

An introduction to the Theory of change and Logical framework for Proposal development

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UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, SUBREGIONAL HEADQUARTERS FOR THE CARIBBEAN

Learning Objectives



- Define what a **Theory of Change (ToC)** is and why it's important.
- **Understand** how ToC fits into public sector planning and donor proposals.
- Learn and apply the **eight-step ToC process** (based on GEF guidance).
- Identify and assess **assumptions, risks, and stakeholder roles**.
- **Practice** building a ToC using a real-world case.
- Review of the Logical framework matrix



Why Theory of Change (ToC) matters in proposal development?



Donor requirements

- Required by donors such as GCF and GEF
- Improves proposal quality
- Ensures coherence

Strategic Benefits

- Clarifies strategic thinking
- Engages stakeholders
- Supports learning and adaptation



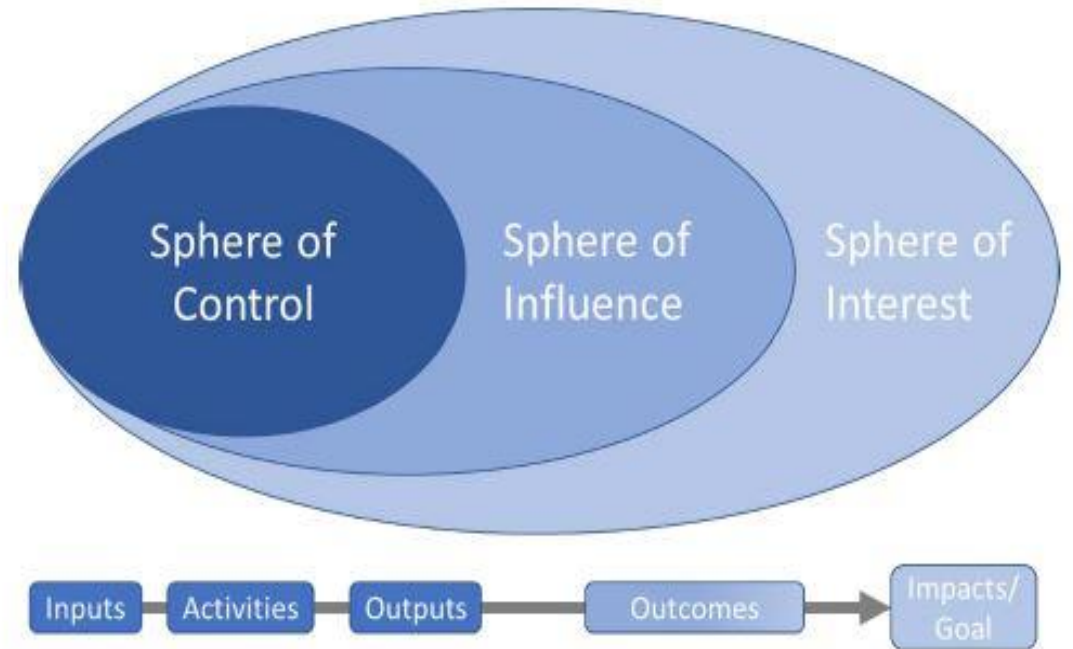
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What is a Theory of change (ToC)?

Theory of Change is both a process and a product — it's a structured way to describe how your project will create change, why you believe it will work, and what assumptions you're making.

Figure 1: A widely reproduced depiction of the relationship between the goal (or impact), outcomes, outputs and activities of an intervention, and its level of control over them (redrawn for here). The ToC process works back from the right to the left.



Source: Theory of Change Primer, Global Environment Facility (GEF) – Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel



Theory of change vs Logical framework (Logframe)

Theory of change

- Explains how and why change happens
- Identifies causal pathway
- Focuses on assumptions and risks
- Flexible and iterative
- Supports strategic design and adaptive learning

What they have in common

- Used in development proposals
- Supports results-based project design
- Links activities to intended outcomes

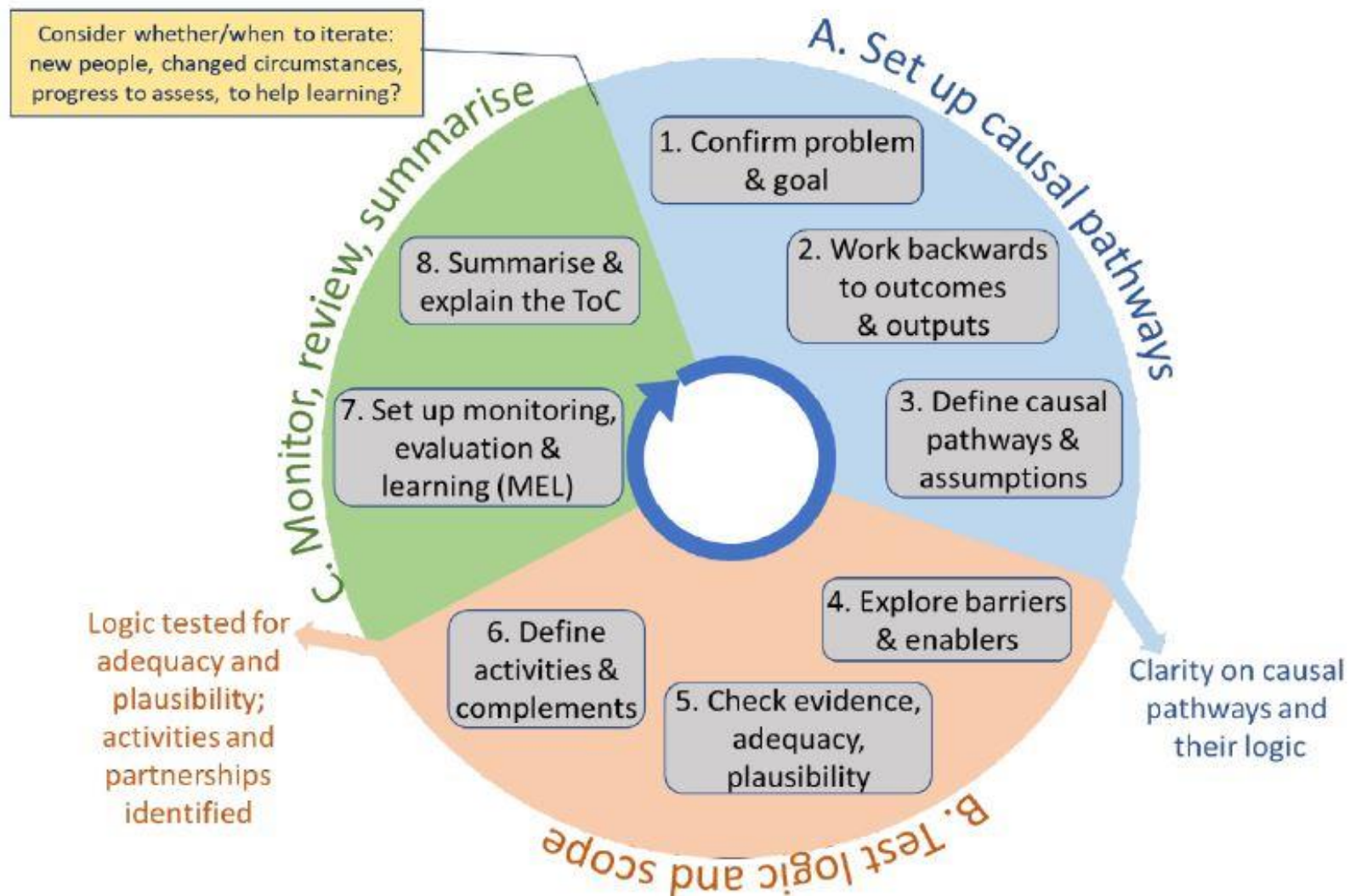
Logical framework

- Describes inputs, outputs and outcomes
- Used mainly for tracking and accountability
- Fixed structured format
- Good for routine reporting



The ToC Process

- A. Set up causal pathways
- B. Test logic and scope
- C. Monitor, review and summarize



Source: Theory of Change Primer, Global Environment Facility (GEF) – Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel



Phase A: Setup Causal Pathways

Step 1: Confirm problem and define goal

Start by **defining the core issue** you want to address, and what success would look like if you solve it

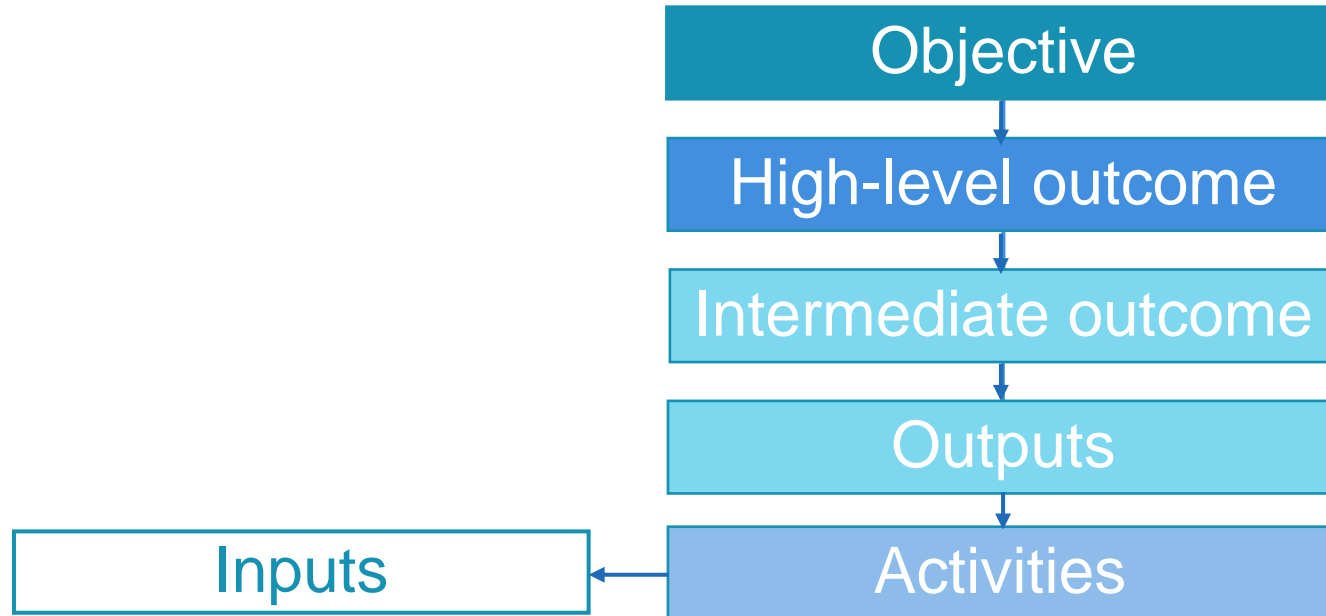


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Phase A: Setup Causal Pathways

Step 2: Work backwards to outcomes and outputs



Think backwards.
What **needs to change** for the goal to be achieved

Phase A: Setup Causal Pathways

Step 2: Work backwards to outcomes and outputs (Cont'd)

- The problem tree shows you **why** things are going wrong.
- The solution tree shows you **what needs to change** and **how you plan to fix it**.
- Together, they form the **logic** behind your **Theory of Change**.

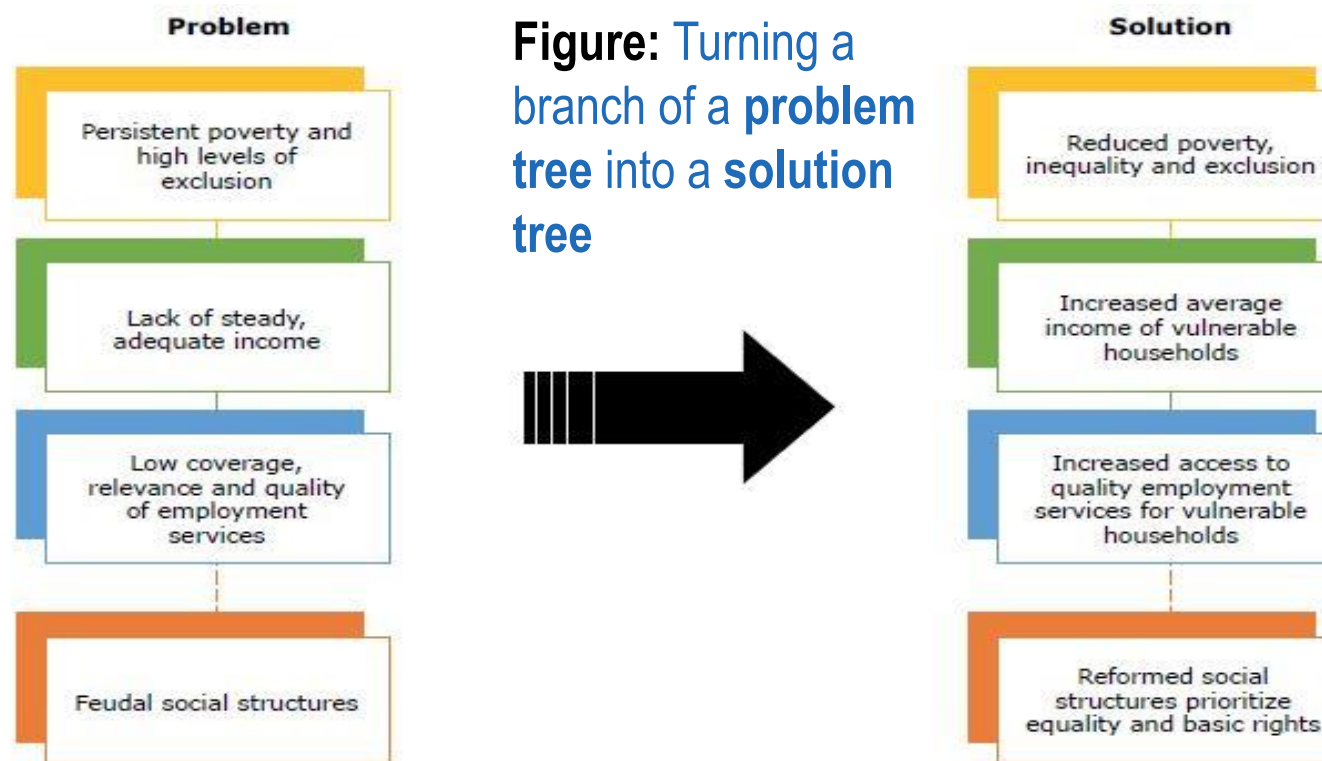


Figure: Turning a branch of a **problem tree** into a **solution tree**

United Nations Development Group (2017). Theory of Change: UNDAF Companion Guidance.

Phase A: Setup Causal Pathways

Step 3: Define Causal Pathways (If-then) and Assumptions

If this happens, **then** what?
And what are we **assuming**?

Example: Public Health – Reducing Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)

Goal/ Outcome: Reduce incidence of diabetes in adults

Causal Link:

If adults receive free community nutrition counselling, *then* they will improve their diets, *because* they will better understand the health risks and how to shop/cook differently.

Assumptions:

- People are motivated to change their eating habits.
- They can afford healthier food options.
- Counsellors are well-trained and culturally relevant.



Exercise #1

Your Task

- Form your groups for the project
- Decide on core issue you are trying to address
- From that determine your **objective**
- Pick one **output** and one **outcome** from your project.

- Complete this sentence:
 If we do (*output*), **then** (*outcome*) will happen, **because** (*why it matters*).

- Write down **three assumptions** you are making in that causal link.
 - What conditions must be in place for the outcome to happen?
 - What are you taking for granted that might affect success?



Phase B: Test logic and scope

Step 4: Identify Barriers and Enablers

Identifying Barriers and Enablers help you to stress-test your theory

- **Barriers** – What can block this outcome from happening?
- **Enablers** – What could help it happen more easily or quickly?

It builds directly on the assumptions and risks from Step 3, and starts to shape your strategy — including partnerships, policy work, or other support activities.

Example:

Goal: Improve reading skills of primary school students in rural areas

Causal link: If **teachers receive specialized literacy training**, then **students' reading levels will improve**, because **instruction will be more engaging and effective**.

Barriers

- Teachers don't have time to attend full training
- Lack of electricity/internet limits use of reading apps
- Children don't have books at home to reinforce learning

Enablers

- School leaders support professional development
- Existing partnerships with book donation NGOs
- Community interest in improving school performance



Phase B: Test logic and scope

Stakeholders and Enablers: Who help to Make change happen?

Why Stakeholders Matter in a Theory of Change:

- Complex development problems can't be solved alone.
- Stakeholders help shape solutions, deliver interventions, remove barriers, or advocate for structural change.

Types of Stakeholders to Consider:

- Implementers – NGOs, public agencies, service providers
- Decision-makers – ministries, local governments, funders
- Communities – those affected by or benefiting from the intervention
- Influencers – religious leaders, media, civil society
- Blockers or gatekeepers – actors who might resist or delay change



Phase B: Test logic and scope

Step 5: Check for evidence and plausibility

This step is where you test your causal logic:

- Is there evidence that your proposed actions will lead to the outcomes you expect?
- Are your assumptions reasonable?
- Are your solutions adequate to the scale and complexity of the problem?

Types of Evidence to Consider:

- Evaluations from similar programmes
- Academic research or policy briefs
- National data or survey results
- Practitioner knowledge or community feedback



Phase B: Test logic and scope

Step 5: Check for evidence and plausibility (Cont'd)

Questions to ask about your assumptions:

- Is this **clear** and **complete**?
- Is it **plausible** based on evidence or experience?
- Do we need to **test** it, **monitor** it, or **adjust** it?

If the **assumption** doesn't **hold**, it becomes a **risk** to your expected result.

Assumption	Related risk
People are motivated to change their eating habits	Risk: Behaviour doesn't change despite counselling. Therefore, no dietary impact
They can afford healthier food options	Risk: Nutritional advice fails due to unaffordable food prices
Counsellors are well-trained and culturally relevant	Risk: Sessions are irrelevant or misunderstood, leading to low engagement



Phase B: Test logic and scope

Step 5: Check for evidence and plausibility (Cont'd)

Check the adequacy of your solution:

Coverage vs. Scope	Depth of change	Evidence/Stakeholder feedback
Does the solution reach enough people or places?	Are we addressing root causes or just surface symptoms?	What does past experience tell us about this type of solution?
Are we solving the problem at the same scale it exists?	Do we need policy, legal, or system-level action?	Are we missing key success factors (e.g. partnerships or complementary actions)



Phase B: Test logic and scope

Step 5: Check for evidence and plausibility (Cont'd)

Theory of change goal: Reduce incidence of diabetes in adults

Proposed solution: Deliver community nutrition counselling and workshops

Coverage vs Scope:

- Is this intervention reaching a wide enough segment of adults at risk?
- Are the workshops available across rural and urban communities where diabetes is prevalent?

Depth of change:

- Is counselling alone enough, or are broader interventions needed (e.g. food affordability, policy changes)?
- Are we addressing the root causes of poor dietary habits (e.g. marketing, income, education)?

Evidence and stakeholder feedback:

- Have similar programmes shown measurable results in changing dietary behaviour?
- Do health workers and communities believe this is the most effective entry point?

If the answer to any of these is “no” or “not sure,” consider **expanding, adjusting, or combining** strategies in your Theory of Change.



Phase B: Test logic and scope

Step 6: Define scope and activities

This step helps you clarify what your project **will actually do** and just as importantly, what it **won't do**.

Once you've mapped out your outcomes, assumptions, and risks, it's time to be realistic:

- What is within your direct control (your scope)?
- What actions or results depend on others (outside your scope)?

This helps manage expectations, sharpen your project design, and guide resource allocation.



Phase C: Monitor, Review and Summarize

Step 7: Identify what to monitor

Step 7 is where you define how you will track progress and learn from your results. It connects your causal logic to indicators, which allow you to test:

- Whether each step in your theory is happening as expected
- Whether your assumptions are holding
- Whether you need to adapt

What You Should Identify in Step 7

Indicators

What signs will tell you that your activities, outputs, and outcomes are actually happening?

1. Use SMART indicators (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)
2. Match indicators to your Logframe or Results Matrix

Means of Verification

Where will the data come from?

1. Surveys? Admin records? Focus groups? M&E reports?

Learning Loops

How will you use what you learn to improve?

1. Who reviews the data?
2. When do you reflect and adapt (quarterly, midterm)?



Phase C: Monitor, Review and Summarize

Step 7: Identify what to monitor

Example: Reducing Diabetes

Result Level	Indicator	Means of Verification
Outcome	% of adults eating 5+ servings of vegetables per day	Household dietary survey
Output	# of adults who complete counselling sessions	Session attendance logs
Activity	# of workshops delivered; % of trained facilitators	Workshop reports; training completion forms



Phase C: Monitor, Review and Summarize

Step 8: Summarize and communicate the ToC

Develop a summary diagram with a 1-2 page narrative accompaniment

The narrative should stay short but contain as a minimum: a rationale for the intervention, a situation/context analysis, a description of the diagram logic (explaining barriers and enablers, key elements of evidence, and the basis for a `Monitoring, evaluation plan

Also explicitly state the intention of the ToC and mention who (in what roles) was involved in developing it (as this should frame any assessment of the quality of the ToC process)



Phase C: Monitor, Review and Summarize

Step 8: Summarize and communicate the ToC (Cont'd)

Sample ToC Narrative Format (Template Style)

Goal: [What change are you aiming for?]

Causal logic:

If we do **[key action]**, then **[short-term change]** will happen, because **[underlying reason]**. This will contribute to **[longer-term development goal]**, provided that **[assumptions]** hold true.

Example ToC Narrative Format

Goal: Reduce the incidence of diabetes in adults in targeted communities

Causal logic:

If **we deliver free, accessible community nutrition counselling to adults**, then **they will improve their dietary habits**, because **they will gain knowledge, confidence, and culturally appropriate strategies for healthier eating**

This behavioural change, combined with early interventions, will contribute to **reduced rates of diabetes over time**, provided that **healthy food options are affordable and counselling sessions are well-attended**.



Phase C: Monitor, Review and Summarize

Step 8: Summarize and communicate the ToC (Cont'd)

Theory of Change Diagram



Assumptions

- Participants attend and engage
- Healthy food is accessible
- Sessions are relevant and sustained



Exercise #2

Your Task

As a group, return to your project idea identified earlier and prepare a 2-3 verbal pitch of your Theory of change.

Your pitch should explain:

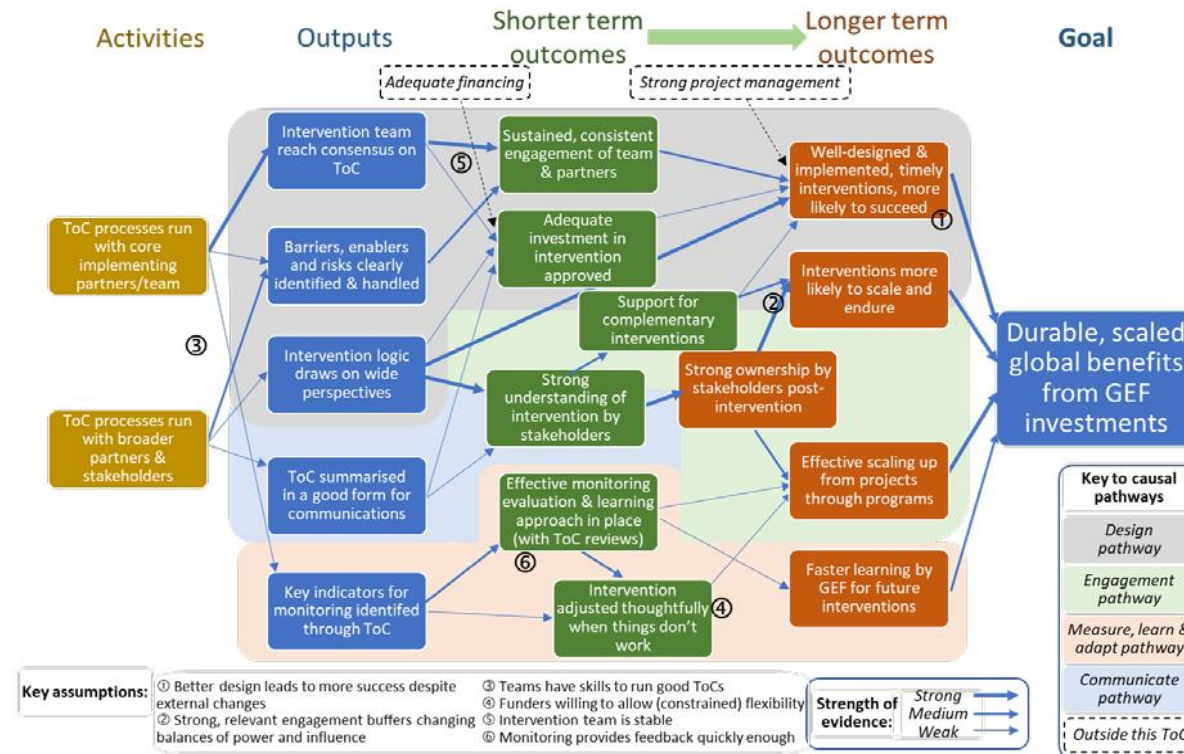
- What problem you're solving
- What your main outcome is
- What outputs and activities you'll deliver
- Why you believe this will work (causal logic)
- What assumptions or risks you're watching
- Who do you plan to partner with (enablers) to achieve your goal (at least 1)



Phase C: Monitor, Review and Summarize

Step 8: Summarize and communicate the ToC (Cont'd)

Theory of Change Diagram example



Source: Theory of Change Primer, Global Environment Facility (GEF) – Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel



Key distinctions between Theory of change and Logical framework

Theory of change	Logical framework (Logframe)
Narrative and visual map of change	Structured results matrix
Focuses on causal logic and assumptions	Focuses on indicators, targets, and responsibilities
Flexible and adaptive	Rigid, linear and standardized
Explains the “ why ” behind change	Tracks the “ what ” was done and achieved
Often required by donors like GCF, GEF	Often required by donors like GCF, GEF



The logical framework

Level	Statement	Indicator	Means of verification	Assumptions
Goal	Reduce incidence of diabetes in adults	Percentage reduction in new adult diabetes diagnoses over 3 years	Clinic and hospital intake records; household surveys	Wider NCD strategy supports prevention at national level
Outcome	Improve dietary habits among adults in target communities	Percentage of adults reporting increased fruit/vegetable intake	Community health surveys; pre/post dietary assessments	Participants are motivated and able to act on dietary advice
Output	Adults receive free community nutrition counselling	Number of adults attending at least 3 counselling sessions	Counselling attendance records; programme monitoring reports	Sessions are accessible, culturally appropriate, and well-promoted
Activity	Design and deliver community nutrition workshops in priority areas	Number of workshops conducted and materials distributed	Training logs; facilitator reports; distribution lists	Qualified facilitators and logistical support are available



Exercise #3

Your Task

As a group, return to your project idea identified earlier and complete the Logframe matrix

Define the following for your intervention:

- **Goal** (long-term change you want)
- **Outcome** (direct change your project contributes to)
- **One Output** (service or product you will deliver)
- **One Activity** (what you will do to produce the output)

For each level, fill in:

- One **indicator**
- One **means of verification**
- One **assumption** that could affect success



Additional resources

- [UNDAF ToC Guidance](#)
- [GEF Theory of Change Primer](#)
- [TheoryofChange.org](#)



Thank you!

ECLAC virtual library

