

POLICY BRIEF



Theories of Change

This policy brief provides an introduction to “Theories of Change.” A “theory of change” (ToC) is a statement – a strategic narrative - about how an intervention hopes to foster change to produce intended outcomes and impacts. ToCs are not academic exercises. ToCs help organizations identify the implicit underlying assumptions in their work. Agencies often design programs based on weak assumptions about what will foster change rather than using solid research. ToCs make the monitoring and evaluation process more explicit by identifying anticipated changes. ToCs help support evidence-based policies and programs that challenge widely held but misguided assumptions.

Intent vs Impact

Too often well-meaning efforts to foster peace and security result in unintended and counterproductive impacts. The gap between intent and impact is a challenge facing all organizations who make assumptions about how they can intervene to support peace and security. These assumptions develop from personal experiences, media narratives, or academic training. Organizations tend to see the problem that their organization can fix. Theories of Change help to reduce the gap between intent and impact by challenging these assumptions. Rigorous research can test organizational assumptions underlying the design of their projects, programs, or policies.



Theory of Change Formula

Theories of change have three parts. First, there is a theory of what factors are driving or mitigating conflict. Second, there is a theory of what can be done about conflict. A theory of change is about how some driving or mitigating factor identified in a **CONFLICT ASSESSMENT** can be changed with some **INTERVENTION PLAN** to achieve an **IMPACT** that prevents violence or builds peace.



Each stage should be informed by research. Conflict assessment requires robust, multi-stakeholder research. Too often, planners jump from a conflict assessment to planning without first articulating how the outcomes of their assessment research fit into a hypothesis that explains their intervention. Too often, conflict assessment is a just an exercise documenting assumptions about what is driving or mitigating conflict. Without good research, the design and planning of an intervention is based on an untested hypotheses or guesses about what will produce change in conflict drivers or mitigators. And finally, monitoring and evaluation requires robust research to identify the impacts of an intervention.

Theories of Change can be articulated as statements that create testable hypotheses for monitoring and evaluation. For example, if a conflict assessment finds that a shortage of water is driving inter-ethnic conflict, then planning to support inter-ethnic water management boards may impact peace and security by helping communities communicate peacefully about how to manage water.

If a conflict assessment finds that government corruption is driving inequality and division among classes, then planning to support a community's capacities for monitoring and addressing corruption can impact peace and security by reducing corruption and empowering communities to participate in governance.

Change rarely happens in a “cause and effect” pattern with a theory such as “unemployment causes youth violence.” Conflict is more like a system where various factors interrelate with each other. Ideally integrated programs grow out of multiple theories of change. **Peacebuilding requires multiple theories of how change will take place in a complex and dynamic system of actors, levels, and interacting causes and effects.**

**Dynamic systems
require multiple
theories of change**

For example, an Iraqi NGO conducted a conflict assessment of the local context and found the lack of representative local decision-making bodies, inter-ethnic tensions, and economic deprivation were each important factors driving communities toward violence. To address these three interrelated drivers of conflict, the organization planned an integrated program to set up local community development councils made up of male and female representatives from different ethnic groups to foster local governance and incentivized inter-ethnic cooperation through offering micro-credit loans to multi-ethnic business proposals to foster economic development. The NGO identified multiple impacts. The communities where they worked were less susceptible to insurgent recruitment, experienced less violence, and developed sustainable programs that fostered viable economic systems.

Recommendations on Theories of Change

Here are some practical ideas on how to start developing lists and ideas about theories of change.¹

- *Listen carefully to metaphors.* What are the assumptions we make about how our programs and policies work? Do our metaphors hold within them a theory about how things work?
- *Task someone in the organization to interview staff members about their theories of change.* Ask each person in your organization to identify the underlying logic, the theory of change, in their work. Then hold a group discussion about similarities and differences in the theories of change in your organization.
- *Ask staff to add a “theory of change” section to their weekly, monthly, or trip reports.* Encourage regular reflection about how new information, conversations with other organizations and local people influence their ideas and assumptions about theories of change.
- *Identify the evidence-base for your theories of change.* What research supports your theories of change? What research confirms or calls into question your theories of change?
- *Compare organizational theories of change.* How does your assessment of what is driving and mitigating the conflict compare to other groups working in the region? How do your theories of change compare to theirs? Do your efforts work synergistically with each other in a dynamic system, or do your theories of change and interventions conflict with and undermine each other?

¹ Adapted from John Paul Lederach, Reina Neufeldt, and Hal Culbertson, *Reflective Peacebuilding: A Planning, Monitoring, and Learning Toolkit* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2007),

The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) is a global membership association of nearly 100 peacebuilding organizations, and a network of more than 15,000 people developing processes for change in complex conflict environments. AfP amplifies the strengths of its members and works collaboratively on issues that are too large for any one organization to tackle by itself.

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