

# FAGLIGT



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- læring og metodeudvikling på tværs

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### Making sense of what we do

Lessons learnt from using Theory of Change as a participatory planning tool  
with NGOs in Denmark, Nepal, Central Asia and Libya<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This paper has been prepared specially for *Fagligt Fokus* as an input for the learning process on how Danish CSOs and their partners can integrate Theory of Change in their programme planning. The views presented in the paper are not the position of 'FagligtFokus', but solely the positions of the author. This paper has been prepared for a TOCs Seminar organized by CISU, Copenhagen, January 16, 2014.

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**List of abbreviations**

- CSO Civil society organization
- DCA DanChurchAid
- ICCO The interchurch organization for development cooperation, Netherlands
- INGO International non-governmental organization
- SMART Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely
- ToC Theory of Change

## 1. Introduction

'Theory of Change' (ToC) increasingly attracts the attention of project and program planners eager to promote good or best practice of program planning, monitoring and evaluation. Some people and agencies use the term to describe a dialogue-based analysis of values, worldviews and philosophies of 'how change occurs'. Other people view it from a technical perspective as a tool and methodology to map out the logical sequence of an initiative, from activities through to the end result it seeks to reach.

This article focuses on Theory of Change mainly as a technical tool for planning of program interventions and for the development of frameworks for monitoring and evaluation. The article argues that – if used consistently – ToC is well suited to deal with the complexity, non-linear and unpredictable factors that often affect social programming. The article further argues, that ToC can help improve planning and commitment of planners to implement their plan as it improves our understanding of *why* certain interventions are more feasible than others.

### What is a Theory of Change?

In this article ToC is understood as a way of representing the changelogic behind a program. It is a process (and the result of that process) that aims to explain *how* and *why* we think that certain interventions will lead to a desired change. When it is well done, a ToC is a 'mental road map' that can be read by others so that they understand where we are going. It is a tool that can be used to monitor and visualize a project's progress and to assess the feasibility of the project strategy.

#### What is a precondition?

A precondition is a condition that must exist or be established before something else (our objective can occur). In a ToC planning exercise our job is to identify all the preconditions that we think we need to create or care for in order to realize our objectives and to put them in order.

Like a Log-frame, a ToC has objectives, results and activities. Yet a ToC puts high emphasis on preconditions (short and longer term outcomes) – or results – that a program *must* realize, if it is to reach its objective. In addition, a ToC illustrates how the short term and intermediate outcomes of a program influence changes at other, long-term levels.

Finally, a ToC adds importance to the assumptions – our implicit thinking – about how the achievement of a result – or precondition – at all levels will lead to the achievement of a result at other levels. Clarifying what is going on 'between' each planned result at each 'level' of the strategy, acknowledging possible weaknesses in the logic and proposing ways to address them, inform the program strategy and cohesion and contribute to an ongoing reflection on the feasibility of the strategy.

### The content of this article

This article describes how the ToC approach has been used as a participatory, bottom-up planning tool by the Danish INGO DanChurchAid(DCA) and the Dutch INGO, ICCO. DCA and ICCO have used ToC to engage donors and local partners in Denmark, Central Asia, Nepal and Libya in processes of joint thinking about how and why proposed interventions could bring about positive changes in the lives of target beneficiaries.

Based on these experiences, lessons learnt are discussed. The article is based on informal feed-back from workshop participants participating in ToC planning and monitoring processes from 2011 - 2013, semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives and partners as well as the authors' own observations when facilitating ToC workshops.

## **2. Why and How 'Theory of Change' - The Use of Theory of Change for planning and monitoring purposes**

Cases used for this article have all applied ToC as a participatory planning tool. Yet, the motivation to do so differs. Some emphasize the usefulness of ToC in terms of strengthening program cohesion and common understanding among multiple stakeholders to the planning process. Others state that they find the tool more flexible and easier to use when having to navigate in and communicate complex change processes and the progress they make.

Main reasons for choosing ToC is outlined in this section.

### **Creating program coherence and ownership**

ICCO has no formal requirements in terms of project and program formats and planning processes, but regional offices and partners are strongly recommended to develop a ToC for their programs. ICCO staff members point at ToC as their preference because the tool leaves more space for qualitative discussions about *how and why* change occurs and for adaptations and tracing of changes in program plans compared to other planning tools.

It is both the intention and the experience of ICCO that participatory ToC processes strengthen partners' understanding of what it is that they want to achieve and how their own work and the work of other organizations contribute towards their desired final objective. This strengthens the program coherence and the sense of ownership by local partners to the programs that are supported by ICCO. This is the key to ICCO's partnership approach.

ToC was therefore a natural choice when, in 2011, 25 local CSOs from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan were to be united under a framework of one, joint program, financially supported by ICCO and DCA. And again in 2013 when a similar exercise of uniting partners under a joint framework took place in Nepal with 5 local NGOs in cooperation with ICCO, DCA and the Lutheran World Federation.

### **Clarifying the contribution of short-term projects to long-term objectives**

For DCA the main motivation to use ToC for project planning in Libya in 2012 and 2013 was that it was considered more intuitive and easier to understand than other planning tools and thus facilitating partner involvement and ownership. This was important since none of DCA's partners had any prior experiences developing program strategies and plans. An independent civil society did not exist before the fall of president Gadhafi in 2011 and none of DCA's partners had ever prepared a development project before.

The volatile political situation in Libya and the related funding situation was the second reason for choosing ToC. Due to the unpredictability of the situation, DCA's main donor operated with funding frameworks of 6-12 months – far too little

time to achieve the ambitions of DCA and its partners to mainstream gender rights and equality into the new Libyan constitution and related legal frameworks.

DCA found that using ToC would make it easier to illustrate to the donor how the results that they could realistically produce within a funding framework 6-12 months would contribute to DCA's and partners' own long-term objective – as well as to the programmatic priority of the donor itself.

### Creating space for flexibility in a complex world of change

A third reason for choosing ToC has to do with the nature of advocacy planning. Identifying feasible strategies and intermediate outcomes for advocacy projects operating in shifting political contexts can be a challenge. No matter how clearly an advocacy strategy to a desired long-term policy change goal is articulated, it is impossible to predict or explain all the variables that might be important within the change process.

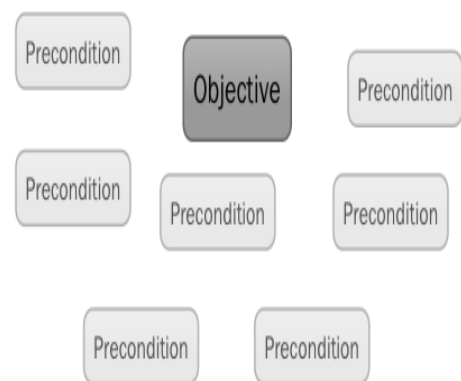
DCA's advocacy unit in Copenhagen chose ToC because they felt that the tool allowed them to adjust and trace the changes they knew they would have to make in their advocacy plans, each time the context changed. In addition they felt that – being a visual tool – ToC helped them present and communicate their strategy and their progress and achievements to partners and stakeholders in a simple way that was easily communicated and understood.

### The process

In all the cases mentioned in this article ToC planning workshops were structured so as to enable participants to go through the following 'planning steps':

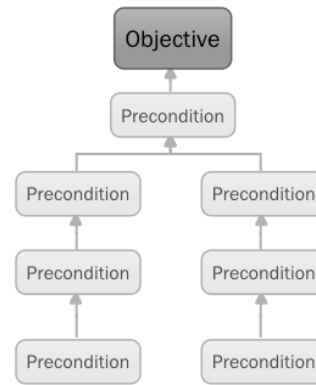
**Step 1: Formulation of an objective to which the program would want to be held accountable.** Participants were requested to make the objective as specific and measurable as possible since this makes it easier to visualize the end situation. It also makes it easier to identify the various preconditions/intermediate results that should be created to reach the program's objective.

**Step 2: Defining 'logical flows' or pathways to the objective:** With a SMART objective, participants were ready to move to the next phase and think of all the preconditions that should be in place for them to reach their objective. A brainstorm of all the preconditions that need to be fulfilled was facilitated and all preconditions were named on cards by asking each other what *had* to happen, before the final objective could be achieved? Also, participants were asked to bring cards in order, starting with the *first* event that had to happen if they were to start their program the day after. Cards should be linked with a causal 'so that' formulation between each step. In this way, participants were encouraged to create a logical link between each of the preconditions identified.



### What is a Pathway?

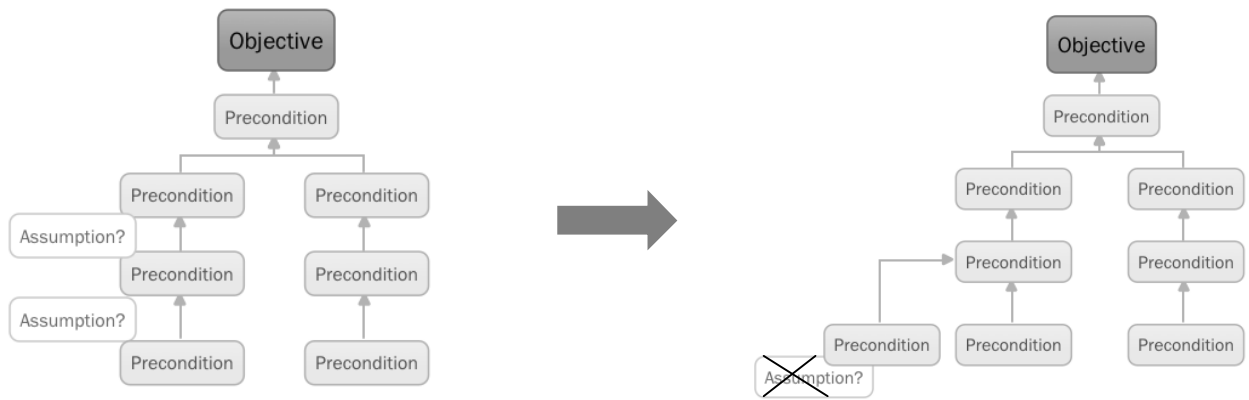
A pathway is a sequence or 'row of preconditions' that needs to be established for us to reach our objective. The model shows 2 pathways.



**Step 3:** Once 'flowcharts' of logical steps had been developed, participants were asked to 'test' their logic and the feasibility of their work by identifying and **checking the validity of their own, underlying assumptions**. Assumptions would be beliefs about conditions that participants supposed already prevailed and which they believed would be critical to achieve the project's objectives. If the exercise showed that assumptions were flawed, then participants were asked to add a new precondition to their ToC in order to create the condition that would enable them to 'move forward in their change process. If it turned out that the validity of certain assumptions remained unclear and could only be tested against 'reality', then participants were asked to keep them for later so that they could keep an eye on them during program implementation and adjust their program accordingly.

### Checking Assumptions – an example:

In Central Asia, a group of organizations wanted to raise awareness among migrants so that they could defend their rights in front of Russian border guards. The underlying assumption was that migrants could speak with the guards in their language (Russian). This was not the case however; half of the migrants did not speak Russian. When the organizations realized that through critically reflecting on their assumptions, they decided to add another precondition in their theory of change. The flawed assumption 'migrants speak Russian' was replaced by an additional precondition: 'Migrants should have access to a hotline of bilingual Russian speaking advisors, who could help them, if they got in trouble'. The principle of replacing flawed assumptions with additional preconditions is visualized in the model below.



**Step 4:** Once assumptions were checked and pathways revised, participants were asked to describe activities and indicators for all relevant preconditions in their theories of change. This was done in a separate table.

**Step 5:** Finally, participants produced a short narrative. In a well-developed ToC, 10-15 lines of description will often be enough to explain readers how a program will bring about change.

### 3. Lessons Learnt

The experiences and lessons learnt from the 4 countries have been quite similar in many ways, despite the fact that the quality and completeness of their final theories of change vary. Working with the participants and observing their struggles and successes with the process, provided useful information about the ways in which the approach added value to planning and project implementation and the challenges that remain.

5 main lessons emerged that have implications for the use of TOC for planning and monitoring:

*While developing the ToCs, each of us could see where and how to work and how others could complement our work  
**ICCO partner, Kyrgyzstan***

*After this analysis I saw new aspects and got new ideas for my project'.  
**DCA partner, Libya***

**Lesson 1: When used as a participatory, bottom-up planning tool, ToC can help strengthen ownership and commitment of program providers/local partners to implement a program.**

One or two persons can easily sit down and develop a ToC for a program or project. Often, this will even be faster and easier than involving multiple stakeholders in the process.

However, building a team of partners, staff members and CSOs that will take ownership over the initiative and work towards its implementation is very hard without their active participation in actually developing the ToC.

The reason for that should be found in some of the key factors that are important if organizations, either individually or jointly, are to succeed with and implement their strategies:

- *The strategy has to make sense*: Partners and stakeholders should feel that the strategy is legitimate, sound and necessary in relation to the overall objective and the context in which they operate. This happens more often, if those who are to implement the plan actually participate in its formulation. Planning is a learning exercise and it is through the process of learning that we understand why we do as we do.
- *There has to be commitment to the strategy*: Stakeholders should wish – or even want – to contribute to the implementation of the strategy. They should be prepared to change their work, add tasks or even, when needed, ‘kill their darlings’ to execute the strategy. When we understand why we do as we do, commitment is likely to increase. Nobody likes to do things that don’t make sense to us.
- Stakeholders should feel that they have sufficient *executing power* (money, manpower, knowledge) to implement the strategy and should then ‘live it’ in practice.

Feedback from participants in Libya, Central Asia and Nepal indicates that using ToC (in particular step 2 and 3) was very helpful in terms of generating very detailed discussions and thereby joint understanding of all the different aspects of the projects and the implicit assumptions behind the actions that participants proposed. This helped participants to a deeper understanding of their project and why they did as they did.

Rather than just knowing what they wanted to do, participants came to understand *why* they thought that their proposed actions would lead to their goal and how their implicit assumptions affected their planning. In other words: their planning made them feel that their plan, which lead them to understand it at a deeper level: They would not only know what to do but also why they did it.

When people understand *why* they do what they do, rather than *what* they do, their commitment to fully engage will increase and the chances of them achieving their goals are likely to improve.

This was confirmed by CSOs in Kyrgyzstan who experienced that the approach contributed to greater clarity of what it would take of them to reach their joint objectives. Many Kyrgyz CSOs thought that it helped them create more realistic projects because the visual presentation combined with the ‘step wise approach’ helped them reach a deeper understanding of what it would take to bring about the desired changes and why, and how they themselves could contribute and cooperate with each other.

As such, **quality and commitment** goes hand in hand. The more participants come to understand what they are doing and why, the more committed they are to implement their strategies.

In programs where several partners were to work together towards a joint objective, participants also came to understand, that their success depended on them working together and on each of them fulfilling their obligations towards the program.



In both Nepal and Central Asia this led participants to realize that if they were to reach their objectives, then it could be necessary to invite more partners on board to add to the capacity and skills that participants possessed themselves.

**Participation of external stakeholders may strengthen the quality of planning and planners' executing power.**

During one planning exercise in Southern Kyrgyzstan, external stakeholders and target beneficiaries were invited to participate too. The aim of the process was to identify how a group of CSOs could work together to strengthen transparency and participation of the local population in the planning and budgeting of the Osh city council. To improve the quality of planning, the CSOs decided to invite staff members from the Osh Mayor's office with whom they had already established a good working relationship.

The participation of staff members from the Mayor's office had two main benefits:

First, staff members from the Mayor's office shared valuable information about decision making processes, priorities and concerns of the city council and the Mayor's office which the program should take into consideration and reflect in the planning process. This improved the quality of decision making and prioritization hereby enhancing the final ToC.

Second their participation contributed to further strengthen the working relationship and mutual understanding between the group of CSOs responsible for the program and the staff representatives from the Mayor's office. This made it easier to implement the project later on.

***Lesson 2: Participants should allocate sufficient time to go through the process***

Developing a full ToC can be time consuming. For processes involving multiple stakeholders that already know each other and who have a fairly good idea of the objective that they want to achieve, a minimum of two days should be allocated to do a thorough ToC.

Additional time should be allocated to provide participants with a basic understanding of the principles of ToC, before they try to apply it on their own project.

Additional time may be allocated for more complex processes. In the case of Kyrgyzstan 25 CSOs had to merge two separate NGO platforms with each their focus into one joint platform with common development objectives for all. To accommodate the complexity of a process involving so many organizations, it was decided to start with a three-day ToC workshop where the first draft strategic framework was formulated. A few months later another two-day ToC workshop was conducted to allow participants to reflect upon the validity and feasibility of their work and do a final revision of their ToC.

**Lesson 3: The quality of the ToC and its potential as a monitoring tool depends on defining and wording objectives and preconditions in 'SMART' terms.**

Many programs and projects find it difficult to formulate objectives and outcomes as specific results and phrase them as activities or interventions that describe a condition. Some objectives and outcomes are just not sufficiently precise to be used for monitoring.

This challenge is no less present in a ToC process than in planning processes using other planning tools but, if the objective is not clear and specific (SMART), it is literally impossible to identify all the preconditions necessary to reach it.

In one planning exercise, participants phrased their objective as *'The EU raises its ambitions in the UNFCCC climate talks related to mitigation and adaptation'*.

Yet, without a closer definition of the level and nature of *ambitions* that the project would influence, participants struggled to identify both relevant stakeholders and preconditions for their ToC.

Planning was made easier, when participants re-phrased their objective to *The EU budget for climate finance meet the criteria agreed at COP16*. This specification enabled participants to identify which policy process (the EU budget) they would need to influence, and which advocacy calls and level of ambitions they should work to promote (criteria agreed in COP 16).

Formulating preconditions as interim results or conditions is a challenge for many participants exposed to ToC for the first time however, it is difficult to use preconditions that are phrased as infinite activities such as 'create awareness among local population groups' or 'meet 3 politicians' in a monitoring process. How would we know that enough awareness has been created? Or that our meeting with the politicians was successful? Only when we define the results that we want from the meeting or the awareness raising activity.

**4 reasons why preconditions should be phrased as situations that have been created and not as activities**

- It reminds us what we want to *achieve* – rather than what we do.
- It tells us *why* we do as we do
- It helps us *focus* on our objective.
- The likelihood that we actually reach our goal increases if we remain focused.



For a ToC to be useful in monitoring terms, preconditions should be phrased as results or outcomes, so that we can keep track of our interim achievements.

**Lesson 4: Using facilitators that are familiar with the ToC planning tool is a requirement for effectiveness and efficiency in the planning process.**

**A facilitator will help participants ensure that**

- Preconditions are precise and stated in SMART terms - rather than as activities or interventions.
- Each precondition is singular – stating only one condition that must be created.
- Preconditions are put in chronological order and causal pathways.
- They don't get stuck in a loop.
- Assumptions are considered and new preconditions added to the ToC if assumptions turn out to be flawed.
- Everything is recorded and turned into final pathways and ToCs.
- Action plans are developed based on the ToCs
- ToCs are turned into LFAs – if participants feel more comfortable not leaving LFA entirely or if requested by the donor.

Using ToC is like learning to ride a bike. Practice is needed – and at first you may lose your balance while practicing.

Facilitators that are experienced with the ToC process can help ensuring that the planning process is conducted effectively and efficiently. They can help working groups draw relevant information from their discussions, keep the groups focused and ask the questions that will enable groups to break a deadlock or identify aspects of their ToC that needs further elaboration.

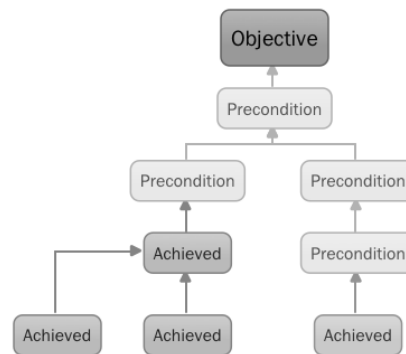
In the ToC planning processes covered by this article, participants were divided into working groups of no more than 5-8 people to allow everybody to have a say and contribute actively to the discussions. Facilitation was done for all groups.

Facilitating group work of more than one group at a time can be challenging – in particular if the facilitator is not experienced or if workshop participants have no prior experiences using ToC or other logical planning models.

To cope with the need for facilitators ICCO made a decision to expose most of its program officers to 4 days of ToC introduction so that they would know how to use ToC in program development planning processes. A Training of Trainers program was conducted for staff members with a particular interest in the ToC planning tool too.

**Lesson 5: Discipline, regular and consistent use of the ToC is needed in order to fully benefit from a ToC planning exercise**

Plans are generally useless if not used. That goes for a ToC too. To ensure that ToCs developed were actually used for weekly or monthly planning, for tracing progress and for reflecting on the plan's feasibility, groups have adopted a number of measurements after the workshops:

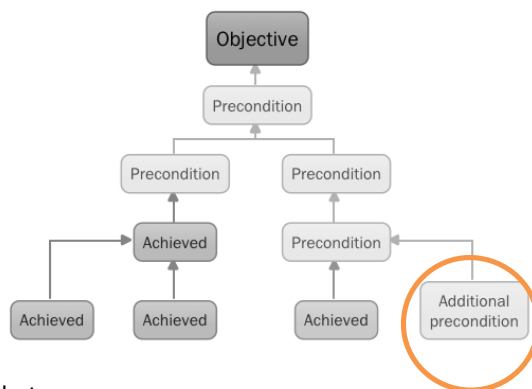


Most projects and partners seem to adopt a biannual meeting frequency. In the case of Central Asia, partners meet twice a year to monitor their progress and assess its feasibility:

Preconditions that are achieved are marked with a different color in order to make a visual presentation of progress. A 'precondition achieved' that does not contribute to the implementation of the next precondition, is a sign that 'some precondition' is missing. This means that one or more preconditions need to be identified and added to the ToC as part of the monitoring process.

The visual presentation of a project in flow-charts or change theories allow participants to reflect on the progress of their project, where they are 'stuck' and why. In the case of Kyrgyzstan and Libya, this led to a revision of the ToCs, as participants' realized that they had to add more preconditions to move to the next level of preconditions.

The need to assess and revise a ToC may be more frequent in advocacy projects and situations of shifting political contexts. Staff in DCA's advocacy unit has responded to this need by integrating their ToC as part of their 'mental map' and adjusted on an ongoing basis according to political changes and opportunities that occur.



Staff experience that the plan contributes to a stronger awareness about how far they have come and helps them priorities their time and focus on those activities that they consider are the most efficient only. As one staff member explained: *I was offered the opportunity to speak at a conference, but when I looked at my plan and realized that my participation would not contribute to any of the preconditions we had identified as important to achieve our advocacy goal, I declined.*

#### 4. Perspectives and questions for consideration

In project planning – as in life in general – we are guided by our own internal and implicit images – or mental models - of how the world works, images that guide our ways of thinking and acting.

What ToC offers is a tool for critically reflecting on this internal or implicit mental model. When applied consistently, ToC can help us to a deeper understanding of why we plan as we do and how our proposed actions are linked to our mental model or implicit assumptions about how we can promote social change..

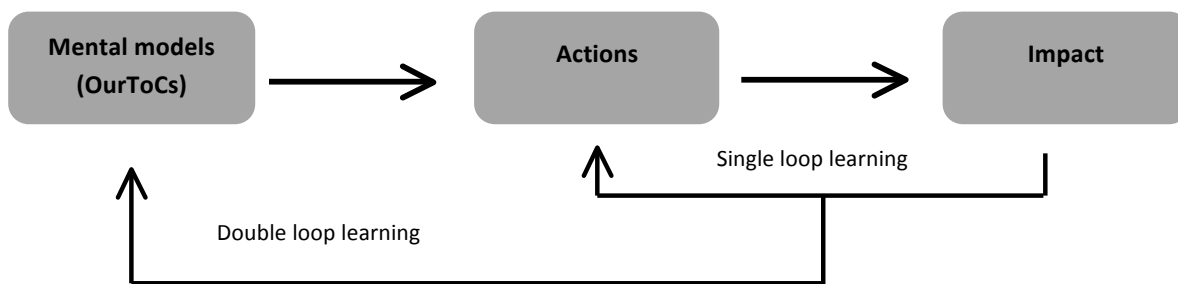
As the lessons learnt from Nepal, Central Asia, Libya and Denmark illustrate, this way of reflection and 'hard thinking' has helped participants to a better understanding of their own projects.

This learning process has been described by several scholars as single and double loop learning<sup>3</sup>. Single loop learning is the repeated attempt at the same problem, with no variation of the *method* of action and without questioning the preconditions necessary to achieve the goal. Double loop learning describes the process in which a project or an organization, attempting to achieve a goal, is able to modify its mental model/theory, the methodology or even the goal itself in light of its experiences.

Single loop learning takes place within our implicit understanding of the relationship between our actions and the impact we make. Depending on the impact we see, we may choose to do more or less of the activity or to repeat the activity at a different point in time. Yet we are not questioning the action itself.

Double loop learning takes place when we become conscious of the implicit values, the theories or preconditions that govern our actions. With this consciousness we are able not only to adjust our actions according to the impact we make, but also to question if they are relevant and feasible altogether – and if our mental model or theory is.

ToC offers a model for such a deeper reflection and understanding of the relationship between our own implicit assumptions or theories about how change is made the actions that we plan to make.



The lessons learnt from Nepal, Central Asia and Libya also demonstrate that using ToC can be demanding and time consuming. It shows that ToC is only as good as the persons applying it.

In their feedback participants highlighted that it takes a certain amount of management, coordination and discipline to really benefit from a TOC and to ensure that the project owners reflect on their plan and learn from their experiences from time to time. Yet, this is important if ToC is to be used for monitoring. Time should be allocated on a regular basis to ensure that our 'mental model', our ToC is adjusted according to contextual changes and according to what we learn about the actions we do and the impact we make.

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<sup>3</sup>Argyris, Chris & Schön, Donald: *Organizational Learning: Theory, Method and Practice*, in Mikkelsen & Poulfelt, *Strategi Med Mening*, 2008

We can choose to react to this challenge by quoting Nike's slogan and say 'just do it'. Yet the challenge may deserve a little more reflection:

*What value would you think that ToC could add to the project- and program planning and internal learning in your organization? And what would it take from you and your colleagues to apply it consistently for planning and monitoring of your work?*