

## Developing and Using Your Program's Theory of Change to Support Implementation, Evaluation and Sustainability

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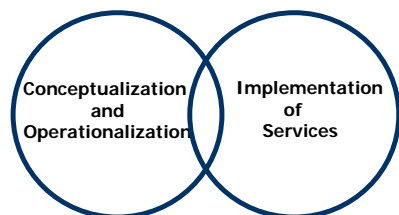
## The Challenge of Complexity

- Human service programs are often asked to respond to multiple and changing needs
- Service delivery environments are complex and frequently changing
- Effective programs must find ways to respond and manage the complexity

- Community-based initiatives operate in complex environments where the scientific certainty of "proof" is seldom attainable.

This is where theory-based frameworks can be especially helpful.

## Linking Ideas to Action



# Theories of Change

Beliefs that funding agencies, planners, and stakeholders have about how to prevent and reduce the impact of family and community violence.

# Theory of Change:

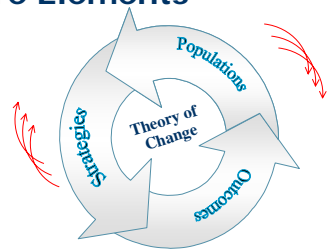
The underlying assumptions that guide a strategy and are believed to be critical to producing change and improvement for children, families and communities.

# Components in Creating a Theory of Change

Component 1: Conceptualize and operationalize the three core elements:

- Who are you serving?
- What are your strategies?
- What do you intend to accomplish?

# Component 2: Relationship Between the Core Elements



Understand and express the relationship between the three core elements

# Potentially 3 theories of change

**Recorded theory** - Intended action as recorded in documentation such as grant proposals, statements of purpose, mission/ guiding principles. [Conceptualization]



Future orientation focuses on intended and expected action

**Expressed theory** - Expected action as expressed by system/ program stakeholders and participants. [Operationalization]

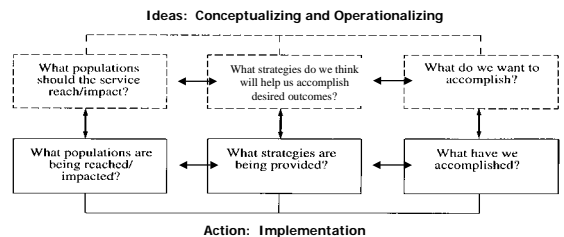


**Active theory** - Actual activities documented through evaluation processes. [Implementation]



Present orientation focuses on what is actually happening.

# Linking Ideas to Action



## Benefits of Articulating a Theory of Change

- Process supports building local solutions
- Facilitates communication and collaboration
- Allows systems and programs to specify where they are going and how they plan to get there
- Supports strategic planning, internal evaluation and quality improvement

- Most of the value in a theory-based framework is in the process of creating, validating, tracking and modifying the model...
- The clarity of thinking that occurs from building the model is critical to the overall success of the program (p. 43).

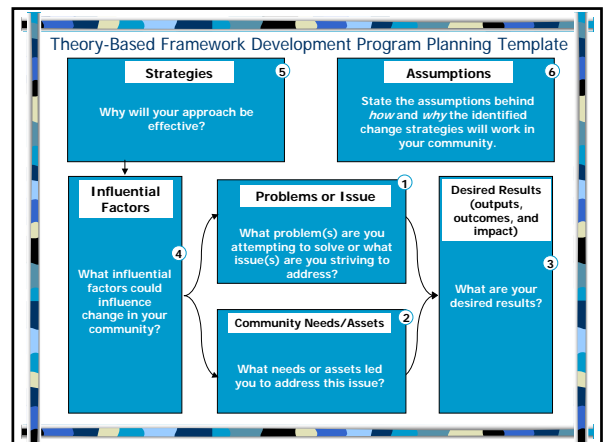
## Theory-Based Framework

A theory-based framework is a tool for expressing the ideas and intended action of a theory of change. Theory-based frameworks document what strategies are believed to be critical to producing change for children and families.

- A theory-based framework links outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program activities/process and the assumptions/principles of the program.

- A theory-based framework links outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program activities/processes and the assumptions/principals of the program. The framework provides a roadmap of your program, highlighting how it is expected to work, what activities need to come before others, and how desired outcomes are achieved.

- Program design benefits
- Ongoing evaluation of the program
- Process of developing a logic model



## Developing a Theory-Based Framework

Population Frame → Strategies Frame → Outcomes Frame

Consider issues and strengths

Consider principles and components

Consider short- and long-term outcomes

Theory of Change: What are the assumed relationships between population strategies and outcomes?

## A picture is worth a thousand words.

The point of developing a theory-based framework is to come up with a relatively simple image that reflects how and why your program will work.

Doing this as a group brings the power of consensus and group examination of values and beliefs about change processes and program results.

## Using a theory-based framework produces

- An inventory of what you have and what you need to operate your program.
- A strong case of how and why your program will produce your desired results.
- An anchor for program management and assessment.

- You can benefit from creating a theory-based framework at any point in the life of a program or initiative.

The theory-based development process helps people inside and outside your organization understand and improve the purpose and process of your work.

## Better Position Programs For Success and Challenge by...

- Improved program Design and Planning
- Thoughtful Program Implementation
- Focused Program Evaluation and Strategic Planning
- Careful thinking to ensure feasibility and defensible uses of resources
- Bring Consensus

## Beyond Accountability

Unlike approaches that rely only on the tracking of outcomes and indicators to build accountability, the theory of change approach:

- focuses on more than outcome information
- anchors measures in a context
- increases the usefulness of collected information

## Maximize the Relationship



- **Effective evaluation is not an “event”** that occurs at the end of a project, but is an ongoing process which helps decision makers better understand the project; how it is impacting participants, partner agencies and the community; and how it is being influenced/impacted by both internal and external factors.

- The theory-based approach helps to clarify each element of your program, it enables you to respond to the question:

**“ To what do I want to be held accountable?”**

The Evaluation Forum (1999)

- A program is a theory and an evaluation is its test.

In order to organize the evaluation to provide a responsible test, the evaluator needs to understand the theoretical premises on which the program is based (p. 5).


Carol Weiss (1998)

- There is no one right way of doing evaluation. It is different for every community and project.

- Different mix of clients
- Different service delivery approaches
- Defines different outcomes
- Different phase of development
- Faces different contextual issues

## Why Are You Doing an Evaluation?

- Improving your program
- Evaluating the effectiveness of a program
- Generating new knowledge

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- An effective way to narrow the possible field of evaluation questions is through the development of a theory-based framework.

Once you have built consensus on a theory-based framework, you will find that it provides you and your evaluation team with a focus for your evaluation by clarifying which variables are critical to achieving desired outcomes.



## ■ Developing Evaluation Questions

- What do you want your project to accomplish?
- How will you know if you have accomplished your goals?
- What activities will your project undertake to accomplish your goals?
- What factors might help or hinder your ability to accomplish your goals?
- What will you want to tell others who are interested in your project?



## Things to Remember...

- The particular philosophy of evaluation
- Different stakeholders will have different questions.
- There are many important questions to address.
- Stay focused on the primary purpose for your evaluation activities at a certain point in time and then work to prioritize which are the critical questions to address.
- Examine the values embedded in the questions being asked. Whose values are they?





## ■ Basic Measurement Parameter of a Theory-Based Framework

**Outputs** are the direct results of program activities.

**Outcomes** are specific changes in attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, skills, status, or level of functioning.

**Impacts** are organizational, community, and/or system level changes expected to result from program activities.

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- **Outcomes and indicators** are often confused as one and the same, when they are actually distinct concepts. **Indicators** are measurable approximations of the **outcomes** you are attempting to achieve.

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- **Short-term outcomes**
  - **Long-term outcomes**



## Criteria for Selecting Outcomes

- Is the outcome information useful to managers and administrators?
- Is the outcome information useful to front-line workers?
- Is the outcome information relevant to children and families?
- Is the outcome information relevant to other significant stakeholders?
- Does the process provide the opportunity for corrective action?



## Criteria for Selecting Outcomes

- Does the parameter best reflect the status and intent of each frame?
- Is the parameter easily measured?
- Is the measurement of the parameter sustainable?
- Is the measurement of the parameter valid and reliable?



## Frameworks can create challenges

- Loss of ambiguity can create conflict
- Clarification of goals can lead to anxiety about performance
- Establishing strategies collaboratively can challenge leadership styles
- Building agreement among people involved in the framework development process
- Consensus does not necessarily bring about effective strategies



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