

# Theory of Change<sup>1</sup>

## Concept Note

### I. WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE?

A theory of change describes **how we believe that change could be made to happen** and outlines **the main elements for that change**.

It seeks to **identify how we think that different factors could interact in relation to the change and what the underlying assumptions and risks are**.

A Theory of change is actually a very **simple concept**: Throughout our work and personal lives we have aims, objectives and ideas about how to achieve our goals. However, we rarely take the time to think these through, articulate and scrutinise them, and make explicit the underlying beliefs and biases that shaped our thinking. All a **Theory of Change process does is to make these assumptions and beliefs explicit and more testable**.

A Theory of Change is more than a narrative or graphic account of a results chain. Unlike the results chain and logframe, which have very specific roles in terms of accountability and measurement, the purpose of a Theory of Change is:

- **Analytical**
- **Explanatory;**
- **Learning by doing, and verifying against practice.**

It is the **basis** upon which we design a results chain and logframe, not the other way around. The Theory of Change lays out a working hypothesis subject to verification during and after implementation.

Because it is a way of critical thinking, a Theory of Change can be developed for any level of intervention: **a programme, a project, an organization, a policy, or a strategy**.

In recent years, several UN agencies have moved into Theory of Change thinking. **UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women** have all presented theories for their main areas of work to their Executive Boards over the past year or so.

While the concept is simple, **many different terms** have been used over the years to describe an approach that is based on a plausible and sensible model of how the programme is supposed to work.

There is a **great variety** of terms used. These terms are **not always used interchangeably**; sometimes they have **particular meaning, but these vary widely**. (i.e: Causal chain, Causal model, Cause map, Impact

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<sup>1</sup> This document has been prepared jointly by the Peer Support Group (PSG) and the UNDG LAC Secretariat to provide support to RCs/UNCTs in the application of the Theory of Change as included in the new [Interim UNDAF guidance](#).

pathways, Intervention theory, Outcome change, Outcome line, Program theory, Results chain, Theory-based evaluation, Theory-driven evaluation, Theory of action).

### Terminology in the UN

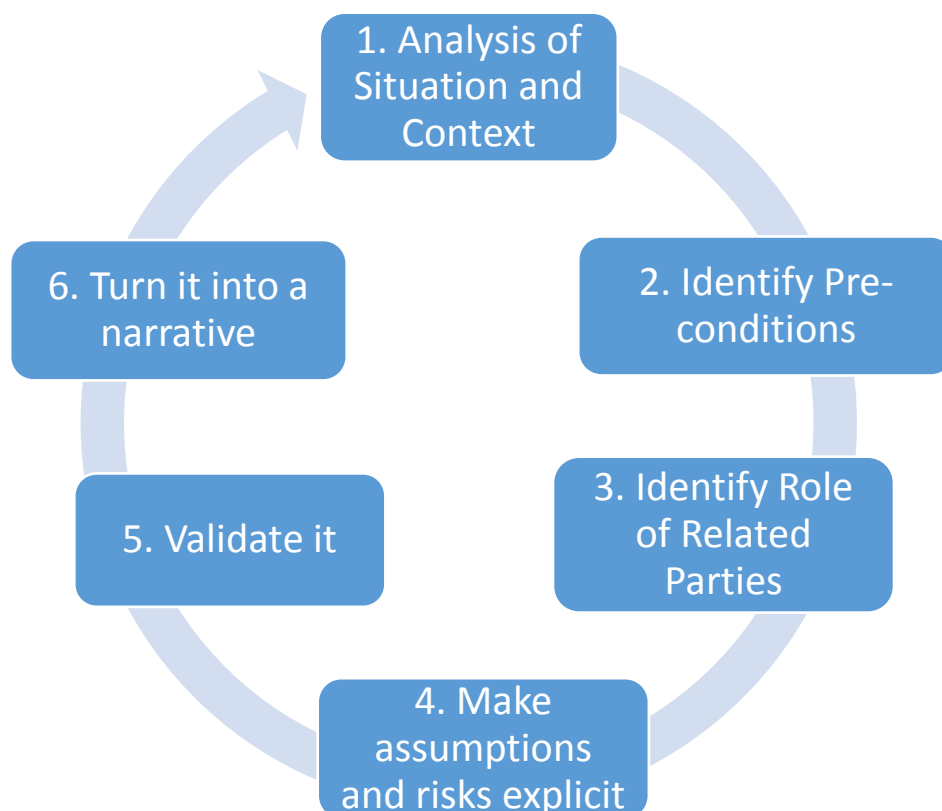
Typically, while the UN wrestles with the implications of introducing something new like the Theory of Change, it also seem to be wrestling with the basic question of how to define it.

Unlike other RBM and programming terms there is **no settled definition and understanding of Theory of Change across the UN**. What we are seeing at this point are slightly different interpretations of what it means, what the underlying process is, and what the final product looks like.

This note proposes a way forward on how to build a theory of change after a review of existing literature and UN practice.

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## II. HOW TO DEVELOP A THEORY OF CHANGE?



## **1. Analysis of Situation and Context**

Theory of change starts with the analysis of a situation and context that needs change, and the identification of the desired change. This involves a thorough context analysis drawing on data and evidence from the Common Country Analysis (CCA). Since a CCA includes a causal analysis, including structural factors that explain, for instance, political instability, high levels of violence, exposure to hazards, weak state capacities, and persisting (gender) inequalities and discrimination in a particular country, those information could be used for the situation and context analysis in the formulation of a Theory of Change. There are other specific analysis relevant in developing a ToC. They are as follows:

- **Comparative Advantage Analysis:** This involves analysing where the UN and specific UN Agencies comparative advantages are, where we can provide the best added value, and whether it is efficient in providing a result on specific paths, hence prioritizing which one(s) are the best likely for us to contribute to.
- **Capacity Gap Analysis:** To find out what capacities are lacking for those affected, and those with a duty, to address the identified problems, including inequalities and discrimination. We do that by identifying required skills, abilities, resources, responsibilities, authority and motivation by those affected to claim their rights and those obliged to fulfil them.
- **Solution Pathway Analysis:** This is an integral part of the situation and context analysis. This involves translating the cause-and-effect analysis of the situation and context assessment into results – outcomes and impacts. The best points of action along the solution path are selected in line with where the programme’s impacts can be placed, as well as where to develop outputs and activities. Several places along the path may be suitable to place results, however we must focus on clear and feasible results within the time frame of the UNDAF, given resources and the existing and potential partnerships, etc.

## **2. Identify Pre-condition**

A pre-condition is a statement or set of statements that outlines what should be in place prior to project, programme or policy execution. The intervention is not guaranteed to achieve its desired change as it should unless the pre-conditions have been met. This means what needs to happen in order to get through the change process.

Depending on the country context, the analysis can also focus on the legal/institutional/policy/social advances that need to be preserved over time to avoid a retrocession in terms of rights and equality for instance.

## **3. Identify Role of Related Partners**

Using a human rights-based approach to find out *who* has to do something about the problems identified in a country, including inequalities and discrimination (this is also in line with the principle of “no one left behind”). We do that by identifying individual and institutional duty-bearers and their corresponding obligations.

#### 4. **Make assumptions and risks explicit**

Causality should be based on evidence. Causality, however, is often dependent on a number of **assumptions**. Causality is also limited by certain **influences**.

- **Assumptions** are **statements, in this case positives**, of variables or factors that need to be in place to be achieve the change.

For example, in a reproductive health service programme, an assumption might be that there are adequately trained personnel and extension services. In a gender public financial resources programme, for example, the assumption might be that political support from the government continues to introduce gender-differentiated budget lines

- **Influences**: Influences encompasses more than risks (statements, in this case negatives, of potential future events – fully or partially beyond our control – that may negatively affect the achievement of results). Influences includes critical external factors and events with unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes that may affect the change process. It is mostly based on the operating environment (political, environmental, cross-border, policy and programme) of the programme or project.

For example, a programme that aims at bringing national laws in line with CEDAW provisions might define the risk that during next parliamentary elections a new party is taking control that is more critical towards the CEDAW. An influence in the same case may include cultural practices and the existence of local laws affecting progress towards CEDAW

*That is why a complete Theory of Change needs to clearly spell out the underlying assumptions, the causal linkages between the different variables that may determine the expected change, including the inputs and outputs deliver, as well as the external factors that may influence progress and opportunities by the UN.*

In theory, every single causal relation needs to be refined by defining assumptions and risks. In practice, however, this is hardly done. Typically, some of the key assumptions and risk underlying a Theory of Change are clustered and depicted in the graphical representation of a Theory of Change or a narrative.

A Theory of Change is an implication of a reality; it is difficult to capture everything. You will need to make judgements about what is important to include.

Consider expressing your Theory of Change at different levels of detail. One version may only capture the big picture, another version might focus on a specific aspect of the theory.

At every key point in the ToC, ask the question “why do I think change will happen?”

## 5. Assess the validity of the theory of change

The next step is to validate the initial Theory of Change. A good Theory of Change should be:

- **Clear**
- **Plausible**
- **Logical**
- **Based on evidence**
- **Consulted**

### Is it clear?

Can the Theory of Change be easily understood by the way it is presented? Is it clear the UN comparative advantages? Does the theory fall into the trap of being overly complicated at the expense of clarity? Is the form that the theory is depicted suitable for the reader to understand?

### Does the theory present a **plausible solution** to a problem?

Is there a logical and defensible relationship between the solution pathway and the problem? In other words, is it reasonable to believe that if that path is chosen, this will represent a change, by reducing or eliminating the problem?

### Are the linkages **logical**?

Are the logical arguments of the Theory of Change strong and plausible? Is it – in the specific context – reasonable to assume that if-then linkages depicted in the diagram are logically connected? Are there any gaps in the logic or any breakdowns in temporal sequencing?

### Is there **evidence** for the linkages?

Is there sufficient credible evidence that support the logic and the linkages in the Theory of Change? Is it consistent with existing, general Theories of Change (if any exist)? Is there sufficient research-based theory that supports the logic and linkages?

### Have partners been **consulted**?

Typically, a theory of change will identify solutions that will not be reached by the single actions of the UNCT. In the process of validating the TOC, it is recommended to consult with the key partners of the UNCT, to ensure that the TOC makes sense to them given the specific country context.

## 6. Turn it into a narrative

It is important for the narrative to accompany the Theory of Change. The ToC could be presented in various forms such as *'theory model, logic model, results or change framework, logical framework, results chain models and outcome models'*; based on organizational preference. Each is a variation on theme depicting the Theory of Change based on the content and level of details. The UNCT and most UN Agencies have come to adopt the Results Framework format. However, the current format needs tweaking to align it with the demands of a complete ToC.

## **Annex 1a: Narrative Example of a ToC using the UN MSDF**

The logic of the United Nations Multi-country Development Framework (UN MSDF) in the Caribbean premised on the evidence that the Caribbean Region has experienced poor growth performance over several decades with unsustainable levels of debt despite its middle-income status and moderate to high human development classification. The region also has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy, youth unemployment, rising crime and gender based violence. Non communicable diseases (NCDs) and climate change also present major challenges. While the Caribbean has made progress in important areas of its development priorities, it has been slow and in some areas there have been reversals.

The post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presents a major opportunity for Caribbean countries to reverse decades of lagging economic performance and make the transition to balanced, holistic, and people-centred growth and sustainable development.

In line with priorities set out in the MSDF and the SGDs, the Country X CIP/SIP will focus on (i) An Inclusive, equitable and prosperous Caribbean, (ii) A Healthy Caribbean; (iii) A Cohesive, Safe and Just Caribbean and (iv) A Sustainable and Resilient Caribbean. Within this framework, the programme will adopt an integrated approach targeting the most vulnerable people (women, youth and children and other marginalized and groups) and places both as actors and beneficiaries to ensure inclusive high quality education, promote labour market institutions that facilitate young people's employment and equal and equitable employment opportunities and bring relevant laws in compliance with international and regional obligations, particularly for the protection of women and children.

The UN in the region will continue to leverage its convening power and mobilize technical and financial capacity to strengthen its work with Government in providing full coverage and high quality care services, address the rights to social protection and the mounting concerns on the impact on lives from NCDs. Through innovative partnerships and in close collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders, the UN will ensure that policies, responses and mitigation strategies are reflective of the fact that women, men, boys and girls experience poverty and economic growth differently. This will allow an inclusive approach to addressing broader development issues such as reform and enhancement of key security and justice institutions; building national capacities for evidence-based policy and decision making and ensuring measures and strategies are in place to examine climate change, disaster risk reduction and mitigation, and environmental degradation, as well as their effects on health, livelihoods, poverty, human rights, and development.

The coordinated approach of the UN MSDF will create immediate synergies and harness economies of scale so that access to quality education and life-long learning is increased; access to equitable social protection systems, quality services and sustainable economic opportunities is improved, equitable access to justice, protection, citizen security and safety is reinforced and universal access to quality health care services and systems is in place.

With the required capacity at institutional levels, the UN will support relevant legal and institutional reforms to ensure inclusive and sustainable solutions are adopted, policies and programmes for climate change adaptation, disaster risks reduction and universal access to clean and sustainable energy are enforced and laws, policies and systems are introduced to support healthy lifestyles among all segments of the population.

Designed on the principle of relevance and adaptability within and across the strategic pillars, the UN MSDF will be flexible and adaptable throughout the programme cycle to remain relevant to specific and emerging national needs and priorities through periodic reviews, studies and surveys. Programmatic and operational

synergies within the Region will also be stepped up in order to contribute to the MSDF outcomes and SDGs in a coherent, effective, efficient and sustainable manner.

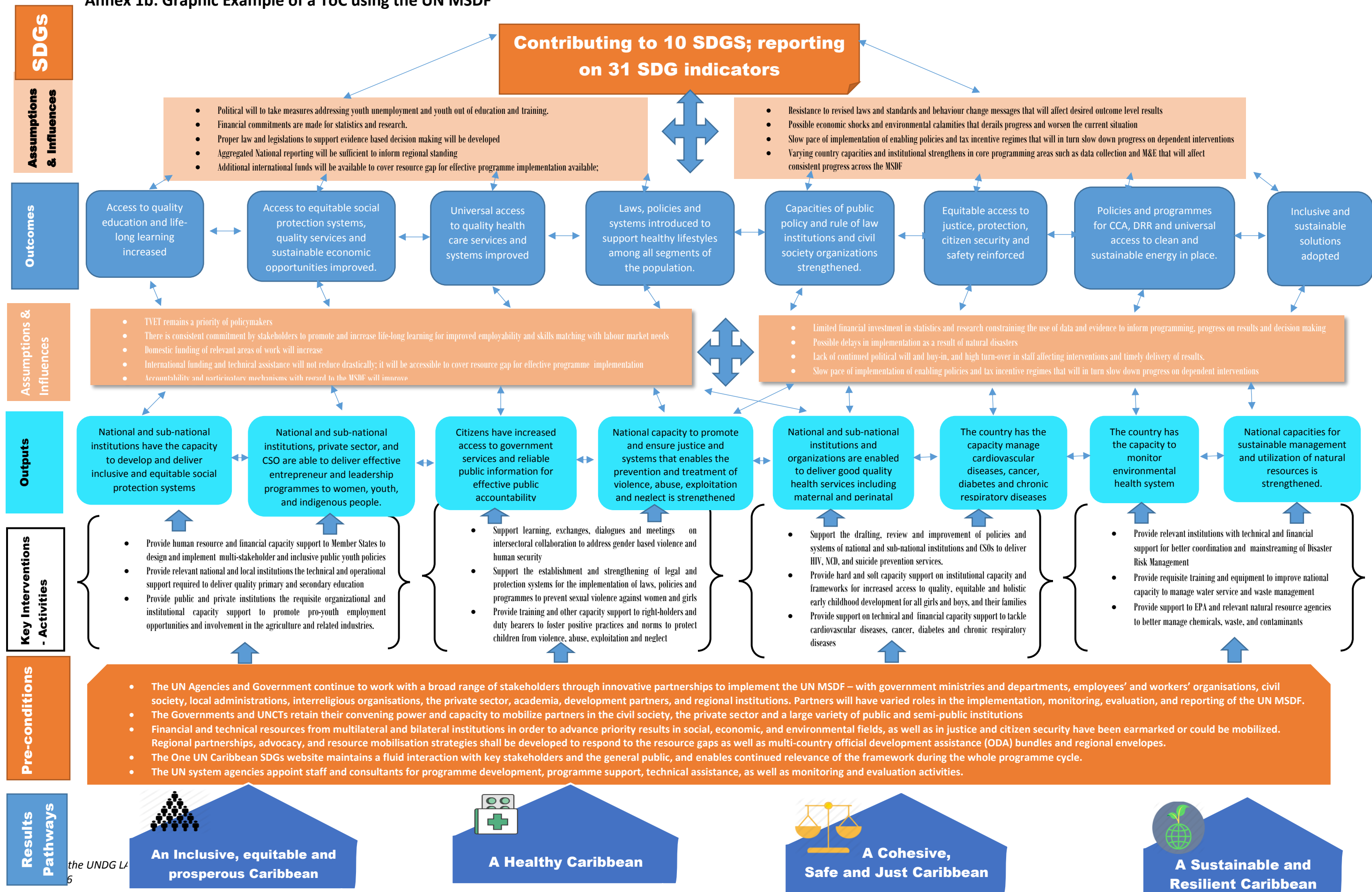
In respect of the above, the UN will strategically engage all development partners in the region in order to consolidate gains on development interventions and further leverage transformational change.

On the backdrop of strong political will to continue to take measures to address the underlying causes of socio-economic and environmental development challenges in the Caribbean and potential investment in M&E, statistics and research, the UN will ensure innovative actions and high quality results in a specific intervention or country are documented and showcased as lessons, replicated and scaled up across the region for development change to be as symmetric as possible.

Concerted efforts to ensure sustainability of development results and continuity of interventions with clear exit strategies based on adequate capacity development and/or institutionalization of mechanisms and processes will be mainstreamed at both institutional and national levels.



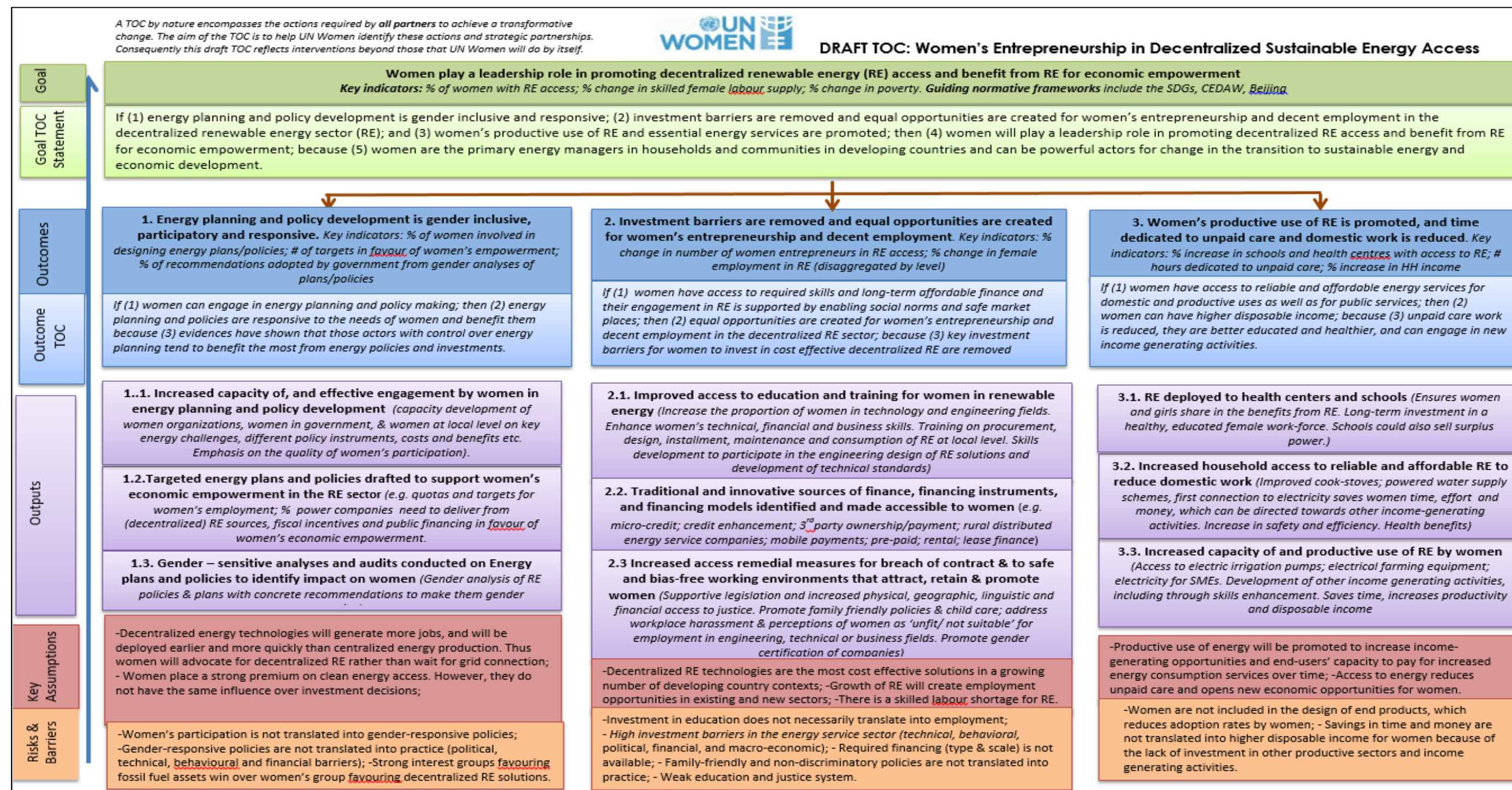
## Annex 1b: Graphic Example of a ToC using the UN MSDF





## Annex 2: Example of a Theory of Change

UN Women's global flagship programme on women's entrepreneurship in decentralized sustainable energy access



## Annex 3: Reading material

<p><b>Develop Programme Theory/Logic Model</b> Better Evaluation <a href="http://betterevaluation.org/plan/define/develop_logic_model">http://betterevaluation.org/plan/define/develop_logic_model</a></p>	<p>A brief overview of programme theory with links to additional detailed, high-quality resources.</p>
<p><b>An Introduction to Theory of Change</b> The Evaluation Exchange, Volume XI, Number 2, Summer 2005 <a href="http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/evaluation-methodology/an-introduction-to-theory-of-change">http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/evaluation-methodology/an-introduction-to-theory-of-change</a></p>	<p>A two-page introduction to Theories of Change</p>
<p><b>Creating Your Theory of Change</b> NPC's Practical Guide, NPC (Harries/Hodgson/Noble), November 2014, <a href="http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/creating-your-theory-of-change">www.thinknpc.org/publications/creating-your-theory-of-change</a></p>	<p>A good and clear practical guide how to create, represent, use and measure a Theory of Change.</p>
<p><b>Theory of Change</b> Patricia Rogers, Theory of Change, Methodological Briefs – Impact Evaluation No. 2, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence, 2014 <a href="http://devinfo.live.info/impact_evaluation/ie/img/downloads/Theory_of_Change_ENG.pdf">http://devinfo.live.info/impact_evaluation/ie/img/downloads/Theory_of_Change_ENG.pdf</a></p>	<p>A methodological brief on Theory of Change in the context of a UN agency and with a focus on using it for evaluations.</p>
<p><b>Theories of Change in International Development: Communication, Learning, or Accountability?</b> Craig Valters, JSRP Paper 17, August 2014 <a href="http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP17.Valters.pdf">http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP17.Valters.pdf</a></p>	<p>A critical analysis of Theories of Change in the context of international development.</p>