



# PM4NGOs

## **Theory of Change** **Guide for Program Practitioners**

Supplemental to the Guide to  
Program Management in  
Development (PgMD Guide)

## Publisher

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This guide had also the strategic authorization from ActKnowledge and the Aspen Institute to use and adapt the Superwoman case study on the Part 2 of the document. We are grateful to them for this knowledge sharing and openness to contribute in our mission.

ActKnowledge  
[www.actknowledge.org](http://www.actknowledge.org)

ActKnowledge is an action research organization dedicated to working with community organizations, not-for-profits, foundations and governmental agencies to transform traditional institutions and environments for social change. ActKnowledge work with these organizations as partners in a process aimed at creating transformative knowledge through the interplay of learning and action.

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change  
[www.aspenroundtable.org](http://www.aspenroundtable.org)

The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change was established in 1992 as a forum for people who are engaged in the field of comprehensive community initiatives. Roundtable participants from foundations, program agencies, technical assistance providers, evaluators and public sector officials meet to discuss the lessons from initiatives across the country and to work on the common problems that they face.

**“We need some archipelagos of certainty to navigate on this sea of uncertainty”**

**Edgar Morin**

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## Forward

This document aims to be a guide to help to direct the design of a Theory of Change applied to social change processes.

We live in complex and dynamic times that full of uncertainty and a multitude of relations (identity, economic, social, geographical, political, cognitive, intercultural, institutional, historical, etc.), which has a direct impact on the social change and development processes for involving those to whom this guide is addressed.

A Theory of Change is grounded in our knowledge and experiences and helps us to organize our thoughts and determine the conditions that are needed to achieve desired change in a given context.

In working for social change, we believe that we will reach a better place by following a certain logic and change action. And we believe that we will better reach that desired change situation by acting on a series of conditions existing in the environment. That conviction about the possibility of a future that we believe to be better is a driving force to be celebrated. The problem emerges when our conviction becomes doctrine and we start believing that our future paradigm is the only viable and desirable one.

Developing a Theory of Change (ToC) provides us with a tool for framing and monitoring our actions, opening space for accountability to ourselves and to those stakeholders involved in the process.

While there are several ToC models available, this supplemental material to the Guide to Program Management in Development (PgMD Guide) focuses on the general knowledge and information about ToC, guiding readers step-by-step through the process from start to finish.

It is our hope that this supplementary guide becomes a practical toolkit for Program Managers, those interested in ToC, and stakeholders involved in establishing and successfully implementing development and humanitarian sector programs.

Sincerely,  
PM4NGOs

## Introduction

A Theory of Change provides a blueprint for the work ahead and anticipates its likely effects. A Theory of Change also guides us in determining what should be evaluated, when, and how. Developing a theory of change may sound complicated, but many program practitioners and social workers have found that the process can help to clarify and simplify the way we think about social change.

This guide for practitioners outlines some practical advantages of developing a Theory of Change within your organization, community and partners. In order to provide a solid understanding of the TOC, the document had been broken into 2 parts- Change Processes and Designing the Theory of Change.

The first part is dedicated to the understanding of change processes in social development and introduces key definitions and concepts, vocabulary, and dimensions of change. The objective is to provide a framework for a practical approach to change processes in social development initiatives. The tools are presented to evaluate, learn, and drive change.

The second part is a practical case study with consolidated references that illustrates the step-by-step process to fully design a TOC for social program management.

The second part demonstrates the practical process, utilizing the technical vocabulary introduced in the part 1.

At the end of the guide a glossary is provided to support the learning of all key concepts introduced in this guide.



## PART 1: Change Processes

### 1.1. What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change describes a process of planned social change, from the assumptions that guide its design to the long-term goals it seeks to achieve. A Theory of Change defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks — interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions — is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change/change framework, which is a graphic representation of the change process.

In short, a Theory of Change is:

- A visualization exercise that enables us to focus our energy on specific future realities which are not only desirable, but possible and probable
- A set of assumptions and abstract projections regarding how we believe reality could unfold in the immediate future, based on i) a realistic analysis of the current context, ii) a self-assessment about our capabilities of process facilitation, and iii) a critical and explicit review of our assumptions.
- An informed, thoughtful, and action-based approach that helps us to identify milestones and conditions that have to occur on the path towards the change that we want to contribute to happen.
- A multi-stakeholder and collaborative experiential learning exercise that encourages the development of the flexible rationale needed to analyze complex social change.
- A semi-structured change map that links our strategic actions to specific process results that we want to contribute to happen in our immediate environment.
- A process tool that helps us to monitor, consciously and critically, our individual and also collective way of thinking and acting.

It is as important to differentiate ToC from other approaches as to define what it is not. Therefore, a ToC is not:

- An absolute truth of how change has to happen, of how it is going to occur or even of how we want it to occur.
- A definitive recipe that eliminates the uncertainty existing in complex and emerging social processes.
- A substitute of the Logical Framework as a rigid planning tool.

Theory of change or Logic Model?

Some people use the terms “theory of change” and “logic model” interchangeably. Others say that it is important to maintain a distinction between the two. What do the two terms mean? And what’s the difference between them?

- A Theory of Change takes a wide perspective of a desired change, carefully probing the assumptions behind each step in what may be a long and complex process. Articulating a theory of change often entails thinking through all the steps along a path toward a desired change, identifying the preconditions that will enable (and possibly inhibit) each step, listing the activities that will produce those conditions, and explaining why those activities are likely to work. It is often, but not always, presented as a flow chart.

- A logic model takes a more narrow practical approach at the relationship between inputs and results. It is often presented as a table listing the steps from inputs or resources through the achievement of a desired program goal. Some grant makers use separate logic models to chart the implementation components of Theory of Change.

## 1.2. The Theory of Change Basic Vocabulary

Component	Description	Examples
<b>Vision of success or Long Term Outcome</b>	It is the most significant change expected, the target image, the desired high level change for a particular issue. The goal you want to reach which is the purpose of your program. All other outcomes on your framework are preconditions to this outcome.	Long-term, livable wage employment opportunities for survivor women who had been victims of domestic violence.
<b>Outcomes or Pre-conditions</b>	They are results - sufficient and necessary - key to achieving the vision of success. All outcomes, except the long-term outcome, are also preconditions. They are called preconditions because they are conditions that must exist in order for the next outcome in the pathway to be achieved. There are preconditions to primary level, secondary, tertiary, etc.	Survivors women attain coping skills Survivors women have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs Survivor know and have appropriate workplace behaviors
<b>Assumptions</b>	Represent situations outside the organizational control that influence the outcomes / preconditions. An assumption like a precondition is a condition that is necessary for your program's success. Unlike a precondition, it already is in place and does not need to be brought about. Assumptions are crucial because if they are incorrect it can completely alter how the program works	There are jobs available in non-traditional skills for women. Women are accepted in non-traditional skills marketplace. Women who have been abused need more than just skills, they need to be emotionally ready for work as well.
<b>Interventions</b>	Are initiatives or strategies to achieve outcomes / pre-conditions of a higher level. The things your program or group of stakeholders will undertake to bring about outcomes.	Set up counseling sessions Lead group sessions Identify potential employers Match survivor women to internships
<b>Pathway of Change</b>	Pathways are like a road map connecting several outcomes / preconditions from the current state to the vision of success. The sequence outcomes must occur in order to reach your long-term goal. Most initiatives have multiple pathways which lead to the long-term goal.	Enrolling women survivors in a non-traditional job training and providing concealing and negotiating with local businesses to reach the long-term, livable wage employment opportunities
<b>Indicators</b>	Measurable evidence of meeting a goal. Metrics to know if the successful implementation of the outcomes/preconditions had been or not reached. Each indicator needs to have four components: population, target, threshold and timeline.	Outcome: Survivors women have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs Indicator: Program graduation Population: Survivors women from domestic violence
<b>Threshold</b>	For a specific indicator, is the value when the change happens. How much is believed to be needed for the outcome be achieved.	Target: 60% of Survivors women from domestic violence Threshold: 90 % of graduation final test approval Timeline: Before the 5 <sup>th</sup> month of the program

Table 1: The Theory of Change Vocabulary

### 1.3. Dimensions of Change

In this section, some conceptual elements will be introduced to help in more comprehensively understanding of Theory of Change fundamentals.

Social change processes want to take us into the unknown. Any change process requires comprehensive thinking and an actionable approach that makes it possible to attain, maintain, and nurture the vision of change.

The diagram<sup>1</sup> below articulates how to generate an analysis around the different dimensions of change needed to achieve sustainable success with Theory of Change design process. Integrating different types of initiatives, the change process is designed in an integrated and clearly articulated way. This helps to propose more pertinent institutional actions and to develop a more collaborative and clear relationship with other initiatives led by other actors which are already underway.

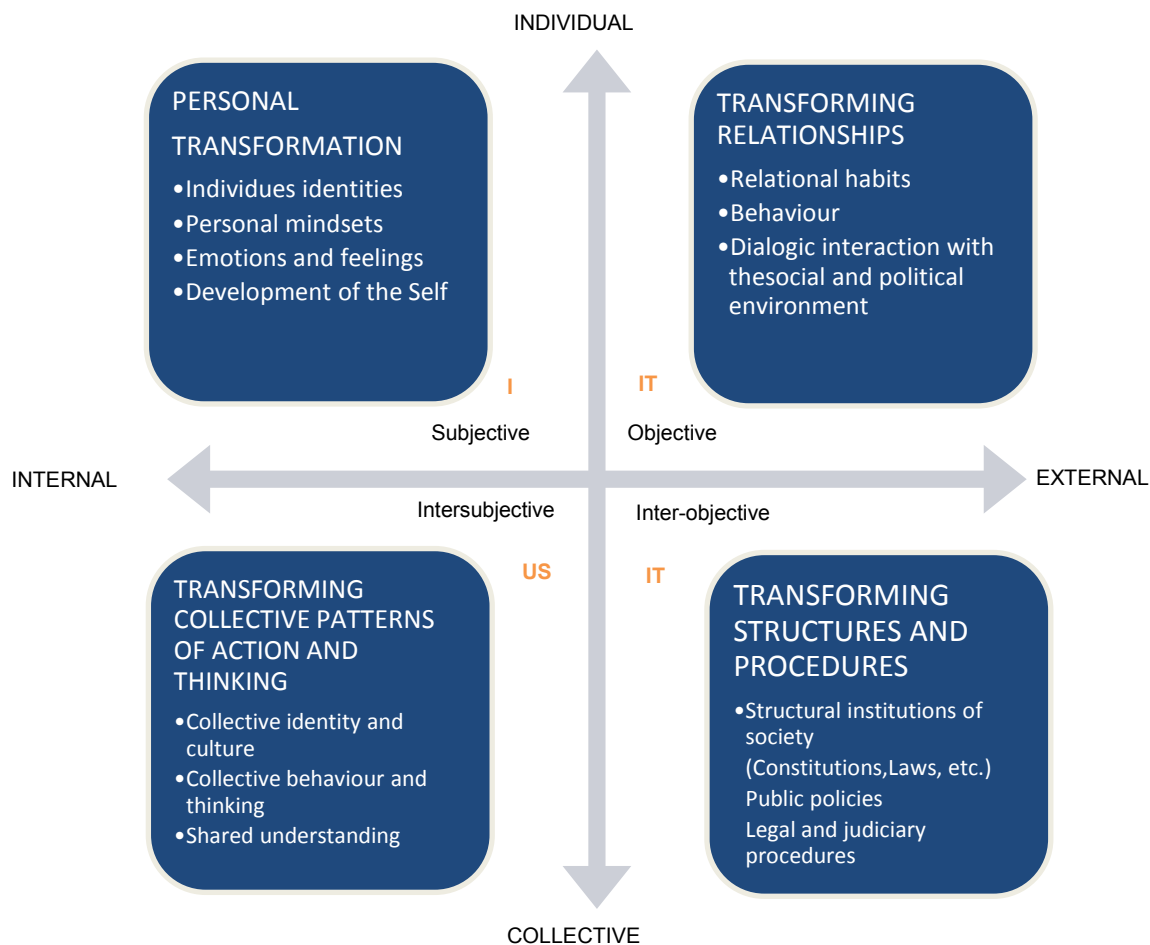


Figure 1: Dimensions of Change

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Theory Of Change - Iñigo Retolaza Eguren - UNDP/Hivos, 2011

Here are some examples of different initiatives that relate to those four dimensions:

<b>Transforming the Self:</b>	Individual training and self-reflection according to context and experience, activities to encourage the practice of reflection in a professional setting (reflexive practice), recognition and management of multiple identities, identification and modification of one's mindsets, introspection and personal development.
<b>Transforming our Relationships:</b>	Creation and facilitation of spaces for multi-stakeholder encounters, spaces for dialogue, initiatives to coordinate agendas among multiple actors, spaces for deliberation and public conversation, resolution and/or management of relational conflicts, exchange of experiences based on situational contexts, participatory action-learning processes, learning peers, etc.
<b>Transforming Cultural Patterns</b>	Campaigns to raise awareness and mass communication, advocacy towards opinion forming media, changes in the collective perception of others (i.e. racism, discrimination based on identity, social acceptance of marginalized groups ), actions aimed at specific segments of the population depending on the situation (e.g. intra-family violence and its effect on husbands, wives, sons and daughters), activities designed to modify cultural and social patterns of exclusion or dysfunctional collective habits, etc.
<b>Transforming Structural Institutions</b>	Support for constitutional change processes, lobby on key legislative reforms, promotion of social control processes related to public policy, support for decentralization processes aimed at social development and the eradication of poverty, educational and health reforms, change of economic models, change and/or creation of formal and non-formal institutions, etc.

Questions to consider when reflecting on and designing our Theory of Change

- What type of change are we visualizing?
- How can we develop a more flexible thought logic?
- What are the implications of using rigid logic to facilitate complex social change processes?
- On which social levels do we want to generate change?
- How influential is our way of thinking when it comes to facilitating processes of social change?
- What relationship patterns do we need to develop in order to make our Theory of Change useful to our purposes?
- What social and cultural factors do we need to consider when it comes to designing our Theory of Change?
- What dimension of change predominates in the action of our organization?
- What are the implications of concentrating on one sole dimension of change?
- How do we integrate the different dimensions in our Theory of Change?

- What type of activities or initiatives can we develop for each dimension of change?
- What alliances do we need to put in place as to approach our processes in a more comprehensive way?
- Which formal and/or informal institutions can help us to speed up our change process?
- What could be the points of departure for institutional change in our Theory of Change?
- How do the formal and informal institutions interact and shape our organization/society?

#### 1.4. Assumptions, Pre-conditions and Change

The rationale of the Theory of Change develops from an understanding of the premises and assumptions that change protagonists use to understand and act on reality.

The process of designing a Theory of Change emphasizes changing the paradigm from which actors define reality. Action taken to transform reality will derive from looking at reality in a new way. In other words, when approaching social problems from a different perspective our thinking and action regarding the resolution or management of complex problems, we assume to be able to achieve different (and better) results than we could have accomplished without this paradigm shift.

##### **Assumption:**

Something that you accept as true without question or proof.

*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

The act of taking for granted; Something taken for granted or accepted as true without proof; a supposition.

*Webster's New World College Dictionary*

One aspect that is a characteristic of the Theory of Change is the emphasis placed on intensifying and deepening the reflection process of the key actors, at least of those designing and supporting the desired change process. Not only is it a matter of analyzing and identifying the conditions necessary for defining the path to be pursued, but also of explaining how we arrive at those conclusions and the thought process by which we arrive at certain arguments and reasoning. The Theory of Change obliges us to constantly and repeatedly review the assumptions we use for interpreting reality so to better qualify our argumentation.

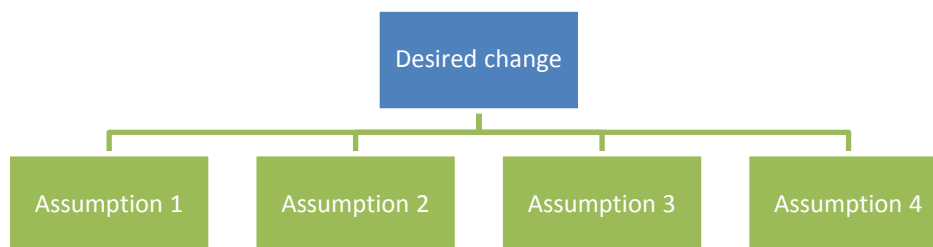


Figure 2: Assumptions and pre-conditions – key concept for TOC

Questions to consider when reflecting on and designing a Theory of Change:

- What initial assumptions support our Desired Change?
- With whom have we shared and vetted them?
- What are we not seeing that we need to see?
- What assumptions should we reconsider over time?
- How does our identity(ies) and past life experience affect the configuration of our assumptions?
- What mechanisms do we have for explaining and reviewing our assumptions?
- What methods (individual and peer-to-peer) are available to us for intensifying our internal reflection process?
- How do we react emotionally when someone questions our assumptions?

### 1.5. Backward Mapping Flow and Pathways of Change

The TOC process hinges on defining all of the necessary and sufficient conditions required to bring about a given long term outcome. TOC uses backward mapping requiring planners to think in backward steps from the long-term goal to the intermediate and then early-term changes that would be required to cause the desired change. This creates a set of connected outcomes known as a “pathway of change”. A pathway of change graphically represents the change process as it is understood by the initiative planners and is the skeleton around which the other elements of the theory are developed.

During the process of creating the pathway of change, participants are required to articulate as many of their assumptions about the change process as they can so that they can be examined and tested to determine if any key assumptions are difficult to support (or even false).

The ToC approach to planning is designed to encourage very clearly defined outcomes at every step of the change process. Users are required to specify a number of details about the nature of the desired change — including specifics about the target population, the amount of change required to signal success, and the timeframe over which such change is expected to occur.

Theory of Change is essentially a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused on mapping out or “filling in” what has been described as the “missing middle” between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved. It does this by first identifying the desired long-term goals and then works back from these to identify all the conditions (outcomes) that must be in place (and how these related to one another causally) for the goals to occur. These are all mapped out in an Outcomes Framework.

The Outcomes Framework then provides the basis for identifying what type of activity(ies) or intervention(s) will lead to the outcomes identified as preconditions for achieving the long-term goal. Through this approach the precise link between activities and the achievement of the long-term goals are more fully understood. This leads to better planning, in that activities are linked to a detailed understanding of how change actually happens. It also leads to better evaluation, as it is possible to measure progress towards the achievement of longer-term goals that goes beyond the identification of program outputs.

## 1.6. Change Phases

Change processes are dynamic and complex. They evolve as a result of dynamic and emergent interactions that continuously go through different stages. Although we may plan to promote, actively, certain interactions and change processes, the result emerging from them is quite uncertain and cannot be fully controlled. To simplify, every process of change passes through four main phases<sup>2</sup>:



<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Theory of Change - Iñigo Retolaza Eguren - UNDP/Hivos, 2011

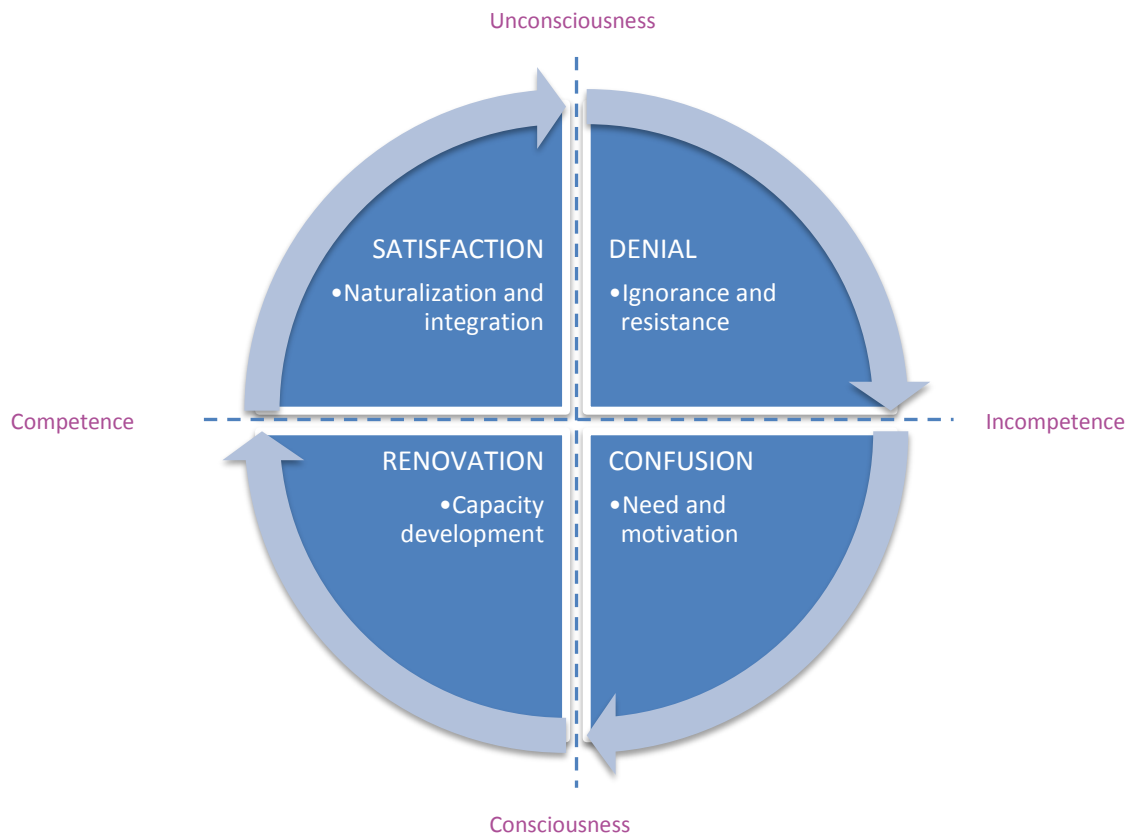


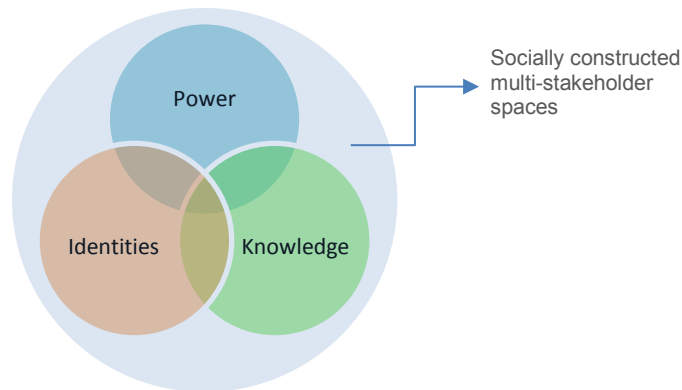
Figure 3: Change Cycle

Questions to consider when reflecting on and designing a Theory of Change:

- How can we communicate the need for change to those around us?
- What are the points of resistance that we find in ourselves and others?
- What are the causes of resistance to change?
- What strategies are we going to implement in order to move from a state of confusion to one of renovation?
- How can we facilitate the creation of conditions to sustain the new changes?

### 1.7. Change Stakeholders

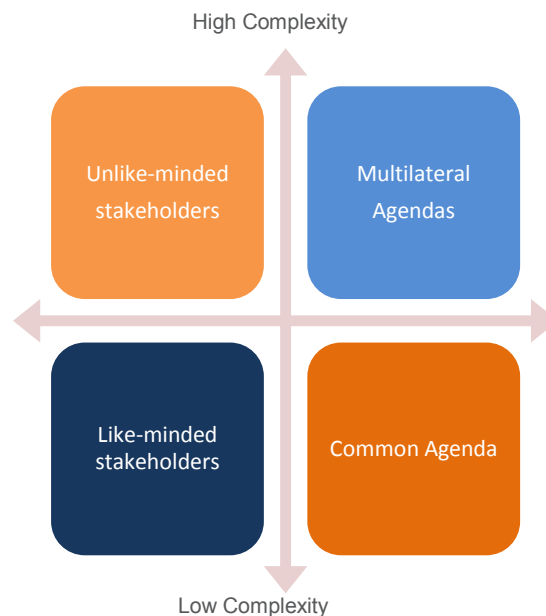
In every participatory process there is a direct relationship between power, knowledge, and interests of the actors involved. Some dynamics of power can help to integrate in a (more) horizontal and inclusive manner of the different types of knowledge that exist among the actors who participate in the process. In contrast, an oppressive use of power by the powerful can restrict the possibility of recognizing and acknowledging, as valid and relevant, certain identities and types of knowledge. The level of inclusiveness of ongoing power dynamics and structures determines the quality of interactions between different knowledges and identities.



*Figure 4: Stakeholders Relationships and Dynamics*

In the diagram above we find overlapping spaces where interactions are more fluid and the boundaries are blurred. These are the spaces where facilitators of social change processes move. These are spaces that open the possibility for new realities to emerge since actors interact in ways that do not necessarily reproduce existing power dynamics or oppressive institutions. These are creative spaces where actors are free and able to think and have dialogue in different and new ways.

The degree of social complexity, with respect to the quality and effectiveness of the interaction that exists between these people and their agendas, will determine, in one way or another, how collaborative, inclusive, and effective the process of change will be in relation to the achievement of the desired change. At the same time, it will help to understand the degree and quality of interaction between the different stakeholder networks in which we must operate.



*Figure 5: Managing Complexity within Change Stakeholders*

The diagram above shows the levels of complexity we may find in any social change process. Those processes involving few like-minded stakeholders (same interests, similar identities) are considered of low social complexity. The existence of many not like-minded stakeholders (diverse and many times confronted interests, positioning and identities) increases the level of social complexity of our process.

**Influence Analysis.** This map focuses on the actors' capacity, - either today or in the future - to influence the process of change. This type of analysis can be combined with the first, by identifying the actors according to sector, and then positioning them in the quadrants of the influence map.

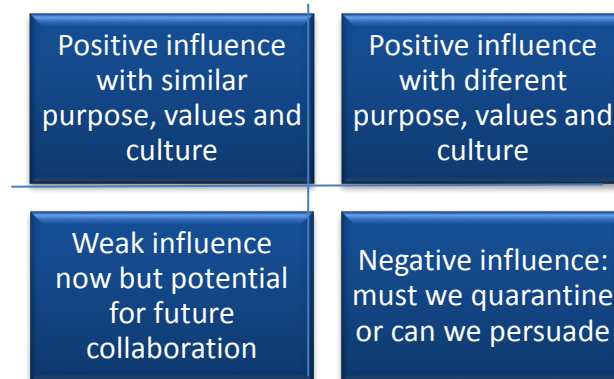


Figure 5: Influence Analysis within Change Stakeholders

**Analysis of Position Based on Interest:** In this case, the aim is to identify the position of the party in question, or 'stakeholder', on the basis of their interest with regards to the desired change. Actors are identified and analyzed on the basis of three categories: movers, floaters and blockers.

- ❖ **Movers** are those social organizations, public entities, private corporations, key individuals, political parties, donor agencies, etc. committed to contributing to the desired change and they are to be found in the innermost circle. There is greater affinity in their interests and it is reasonably easy to establish constructive relationship areas and strategic alliances between them.
- ❖ **Blockers** are those who are against the process, due to their own interests being negatively affected. They may also block the process because they do not have the necessary information to help them understand that it is possible to incorporate their interests through negotiation/mediation processes. Similarly, they may be blocking the process because of a question of inertia and historical lack of trust or rivalry with the movers or the subject of change (for example, big landowners blocking a redistributive agrarian reform process).
- ❖ **Floaters** are those who occupy a position somewhere in between these two: they do not positively block the process, but neither do they actively support it. These actors may also change position (become a blocker or mover), depending on i) what is most beneficial to their own interests, ii) how movers or blockers influence and communicate with them.

Once all of the key actors have been identified and classified in terms of sector and their positioning with regards to the desired change, the first step is to carry out an analysis of interests. Then identify groups/alliances that block or move the change process; and finally define possible strategies with regard to i) like-minded collective action (movers and some floaters), and ii) strategic lobby on not like-minded key actors (some floaters and blockers). The aim of this last process is to study which strategies would help to win over floaters, neutralize or divide blockers, and/or strengthen alliances between movers.

## 1.8. Learning, Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

This section focuses on promoting the relationship that must exist between learning, monitoring, and accountability. This is a relationship that, in practice, is not particularly clear, but it is essential to explain it and give it due attention. Let's look at some theoretical elements that will help us to better understand the importance of learning in processes of social change.

A first approach to learning is based 4 stages from past experiences. *concrete experience* (experience gained through practice), *reflective observation* (analysis deriving from the application of certain questions and analytical lenses to our concrete experience), *abstract conceptualization* (summary of the theory and updating of assumptions made, based on our reflective observation), and *active experimentation* (our direct action in the real world, based on what we have reflected on and learnt as a result of our experience).

The second approach has to do with looking at the future as it emerges. This is *emerging learning* responding to the question: *What do we need to learn from the emerging future?* This question helps us to develop new capacities in the present moment based on what we need to know how to do and see in the future we are proposing (our Theory of Change).

In the case of multi-stakeholder processes, this framework is enriched by elements of collaborative learning, in which it is recognized that the individual is a social being and therefore needs to interact with other peers, groups, and society as a whole to consolidate his or her learning process. In other words, in order to expand and accelerate her learning curve, the individual needs more contextualized, deeper, and richer learning processes.

Finally, we need to link these learning spaces and dynamics with the accountability mechanisms and processes that every organization has (local and international NGOs, grassroots organizations, social movements, civil associations, public bodies, etc.).

This involves adjusting the design of progress reports on activities, integrate new actors in the monitoring and evaluation processes, convening public hearings, and taking into account the learning dynamics suggested. These must be more participative, integrate various mindsets, interests and identities, recognize diversity, be flexible, and sustained in local practice.

In conclusion, the facilitation of multi-stakeholder learning spaces for social change demands the integration of our learning (experiential and emergent) with i) more transparent mechanisms for accountability, and ii) monitoring systems which are more participatory and inclusive. These are monitoring systems which are designed not only to satisfy the needs of any given organization/donor but also to promote social (un)learning, involving a broad set of stakeholders who are all engaged in the change process supported by our programs and projects.

Questions to consider when reflecting on and designing our Theory of Change

- Who defines and participates in our accountability and monitoring system?
- How do we learn, as individuals and as a group, from our past and future?
- How can we, as social change organizations, facilitate spaces for broader and more reflexive social learning?

- What are the mechanisms to be implemented in order to include a more diverse set of actors in our learning, monitoring, and accountability systems?
- What are the strategies we use to integrate our learning into our actions?
- What are the methods we need to use in order to communicate our learning and monitoring to a broad and diverse constellation of stakeholders?

## 2. PART 2: Design Process for Theory of Change

In this second part we will walk in a real Theory of Change case adapted from “Superwomen”. We would like to thank ActKnowledge, Superwomen founders and staff for their generous permission to use their experience as an example for this publication.

ActKnowledge facilitated the program design and evaluation processes. New Destiny Housing Corporation, the lead agency for Superwomen, has graciously allowed ActKnowledge to use their program as an example for case study.

Superwomen is a program. Theories of change are often used for single programs like this. However, a strength of the Theory of Change approach is that it can be used for initiatives that may comprise many programs and partners. For the purposes of a tutorial to convey the basic processes and concepts, we will stick with a single program.

The Theory of Change Process Flow had been here concentrated in 7 stages:

1. Preparation work to ensure that the TOC is aligned with the overall internal and external organizational ecosystem
2. Identifying long-term goals
3. Backwards mapping and connecting the preconditions or requirements necessary to achieve that goal and explaining why these preconditions are necessary and sufficient.
4. Identifying the interventions that your initiative will perform to create your desired change.
5. Developing indicators to measure your outcomes to assess the performance of your initiative.
6. Writing a narrative to explain the logic of your initiative.
7. Integration management



## 2.1. Preparation work

Before beginning the ToC process, participants need to think carefully about:

- Their ultimate goal for the initiative, the desired change that will take place;
- Their purpose for how they want to use their theory (e.g. internal decision making, on-going check-in, evaluation, reporting to donors, presentations to Board members, constituents and/or partners);
- Their resources and capabilities;
- Who should be at the table, which stakeholders to involve.

The preparation work should ensure that all the information has been collected before the start of ToC process and is available to all participants engaged. This design process might vary from one organization to the other, however, some good practices that are recommended are to:

- **Set Initial Governance Structure:** Identifying a group of people that will be responsible to lead the overall ToC effort from start to finish is critical as ToC is a challenging work.
- **Conduct Context Analysis:** A context analysis helps us to understand the root causes of the present state, identifying possible assumptions needed for change to happen. It helps us to understand the implications of focusing on particular pathways in a theory of change, including what unique value we may bring to actors already working on certain issues.
- **Identify Program Stakeholders:** Although the ToC had not yet been designed, participants should have an initial definition of the primary and secondary level of stakeholders.
- **Identify Initial Risks and Opportunities:** During the ToC process, it is important to promote further efficient risk management processes and identify potential opportunities.

Superwomen is a real program that started as a collaboration between a social service provider, a non-profit employment training center, and a domestic violence shelter to help female abuse survivors to create long-term, livable wage employment opportunities for women who had been victims of domestic violence. The three organizations began their program with two basic assumptions (which are integral to their theory of change):

1. Non-traditional jobs, such as electrical, plumbing, carpentry, building management provide better wages and more opportunities for upward mobility and are more likely to have unions. Therefore, job stability and good wages are more likely if women are trained in these areas.
2. Women who have been through domestic abuse need more than job training to move to economic stability. They need to develop coping skills, workplace behaviors, and have child care available. They also need to be able to manage crises in their lives and such events as court appearances and dealing with the foster care system. If these aspects of their lives are not taken into account, any job training will not likely lead to permanent employment.

## 2.2. Identify Goals and Assumptions

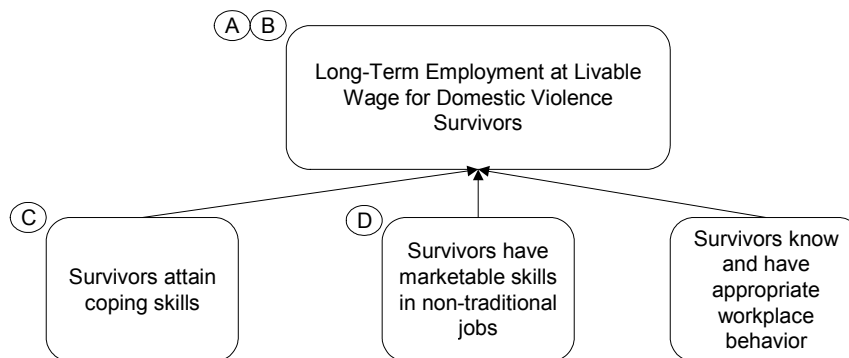
The elaboration of a Theory of Change begins **not** with the identification of a problem to be resolved, but rather with the creative, appreciative, and positive visualization of a situation that we wish to attain at a later time. The desired change represents a combination of conditions, relationships, and results that we wish to occur in the years to come as a result of our action in the context of the present and the future.

The long-term goal, the desired change must be plausible. It is necessary to concentrate on changes in and among individuals, organizations, social structures, cultural patterns, and institutions on which our organization can really influence.

In the first stage of theory development, ToC participants discuss, agree on, and get specific about the long-term goal or goals. This can be done in a variety of ways, but the important thing is to set a good, clear outcome. The quality of the rest of the theory hinges on doing this right!

Then, ToC participants start to design a simple map of the preconditions required to bring about the long-term goal. Beginning the mapping process helps stakeholders to visualize and prioritize their goals as well as specify what they expect to change and for which outcomes they want to be held accountable.

### Identifying Goals and Outcomes



### Commentary

For this example, the long-term outcome is the long-term employment of domestic violence survivors at a livable wage. To achieve that goal, the program designers<sup>3</sup> identify three preconditions: survivors attain coping skills, survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs and survivors know and have appropriate workplace behavior. The program designers identified these preconditions from their experience and from research. To illustrate the logical importance of the three preconditions, we use solid, arrowed lines to show that the preconditions **MUST** come before the final long-term outcome.

<sup>3</sup> In this example, we call those creating the TOC the program designers. It signifies that staff from the three collaborating agencies are responsible in this case for the program plan. Often, however, other stakeholders are included in the TOC process, such as people who will be served by the initiative, or people knowledgeable in some area (e.g. employment training or domestic violence) that can bring a needed perspective to the table. When not referring to this example specifically, we call anyone involved in creating the TOC, “the TOC participants”.

### *Assumptions and Justifications*

As previously discussed, the program designers realized that the program could only effectively work with women who had already begun to stabilize their lives. Any initiative is only as sound as its assumptions. Unfortunately, these assumptions are too often unvoiced or presumed frequently leading to confusion and misunderstanding in the operation and evaluation of the initiative. To address that problem, TOC documents assumptions to ensure agreement for planning and posterity.

**For the long-term outcome: “Long-term employment at livable wages for domestic violence survivors”, these assumptions must be met for the outcome to be achievable:**

- A. There are jobs available in non-traditional skills for women.
- B. Jobs in non-traditional areas of work for women, such as electrical, plumbing, carpentry and building management are more likely to pay livable wages and are more likely to be unionized and provide job security. Some of these jobs also provide a ladder of upward mobility, from apprenticeship to master, giving entry-level employees a career future.

These two assumptions make explicit why the participants believe this program can work: there are jobs in non-traditional work and that those jobs can offer better financial and professional opportunities.

**For the outcome: “Survivors attain coping skills”, (which is also a precondition of the long-term outcome): the assumption is:**

- C. Women who have been abused need more than just skills, they need to be emotionally ready for work as well.

Again, this assumption clarifies why and how this program is different from traditional job training programs, i.e., the special psychological supports needed for the initiative’s clients.

**For the outcome: “Survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs”, it is assumed that:**

- D. Women can learn non-traditional skills and compete in the marketplace.

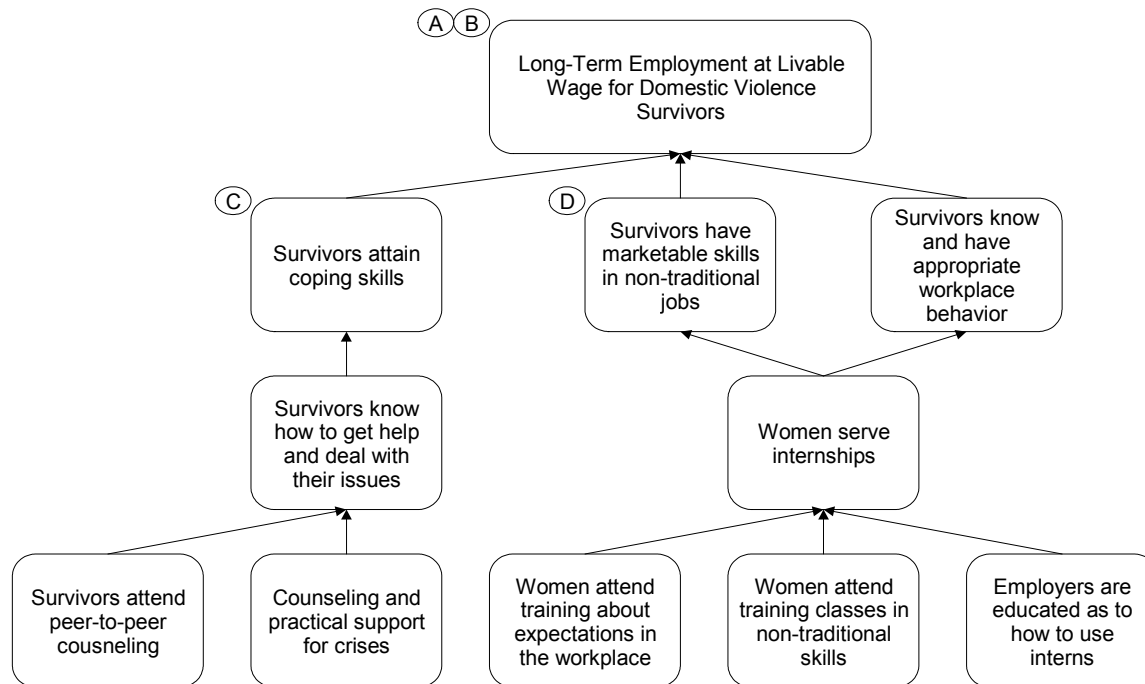
This assumption is an article of faith that women can compete and succeed in this new labor market.

Documenting assumptions and justifications is a continuous process. As outcomes are added and moved on the framework, it remains necessary to question and explain how and why they are necessary.

## 2.3. Backwards mapping and connecting outcomes

After the first step of laying out the initial expectations and a simple change framework, comes a more detailed stage of the mapping process. Building upon the initial framework, we continue to map backwards until we have a framework that tells the story we think is appropriate for the purposes of planning. Sometimes, this will require much more detail because stakeholders want to identify the “root” causes of the problem they hope to resolve. In other cases, the map will illustrate three or four levels of change, which display a reasonable set of early and intermediate steps toward the long-term goal.

Because this work is challenging and most social change programs or broader initiatives have a lot of moving parts, change frameworks usually go through many revisions. Outcomes are added, moved and deleted until a map eventually emerges that tells a story the group can agree on. For the users, the debate is often the most valuable component of ToC because they are now jointly defining the expectations, assumptions and features of the change process. ToC participants are required to make explicit, and agree upon, the underlying logic of the initiative improving which improves the productivity and accountability.



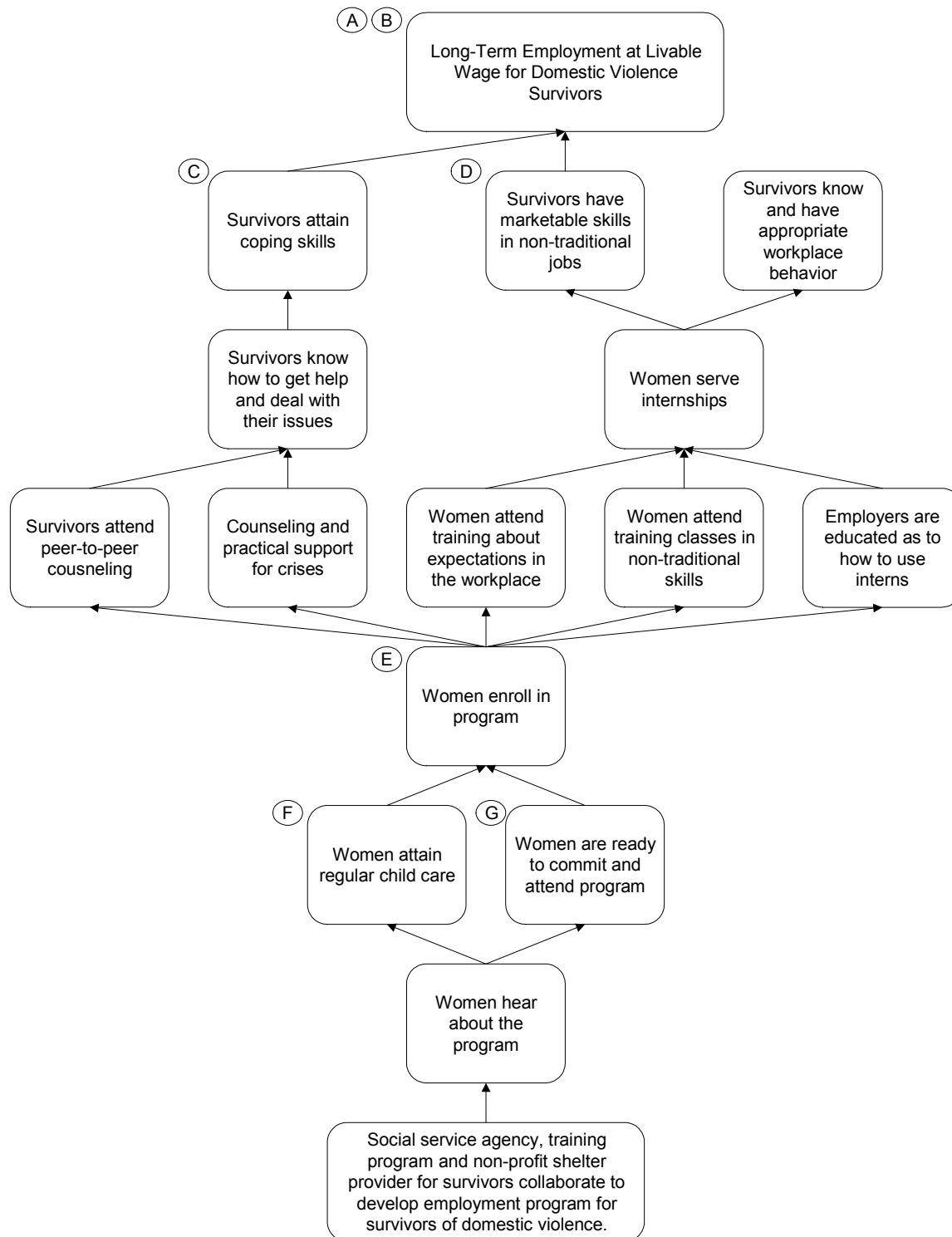
### Commentary

For Superwomen example, program designers asked themselves what women would need if they were going to have long-term employment. Specifically, how would the project’s participants achieve the three identified preconditions (coping skills, marketable skills, and appropriate workplace behavior) to the ultimate outcome? That required identifying what it would take for women to achieve coping skills, job skills and knowledge of workplace behavior.

### Drawing Connections

In this stage, we continue illustrating how the long-term outcomes are linked to the intermediate ones. In the previous map, we connected the final long-term outcome of employment at a livable wage to the three intermediate outcomes with solid, arrowed lines, indicating that they are preconditions. This process holds true for the intermediate outcomes as well. For “Survivors know how to get help and deal with their issues” we use arrowed lines to show that the two outcomes below it are direct preconditions of it.

Illustrating connections helps to spot-check the initiative’s logic as well as identifying where the initiative should intervene. Following the logical path from outcome to proposed precondition often points out inconsistencies. ToC participants are able to readjust their frameworks and drop or add outcomes as necessary. They also understand when these outcomes will take place on their own or require an intervention by the initiative to make it happen, such as a program activity.



### Commentary

This framework continues, fleshing all the way back to the initial condition—a coalition of organizations working to develop employment programs for domestic violence survivors. Again, explaining preconditions remains important, therefore, for “Women enroll in program” the assumption is:

E. The program cannot help all women and so entry into the program must include screening so that women who have sufficient literacy and math skills to take the training, and lives stable enough to attend classes are admitted. The program does not have the resources to handle providing basic skills or major social services.

Early on in the planning process, the group realized that they only had the resources to provide assistance to women who had already begun to stabilize their own lives. The program could take care of the temporary issues, such as emergency housing but not something more permanent or serious, such as substance abuse.

Because of the relative simplicity of this framework, it seems as if the connections are all givens. At this stage, you might think: “If it’s below another outcome, then it must be a precondition. Why all the arrowed lines?” While in this example it is not difficult to organize preconditions, in more complex frameworks, boxes can be near each other without a direct relationship, connections can be made across the framework, etc. For the clarity of the framework, connections are irreplaceable.

## 2.4. Developing Indicators

The Indicators stage is when details are added to the change framework. This stage focuses on how to measure the implementation and effectiveness of the initiative. By collecting data on each outcome, the initiative can identify what it is or isn’t happening and find out why.

Each indicator has four parts: population, target, threshold and timeline. But you can forget the jargon. Simply put, for each indicator you want to ask:

Who is changing? (women enrolled in the program)

How many do we expect will succeed? (perhaps 90% of the enrolled women)

How much is good enough? (a \$12 per hour job for at least six months?)

By when does this outcome need to happen? (perhaps within two months of graduation)

More specifically, the terminology of the indicators can be described as:

- **Indicator:** The actual variable being measured, such as average test scores or proficiency in a particular skill.
- **Population:** The group that you are measuring, such as a program’s clients.
- **Threshold:** The minimum criteria needed for the outcome to be successfully achieved. (E.g., the threshold for a successful election between two candidates is 51% of the vote; if there were three or more candidates, the threshold would be lower, because only a majority of the votes would be required to be successful.)

Here are some sample indicators for Project Superwomen:

Goal/Outcome	Indicator	Population	Threshold
<b>Long-Term Goal: Long-term employment at a livable wage for domestic violence survivors</b>	Employment	Program Graduates	Remain in the job for at least 6 months and ear at least \$12/hour.
<b>Outcome 1: Survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs</b>	Skill level in electrical, plumbing carpentry or building maintenance	Program Participants	Successfully complete internships.
<b>Outcome 2: Survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs</b>	Program Graduation	Program Participants	Graduation (Yes/No)
<b>Outcome 2: Women attend training classes in non-traditional skills</b>	Attendance	Program Participants	Women attend and miss no more than 3 classes.

## 2.5. Identifying Interventions

After laying out the near complete change framework, we now focus on the role of interventions (those things that the program-or projects-must do to bring about outcomes).

### Interventions

At this stage, note that some arrows have solid lines while others are dashed. The solid lines represent connections that will occur without the need for intervention. As long as the prior preconditions are met, these outcomes will be met. We represent interventions, an initiative's program activities, as arrows with dashed lines for three reasons:

1. We believe the outcomes those arrows lead to *will not* occur at a sufficient level without an intervention.
2. They represent *actions* by the initiative and thus something that the initiative is responsible for
3. Because these outcomes are control variables, they need to be measured to evaluate the interventions' effectiveness.

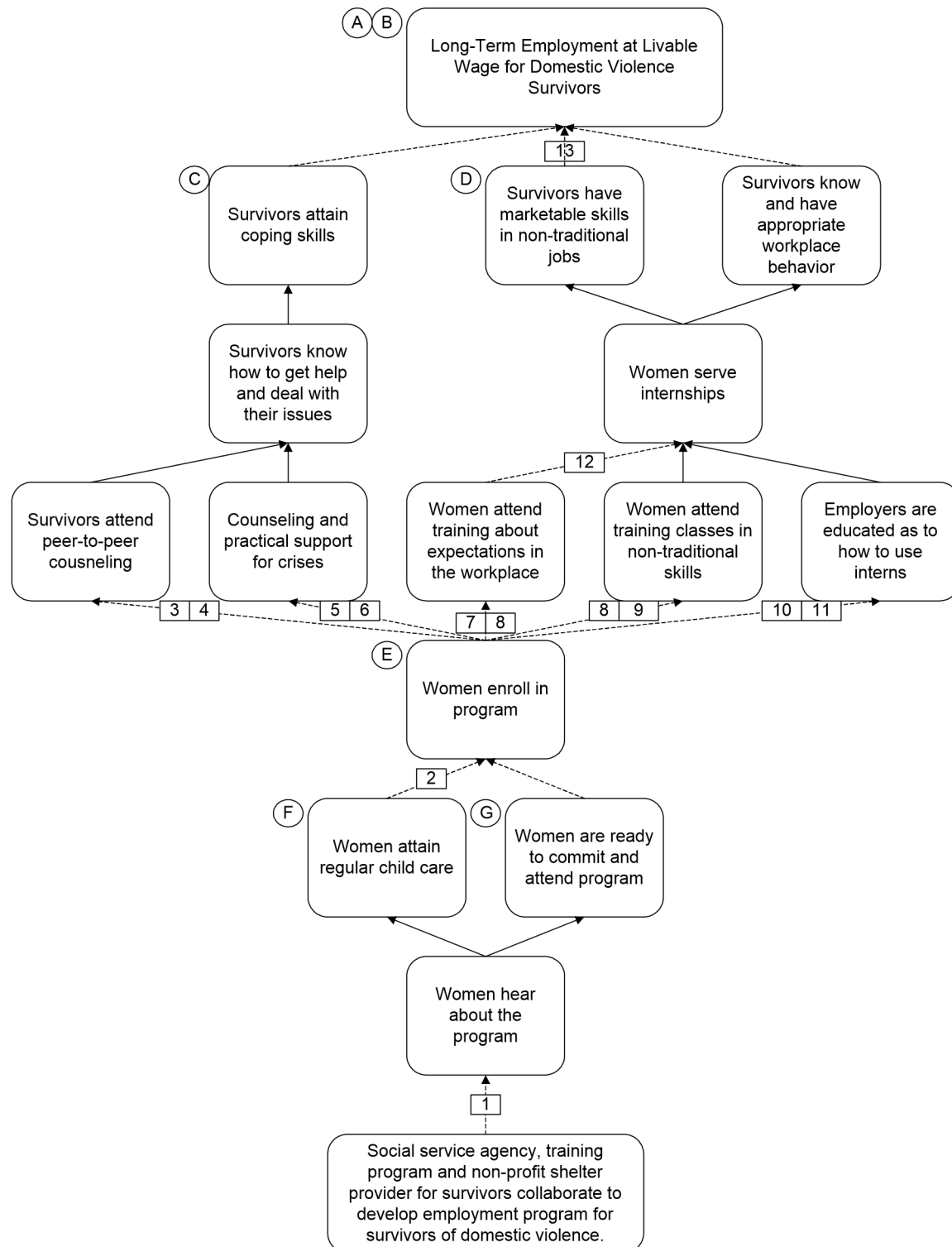
By identifying interventions, the stakeholders explain how their work is going to change the community. Until this point, the change framework has been like a recipe without directions, a literal listing of intermediate ingredients, and until this point our "recipe" hasn't explained how these components are used and put together. The interventions explain what the stakeholders are going to do to achieve their desired outcomes. Hence the first intervention (1), an outreach campaign, is of course necessary to

publicize the program. While this example seems obvious, the point is again to be clear about what the stakeholders expect the initiative to do—something that is often taken for granted, but never clearly or consistently expressed.

We also identify each intervention with boxed numbers. Often a dashed interventions arrow will have multiple boxes because the outcome requires multiple activities for it to happen.

### Spot Checking

At every stage of the ToC process, there is a need for stakeholders to question whether new revelations reveal an inconsistency in their logic: Does specifying interventions highlight an important gap in the Outcomes framework? Do any of the assumptions suggest an additional change pathway (with additional early and intermediate outcomes)? Stakeholders should ask themselves if what they are creating “makes sense” by thinking about whether their map reflects a plausible theory, and whether the set of interventions are actually feasible for them to implement, given the resources they have at their disposal.



### Commentary

Boxed numbers represent the interventions 1-14. Clearly, this initiative plans many interventions to serve its potential clients and popularize the program.

### Interventions

1. Outreach campaign
2. Screening
3. Set up counseling sessions
4. Lead group sessions
5. Help provide for short-term crises, such as housing evictions or court appearances
6. Provide one-on-one counseling
7. Develop curricular in electrical, plumbing, carpentry and building maintenance
8. Conduct classes
9. Curricula and experiential learning situations developed
10. Identify potential employers
11. Create employer database
12. Match women to internships
13. Help women secure permanent jobs

Referring to the criteria we established earlier, we can see how they apply to Project Superwomen's interventions:

#### Intervention 1: Outreach Campaign

1. We believe the outcomes those arrows lead to *will not* occur at a sufficient level without an intervention. Clearly, without an outreach campaign, Superwomen would have little chance of achieving the next outcome "Women hear about the program". No matter how great the program might be, if there were no outreach, utilization would probably be low.
2. They represent *actions* by the initiative and thus something that the initiative is responsible for. The outreach campaign is to be performed/led by the Superwomen staff so they are definitely responsible for how well it is designed and implemented.
3. Since these outcomes are control variables, they need to be measured to evaluate the interventions' effectiveness. To achieve its long-term goal for its clients, employment at a livable wage, the staff of the collaborating organizations will want to ensure that they are doing the job right. What clients, funders, and program staff want and need are results. If Project Superwomen is to work then information about the program has to reach these women in need.

## 2.6. Writing the Narrative

After completing the indicators and the framework, including assumptions, justifications, and interventions, the participants have to wrap it all up. We have found that writing a narrative—a meta-description of the program—is an excellent final step for the TOC design process. The users are forced to take a step back from the intellectual abstraction of boxes, arrows and numbers and translate their initiative into normal language. For TOC users, this provides both a final spot-check as well as another tool to intuitively understand the initiative. After capturing an initiative's multiple levels of change, it can be difficult to describe it again in normal language. The narrative helps to bridge that gap by emphasizing the most important components and pathways, so that the users can again see how the initiative creates their desired change.

The narrative also helps stakeholders explain their program to outsiders. Backed up by the change framework, the narrative can give stakeholders confidence in the logical underpinnings of the program. Writing the narrative makes it possible to coherently explain how the sequence and interventions make change possible.

### Components of a Narrative

A good narrative sums up the initiative's story. The narrative typically starts from the beginning with the background and goals explaining why they are important and how the initiative's work achieves the goals. Required elements of a narrative include:

A narrative typically includes:

- Background: What is the context and the need
- Long-term goal: The ultimate desired outcome
- Intermediate goals: What and how these goals are important for themselves as well as for the ultimate goal.
- Assumptions and Justifications: The facts or reasons behind the initiative's features
- Interventions: The initiative's activities and programs
- Program Logic: The understanding that guides every step of the initiative

A well-written narrative includes enough detail to clearly capture the program's goals, but only enough to emphasize the unity of logic and action.

### Final Narrative

Superwomen was founded as a collaboration of a social service provider, a nonprofit employment-training center, and a non-profit shelter provider for female domestic violence victims. The group's goal was to help women obtain a type of employment that would keep them out of poverty, off public assistance while providing stability and upward mobility. The group chose jobs in electrical, plumbing, carpentry and building maintenance because they provided entry-level positions, possible union membership, and opportunities for advancement at livable wages.

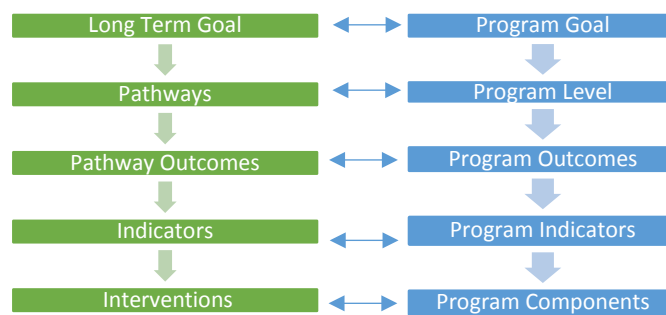
Based on the assumptions that women can learn non-traditional skills and that employers could be identified that would hire them, the project's goal was to provide both the training and support needed by this population in order to enter and remain in the workforce. The group believed that most of the women they could train would be single mothers, coming from abusive situations and would need psycho-emotional counseling, especially regarding low self-esteem and impaired coping skills. They also recognized that even women whose lives are fairly stable might face crises from time to time requiring practical help or psychological support. For some of the women who had not worked before, the group included training in non-traditional skills, training in workplace expectations and intensive psychological supports.

Based on their resources, the group decided that they could provide assistance with some crises, such as housing evictions or court appearances, but could not be responsible for completely stabilizing the lives of their clients. This dictated their screening process ensuring that new women entering the program had already settled major issues, such as housing, substance abuse, or foster care.

## 2.7. Integration Management

The diagram below illustrates a simplified integration, based on logical framework, between Theory of Change elements and Program Management. The integration between those 2 levels of management, ensures organizational alignment and focus.

In terms of organizational systemic approach those linkages ensure that the project level is working to deliver aligned outcomes with the program goal and to the Theory of Change Pathways.



## References

Several organizations offer helpful information on theory of change may find helpful for creating their own theory of change or logic model.

- Theory of Change ([www.theoryofchange.org](http://www.theoryofchange.org)), a collaborative project of ActKnowledge and the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. This comprehensive website offers a wide array of background information, tools, and sample documents that can help grant makers and grantees get started with theory of change.
- W. K. Kellogg Foundation ([www.wkkf.org](http://www.wkkf.org)). The Logic Model Development Guide, a companion to the foundation's Evaluation Handbook, focuses on how to develop and use a logic model.
- Grantmakers for Effective Organizations ([www.geofunders.org](http://www.geofunders.org)). GEO provides links to various resources on theory of change, including the INSP Theory of Change Development Tool and GEO's own emerging organizational theory of change.
- Annie E. Casey Foundation ([www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)). Theory of Change: A Practical Tool for Action, Results and Learning, the foundation's handbook for community organizations involved with its Making Connections program, is available on its website.
- International Network on Strategic Philanthropy ([www.insp.efc.be](http://www.insp.efc.be)). The Theory of Change Development Tool and accompanying manual may be downloaded from the INSP website.

## Glossary

### Assumption

Conditions or resources that your group believes are needed for the success of your program, and that you believe already exist and will not be problematic. An assumption like a precondition is a condition that is necessary for your program's success. Unlike a precondition, it already is in place and does not need to be brought about. When your group states your assumptions, it is a good time to take into account the various conditions that your program's success will rely on. Assumptions are crucial because if they are incorrect it can completely alter how your program works.

### Backwards Mapping

The process of beginning with your long-term goal and working “backwards” toward the earliest changes that need to occur. This is the opposite of how we usually think about planning, because it starts with asking “what preconditions must exist for the long-term outcome to be reached?” rather than starting with the question: “What can we do to bring the outcome about?” a question that comes later.

### Change Framework

The illustration of your theory. This is a graphic representation of your outcomes and pathways, with interventions, assumptions and justifications keyed to the diagram.

### Core Planning Group

The team of stakeholders who will be responsible for development of the theory. This group should know development of the theory. This group should know the process, plan and facilitate meetings, summarize and represent the information produced at the meetings so it can be brought back to the larger group, and ensure that all the components of the theory are completed and solid. This is too much work for one person, so we recommend that a team of 2-4 people who act as “guardians” of the process.

### Facilitator

The person who runs the meetings. We strongly recommend at least two facilitators at each meeting, since a lot has to be taken down. The facilitator(s) is responsible for asking the right questions to make sure that all the pieces of the theory are articulated.

### Indicator

Measurable evidence of meeting a goal. Indicators are visible signs, (e.g. reading scores, attendance) that demonstrate that the outcomes are achieved. Often, indicators can be counted (quantitative), but sometimes evidence will be something more descriptive (qualitative). Each indicator needs to have four components: population, target, threshold and timeline. These answer the questions: Who or what is to reach this goal? (population) How many of that group do we need to have reach the goal? (target) What level needs to be reached — how good is good enough? (threshold) By when does this goal need to be reached? (timeline).

### Interaction

Sometimes the achievement of two (or more) outcomes at the same level will have an impact on each other. For example, if parents being motivated to read to their children and parents being literate are both preconditions required for parents to read to their children more, there may also be an interaction in that as parents become more motivated to read they may also undertake to become more literate, or as parents take literacy classes, they may see the value of reading and become more motivated. In the theory, we represent this graphically with a sideways arrow.

## Intervention

The things your program or group of stakeholders will undertake to bring about outcomes. Sometimes people use the term strategy or activity. We use strategy to describe the overall focus of the initiative, and activity to describe all the specific actions that make up an intervention. So, for example, an intervention might be “hold literacy classes” and the various activities needed to make that happen would be things like identifying space and teachers, choosing a curriculum, screening students, etc. We indicate where an intervention is needed to bring about an outcome with a dashed arrow leading from one outcome to another.

## Justification

Statements about why we expect one set of outcomes to lead to another. Why are the preconditions necessary for the outcome to be achieved? Justifications are often based on research, but may also come from past experience, common sense, or knowledge of the specific context.

## Long-Term Outcome

The goal you want to reach which is the purpose of your program; for example, academic achievement for youth, or employment for a certain group. All other outcomes on your framework are preconditions to this outcome.

## Narrative

A summary of your theory that explains the pathways of change, highlights some of your major assumptions, justifications and interventions, and presents a compelling case as to how and why your initiative expects to make a difference. The narrative may also contain some information that is additional to what is in your theory, such as your overall vision, the history of how your initiative came to be, and some community context. The purpose of the narrative is twofold: (1) to convey the major elements of your theory easily and quickly to others; (2) to better understand how the elements of the theory work as a whole. We usually recommend that narrative shouldn't be more than one or two pages.

## Outcome

An outcome is a state, or condition, that must exist for your initiative to work and does not currently exist. An outcome may represent a change in a group of people, organizations, or places. Outcomes are the building blocks of your Theory of Change. Except for the long-term outcome, all outcomes on your change framework are also preconditions which are necessary for other outcomes.

## Outcome Framework

The visual depiction of the pathway of outcomes, in which they are placed in sequence showing which outcomes are preconditions of other outcomes. This is the first component you will complete in developing your theory.

## Pathway

The sequence outcomes must occur in order to reach your long-term goal. Most initiatives have multiple pathways which lead to the long-term goal.

## Population

The entity (some common examples are groups of people, organizations or places) your initiative seeks to have an impact on, e.g. students in a certain school, parents, residents of a certain neighborhood. This is one component of an indicator.

## Precondition

All outcomes, except the long-term outcome, are also preconditions. They are called preconditions because they are conditions that must exist in order for the next outcome in the pathway to be achieved. You can think of them as precursors because they must be achieved before the next outcome in the pathway, and as requirements for the accomplishment of the next outcome.

## Scope

The extent to which your theory attempts to account for all the factors necessary to reach your long-term outcome. Different scopes are appropriate for different purposes. In general, each group must decide the “breadth” of its scope — how many of all the possible pathways for change will you identify, and the “depth” of its scope — how many levels of preconditions will your pathway have which shows all the steps to reach the goal.

## Target

How many of your population you expect will change based on your initiative. For example, do you expect 80% of students in a school to improve in some way? Or do you expect to find jobs for 100 residents? As with all components of indicators, your target for your long-term outcome should be set by combining your vision for change with a realistic assessment of your resources. Targets for all other outcomes should be based on how many people need to change in order for it to be enough for the next outcome in the pathway to occur. For example, if only 20 people take a literacy class, would you be able to raise overall literacy rates in your community by the amount you want?

## Theory of Change

A theory of change defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks — interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions — is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change/change framework, which is a graphic representation of the change process.

## Threshold

How much does your target group need to change? Simply put, “how good is good enough”? For example, if students improve reading scores by one grade, is that sufficient? Or how many sessions must participants attend of a class or workshop to attain the skill being taught? Again, as with the target and timeline, how much change is determined by how much you believe is needed to reach the next outcome.

## Timeline

By when does the outcome need to be reached at the level (threshold) and for the number of people you have specified? The timeline for reaching any given outcome depends on the timeline for reaching the outcomes above and below it on the pathway. So, for example, if residents will not have completed a literacy class until the end of the year, it is unrealistic to expect to see an increase in literacy rates in a shorter timeline. Likewise, if the long-term outcome is that parents read to their children within three years, you can work backwards to determine by when they need to have increased literacy and motivation.

## Ultimate Outcome

Often, a group has a vision of change which is beyond, or grander, than they can achieve through the initiative, but they believe the initiative contributes to this vision. When that is the case, we put a dotted line above the long-term outcome (e.g. stable employment) and have an ultimate goal (e.g. end of poverty in the community). Your group will not hold itself accountable for this goal, but may like to keep it visible as a reminder of your vision for the community and what you hope your project contributes to, beyond the concrete goal you will hold yourself accountable for.