

Step 5: Develop Theories of Change

Once you have identified a number of promising early actions, it is time to operationalize and test the logic behind those ideas using Theories of Change. A Theory of Change (ToC) is a comprehensive illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. In the context of FbF, creating a theory of change means describing step-by-step how and why the desired outcome (in our case reduced humanitarian impact) will be attained by taking the selected forecast-based actions. It will help you to visualize, and eventually test whether your early actions are really likely to reduce the prioritized impact. A ToC is often created as a series of “if... then...” statements and then put into a visual representation, like a flowchart (see example below). It helps to think of a ToC as a map on which you mark the spot where you want to go (the desired result or problem solution). Then you draw a route on the map that you think is best to take to get from A to B (the description of the expected chain of results, from action to solution). You will realize that you make assumptions, for example, that a particular bridge is passable or that you can cover a certain distance per day. You also note down landmarks you expect to see on your way (intermediate results or milestones). It is very important to use all available evidence when building a theory of change, so that every “if... then...” relationship is built on information and evidence rather than conjecture.

A ToC can also be used as a basis for a logframe and monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Your team should therefore develop a detailed ToC for each considered early action for inclusion in the protocol. The choice of how many ToCs to develop at this stage will depend upon your team’s needs and your process for narrowing and testing your early actions. At the end of this process, your team should have a sound understanding of how and why each action will contribute to your desired results. ToC for the final selected early actions will need to be included in the EAP submitted to the FbA by the DREF.

The ToC process is a crucial step in your identification of actions, make sure to follow this guidance on steps to take.

At least four steps are involved in developing a theory of change:

Step 1:

Start from a specific goal, meaning the positive change the programme or project seeks to induce in order to address a problem that has been identified.

Example: “Reduce the incidence of diarrheal diseases in vulnerable communities when there is flooding in Exemplandia”.

Step 2:

Map out the process of change, working backwards from the specific goal. Ask: “What is required to bring about this change?” It is useful to do this as a team and consulting relevant and knowledgeable stakeholders. Tip: Note down process steps on post-it notes and put them on a flip chart (see example below). Visualizing a ToC helps team members to understand it more easily and question its logic.

Example: Visual representation of a ToC for Exemplandia (Fi. 4)

Step 3:

Write a narrative summary expressed as a sequence of logically linked events (“if... then...” statements) and support them with available evidence.

Example: “If all households in flood-affected communities have 30 days worth of water purification tablets and received information how to use them, then they will purify their drinking water. If they purify all their drinking water, the incidence of diarrheal diseases will decrease.”

Step 4:

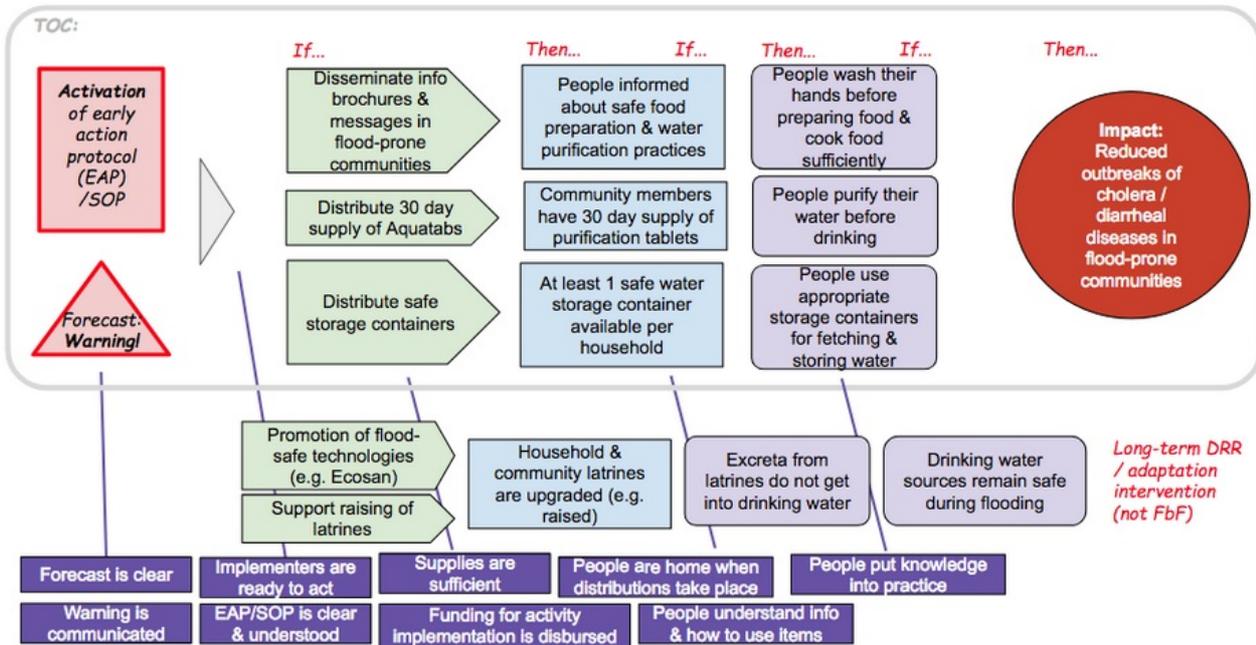
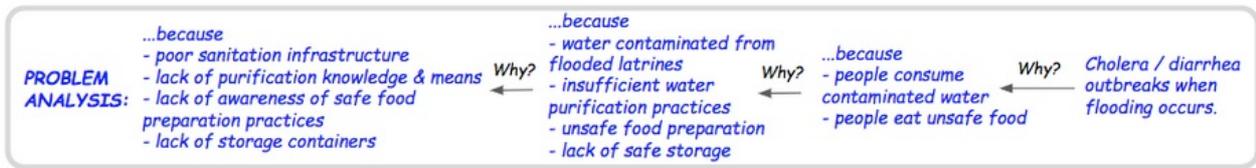
Make implicit assumptions about how changes happen explicit and reference supporting evidence.

Tip: Note assumptions on post-it notes in a different colour and add them in between the process steps.

In the previous example, many assumptions are made that would need to be confirmed by evidence. For example, it is assumed that households understand and appreciate the information they have received about the importance of water purification, or they already have the knowledge and awareness to use purification tablets. But what if pre-existing knowledge about water purification is low?

What if written information materials are given to a household whose members cannot read? What if there are community members who speak a different language? What if there are reservations against using blue pills or tablets, based on previous bad experiences or rumors? What if households purify their drinking water but they don't purify the water used for washing food items? What if safe hygiene practices are relatively unknown and household members don't wash their hands with soap and water before preparing food and before eating?

All assumptions, as trivial as they may seem, should be made explicit and checked against evidence to see whether they are “safe” or they need to be addressed as part of the early action protocol.



Alternative visualization of a theory of change for forecast-based actions



Additional Resources

- Tool: [Editable example of FbF action theory of change.](#)
- Resource: [Hivos guidance on how to develop a ToC in 8 steps](#); “Theory of Change Thinking in Practice”
- Resource: [How to facilitate a theory of change development workshop](#), including a 2.5 days agenda (Hivos)
- Resource: Nesta UK, [6-page compact guidance how to develop a theory of change.](#) Also addresses the issue of different levels of results
- Resource: [Tools4Dev](#), overview – including visualizations – of ‘theory of change’ vs. ‘logic models’
- Resource: Learning for Sustainability, [comprehensive list and direct links to guidance notes](#), how-to documents and practical examples of working with theories of change
- Resource: [DFID review of the use of ‘theory of change’ in international development](#); comprehensive overview and further references
- Resource: [BetterEvaluation.org list of available Theory of Change Software](#), some are for

free

- Decision-tree to help identify any fatal assumptions in your ToC:

