perfect” theory or map, but rather starting a process of thinking critically about your work and asking important questions. Building a map is just a way to facilitate this, and should be something “living” not static, that grows and changes with time.

Given this, everyone's opinion has value and needs to be heard. The goal is to get people talking, and to learn and listen.

Step One: Your Vision

Imagine that you are flying over your community in a hot air balloon (and brave enough to look down).

What changes would you see on the ground if you were able to realize your vision?

Step Two: Your long-term outcomes

In the next 5 to 10 years, what are the most important changes or outcomes in your community (and beyond) that you expect your organization will contribute to? Think about these changes in terms of a timeframe, a geographic scope, and beneficiaries or stakeholders.

Your Organization's Long-Term Outcomes

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Step Three: Your short-term outcomes

Although these types of outcomes may seem difficult to measure, there are many credible methods for tracking shorter-term outcomes. To help you think through this task, begin by reviewing the longer-term outcomes listed above. Write these down on the large post-it notes and position them high on the wall or board. Now, think about what specific changes need to happen or might be important in order to achieve the longer-term outcomes.

Specially, what changes do you expect need to happen NOW in order to reach your long-term goals?

We've provided you with the space to discuss 5 long-term outcomes and 5 short-outcomes for each longer-term outcome. You can certainly have fewer outcomes.

We recommend that you take a picture of your Theory of Action map for future reference. You can easily recreate this map using a word processing programs such as Pages, Word or Open Office Writer.

Your Organization's Short-Term Outcomes

Long-Term Outcome

1.

Short-Term Outcomes

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

Long-Term Outcome

2.

Short-Term Outcomes

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

Long-Term Outcome

3.

Short-Term Outcomes

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

Long-Term Outcome

4.

Short-Term Outcomes

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

e.

Your Organization's Short-Term Outcomes

Long-Term Outcome	Short-Term Outcomes
5.	a.
	b.
	c.
	d.
	e.

Step Four: Your Key Actions

Key actions are what your organization is doing to achieve desired outcomes. Examples of key actions might be voter engagement work, capacity building workshops, or developing community-based services for children and their families.

What are up to five key actions for reaching your short-term outcomes?

Your Organization's Key Actions

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Step Five: Linking Actions to Outcomes

For each strategy listed above, answer the following two questions:

1. What change do you hope will happen as a result of this action?
2. Why do you think that this action will lead to the outcome you have identified

Linking Actions to Short-Term Outcomes

Action	Short-Term Outcomes
<i>What change do you hope will happen by implementing this action?</i>	<i>WHY do you think that this action will lead to this outcome?</i>

1.	WHY?
----	------

2.	WHY?
----	------

3.	WHY?
----	------

4.	WHY?
----	------

5.	WHY?
----	------

Step Six: Your Change Partners

What other actors (organizations, institutions, etc) are necessary to help your organization reach the short-term outcomes you've just mapped out? Mention those most important to your work. Examples of actors might be parent teacher coordinators, unions, support of particular politicians, etc.

Name up to 5 organizations or types of organizations that are important partners in helping your organization achieve its outcomes and explain why.

Your Change Partners

Name of Change Partner	What is this group helping you achieve? Why are they important?
1.	WHY?
2.	WHY?
3.	WHY?
4.	WHY?
5.	WHY?



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