



Theory of Change for MSPs

Day
Four
Projects



Theory of Change for MSPs

Theory of Change is both a process and product. It can be best understood as a visual and narrative description of how and why a desired change is theorised to happen.

A useful Theory of Change offers an outline of desired changes and the actions necessary to bring about such change. When developed through a quality process, it supports strategy development, continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement.

There are many different approaches to developing Theory of Change, and many examples of ToCs exist for organisations, initiatives, and projects. Typically, ToCs logically describe connections and relationships between inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes.

In the context of MSPs, it is typical to expect that a complex set of activities will contribute to desired change, and that the catalysing effects of MSP activities will lead to long-term results. This is a departure from other ToCs that demonstrate clear linkages and causality between activities and outcomes, and can often be a stumbling point for teams that are accustomed to more linear ToC work. Spending time exploring these different pathways of change is useful and important when considering an MSP's unique contribution.

Key considerations for Theory of Change for MSPs:

- MSPs are multi-level, involving platform foundations, activities, results and impact domains;
- Results are temporal: they accrue at different rates for different levels;
- Result pathways are non-linear and contributory, with multiple actors shaping long-term MSP impacts;
- MSP results are inter-related: both within and across MSP levels;
- Platform levels are linked through shared foundations, activities and result areas.

Importantly, Theory of Change can be understood as both process and product.

Process

Through participatory engagement with stakeholders involved within an MSP, usually in workshops and consultations, a range of perspectives are gathered to begin to articulate what change an MSP desires to create, and how that change is going to take place. This process is intentionally iterative and within multi-stakeholder platforms, it is necessary to draw from the views and vantage points of multiple sectors and perspectives. The set of activities described here may be useful as starting points for developing a ToC for your MSP.

Product

Theory of Change processes generate a visual and accompanying narrative description of how a desired change is going to take place. These products take many different forms showing links between activities and intended outcomes. Spending time exploring these different pathways of change is useful and important when considering an MSP's unique contribution.



Getting Started

To get started on developing a theory of change, the following activities may be useful. While these exercises won't result in a Theory of Change for your platform, they are useful primers to start thinking about the different features or elements that your Theory of Change may need to include.

What you'll need:

1. A collaborative space, online or in person. A white board and sticky notes are useful.
2. Around 1 hour for each exercise: the following four exercises are to get you started. Developing a full Theory of Change often takes longer, and is completed over a period of time.

1. Ambition Statement

An ambition statement helps to describe the overall direction for your MSP. Often, an ambition statement is a single sentence, or north star, for where your MSP is headed. To make a start on your ambition statement, try completing the following sentence: "A world where....."

2. What's getting in the way?

Once you've named your ambition, it's useful to consider what is currently stopping your ambition from being a reality. There could be many reasons- operating at local through to global levels. Perhaps it's because there's limited awareness, understanding or acceptance of the challenge; too few resources being devoted to the area; strong and powerful opposing perspectives which are stifling efforts at change; little available evidence or data; fragmented and uncoordinated action among diverse stakeholders; etc.

In this exercise, spend time as a group brainstorming all the blockers or challenges that lie between you and your ambition. Are there particularly important or powerful challenges? Are there any clusters or groups of challenges?

3. What might our platform try to change?

Having begun to map out some of the challenges or roadblocks, which ones might your platform seek to influence? This isn't about what you'll do to influence them, it's just about identifying a set of challenges your platform is (or could be) well positioned to change.

What about these challenges or blockers could your platform influence? And by when?

Consider what your platform could change in 1 years' time; in 3 years' time, and in 5 years' time. Write these down as 'outcome statements': e.g. "In 5 years' time, programs and other initiatives launched by the Ministries of Education, Health and Environment will be based on valid and reliable data".

4. What can our platform do, to influence these outcomes?

As a group, consider the unique role and activities your platform can bring to influence the outcomes you've identified. Common platform activities include: facilitating discussions and dialogues among partners; catalysing new ways of thinking and doing; curating, synthesising and sharing knowledge and evidence; securing funding for platform activities and initiatives; and advocating for and on behalf of platform members.

Write down all the activities your platform currently does, and all that you think it could do. Once these are clear to you and others, identify which activities link to which outcomes – are there any activities or outcomes that are unlinked?

Templates





