

Constructing a Theory of Change for a Program or Project

The Theory of Change (ToC) provides context for the proposed program and tells the story of how the program will influence the target audience.

A ToC is a conceptual model that visualizes how program strategies will lead to intended results. Think in terms of what “could work” based on current research and knowledge, and what you and others have experienced implementing the same or similar programs.

The overall difference between the Theory of Change and a program logic model (LM) is that the ToC describes and illustrates broad and general concepts about change. The program LM describes and illustrates more detailed elements essential to program design, plans, management, and evaluation. You can start with one or the other, but ideally there is a ToC behind a program’s LM.

Steps to guide the development of a ToC:

Step 1: Identify Results

What does the program hope to achieve? This is the long term effect or results. Results can be a single outcome or multiple outcomes over time. Think broadly because not all strategies will lead to one result.

Step 2: Name Strategies

Most often it is several strategies combined over time that will yield the results. What strategies have been or will be used by the program, are used by similar programs, and/or identified in the research literature?

Step 3: Define Underlying Assumptions

A strong theory of change is grounded in knowledge—results are connected to strategies that reflect a **balance** of research, practice, theory and experience. Has research, best practices, experience and theory been adequately examined to guide knowledge and assumptions behind the strategies? Are these strategies and results plausible given the organization’s assets and limitations? Have similar programs been reviewed to learn what strategies worked under what conditions to get results?

The framework below can be used to visualize how likely the identified strategies are to succeed.

	Practice/Experience	
	Low	High
Research/Theory	Low	<i>Least likely to succeed</i>
	High	<i>Most likely to succeed</i>

Theory of Change Template

