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# *Developing a Theory of Change:* Practical Guidance



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



**OVERVIEW OF THEORY OF CHANGE CONCEPTS AND LANGUAGE**

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**PART I**





## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children and youth by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

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# Who Needs a Theory of Change, and Why?

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A theory of change is a fundamental component of any large-scale social change effort. A clear theory of change helps to strengthen strategies and maximize results by identifying the work to be undertaken, the expected signals of progress and the presumed or possible pathways to achieving desired goals that reflect beliefs, working assumptions or hypotheses.

**Developing a theory of change is essentially the process of making explicit collective assumptions about how change will happen — in other words, *making thinking visible*. The process of articulating a theory of change helps ensure that everyone involved in a social change effort understands and is aligned in common strategic intent. A theory of change product helps to document this visible thinking.**

By reflecting or representing beliefs, assumptions and expectations about how change will occur, a theory of change is a good basis for measurement, experimentation and learning. For example, a theory of change can help those who are implementing strategies to test assumptions and build understanding about ways a strategy or its implementation needs to be adapted. A sound theory of change also helps clarify the complicated pathways to change for programs or strategies aimed at broad, large-scale goals. For programs or strategies that are complex, where the operating environment is fluid and unpredictable and may influence a strategy or its implementation in unknown ways, a theory of change is an especially important tool. It serves as a compass that remains pointed to goals, guides responsive or necessary adaptations and clarifies opportunities for meaningful measurement.

A theory of change can refer to the *beliefs and assumptions* about how a desired change will happen or a goal will be realized. The term also can describe a specific *product* that expresses those beliefs and assumptions by depicting how strategies relate to expected outcomes and ultimate goals.

# About This Guide

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Casey first commissioned ORS Impact (ORS) to develop a practical theory of change guide in 2004.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that much has changed in the last 18 years to affect theory of change development, the Foundation commissioned an updated guide. This new guide incorporates evolution in thinking about theory of change by:

- explicitly identifying how a theory of change can and should advance equity and engage community members in meaningful ways; and
  - providing detailed explanations about what it takes to develop inclusive theories of change and use them to advance powerful, sustained results.
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This guide is for organizations, groups, collaboratives and others leading efforts to achieve ambitious goals. We hope the guide can help funders and implementers of change efforts to be clearer about their objectives, discuss the roles of decision-making authority and equity considerations in their work and better position themselves for useful measurement and learning. The guide is organized into three parts:



## PART 1

Provides an **overview** of theory of change models, processes and products, including key concepts, benefits and limitations.



## PART 2

Offers **step-by-step guidance** — including considerations, exercises and examples for those seeking to articulate and document a theory of change, along with guidance to support teams or groups in developing their theory of change through an inclusive and equitable process.



## DOCUMENTATION TEMPLATES

Includes **fillable templates** to record theory of change assumptions, components and audiences.

# Key Concepts

Theory of change can describe both a conceptual model for how change will happen as well as a product that documents such a model. Generally, a theory of change should clearly distinguish the actions to be undertaken from the change to be realized — including along-the-way changes and longer-term goals. A useful theory of change process should answer the questions:

- What are actions to be undertaken?
- What will those actions make possible?
- What changes or new conditions are expected to occur as a result of those actions in the near term and in the longer term?
- Who will benefit from these actions or changes?

## Ways to represent a theory of change

Theory of change products can take many forms. They often are presented as graphic or visual diagrams, sometimes called outcome maps.

### OUTCOME MAP





There are many possible formats for documenting a group's core concepts, assumptions and expectations about change. (See **PART 2** of this guide for a selection of theory of change representations.)

Regardless of its format, a useful theory of change will depict or clarify:

- the broad goals or results being sought;
- strategies and related actions to be implemented, which may include multiple areas of effort or different intervention points that reinforce or build on each other;
- the outcomes that are expected or assumed to result from actions, as well as the expected sequence of outcomes (also known as the pathway of change) that leads to achieving the goal; and
- key beliefs or assumptions about the pathway of change, including:
  - how actions will be implemented and by whom;
  - the relationships and hypotheses connecting actions, outcomes and end goals; and
  - how much time is required to realize key outcomes or the end goal.

## Language and terms

When describing **actions** and **changes** expected based on those actions, different groups may also use different terms. There are no right or wrong terms; groups can use any terms that feel comfortable to all. However, it is important to be clear about whether terms are meant to describe actions or changes, and to use terms consistently.

Similarly, the term **theory of change** may not resonate with everyone. It is fine to use other language to describe the model or product that clarifies expected actions and resulting changes and how they are logically linked. Other terms that are sometimes used to describe such a conceptual model or product include *theory of action*, *theory of influence*, *pathway of change*, *strategy*, *blueprint for change*, *engine of change*, *road map* and *logic model*.<sup>2</sup>

### Distinguishing action and change

- Terms that typically describe **actions**: *activities, interventions, inputs, outputs*
- Terms that typically describe **changes**: *goals, results, outcomes, indicators*
- Terms that can describe either **actions or changes**: *objectives, accomplishments, measures, metrics*

# *Benefits of Creating a Theory of Change*

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Realizing broad, ambitious social change is a complex undertaking that can take a long time. There is too much at stake to be unclear, vague or random in the pursuit of a better and more equitable society or a healthy planet. Though it can be challenging to make visible collective thinking about what is expected to change — along with when, how and why it will change — many organizations, teams and partnerships have benefitted from engaging in this effort. Theory of change development can help groups to:

- experience significant breakthroughs in their thinking;
- increase their agreement and alignment about how change will happen;
- better acknowledge and address power differences between those involved;
- promote equity in their pursuit of goals;
- better understand the roles and expectations of different contributors;
- better understand where to invest time and resources; and
- better measure their strategies.

Theories of change are powerful tools for guiding large-scale, complex efforts seeking ambitious goals. Importantly, theories of change are not neutral or free of values. As they clarify core elements of their strategies, assumptions and expectations about change, teams or groups have opportunities to reflect on and make choices about:

- whose views and voices are included — and whose are missing;
- who makes key decisions about the conceptual model; and
- how to explicitly identify and mitigate or eliminate historic biases that harm certain groups and prevent results from being realized by all.



## The benefits of multiple perspectives

For too long, the people social-change efforts are supposed to benefit have been excluded from theory of change development. To ensure strategies are meaningful for and accountable to communities, community members should play a clear role in the development process.



Inclusive theory of change processes create space for multiple perspectives, experiences and voices and invite greater input into key choices and decisions. Such processes also provide important opportunities to clarify who has authority in the effort and to build trust and relationships among different parties, creating the conditions for successful implementation and realization of goals.



Inclusive processes make it more likely that teams will be able to recognize and sufficiently address the root causes of the problems being examined, as well as large-scale, systemic factors that affect their social change efforts. When those most affected by proposed goals, actions and interim outcomes take part in creating the theory of change, the model is more likely to identify meaningful components and assumptions.



Those involved in developing a theory of change — ideally before the model is implemented — should consider whether the people most affected by proposed actions or goals have opportunities to voice their priorities and contribute to the theory of change. An inclusive process might include questions like the following to consider barriers to and levers for advancing equity:

- To what extent are the proposed strategies and outcomes truly meaningful for the people or communities they are meant to benefit?
- How might implicit working assumptions reinforce traditional or historic ways of thinking or working that exacerbate inequity, discrimination, bias or harm for certain groups?
- How do the systems or institutions involved in the change effort treat individuals or groups differently based on their race, home language, zip code or background? Do these systems diminish or restrict opportunities for some but not others? Have the drivers of historic and current inequity in the institutions and systems that affect this social change effort been sufficiently recognized? Do the proposed strategies and change pathways show promise to address these drivers of inequity?



While inclusive and equitable theory of change development takes time, investing in this effort helps those seeking broad goals to clarify thinking so that they are better positioned to be successful. (See **PART 2** of this guide for tools and examples that support equitable theory of change development. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide* also serves as a useful blueprint for incorporating equity in the context of theory of change development.<sup>3)</sup>

**Inclusivity:** Practices that invite, encourage and support contributions and participation of all — particularly those who are directly affected and traditionally excluded — and ensure that all participants have power to influence decisions and actions.

**Equity:** Conditions that ensure those who have historically been excluded or oppressed have clear roles and authority in seeking change that affects them. “Advancing equity” can include changes related to access to resources, quality of services and public or organizational policies that result in fair treatment, opportunity and outcomes.

## Using the process to clarify strategy

As noted, a theory of change is both a conceptual model and the concrete product that reflects that model. While a theory of change product can serve as a useful tool for communication and transparency, the process of developing and clearly articulating the model is equally valuable.

Theory of change development forces all parties to be clearer and more explicit about their strategy. The process can reveal where thinking is fuzzy — where logic or linkages are weak — and surface biases and divergent views about how change is expected to happen, especially among those with different positions or levels of authority. The process also helps to ensure different views are explored and addressed. In the life cycle of a strategy, the earlier these points of fuzziness or tension are resolved, the better.

Theory of change development is especially useful for delineating and reaching agreement about what is sometimes called the “messy middle” — that is, the interim changes that are



expected to occur within a complex, large-scale social change effort on the way to realizing its goals. Because many such efforts cannot succeed without affecting large systems and institutions, systemic change can be an integral aspect of the model for change, helping to create conditions for large-scale change among large groups of people. Since changes in systems or social structures are frequently qualitative and can be hard to name or identify, the process of clarifying interim outcomes is often at the heart of theory of change development. (See **PART 2** for examples of interim outcomes that often describe positive change on the way to end goals.)

Finally, an inclusive theory of change development process promotes equity by helping groups surface and probe differing beliefs and assumptions. Productive questions may arise, such as:

- How are the proposed interventions truly relevant, respectful and meaningful to people and communities?
- How do the proposed pathways recognize and make use of communities' assets, navigate biases and avoid harms?

The process often sparks important — if sometimes uncomfortable — conversations. Those conversations can help increase awareness of ways the theory of change upholds and advances equity, or risks not doing so. The process also can strengthen collective work by enhancing the level of commitment and buy-in among many stakeholders.

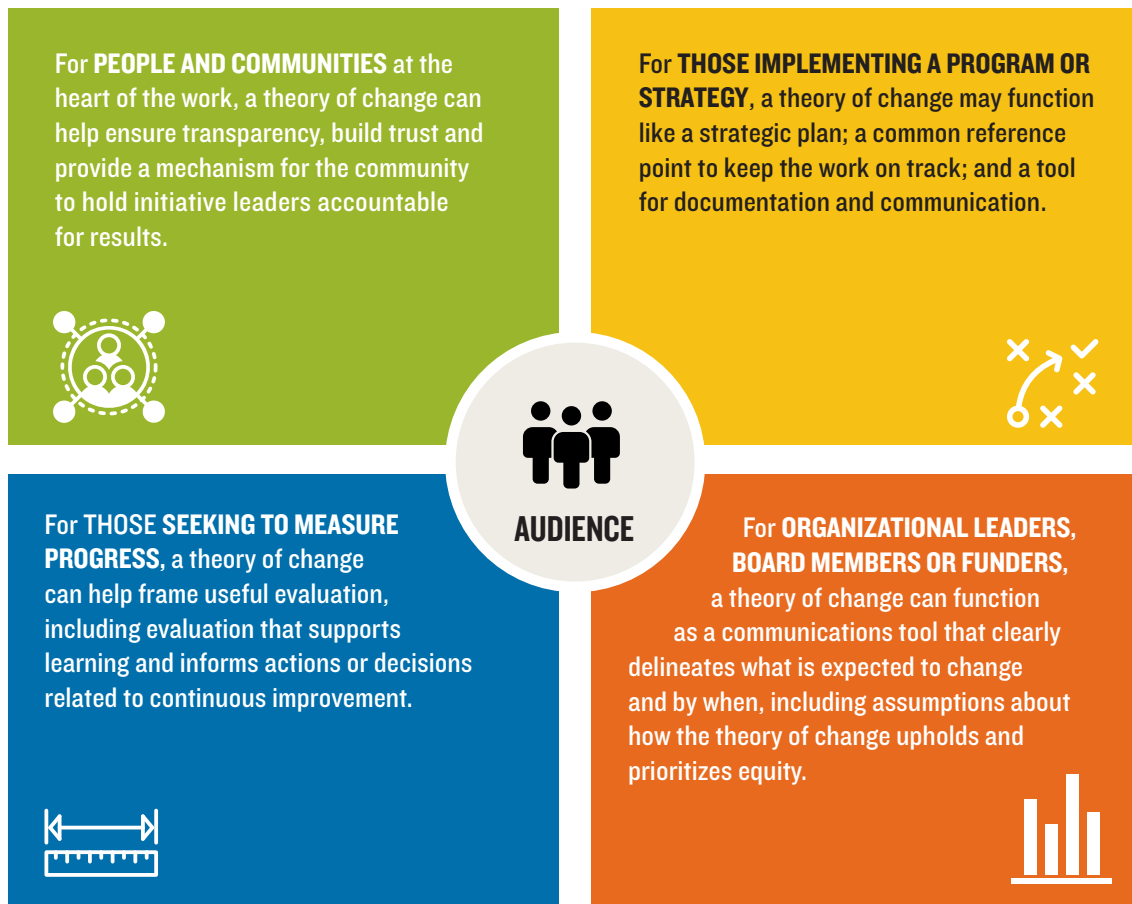
## More meaningful measurement

A clear theory of change serves as the basis for meaningful measurement — whether in assessing progress or in supporting strategy refinement. Clarifying interim outcomes and expected pathways to an end goal enables groups to expand their understanding of success beyond a sole focus on end goals, making it easier to design and deploy more focused measurement that better positions them to document and learn about progress.

Measurement grounded in a theory of change can help funders and implementers understand their strategies, refine their thinking and make significant adjustments. For example, when actions, interim outcomes and assumptions are clear, teams can better assess whether assumptions about change are holding up and whether the outcomes most critical to goal advancement are evident. Further, working through an inclusive theory of change development process helps to inform measurement that upholds equity. For example, inviting input from those most affected by the strategies and goals can help teams prioritize measuring the kinds of changes that are most meaningful to them.

## Uses for different audiences

A clear theory of change benefits different audiences that may have different needs or interests related to the goals being sought.



## Theories of change as living tools

Theories of change become most valuable when they are regularly used. Instead of being viewed as a static narrative or visual product, theory of change products can become dynamic, living tools that support ongoing reflection and learning. (See **PART 2** for additional guidance on putting a theory of change to use.)



# Potential Limitations

While developing a theory of change holds numerous benefits for a social change effort, it also is helpful to understand the potential limitations — and ways to address some common issues that may arise.

## THEORY OF CHANGE LIMITATIONS AND WAYS TO ADDRESS THEM

LIMITATIONS	STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THEM
Visual or graphic depictions of theories of change can make it appear that expected change pathways are predictable.	Rather than viewing theory of change depictions as firm, predictive models for how exactly change will happen, collaborators can remain mindful of assumptions and influencing factors. For example, it can be difficult to predict relationships between different actors or parts of a system, or to foresee external events or other emerging factors. Ideally, theory of change products can help collaborators surface important questions and regularly measure their work to learn about progress.
Graphic depictions often show a straight line to change when positive change may not actually follow this path.	In complex social change efforts, progress can show up in different ways. One step forward might be followed by two steps back, only to be followed later by another step forward. Protection against or even mitigation of a known threat may constitute important progress. Though it is sometimes difficult to portray such nuances graphically, groups can use the theory of change process to surface expectations about the different forms that positive outcomes could take.
The theory of change development process can lead to fatigue or frustration for some.	Developing a theory of change is not easy. It takes time, especially if collaborators are committed to an inclusive process or need to work through fuzzy or divergent thinking. This can feel frustrating, especially to those who see theory of change development as “thinking, not doing” or otherwise not valuable or necessary. Frustrations might turn into pressure to shortcut the process. Quick processes have their own pitfalls, though — especially when it comes to advancing equity. Ensuring that all parties are aware of the benefits can help, as can carefully considering how to structure the process to be as efficient and productive as possible. (See <b>PART 2</b> for additional guidance on structuring a theory of change process).

# Ready, Set, Action!

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With a greater understanding of theory of change concepts and language and a greater appreciation for the benefits of creating a theory of change, you are ready to dig into **PART 2** of this guide, where you'll find a range of practical tools, exercises and examples to support theory of change development.

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## Endnotes

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- 1 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2004). *Theory of change: A practical tool for action, results and learning*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/theory-of-change>
- 2 Logic models are a type of theory of change, most often used when actions involve direct services or a discrete intervention for a defined group of people that is implemented in a predicted manner. This guide is most focused on developing theories of change for efforts that require multiple areas of action, often seeking to change the underlying conditions (such as systems, social structures or policies) that are most likely to support broader changes for populations and places.
- 3 The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2015). *Race equity and inclusion action guide: Embracing racial equity: 7 steps to advance and embed race equity and inclusion within your organization*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide>





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