

# GUIDANCE NOTE

## on Theory of Change

JUNE 2021



**PEACEBUILDING  
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*This Guidance Note is part of a series of practical, programming guidance periodically issued by PBF. The purpose of PBF Guidance Notes is to provide additional information to recipients of PBF funding and PBF Secretariats to improve design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of PBF projects. This Guidance Note on Theories of Change provides a specific peacebuilding lens to guide fund recipients' development of theories of change and should be used to inform project design choices at the outset of project conceptualization.*

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# 1. PROGRAMMATIC PATHWAYS AND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW CHANGE WORKS<sup>1</sup>

A strategic priority commits teams to broad areas of work that they anticipate will play a critical role to positively shift a conflict driver. For any given strategic priority, however, there are likely multiple pathways or approaches to achieve that change. For example, increasing young people's confidence in local governments in order to reduce inter-communal violence or competition over resources may involve bolstering transparency in decision-making, increasing the responsiveness of administrative offices to local communities, encouraging more effective and youth-inclusive management of scarce resources, or helping local youth mobilize across the social divide to jointly demand better services. These different pathways contribute to achieving the same overarching strategic priority.

Behind each programming pathway is a theory about why **that particular approach** will bring about the desired change. Selecting the most effective approach requires teams to critically consider their assumptions about which actions are most likely to produce that change. These assumptions are commonly referred to as a **THEORY OF CHANGE**.

Theories of change benefit from research and studies that provide evidence that a given approach is likely to produce the desired change. Good project design starts from making such assumptions explicit, assumptions that should be tested throughout the implementation cycle to see if they still hold. Making programming assumptions explicit and testing them will not only increase the effectiveness of the individual project, it will also contribute to the knowledge base and improve future programming by providing critical information about what works and what doesn't work.

Because **theories of change** explain **WHY** an action is assumed to produce a certain change, they inform the very initial steps of conceptualizing an approach at the design stage. A good rule of thumb for assessing a theory of change is to determine whether a given formulation explains why a change is expected to happen or if it describes how it will happen. If the statement explains "how" and not "why", it is not making explicit the embedded assumptions that are driving programmatic choices. Instead, formulations that explain **HOW** change is expected to work are referred to as **logic models** because they summarize each step in a project's activities and examine how they are logically connected through time to produce the desired change. Developing a logic model, then, can only be done once teams have identified not only the programmatic pathway, but have also determined the individual actions they will take to operationalize that pathway. Both theories of change and logic models are important devices for evaluating the strength of a project, but they serve distinct purposes and are done at different times of the project cycle:

THEORIES OF CHANGE	LOGIC MODELS
 Are <b>developed at the concept stage</b> , when the general goal is known	 Are <b>developed after project design</b> when project components are known
 Are <b>explanatory</b> ; they address "why"	 Are <b>descriptive</b> ; they address "how"
 Are <b>analytic</b> ; they examine embedded assumptions ideally underpinned by evidence	 Are <b>representational</b> ; they array project components in causal chain
 Can be either <b>global</b> (i.e. "contact theory") or <b>project-specific</b> , but should always be interpreted for the local context.	 Must be <b>project-specific</b>

<sup>1</sup>. Adapted from the [Youth, Peace and Security: A Programming Handbook](#), 2021.

## 2. EMBRACING COMPLEXITY BY UNPACKING UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The environments we operate in are complex and prone to rapid changes. Complexity within our programming contexts occasionally creates confusion or undermines our confidence about what we know and what we assume will happen. Identifying a theory of change, however, is simply a process of explaining why a given action or intervention is expected to provoke a specific kind of change.

To illustrate this point, consider a hypothetical scenario where a conflict analysis has indicated that confidence in formal state institutions or faith in the peace agreement is undermined by sexual and gender-based violence against young women accessing basic social services (BSS). The below matrix proposes an array of programming pathways for how teams might approach this problem. Each pathway, however, comes with assumptions about what the core trouble is and, thus, what needs to change to see a reduction in SGBV. The purpose of the matrix is to demonstrate the kinds of questions program staff should be asking about their own work by detailing implied assumptions about what is driving the problem for each programming approach.

**Table 1. Desired program result: Eliminate SGBV against young women who access BSS**

PROGRAMMING APPROACH	ASSUMPTION	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
<b>Training BSS staff in SGBV protection measures</b>	Staff lack capacity or knowledge about what to do if they witness SGBV in the workplace. If staff members knew about internal policies and protection mechanisms (e.g. whistle blower complaint mechanisms, ombudsmen offices, human resources disciplinary boards, etc.), they would utilize those policies and mechanisms to ensure citizens are protected from SGBV when they access BSS.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that what is lacking is staff knowledge of existing mechanisms and policies rather than the willingness or ability of staff to exercise them.
<b>Hiring more female senior managers</b>	Impunity for SGBV is driven by a male-dominated management structure. If women had decision-making power, they would create and/or enforce internal disciplinary controls that would punish staff who perpetrate SGBV. This is based on a conviction that women are less likely to participate in or condone SGBV and that their authority to enforce discipline will be recognized within the institutions.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that female managers have the knowledge, will and ability to discipline staff members for SGBV.
<b>Awareness raising of women's rights among BSS staff</b>	BSS staff do not understand rights and normative commitments and so staff are not aware of the full range of ways that SGBV is a harmful practice. If they knew, they would cease enabling or perpetrating SGBV because they would not want to cause harm.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that lack of staff understanding that SGBV does harm by violating rights of victims is what drives assault.
<b>Educating young women who are likely to access BSS about their rights and protection mechanisms</b>	Potential victims currently are unable to advocate for themselves or seek effective protection and justice. If young women were aware that SGBV is a violation of their rights, they will either be able to fend off assaults because they know their rights or, if they are accosted, will know where to turn for protection and redress to hold perpetrators accountable. This approach also assumes that protection mechanisms and internal disciplinary measures are efficacious.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that equipping young women with knowledge of how to exercise their rights will reduce violence against them. This is a potentially dangerous ToC, since it 1) implicates victims in their own victimization, and 2) may encourage more interaction with predatory actors without effectively addressing protection and justice mechanisms.

PROGRAMMING APPROACH	ASSUMPTION	SUPPORTING EVIDENCE
<p><b>Establishing codes of conduct and disciplinary mechanisms within offices of BSS</b></p>	<p>A lack of consequences for perpetrators of SGBV effectively acts as a green light for abuse. This approach assumes that codes of conduct or internal controls do not exist. It also assumes that if such measures were put in place, their enforcement would curb perpetrators' actions, a question that speaks to institutional cultures based on patriarchy.</p>	<p>ToC for this approach requires evidence that staff need clear instruction about what is and is not permitted, as well as clear and meaningful censure when rules are violated.</p>
<p><b>Pursuing emblematic legal action against perpetrators of SGBV in BSS</b></p>	<p>There exists a lack of consequences for both the perpetrators of SGBV and the institutions that employ and enable them. This approach moves the locus of action or redress outside of the BSS structure and into the more public sphere of the criminal justice system. It assumes that pressure from public knowledge and support generated by the case will make potential perpetrators less willing to risk career and reputation and force the institutions to change organizational culture and exercise more effective discipline. A part of this assumption is that public outcry can apply sufficient pressure to effect change, an assumption that is as much about transforming cultures of patriarchy as it is about governmental accountability to its public.</p>	<p>ToC for this approach requires evidence that female managers have the knowledge, will and ability to discipline staff members for SGBV.</p>

Before determining which approach is best for any given project, teams should examine the range of programming options and associated evidence in this manner to understand how the various assumptions underpinning the different approaches play out in their specific contexts.

### 3. IS ONE THEORY OF CHANGE SUFFICIENT?

In reality, most projects will use a combination of several programming approaches to achieve an overall goal, in recognition that complex problems need complex and multi-disciplinary solutions. Teams may wish to utilize tools that promote systems thinking, which appreciates that settings are not only complex but dynamic and call for non-linear, iterative thinking. These tools provide methods for unpacking complexity while recognizing the interconnected nature of many peacebuilding challenges and opportunities.

By delineating how different facets of a complex system reinforce each other, moreover, systems thinking supports project staff to identify inter-connected theories of change at different levels of the project. Such “cascading theories of change” can help teams identify assumptions about how change at one level contributes to higher level changes. In other words, it encourages teams to identify theories of change for the overall impact or goal, for the different outcomes that will contribute to that change, and among the various outputs that contribute relevant changes to achieve each outcome.

In the local governance-focused youth initiative outlined in the introduction, for example, the project appears to have two interconnected high-level goals: increasing young people's confidence in local government, which is expected to subsequently reduce inter-communal violence sparked by competition over scarce resources. To fully investigate the assumptions underpinning this project's approach, project teams will need to provide evidence or articulate their assumptions for each high-level impact.

#### PRO TIP

Although many organizations suggest an “if/then” approach to developing theories of change, this often leads design teams to simply list their project components in a series of “if” clauses. This approach fails to address the actual assumptions about why positive change is expected to occur as a result of the intervention.

Instead of if/then clauses, try simply describing your theory of change in one or two paragraphs, or develop a table similar to Table 1 to evaluate competing assumptions behind different approaches.

#### ToCs at the impact level must:

✓ **EXPLAIN** why increased confidence in local government among youth will reduce inter-communal violence, and

✓ **UNPACK** the link between competition over scarce resources leading to inter-communal violence.

Once the project team has explained why increasing the confidence of youth in local government is expected to produce the two-fold impact-level changes of reducing violence and lowering competition over scarce resources, the team must then reflect on the underlying assumptions about how to achieve those aims. To accomplish this, teams are encouraged to develop a table similar to Table 1 above for each programmatic outcome.

For example, our project team may determine that their project will include an outcome that advances the goal of increasing young peoples' confidence in local government. As noted in the introduction, this may be pursued through a variety of approaches, which are enumerated in the following table:

Table 2. Increasing young peoples' confidence in local government by...

PROGRAMMING APPROACH	FIRST ASSUMPTION	SUPPORTING ASSUMPTIONS
<p><b>Increasing transparency in decision-making among local government</b></p>	<p><b>Core assumption:</b> community members perceive that local officials take decisions "behind closed doors," which raises suspicion that the decisions favor one group or individual rather than the public good. Such suspicions feed perceptions about corruption as well as raise tensions among social groups who feel they are being treated unfairly.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Evidence requirements:</b> ToC for this approach requires evidence that when the public has greater access to the process of decision making and can monitor the internal deliberations of public officials, they will have greater confidence in local officials and accept their decisions, even if those decisions do not benefit their particular group.</p>	<p><b>It's a communications problem:</b> Despite making sound and fair policy decisions, citizens' perceptions remain negative because they assume local decision-makers are privileging one group over another. In this case, it's not the decision-making that is marred, it's that local authorities need better and more open communication on how decisions were taken.</p> <p><b>It's a lack of fairness problem:</b> Because decisions are taken behind closed doors, it enables decision-makers to privilege certain groups or disadvantage others. In this case, taking decisions in the open is expected to curb this problem, but only if other accountability mechanisms like free and fair elections give citizens an opportunity to hold decision makers accountable.</p>
<p><b>Improving local government's responsiveness to citizen demands</b></p>	<p><b>Core assumption:</b> Whether through disfunction, corruption or by acting in preferential ways toward certain groups, local communities do not have confidence that their needs will be met by local authorities. As a result, they turn to extra-legal means to address problems or access resources, which further undermines local authorities' role and perceptions of legitimacy in the eyes of local community members.</p> <hr/> <p><b>Evidence requirements:</b> ToC for this approach requires evidence that local community members' confidence in local authorities increases if they feel their needs are getting met in a fair manner.</p>	<p><b>It's a technical problem:</b> local government lacks a mechanism or process to understand the population's needs and respond to their demands. This problem calls for establishing clear processes for registering citizen requests or complaints and a means for citizens to monitor the response.</p> <p><b>It's an institutional cultural problem:</b> Despite having policies that should produce timely and fair action on the part of local authorities, such policies are not enforced, which opens the way for local authorities to treat groups or individuals differently or ignore citizen requests altogether. Implementing an enforcement mechanism likely includes establishing and exercising effective disciplinary measures against officials and functionaries who are in violation of the rules.</p>

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## 4. DEVELOPING THEORIES OF CHANGE STEP-BY-STEP

### 1 — STEP ONE Determining possible programmatic approaches

1. Together with partners, step aside from organizational mandates and budgetary constraints to **generate a list of necessary conditions or resources to achieve change** within a given strategic priority in the given context. Step away from narrow organizational mandates and be expansive and comprehensive, since elements deemed necessary for change that will not be addressed through programming should be considered risks to programming and factored into ongoing situational monitoring or rolling conflict analysis.
2. Working back from the list of necessary conditions and resources, **identify a range of high-level programmatic approaches** that best contribute to producing the necessary conditions or resources within the strategic priority. Be careful not to reverse engineer the process by thinking first about the inputs your organization expects to provide; keep focus on the bigger picture. This will help foster innovation and avoid a “cookie cutter” approach to programming.

### 2 — STEP TWO Unpacking assumptions through theories of change to determine programming areas

1. Clarify the **theories of change** by reflecting on why change is expected to happen. Such assumptions may need to problematize taken-for-granted notions about what powerful stakeholders want, or how economic, political, cultural or communal factors are expected to function or react. Making explicit our assumptions also can reveal if deeply held normative commitments are driving programmatic choices in ways that may be counter-productive within the context.
2. Select the programmatic approach with the most effective theory of change and match the approach to **organizational mandates and resources** to determine who is best placed to take forward the initiative.

## 5. SUGGESTED RESOURCES

ORGANIZATION/AUTHOR	TITLE	DESCRIPTION
Chris Alford	<a href="#">How systems mapping can help you build a better theory of change</a>	Provides a critique of over-simplified, linear ToC models and offers tips for systems mapping.
Alliance for Peacebuilding	<a href="#">Policy Brief: Theories of Change</a>	Brief description of theories of change and their role/importance for programming.
CDA Collaborative Learning Projects	<a href="#">Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Basics. A Resource Manual</a>	pp. 50-61 provides guidance on constructing theories of change based on a conflict analysis and consideration of the roles and reach of actors and the level of change envisioned.
DfID	<a href="#">Practical Approaches to Theories of Change in Conflict, Security and Justice Programs. Parts I and II (Corlazzoli and White)</a>	Provides excellent guidance on pitfalls of ignoring theory of change and considerations for developing well-evidenced programming hypotheses.
IPAL	<a href="#">Developing A Theory of Change</a>	A guide to developing a theory of change as a framework for inclusive dialogue, learning and accountability for social impact.
Oxfam	<a href="#">Theory of Change Resource: Youth Participation and Leadership</a>	Guidance specifically on theories of change for youth participation



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