

Hivos and Theory of Change

Background

Some years ago, Hivos searched for an alternative for the 'standard' planning and reporting frameworks that is more responsive and appropriate for its own and partners' practices and that supports strategic thinking and more systematic learning. This need was confirmed by the experience that training in result assessment for partners organisations, as organised since 2004, didn't have the intended effects. In 2007 this resulted in a pilot in capacity development support to partner organisations using a Theory of Change approach, taking a broader perspective to programme design and M&E, and with the explicit objective of strengthening "result-oriented organisational practice". Since then, this process has gone through several phases of experimentation and reflection.

Some lessons we have learnt:

- The capacity development process considered insufficiently that organisational change of practice or behaviour is influenced by many more factors than new insights and knowledge alone, however appreciated a new idea may be – as was in general the case with ToC.
- The actual aid context does not provide a conducive environment for approaches that acknowledge uncertainty and complexity and promote adaptive responses. The incentive mechanisms of the aid system and of funding relationships, such as pressure for short term results, 'blue print' thinking, upward accountability and project funding, push partners (and Hivos itself) in a different direction.
- ToC thinking can be confrontational and generate resistance to change, as the process leads to questioning of the status quo and touches upon sensitive issues such as power relations in organisations or the need for collaboration across difference.
- In general, a ToC process needs external facilitation, at least for the first period. We were confronted with the fact that there are few consultants and CD support organisations in the regions that are well acquainted with the thinking, methods and facilitation skills to accompany Theory of Change analysis in organisations.
- Hivos own donor practice is not always conducive: we don't always practice what we preach, and sometimes we expect partners to do things we don't always manage to do ourselves. A legitimate question from both partners and colleagues is: what is Hivos itself doing with ToC? What is the position of ToC thinking in Hivos practice?

State of affairs

In 2010, Hivos asked a group of consultants¹ who were involved in different stages of the CD support to partners, or otherwise interested in ToC, to support us in an action-learning process, in order to learn systematically from the experiences with ToC thinking and to explore and address some of the challenges Hivos and its partner organisations encountered. The ultimate goal of the process is to strengthen the capacity of all involved for critical reflection on their practice and for strategic action to achieve their goals of social and political change.

At the moment, the learning trajectory consists of the following components:

- regional learning processes with partner organisations to explore and document the use of ToC in practice;

¹ Centre for Development Innovation (Wageningen University, The Netherlands), CDRA (South Africa) and Iñigo Retolaza Eguren, independent consultant (Bolivia).

- a series of e-discussions to share views and experiences on topics and questions around ToC and its application in practice;
- a Resource portal on Theory of Change to make resources available to Hivos staff and other actors interested;
- an internal process to integrate ToC thinking more firmly in Hivos own policy, organisational practice and capacity development of staff.

What does Hivos mean by a Theory of Change approach or framework?

In Hivos understanding, Theory of Change is a sense-making framework, that informs and guides ...

... an ongoing process of critical questioning, analysis and reflection ...

... for (distinct but related) processes of strategising, planning, adaptive management, M&E and learning ...

... using a combination of existing and new tools for analysis and reflection (“tools for thought”), depending on what a specific situation requires.

When ToC thinking is used well, it helps people and organisations involved in social change ...

- to sharpen their analysis, understand reality from more than one perspective and act more strategically upon it, individually and collectively;
- to identify and question assumptions underlying their views, strategic choices and actual behaviour;
- to navigate dynamic and unpredictable realities in a way that is focused and result-oriented as well as adaptive;
- to dialogue and collaborate with other actors (incl. not like-minded ones) more successfully;
- to track change processes in a meaningful way, for both accountability and learning purposes;
- to learn about change at micro (own practice/ interventions) and macro (societal) level.

It is not ...

- a new tool or even a tool in itself ...
- a new “donor hoop” that partner organisations have to jump through ...
- another word for Logframe (... but using ToC helps to make a good Logframe).

It requires...

- clear descriptions of the possible ‘tools for thought’ and their utility in strategising, planning, adaptive management, M&E and learning ...
- capacity and willingness to reflect critically about one’s work ...
- an organisational management that supports adaptive management of a programme, project or initiative (even if the back-donor doesn’t).