Module Five: Theories of Change

Practitioners' decisions about what to do in a particular situation are based on assumptions about how to bring about peace and theories about how to bring about change. These underlying assumptions are often implicit, and rarely discussed. RPP is finding that effective programs clarify these Theories of Change and continually test them against the realities of the conflict.

What are Theories of Change?

A Theory of Change | is an explanation of how and why an action is believed to bring about its planned objectives, i.e. the changes it hopes to create through its activities, thereby revealing underlying assumptions. A clear theory of change helps to articulate the logical flow from the starting point (analysis) to the goal of the initiative to the broader change the organization plans to achieve.

A practical formula for articulating a theory of change is the following:

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If x [activity],
then y [expected change],
because z [rationale - why do you think this change will happen?]
Examples of Theories of Change[21]

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Project level (individual level change)[22] | Portfolio/Sector level (socio-political level change)

If *[activity]* children in this school are given individual treatment for trauma recovery,

then *[change]* they will develop increased ability to control their emotions and not act out against others, especially those who are different from them;

because *[rationale]* the activities will have helped them begin to heal from the psychological wounds of war and reduce their overall fear and sense of vulnerability at school.

If we wanted to move this engagement to potentially show results towards socio-political change:

[*Note: under these conditions, if we introduce inter-group skills (negotiation, mediation, problem-solving) to children of different religious groups together, then they will be able to learn them and use them to resolve disputes at school, including those that may arise between religious groups.*[23]]

If *[activity]* we strengthen the capacities of select local and national level government institutions in violence prevention and coexistence;

then *[change]* interactions within the government and between state and civil society will be more constructive and inclusive,

because *[rationale]* local and national government institutions will be better equipped to deal with tensions more constructively and engage in forward looking, preventive approaches within government and in state-society relations.

[*Note: this sector theory of change is very macro-level and needs to be accompanied by more concrete and measurable theories of change at the program and project level. This would help further embed the theory in specific operational contexts.*]

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[21] For more background on the different levels at which theories of change can be useful (activity, project, program, portfolio/sector, country level etc.) see Woodrow and Oatley, "Practical Approaches to Theories of Change in Conflict, Security and Justice Programmes. Part I"

[22] Babbitt, Chigas, and Wilkinson *Theories and Indicators of Change: Concepts and Primers for Conflict Management and Mitigation*, 9

[23] Ibid.

In many (perhaps most) cases these theories are not necessarily conscious or stated. Rather, they are embedded in the skills and approaches that peacebuilding practitioners and policy makers have learned, the capacities and "technologies" of their organizations, attachments to favorite methodologies, and the perspectives various decision makers bring to the peacebuilding process. Ideas about what will contribute to peace may also be dictated by international political dynamics and policies. Some theories focus on *who* needs to change: which individuals and groups in society or which relationships need to change. Other theories concentrate on *what* needs to change: an institution, a policy, a social norm. Still other theories are tied directly to a particular methodology or approach by which the change can or should happen.

Theories of change operate at different levels. On one level, they can relate to micro-level changes (e.g. project or program level), usually associated with specific activities. They can describe how the overall program approach and an activity (or series of activities) will add up to achieve the goal (e.g. how various justice and human rights initiatives achieve progress in that sector). In other words, what changes will result from each activity, and what needs to happen in order for the efforts to result in the goals we have set? See the chart of activities and changes in *Module Four*.

On another level, the **Theory of Change** describes how achieving the program goals will contribute to Peace Writ Large (PWL). In other words, what does the program assume about what is needed to address the driving factors of conflict and achieve Peace Writ Large, and if it were successful, how would it contribute to PWL?

Theories of change need to be grounded in the particular context, and should be specific enough to be testable.

Theories of Change and Peacebuilding Effectiveness

Evidence shows that programs are often less effective than they could be, because their Theories of Change and program theories are implicit (unspoken/unexpressed or not open),

"I THINK YOU SHOULD BE MORE EXPLICIT HERE IN STEP TWO."

Cartoonist: Sidney Harris

incomplete or not well-thought out, untested and at times inadequate for the conflict in which they are working. RPP's evidence suggests that two elements of a good Theory of Change are often missing, as explained below.

Explicit and well-developed connections between activities, goals and Peace Writ Large

Many programs are less effective than they could be, because they make untested, and ultimately unrealistic, assumptions about how their activities will lead to changes in Peace Writ Large. This is a problem regarding their **Theory of Change**!

For example, some practitioners working with political leaders assume that if they change the individual perceptions of key leaders (at the Individual/Personal level), those leaders will then initiate changes in

policies at the Socio-Political level. RPP has found that this assumption is not borne out in many cases. **Programs that explicitly identify and examine their program theories and Theories of Change are more likely to have effects on Peace Writ Large**. They need to be clear about what will happen as a result of the activities they undertake, and how that will lead to the goals and their desired impact on peace.

Below you see the "RPP Matrix *Plus*," which shows how conflict analysis, Peace Writ Large and Theories of Change fit together. Note that this version of the Matrix adds subcategories of change within the Individual/Personal and Socio-Political realms. This greater specificity about the subcategories can be helpful in positioning the program goal within the Socio-Political area.

Effective peacebuilding strategies consider the links between conflict analysis and Peace Writ Large, program goals, and program activities and have an explicit Theory of Change and program theory/theories. Therefore, we can state that effective peacebuilding programs:

- Identify driving forces of conflict and key actors and a vision for Peace Writ Large that addresses them.

- Articulate program goals that reflect change at the Socio-Political level, either institutional change or collective attitude, behavioral or relational change, and ask whether their theory of how the goals will contribute to Peace Writ Large is appropriate in the particular conflict context.

- Define a series of activities and ask, at each stage, what difference these activities will make, and how the changes from these activities will result in the Socio-Political goal. Often activities begin at the Individual-Personal level, but good programs have an articulated strategy and tested assumptions about how they will move from the Individual/Personal level to the Socio-Political, and how they will link More and Key People strategies.