



## Introduction to Program Design: Developing Your Theory of Change

This information guide provides an overview of key terms and definitions related to program design, describes the key elements of a strong theory of change (ToC), and offers tips for getting started in ToC development.

### Introduction

A **logic model** is a graphic representation that defines all building blocks required to bring about a long-term goal. The change process depicted in a logic model should be possible to articulate using “if... then” statements. Both theories of change and logframes can be considered types of logic models. The term **theory of change (ToC)** refers to a diagram that explicitly illustrates (usually with arrows) the causal pathways between activities, outputs, outcomes, and objectives.

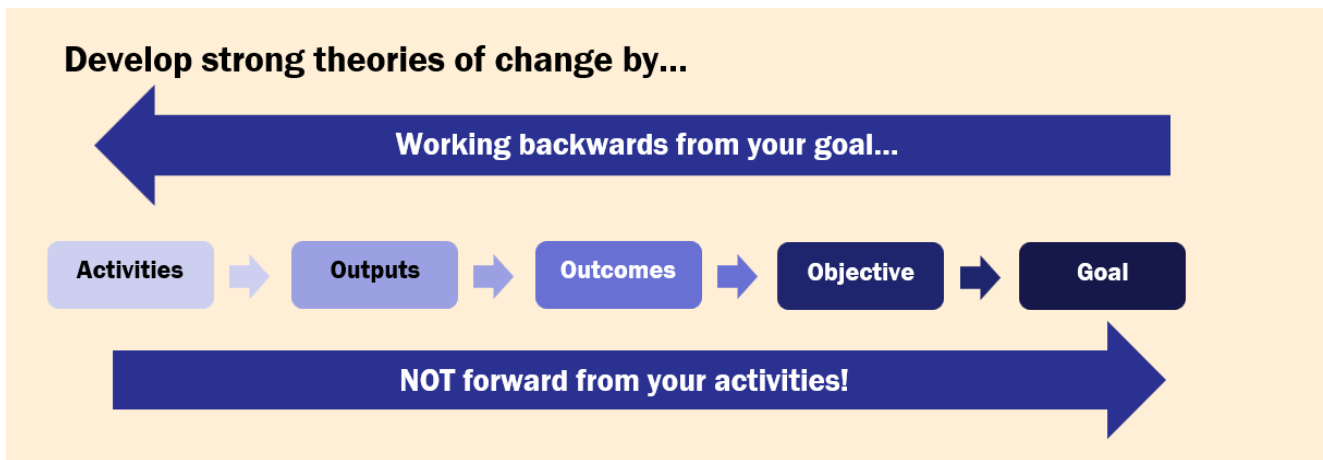
Developing a ToC can help your team:

- Make sure that the logic underlying a program is sound;
- Get on the same page about what you want to achieve, for whom, and how;



A **theory of change** is a type of logic model that explicitly illustrates (usually with arrows) the causal pathways between **activities, outputs, outcomes, and objectives.**

- Collaboratively draw on the knowledge of staff with different roles and perspectives;
- Identify and address potential risks to the program before they occur; and
- Lay the foundation for the project narrative, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan, and budget.



## Elements of a Strong Theory of Change

As the diagram above illustrates, ToCs should be outcomes-driven and should clearly outline the proposed **causal pathways** between activities, outputs, outcomes and objectives. Causal pathways, or logical pathways, are represented by arrows in a theory of change diagram. They visually illustrate how “point A” leads to “point B” within a project.

Different language can be used when discussing the elements of a theory of change. In this guide, we use the terms **goals, objectives, outcomes, and outputs** because these are among the most common. But whatever vocabulary you choose to use, the basic premise is the same: your theory of change should articulate how the process of change occurs.

Key Term	Definition
<b>Activities</b>	Tasks needed to deliver a product or service.
<b>Outputs</b>	The products, goods, services, and immediate results produced directly by the project and that are required for achievement of the project’s outcomes.
<b>Outcomes</b>	The planned or achieved results of an intervention’s outputs; changes that contribute to the project’s overall objective.
<b>Objective</b>	The condition or state a project expects to achieve.
<b>Goal</b>	The overall improved situation to which the project will contribute (but not achieve on its own).

## Developing a Theory of Change

ToCs are ideally developed as a collaborative team effort at the program design stage. They can also be created for existing programs as part of strategic planning processes, grant renewals, or anytime the team wants to revisit and improve program strategy.

### Backwards Mapping

The first step in creating a ToC is deciding the project goal (if not predetermined by a funder). Write or type your goal on a sticky note, whiteboard, or text box. Then, use **backwards mapping** to identify each step or pre-condition needed to move the project toward the goal. As a team, discuss: “What objective do we need to achieve to contribute to this goal?” “What outcomes do we need to see to achieve our objective?” and so on. Working backwards helps ensure causal pathways are logical. It may feel counterintuitive at first but gets easier with practice.

### SMART Framework

Objectives, outcomes, and outputs within a ToC should be **SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound**.

- **Specific:** Does our objective/outcome/output specify what we want to achieve?
- **Measurable:** Is it possible to measure whether this has been achieved?
- **Attainable:** Is it realistic that we will achieve this within the scope of the project?
- **Relevant:** Does this matter for our goal?
- **Time-bound:** Does our objective/outcome/output state a timeframe?

## Case Study

Imagine Ana is an executive director at a resettlement agency, and she is working with her team to develop a theory of change for a new economic empowerment program. The team discusses the long-term results they hope to achieve for their clients, and they write down the following goal:

Refugees are self-sufficient

Ana and her team begin the process of backwards mapping to determine the changes that need to be achieved in order to reach the goal. She asks her team: "What parts of this goal we can we realistically achieve through this project?" The team comes up with the following **objective**:

Employable refugees have full-time jobs.

Ana then asks, "Are full-time jobs enough? And which refugee clients do we want to get employed?" The team uses the SMART framework to revise the original **objective** to:

Employable refugees are employed in full-time jobs earning \$15/hr. within 90 days of program enrollment.

Using an arrow, Ana then indicates how the **objective** will contribute to the **goal**:

Employable refugees are employed in full-time jobs earning \$15/hr. within 90 days of program enrollment.



Refugees are self-sufficient

*This case study continues on the next page.*

## Incorporating Best Available Evidence

Once you determine the outcomes your program aims to achieve, review the best available **evidence** to help inform your program. There are many kinds of evidence, but **evidence-based projects** are typically understood to be those where research has indicated that a given intervention is statistically likely to lead to a certain outcome.

This type of evidence is frequently not available for all program types and intended populations; however, it is still important to research which interventions may lead to your outcomes of interest, and how similar interventions have been successfully implemented. This ensures your program design is based on the **best available evidence**. If you have implemented this program in the past, you should also consider how your own program data can inform your theory of change.

To learn more about evidence-based programs, see [this Switchboard blog post](#), which includes a case study about how evidence improved programming.

## Considering Context and Clients When Creating a ToC

It is important to understand context as you develop your ToC. Client characteristics such as sex, age, education level, and country of origin can affect their access and outcomes. Local considerations, such as the availability of public transit and the job market, may also influence the results you hope to achieve.

To be sensitive to these considerations, programs must take steps to address barriers and aim to ensure that all clients have equal opportunities to engage in and benefit from programs.

Here are four tips for considering context and clients as you create a theory of change:

**Tip 1: Gather information about the risks and barriers different groups face to program participation and success.**

Review internal or external data to identify potential risks for vulnerable groups, such as women and girls, single-parent households, and those with limited English proficiency. Consider literacy, transportation, and child care responsibilities as potential barriers to women’s participation. Your theory of change should include measures to mitigate these risks, such as additional or adapted activities to improve women’s participation.

One way to gather this information prior to project design is to conduct a **needs assessment**—a process for gathering critical information on your clients’ unique experiences and needs. Collecting demographic data during a needs assessment allows you to **disaggregate** the results. (See *box below*.) This can help you identify potential barriers to program participation and plan accordingly.

**Tip 2: Remember the “M” in SMART: align your ToC with measurement plans.**

Remember that a strong theory of change lays the foundation for your project’s M&E plan. If the outputs, outcomes, and objectives in your ToC are truly measurable, it will be easy for you to develop **indicators**, variables that represent valid measures of change (for example: % of enrolled participants who attend one or more ESL classes per month).

**An indicator is a variable that represents a valid measure of change. Indicators help you assess whether the changes you planned in your ToC have occurred, and if so, to what degree.**

**Disaggregation is the practice of separating results based on a characteristic such as sex, country of origin, zip code, etc. This can help you understand how different groups compare.**

Similarly, carefully considering how you will **disaggregate your data** will help you collect the right information later on. For example, if you plan to disaggregate your ESL class attendance by sex, you will need to include data on participants’ sex in your data collection plan. This will then help you monitor any disparities between client groups and make adjustments as needed.

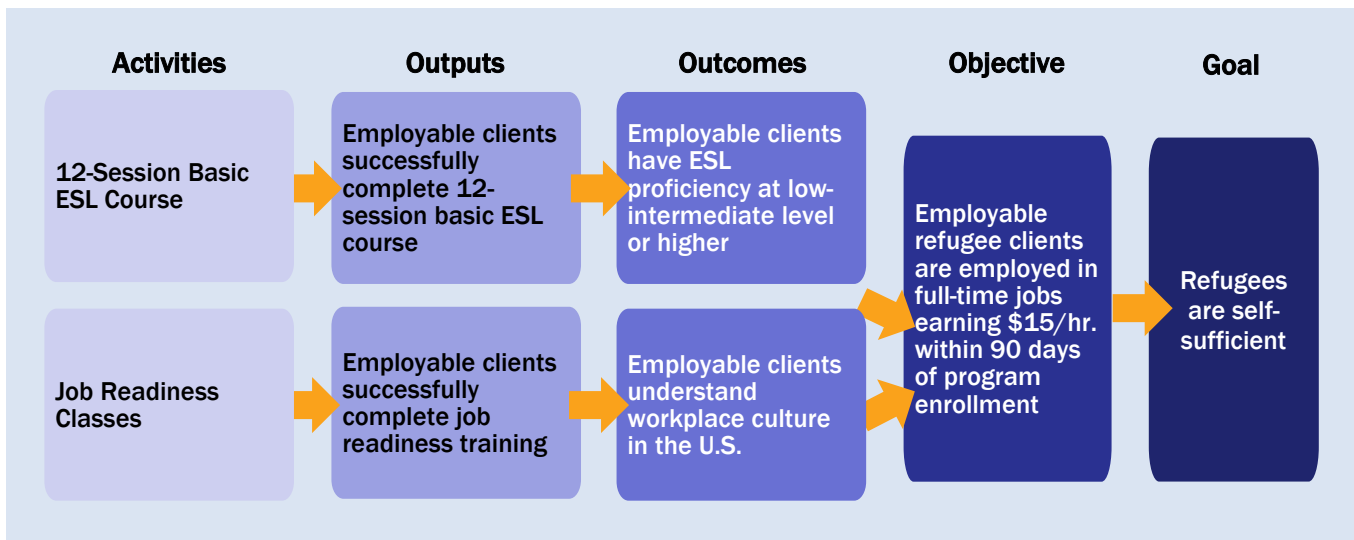
Your M&E plan can also help build accountability into your theory of change. It can help answer the question, “How does this project work?”—not just for some clients, but for all clients. For example, your M&E plan might help you answer: “Is it the case that these outputs will lead to the desired outcomes for women clients? or “Will we be able to approach Afghan, Ukrainian, and Congolese households in the same way?”

**Case Study Continued**

Ana and her team next discuss what **outcomes** will be needed in order to achieve their **objective**. They decide that to become employed in full-time jobs earning \$15/hr., clients will need to understand U.S. work culture, and they must also have at least a low-intermediate level of English proficiency. These will serve as project **outcomes**.

Continuing to work backward, the team decides that for clients to achieve these **outcomes**, they must successfully complete both an ESL course and job readiness training (project **outputs**). Finally, they note down the corresponding **activities**.

Ana identifies participants’ sex as an important axis of disaggregation. As the team tests their theory of change using “if-then” statements, one person flags that they will need to monitor whether the causal pathways are holding true for women as well as men. They will monitor the disaggregated data to determine whether men and women are attending ESL classes and progressing at the same rate, making adjustments if needed. The team has now drafted an initial ToC (see *next page*), which can be tested using “if-then” statements. It can also be revised and improved over time.



**Tip 3: Incorporate the voices of different program stakeholders.**

The development of a ToC should be **collaborative**. Create space to meaningfully engage stakeholders by informing them of the purpose of a ToC, including them in brainstorming sessions, and/or by inviting them to provide feedback on a draft. In addition to program staff, grant-writers, M&E staff, and partners, stakeholders can include clients from the intended population. This collaborative approach can also lay the groundwork for future cooperation and planning around M&E.

**Tip 4: Don't forget about the budget.**

Consider the budgetary implications of each step in your causal pathways. For example, ask whether you have adequate funds for any staff capacity building, child care, transportation, and interpretation needed to achieve the outputs, outcomes, and objectives you have defined. If your budget is not sufficient, you may need to revise your design.

**Testing Your Theory of Change**

Once you've developed your ToC, test its logic using **"if-then" statements**. For instance, you might test the pathway from an output to an outcome as follows: IF "employable male and female refugee adults successfully complete a high-quality job readiness training program," THEN "employable male and female refugee adults will demonstrate basic job readiness." If your "if-then" statements do not make sense, this is a sign your project logic is not sound and adjustments are likely needed.

**Conclusion**

Developing a theory of change as part of program planning and proposal development encourages outcomes-driven programs, helps ensure program logic is sound, and provides a roadmap for success you can monitor and adjust along the way. It is also a key opportunity to build best-available evidence and accessibility into your project design.

**Additional Resources**

[Introduction to Program Design: Developing Your Logical Framework \(Logframe\)](#): This Switchboard guide explains the purpose of a logframe, the companion tool to a theory of change, and offers guidance on developing one.

[SMART Indicators Checklist](#): Use this Switchboard checklist to test whether indicators meet SMART standards.

[M&E Plan Template](#): This Switchboard tool outlines the components of a strong M&E plan, using the example of a refugee employment program.

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