



Guide to Making a Theory of Change

This is a free guide created by [Reconnections](#) to help you create a Theory of Change for your organisation, a specific initiative, a mass movement, or any other change-focused work.

Reconnections includes [Reconnections Consultancy](#) and [The Reconnections Project](#), both of which are run by Dr. Trent Grassian. Our mission is to foster unity and joint learning in an increasingly divided world. We do this by supporting those working for the public good to think critically about their work and impact.

We create and disseminate free online resources (like this one!), tools, and blogs and do a range of freelance work, focusing on evaluations, research, strategic development, facilitation, and training.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Before designing or updating your Theory of Change, review this guide and take the time to ask yourself the hard questions. You should refer back to the guide when you are ready to start workshoping your Theory of Change. Make sure to double-check that you haven't fallen into our ten common pitfalls! If you come across any terms you aren't sure about, there's also a glossary at the end.

Lastly, don't forget to get in touch to schedule a FREE, no-obligation [45-minute consultation](#) with [Dr. Trent Grassian](#) to get more support in developing and actioning your Theory of Change.

WHAT IS A THEORY OF CHANGE?

A Theory of Change (ToC) is a way of mapping out the work you are doing, creating direct links from your long-term goal to the steps needed to achieve it. A ToC starts with inputs and interventions, connecting them to specific outputs and indicators, which then link to overall impact. A well-designed ToC should clearly demonstrate how your work will lead to the impact you want to have, including being clear about any underlying assumptions, potential risks, and how you will integrate monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) into each phase.

At its simplest, a ToC usually includes the following components (see the glossary for definitions):

(1) Context/Problem Statement/Baseline → (2) Inputs/Resources → (3) Interventions/Activities
→ (4) Outputs → (5) Outcomes → (6) Impact

TEN MOST COMMON PITFALLS

These are some of the most common issues we have seen when people try to create or update their ToC. Being mindful of these will help you craft a ToC that's a practical, clear tool for learning, growth, and impact.

1. Building a ToC based on what you are already doing, or treating it like a tick box exercise.
2. Lack of clarity around impact goals, deadlines, and/or expected scale.
3. Not considering external factors, including changes in policy, market forces, cultural norms, or other organisations' efforts.
4. Including too many – or too few – outcomes.
5. Forgetting about inputs and just assuming you will have everything you need.



6. Being too linear in your logic, ignoring feedback loops, unintended consequences, and system complexity.
7. Making big leaps or relying on (hidden) assumptions.
8. Not considering monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL).
9. Forgetting about power dynamics and equity issues.
10. Not regularly updating your ToC based on external conditions and internal learning.

TRENT'S TOP TEN TIPS FOR A USEFUL THEORY OF CHANGE

1. **Work backwards:** Envision your ideal equitable system, then reverse-engineer the steps to reach it, unbound by today's constraints.
2. **Engage stakeholders early:** Speaking with key people from a range of sectors and organisations early on can help clarify your thinking and reveal your assumptions and biases.
3. **Review the evidence and context:** Develop your case in advance to save resources and ensure your ToC reflects real-world realities.
4. **Integrate Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) throughout:** You can't know your real impact without MEL. Proper MEL confirms outcomes and highlights gaps in your ToC and implementation.
5. **Consider risks and mitigation strategies:** While you cannot prepare for everything, you need to consider key risks and how you will monitor and address them.
6. **Break it down:** Consider the type of outcomes you will have in the short-, medium-, and long-term, and how they link together.
7. **Tell a story:** Using a clear narrative to communicate your ToC is a great way to check for hidden assumptions. You can assess your story by applying it to made-up or real-life examples.
8. **Make it visual:** Instead of a lengthy text document, use accessible, engaging formats, like charts, storyboards, or interactive maps. You could try using a logic model, results chain, outcome map, intervention matrix, or a visual roadmap using a graphic pathway or flow diagram.
9. **Keep it streamlined:** Keep your ToC simple and clear. Summarise your long-term goal and timeline in one or two concise sentences.
10. **Update your ToC at least once a year:** Organisations that treat their ToC as a one-and-done artefact risk staying stuck in outdated assumptions. Re-evaluating your ToC on a regular—and as-needed—basis ensures you're responsive to shifting contexts, emerging opportunities, and hard lessons learned. Updates should happen at scheduled times, when certain triggers occur (e.g., major external shocks or policy changes), and based on continuous learning loops with real-time monitoring.



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Assumption: Underlying, often hidden, beliefs about external stakeholders or conditions that your ToC relies on.

Baseline: The current, starting condition or value of an indicator that you can measure future progress against.

Context: The external environment that impacts how and why your ToC will proceed, including social, economic, political, ecological, and/or cultural factors.

Feedback Loop: Tools built into the ToC to revisit, check, and make changes based on emerging evidence.

Flow Diagram: A tool for visualising your ToC using sequential stages or steps (usually shown by boxes or symbols connected by arrows) to show how activities will lead to outputs, outcomes, and impact.

Graphic Pathway: Similar to a Flow Diagram, but with a greater emphasis on movement and flow (of information, energy, or objects). This can be a useful tool in understanding patterns and relationships within the systems your ToC operates within.

Impact: Your big goal. The long-term, systemic change your initiative wants to achieve. This should be measurable and include a timeline.

Indicator: Quantitative/qualitative measures to assess your progress toward an outcome or your overall impact.

Input: Questions that have a set of fixed responses, such as: numeric scales, yes/no questions, or asking about how often something occurs. These are used to produce quantitative data.

Interventions/Activities: The specific actions you are taking to achieve the impact you want (e.g., education or social media campaigns or training sessions) that will produce outputs.

Intervention Matrix: A table that links each activity (rows) with the specific outcomes (columns) they are expected to influence.

Logic Model: A way of representing a ToC, usually in a table format that links Inputs → Activities → Outputs → Outcomes → Impact. It can also include columns for indicators and assumptions.

Mitigation: Steps taken to reduce the likelihood of and/or to address specific risks.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL): Systems to collect impact data (monitoring), assess progress and effectiveness (Evaluation), and use insights to continually adapt, improve, and grow (Learning).

Outcome: A measurable change in knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, or conditions that occurred because of your initiatives/activities. Outcomes can be short-, medium-, or long-term.

Outcomes Map: A diagram that starts with key outcomes (often grouped by themes) and then works backwards to map out the specific interventions and assumptions that will create them.

Output: The direct, tangible products or services produced by your interventions/activities (e.g., number of policies changed or gallons of water saved).

Pathway of Change: A visual or narrative sequence that uses causal logic to show how activities lead to outputs, which then lead to outcomes, and, ultimately, the impact.

Problem Statement: A clear, concise description of the core issue your initiative is addressing. This should include its scope, scale, and root causes.

Qualitative: Measurable insights into groups, experiences, or opinions that cannot be objectively measured using mathematics. This includes questions like “How?” or “Why?” Qualitative data can include videos, focus groups, interviews, written answers, journal entries, art pieces, photographs, and more.



Quantitative: Precise measurements that can be used to demonstrate cause and effect. In theory, quantitative data should be objective (though there are a lot of questions and issues around how objective you can ever truly be in research). In a survey, this can be done using close-ended questions.

Results chain: A structured sequence that links each level (Goal → Outcomes → Outputs → Activities) with explicit indicators and baselines.

Risk: Internal or external factors that could inhibit your ToC in real life, at any stage.

Stakeholder: Individual(s) or group(s) who has a direct interest in your initiative, potentially as a funder, beneficiary, partner, policy holder, or in another capacity.