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Theory of Change and Logframe

A Guide for LMIC Research Projects

Table of Contents

[What is the purpose of this guide? 2](#_Toc92882060)

[Theory of Change 2](#_Toc92882061)

[Step 1 - Context 3](#_Toc92882062)

[Step 2 – Development impact 3](#_Toc92882063)

[Step 3 – Sequence of changes that lead to long term impact 4](#_Toc92882064)

[Step 4 – Project strategy 5](#_Toc92882065)

[Step 5 – Identify assumptions 6](#_Toc92882066)

[Step 6 – Impact statement and diagram 6](#_Toc92882067)

[How much time will it take? 9](#_Toc92882068)

[A note on policy influence 9](#_Toc92882069)

[Logical Framework (Logframe) 10](#_Toc92882070)

[Steps to create a log-frame 10](#_Toc92882071)

[Can logframes be changed? 11](#_Toc92882072)

[Log-frame matrix example 13](#_Toc92882073)

[Effective research uptake strategies – What works? 14](#_Toc92882074)

[References 15](#_Toc92882075)

[Additional resources: 15](#_Toc92882076)

# **What is the purpose of this guide?**

The purpose of this guide is to provide researchers with tools to define, plan for and track the impact of their research projects. These tools will support academics to identify how their research findings and outputs will contribute to development outcomes. Research teams should aim to use these tools at the early stages of the research design process. This will help build an impact orientation to research design by establishing from the beginning how research evidence will be produced, disseminated, and used by different stakeholders. Importantly it will help research teams identify external engagement approaches, communications strategy, co-production models and impact monitoring system. It will also facilitate discussions around project implementation challenges and strategies to address them.

The basis for this guide is programme theory. Programme theory can be used in all types of interventions such as policies, projects and funding initiatives. It can be defined as an explicit theory of how an intervention will contribute to an outcome (Funnel & Rogers 2011). Programme theory development began in the early 60s but gained prominence in the 80s in response to concerns about accountability in government spending especially regarding overseas development aid. In recent years the use of programme theory has become widely adopted in international development project planning and evaluation. It is also increasingly applied to research projects. The Economic and Social Research Council for example encourages researchers to adopt theory of change as a planning tool for impact.

Programme theory has two components: (1) theory of change which explains the process of change that leads to desired outcomes and impacts and (2) theory of action which outlines the goals, activities, and deliverables that will be undertaken in order to produce intended results. The following sections will provide guidance to how to develop a theory of change and theory of action for research projects.

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| The tools in this guide will help you to:   * Map out the links between research, development challenges, context, stakeholders and the longer term social, economic and environmental goals * Plan your knowledge exchange and public engagement activities and outputs * Track progress throughout the project cycle * Develop your funding applications * Strengthen the impact of your research project |

# **Theory of Change**

Theory of change (ToC) provides a framework for conceptualizing impact. It outlines the logical sequence of changes that are necessary to generate the long-term development goal highlighting the role of the research in this process (Vogel 2012). The value of developing a ToC is that it makes impact pathways explicit by articulating the process of change and how the research project can support it.

Developing a ToC should follow 6 steps:

## **Step 1 - Context**

The goal of this step is to conduct a situational analysis i.e. an overview of the current state of the problem, how it affects vulnerable populations and the key stakeholders involved. The discussion on the issues, drivers and effects should be informed by the evidence available. The stakeholder analysis should identify motivations, agendas, levels of influence and alliances between different actors. It is important to ensure that the stakeholder analysis is manageable as it would not be practical to include every possible actor. Research teams should also consider how receptive these stakeholders are to the research project and possible conflicts between research results and current ways of thinking and approaching issues.

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| Guiding questions for Step 1   * What does the evidence tell us about the issue and the drivers behind it? * What are the key stakeholders involved? * What are the relationships between them? * Who owns the decisions that really have an impact on the context? * What are their incentives, drivers and agendas? * What are the main policy spaces? * Is there a consensus or conflict on the need for change? |

## **Step 2 – Development impact**

The development impact is the long term change that the research project is helping to promote. It is important to highlight that it is not expected that the change at the impact level will be wholly attributable to the research. There is consensus among research institutions and funders that impact is a complex non-linear process involving several stakeholders and contributing factors as well as a high level of uncertainty. The impact statement is therefore a direction of travel to guide research projects. The statement should be realistic and specific covering the benefits and the beneficiaries of this long term change as well as the role of the research.

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| Guiding questions for Step 2   * Considering the situational analysis, what is the long term change that needs to take place and for whom? * How will the research project contribute to this? |

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| **Development impact x research outcomes**   * Development impact is the positive contribution research makes to log term changes in society and the economy such as improving health and wellbeing, poverty reduction, equality and environmental sustainability. * Research outcomes are the positive effects directly generated by the research project such as improvements in policies, practices and understanding of issues as well as changes in awareness, attitudes and behaviour. |

## **Step 3 – Sequence of changes that lead to long term impact**

Step 3 is a mapping of the series of changes that need to happen in order to achieve long-term impact. The mapping should show a progression from short term changes through medium to long term connecting the research project and the intended impact. *At the end of this process research teams will have identified not only their pathways to impact but also a set of stakeholders it is aiming to reach and potential partners that can help influence these actors*. Given that impact is multifaceted process research teams should aim to identify 8 to 12 priority changes in order to make the analysis feasible. Changes should be expressed as active statements and as specific as possible. They should also be linked to specific stakeholders

Changes should be grouped into 2 categories:

1. Medium term changes: this is the sphere where the research will have *indirect influence* over relevant stakeholders. This includes changes in national and international agendas, policies, practices and resource allocation. Medium term changes are where research outcomes start to have influence over development outcomes.
2. Short term changes: sphere where the research project has a *direct influence* over the desired changes. Changes in this sphere include better understanding of issues and drivers, increased awareness of new or emerging development issues, improvements in capacity to use research evidence and stronger consensus around solutions.

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| Guiding questions for Step 3   * What are the desired changes the research project would like to see? * Which stakeholders play a key role in this change? * Who can the research project influence most directly? * Which actors can help you generate desired changes? * Where will you focus most of your efforts and resources? * What types of evidence and research results would be useful to priority stakeholders? |

**Stakeholder Mapping**

The discussions in steps 1 and 3 will generate a stakeholder map and help research projects identify priority stakeholders and potential project partners. Priority stakeholders will be individuals, groups and organizations that participate in decision making processes and that the research project needs to influence in order to generate the desired changes. The mapping exercise should also identify non-academic partners that can help the research project to influence priority stakeholders. These strategic partners are actors that the research project does not necessarily want to influence but can help to expand opportunities for the research to engage with the process of change.

Research teams should aim to identify a maximum of 10 stakeholders. Evidently a single research project will not be able to influence every possible stakeholder therefore research teams should prioritise who they can reach most directly. This mapping should be as specific as possible and avoid generic terms such as civil society, policy makers and international institutions. Government is made up by several ministries, departments and agencies which operate at different territorial levels. Civil society organizations range from large international NGOs to social movements and voluntary community based groups. The UN specialized agencies have their own organizational structure responsible for different areas of work. Each agency has regional and country offices in charge of delivering a specific programme of cooperation with the host government.

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| **What is a Stakeholder?**  Stakeholders are those affected by and those who affect the current situation. Stakeholder is therefore a broad category encompassing communities, civil society organizations, academia, governments, international organizations, and private sector. It is important to make the following distinctions when carrying stakeholder analysis:   * Priority stakeholder – actors who are influential in the system and play an important role in the process of change the research project is aiming to promote. * Strategic partners – organizations who have similar interest in achieving outcomes and can help research projects influence priority stakeholders. |

## **Step 4 – Project strategy**

In this step research teams should define a strategy to achieve the short term changes defined in their Theory of Change. This entails identifying a sequence of research outcomes that need to occur in order to support these goals. This process will enable research teams to build a shared understanding of how the project will achieve impact. Some examples of research outcomes are: Evidence is available and accessible to stakeholders; Key stakeholders are aware of the research project; Research projects develop collaborations with civil society organizations at local and national levels; Research project engages with local communities to produce evidence.

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| Guiding questions for Step 4   * Who are the immediate stakeholders and strategic partners that need to be engaged in the outset of the project? How will you promote their involvement? * What new collaborations and partnerships does the project need to build? How will you develop new relationships? * What research outcomes are needed in order to maximise influence over more stakeholders? * What policy spaces, knowledge networks and decision making arenas will you target? How will you gain access to them? * What role will community groups play the research project? How will you help to develop their capacities? |

## **Step 5 – Identify assumptions**

Making assumptions clear is a key part of the ToC process. This step encourages debate around why change is generated in certain way and why researchers believe this is the best pathway to impact. Assumptions relate to how we understand the context, the process of change and the drivers behind it. They are guided by our values, personal and professional experiences, ideological beliefs and academic background.

The challenge is that the process of identifying assumptions can become excessively complicated and overwhelming. The focus should be on promoting critical thinking and increasing awareness of the key assumptions. Research teams should aim to select the most important ones and link them clearly to a change. The aim should be to have a maximum of five assumptions.

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| Guiding questions for Step 4   * Why do we think change will happen this way? * What aspects are influencing our views? |

## **Step 6 – Impact statement and diagram**

Most ToCs are represented by a diagram that provides an overview of the theory and a narrative that explains it in more detail. There are no prescribed diagrams for any type of intervention. Research teams should do what works best given the time, resources and skills available to them. The impact statement and diagram should include the following elements:

* main features of the context;
* statement of long-term impact;
* sequence of events leading to the expected change;
* key stakeholders and corresponding changes;
* the role of the research project in promoting change;
* important assumptions

**Impact statement and ToC diagram examples:**

*Despite improvements in poverty indicators across all regions of the world, approximately 1 billion people still remain below the poverty line. Eliminating extreme poverty depends on multiple outcomes especially improvements to food security and nutrition, health, access to education as well as stronger livelihoods and social protection to reduce vulnerability to shocks and stresses. These changes are only possible if they are founded on sustainable and inclusive economic growth and effective governance systems.*

*Our research project X aims to contribute to the achievement of extreme poverty eradication (SDG 1, target 1.1). The project will proactively influence policy and investment choices to ensure that the poor and marginalised are prioritised in national development planning. Research results and knowledge exchange will provide governments, international institutions and civil society with evidence, new ideas and effective solutions to address poverty, inequality and exclusion. This will be achieved through close partnerships with academic and non academic actors to produce, synthesize and disseminate knowledge. Strategic partnerships, evidence based recommendations and participation in key poverty reduction actor networks will expand our influence over decision making processes ensuring our contribution towards SDG*



## **How much time will it take?**

Creating a ToC for the first time can take time. The process can be challenging but it provides a strong framework to improve research project design strengthening impact and supporting sustainability. The amount of time spent on this process depends on the size and complexity of the research project as well as available resources. Research teams should choose an approach that is most feasible in their case and take advantage of regular meetings and other already existing organizational processes. Workshops are always a good starting point however should not be considered a condition. What is crucial however is to promote a process of participation and reflection involving the entire research team. Having a facilitator is a good practice as this ensures that discussions remain focused and consensus is achieved.

## **A note on policy influence**

When research is well designed, executed and communicated it can improve policy by making it more effective, efficient and equitable promoting better development outcomes. However, all governments in the world struggle to achieve a balance between different goals, competing demands and budget limitations. In the best case scenario research will be one of many influences shaping policy making processes.

In many developing countries these challenges can be compounded by factors such as weak democratic institutions, political instability and insufficient capacity for policy design and implementation. Policies are therefore a result of compromises among stakeholders. Nonetheless research can be a positive influence and help to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable populations. This influence does not have be focused on a specific policy change. Research can also influence governance systems by introducing new ideas, developing capacity to understand and use research evidence and strengthening policy making frameworks.

Understanding the political context where research is carried out is key to achieve any level of influence. The perfect context is where there is government demand and policy makers request knowledge and evidence from researchers. In this case researchers need to offer timely and clear information with actionable recommendations. If they already have a strong relationship with government bodies or officials, then they will be perfectly poised to influence decision making processes.

In many cases however the window for influence will be partially open. Governments will express interest in the research and recognize there is a need for change. However, there is no clear course of action. This could be due to a number of reasons such as lack of leadership in decision making, budget limitations or weak capacity to implement research recommendations. This context calls for a more proactive attitude from researchers themselves. Investments in capacity building to use research evidence and efforts to translate research results into policy actions are crucial. Regular communication with government to disseminate results and discuss possible solutions is also key. Chances of success are also improved when researchers work with partners to expand opportunities to engage in policy dialogue with government.

Another common scenario is that researchers identify a new or emerging issue, but governments simply do not see it as problem or priority. This case is the most challenging and researchers will need time and patience to create policy windows and opportunities to lobby government. Research influence will be determined by the ability of researchers to engage with advocacy networks and awareness raising strategies. It is important to remember that raising awareness is also impact.

Whatever the political context, research teams must bear in mind that research will find resistance when it questions long held assumptions and challenges power dynamics. If conflict between research results and the status quo is likely, the most realistic goal for the research project might be to change the willingness to engage with new evidence and alternative concepts, frameworks and courses of action. *The process of developing a ToC should include discussions on how receptive government institutions are to research results and what are the most appropriate engagement strategies for the context*.

Source: Carden, F. (2009)

# **Logical Framework (Logframe)**

Logframe is a tool that delivers a structured plan with well defined outcomes, outputs and activities to achieve the desired changes and influence identified in the ToC. The pathway to impact and relevant stakeholders described in the ToC will be the basis for the research project logframe.

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| How does logframe differ from ToC?   * ToC describes a broad process of change that takes into account factors outside the sphere of influence of research projects. It enables researchers to reflect on how to achieve impact. * Log-frame focuses on project components i.e. activities, outputs and results that will be directly produced by the research project. They outline specific project deliverables to achieve research uptake and influence change.   Logframe enables research projects to:   * Identify research outputs and link them to development outcomes and long term impact * Develop a plan for knowledge exchange, public engagement and communications tailored to context and stakeholders * Define a monitoring system to report on knowledge exchange activities and other engagement strategies as well as record positive outcomes and lessons learnt. |

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## **Steps to create a log-frame**

The process of creating a log-frame should follow 8 steps:

1. **Defining Impact** – this should be a summary of your ToC impact statement
2. **Defining Outcomes** – the outcomes in the log-frame should be the medium term changes the project aims to influence as described in the ToC. In cases where research teams have identified several outcomes it is advisable to focus on the most important and achievable changes.
3. **Defining Intermediate goals** – these are the short term changes that are under the direct influence of the research project. Intermediate goals should be linked to a key stakeholder, project partner or beneficiary group.
4. **Defining Outputs** – Project outputs are the direct deliverables of the research project which contribute towards the intermediary goals. The main deliverables should be the research results, research uptake strategies and capacity development activities to support research uptake. Outputs must be linked to specific intermediate goals and tailored to the context. However, they can also be used to support more than one intermediate goal.
5. **Defining indicators** – research projects must select output indicators that are simple but provide an objective measurement. Quantitative and qualitative indicators are equally valid as long as they are measurable. These indicators allow researchers to track progress and report on knowledge exchange activities. They will also provide a basis for future impact evaluations. Some examples of output indicators are (1) number of peer reviewed research published in open access format; (2) number of seminars involving research teams and priority stakeholders; (3) number of policy forums where research teams participate.
6. **Defining Activities** – Project activities are the actions needed to deliver project outputs. Logframes do not need to include all the necessary activities but should aim to outline the priority actions. All activities must be tailored to a key stakeholder or stakeholder group and linked to specific outputs of the research project. It is useful to think of how activities should be sequenced over the project life cycle. Some examples of research project activities are academic publications, events, research synthesis, tools, policy briefs, training, secondment and websites.
7. **Defining Inputs –** Inputs are the financial and human resources needed to carry out project activities. They include aspects such as staff, time, budget and equipment.
8. **Logframe matrix** – the logframe is always expressed as matrix that outlines the impact, outcomes, goals, outputs and activities. The result is a clear knowledge exchange and impact plan for the research project. An example of a logframe matrix for research projects is given below.

## **Can logframes be changed?**

Yes, research projects should review their log-frames periodically to ensure that project outputs and activities are still suitable to the goals and outcomes. The need for new or alternative project activities is likely to arise due to new opportunities for engagement and different demand from stakeholders and partners. The logframe will certainly need to be changed if research teams decide to review the project’s ToC.

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| Guiding questions for logframe development   * Are stakeholders aware of the research project? * Do stakeholders have the necessary capacity to use research evidence? * What communication materials and knowledge products would be suited to the needs and capacities of priority stakeholders? * What types of knowledge exchange events would contribute the goals? * How can research results be synthesised and presented in existing policy forums? * How can the project ensure regular communication with key stakeholders? * Have financial resources been allocated to support all outputs and activities? * How much time can research teams allocate to knowledge exchange activities? * Are monitoring indicators specific, objective and measurable? * What the key milestones the project aims to achieve? |

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| **Log-frame matrix example** | | | |
| **Impact** | Eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere currently measured as people living on less that $1.25 a day (SDG 1 target 1.1) | | |
| **Outcomes** | 1. Poverty reduction strategies are incorporated into national, regional and local development policies and plans | | |
| 1. National, regional and local governments allocate resources from their budgets to poverty reduction strategies | | |
| **Intermediary goals** | 1. Government and donors use evidence produced by the research project to devise poverty reduction strategies | | |
| 1. Government and donors have a better understanding of the drivers behind poverty and knowledge of effective interventions to address poverty | | |
| 1. Government and donors have more knowledge on effective interventions to address poverty | | |
| **Outputs** | 1. High quality interdisciplinary research is produced by the project | 1. Research is disseminated through different channels | 1. Tools are developed to support stakeholders to use evidence |
| **Activities** | Activity 1.1 - peer reviewed papers made available in open access format  Activity 1.2 – research findings are synthesised and made available in open access format | Activity 2.1 - seminars convening government and donors are organised  Activity 2.2 – researchers participate in existing national policy forums related to poverty reduction strategies  Activity 2.3 – communications strategy is developed for research project | Activity 3.1- national/regional/local governments and communities are trained to use tools  Activity 3.2 – tools are made available in the project’s website |

## **Effective research uptake strategies – What works?**

There are no large scale evaluations that provide a strong evidence base for the effectiveness of different research uptake approaches in the Global South. However, some studies have aimed to identify good practices in the context of low and middle income countries (Carden 2009, Balls & Nurova 2020).

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| * **What works:** * Building a relationship of trust and a reputation for producing high quality research * Devising a tailored communication strategy and implementing it from the beginning of the research project * Generating actionable and feasible recommendations and communicating research findings in a way that is digestible to non-specialist audiences * Targeting the right stakeholders – policy decisions are also made at subnational levels. It is therefore important to engage with regional and local governments. Although senior government officials have more power and influence in policy making and budget decisions, they are often politically appointed, and their position can be affected by changes in government. It is important for researchers to also cultivate relationships with mid-level civil service. Civil servants also have a lot of knowledge and experience with policy making. * Developing strong relationships with non-academic partners – Partners have their own network of contacts, local knowledge, familiarity with policy making processes and already participate in existing policy forums * Promoting dialogue and collective learning – Knowledge exchange includes listening to communities, policy makers and other relevant stakeholders and understanding the issues as they see it * Avoid one off policy briefs or workshops – Knowledge exchange and communication must be on going and implemented throughout the project life cycle * Involving non-academic actors in project design and implementation – This includes giving them an active role in the identification of research questions, data collection and analysis as well as knowledge dissemination activities such as a joint publications and events. * Participating in existing policy forums – all countries will have policy forums such as technical working groups or committees which feed into government policy and play an important role in decision making. Convening events to meet participating agencies and present research findings can provide an entry point to these policy spaces * Creating new forums to regularly convene key stakeholders helping to strengthen relationships and providing opportunities to build new ones * Reacting quickly to windows of opportunity such as government policy consultations and reviews |

# **References**

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# **Additional resources:**

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Guidance on Research Uptake. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/514977/Research_uptake_guidance.pdf>

Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Guide on Monitoring and Evaluating Policy Influence. Available at: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/6453.pdf>

Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Briefing Paper on How to Develop Engagement Strategies for Evidence-based Policymaking.

Available at: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/1730.pdf>

Guide for Transboundary Research Partnerships produced by the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE). Available at: <https://naturalsciences.ch/uuid/564b67b9-c39d-5184-9a94-e0b129244761?r=20200527115808_1565139307_8ef687bc-7b14-5a4f-ad9e-bf494cddc1d7>

The ELRHA Guide to Constructing Effective Partnerships Between Humanitarian and Academic Organisations. Available at: <https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/effective-partnerships-report.pdf>

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) guide on the logical framework approach. Available at:

<https://www.sida.se/contentassets/9d257b83f4124113a324c61715150722/21920.pdf>

Literature review on effective strategies to enable research use produced by the Alliance for Useful Evidence, Wellcome Trust, What Works Centre for Wellbeing, and the EPPI-Centre at University College London (UCL).

Available at: <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Alliance-Policy-Using-evidence-v4.pdf>

Economic and Social Research Council Impact Tool Kit.

Available at: <https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/>