ANNEX B

Understanding and evaluating theories of change

What are theories of change?

Theory of change is a flexible approach meant to encourage critical thinking in the design, implementation and evaluation of development activities. As described by Vogel (2012) "theory of change thinking" is being increasingly used in international development by a wide range of actors. This guidance encourages questioning strategies and activities that impact on peacebuilding and conflict prevention. It offers theories of change as one way to help evaluators assess and programme managers and decision makers think through the hypotheses of change and assumptions that underpin their work. Vogel describes theory of change as a process of analysis and learning that produces insight to support critical thinking throughout the programme cycle. It is also a flexible approach that may be helpful in encouraging innovation in programme strategies to respond and adapt to change in the context.

Aid work in relation to conflict and peace is often based on approaches, strategies and tactics that are rooted in theories of change (understandings about why particular inputs or activities are expected to achieve intended results [outputs, outcomes and impacts]) that are unstated or ill-defined. They are embedded in the skills and approaches of individual practitioners and peacebuilding organisations, their capacities and technologies, attachments to favourite methodologies, and the perspectives of different stakeholders about conflict and peace.

In the imaginary example of an anti-bias peace programme for journalists in Annex C, one question would be how the planned workshops, consciousness raising, and skills development might actually change conflict reporting. The programme could track the language used in reporting before and after the effort and also survey public attitudes. At the same time, it could see whether the activities were achieving the expected results – or if unexpected obstacles appeared. For instance, it might turn out that individual journalists have very little influence over the use of inflammatory language and that editors determine the use of such language to boost sales. That outcome would suggest that the "theory", about inducing changes in reporting by training journalists, was flawed.

One related task is to identify the sources of theories. Are they a) based on experience (the programme designers' personal and professional experience or that of the stakeholders and beneficiaries consulted during programme design); or b) research-based? Evaluation can contribute to improving the design and implementation of ongoing programmes. It can also uncover whether success, or lack thereof, is due to programme design and theory or to programme implementation.

A useful first step in enhancing strategies in conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming and evaluation is to become more explicit about underlying assumptions of how change comes about – that is, theories of how to achieve peace. Conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities are carried out on the basis of specific ideas and goals as to what they hope to achieve. Programme decisions are based on a number of factors – including assumptions about how to bring about peace and theories about how to bring about change. Peace practitioners select methods, approaches and tactics that are rooted in a range of theories of how peace can be achieved in a specific context. It is important to uncover these theories of change, both in order to test the theories against the realities of the conflict and to provide the basis for evaluating progress towards related objectives.

Theories of change in peacebuilding include those presented in Table B.1, though a systematic inquiry into ongoing and past conflict prevention and peacebuilding work would likely reveal many other theories underlying peacebuilding programmes.

Some theories focus on **who** needs to change – that is, which individuals and groups in society or which relationships need to change. Other theories concentrate on **what** needs to change. It may be an institution, a policy, a social norm. Still other theories are tied directly to a particular methodology or approach: **how** the change could or should happen.

Evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding theories of change

The impacts, effectiveness, relevance, efficiency and sustainability of a conflict prevention and peacebuilding activity rest to a large extent on the accuracy of its underlying theory of change. A false or incomplete theory may be a key explanatory factor for the failure of a programme, project, or policy. In contrast, good theories (based on an up-to-date, thorough conflict analysis) contribute to effective conflict prevention and peacebuilding action and successful interventions. Analysis of the theory of change is therefore a key aspect of any conflict prevention and peacebuilding evaluation. The pertinent theory should be reviewed in the evaluation report and be covered in the evaluation's findings, conclusions, and lessons learned. Such analysis will help contribute to a more refined understanding of how to bring about change for peace.

When conducting an evaluation, the evaluator or evaluation team should ascertain the theories of change of the peacebuilding intervention in question. While they are often variations on the generic theories presented in Table B.1, they should – for the purpose of evaluation – be reframed in relation to the specific context and using the intervention's particular terms.

At times, the theories in operation are obvious, even if unstated, in programme proposals and other documents. More often, the theories need to be uncovered through interviews with implementing staff and other stakeholders – or can be confirmed by those discussions. The evaluation process may also reveal that different staff members are proceeding on different assumptions (theories) about how their efforts will promote change towards peace. The evaluation process itself can thus be useful for helping to clarify this important dimension of intervention strategy.

The two real life examples which follow illustrate these points.

Example 1: Evaluating grassroots conflict prevention in Liberia

In the wake of the 14-year civil war in Liberia, a large international NGO received donor funding to develop Community Peace Councils (CPCs), a community-based mechanism for

resolving a range of disputes, with an explicitly inter-ethnic approach. The CPCs were designed to promote greater democratic participation through leadership development. The evaluation team first identified underlying theories of change and programme assumptions (derived mainly from discussions with local and international staff members) for the CPCs:

Theory #1: Establishing a new community-level mechanism for handling a range of dispute types will contribute to keeping the peace and avoiding incidents that have the potential for escalating into serious violence.

Theory #2: Creating inclusive structures for community problem solving can improve communication, respect, and productive interactions among subgroups in the community, and improve the access of disenfranchised groups to decision making.

Theory #3: Creating a new leadership group infused with democratic concepts and provided with critical skills can foster more effective and responsive leadership.

The evaluation team then discussed whether and how these theories of change were appropriate for the situation in Liberia, and how they were playing out in the programme. To begin, the team conducted an updated conflict analysis, based on interviews and focus groups with a wide range of people in the communities themselves. It then examined whether the programme was having the effects envisioned in the theory of change. For example, the team examined what kinds of conflicts the CPCs handled, and whether those conflicts had the potential for escalating and inciting widespread violence. If they did, then the CPCs would directly contribute to stopping a key factor in violent conflict. If, however, those conflicts were unconnected to the driving factors of the conflict, or the local-level conflict-handling mechanisms were not able to address the types of conflict most likely to escalate, then the CPCs would make little or no contribution to "peace writ large".

The evaluation team found that the CPCs were, for the most part, **not** handling the most serious and volatile disputes, which concerned land issues. The team then explored whether this was due to a failure in programme implementation or, alternatively, a theory of change that was incomplete or inaccurate. The main conclusion was that, while the CPCs were well set up and trained well, the CPCs became mostly excluded from handling land issues as communities were repopulated and traditional leadership patterns re-established. At the same time, the hope (and theory) regarding alternative leadership models proved unfounded, as traditional leaders gained control over the CPCs or used them to address issues they preferred that someone else deal with. The evaluation recommended that the agency work to expand the mandate and capability of the CPCs for handling land disputes by connecting them to land commissions and other emerging government structures. It should also be said that the CPCs did represent a useful developmental advance, even if they were unable to fulfil, as completely as hoped, a contribution to "peace writ large".

Example 2: The impact of international peacebuilding policies and programming in Kosovo

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects performed an extensive study of the reasons for the recurrence of inter-ethnic violence in Kosovo in the spring of 2004 and the relationship of that violence to policies and programmes undertaken by the international community. Among other things, the study identified the theories of change underlying the various approaches to improving ethnic relations. As is often the case, these underlying theories

were strongly influenced by the policies and (unspoken) assumptions of the international community. The multiple aid and development programmes were directly linked to implementation of internationally-established "Standards for Kosovo" and widely held beliefs regarding refugee returns, inter-ethnic relations, and a future multi-ethnic state as the basis for peacebuilding.

The Kosovo example concerns many agencies and multiple programmes. The study identified major programming approaches, and associated theories of change, some of which are listed here, and then examined the effectiveness of each, and their relationship (if any) to preventing violence.

A. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue

In Kosovo, the bulk of what agencies and community members identified as peacebuilding was labelled "dialogue." Dialogue encompassed a wide range of activities: from social contact to structured conversations about identity and the promotion of mutual understanding, to problem-solving related to concrete issues, and to negotiation and mediation of agreements on land use in the Municipal Working Groups on Return. The most frequent theories of change for dialogue efforts in Kosovo were:

Theory #1: Involving Kosovar Serbs and Albanians in mutual discussions can help develop the conditions for the safe, successful and peaceful return of internally displaced persons to their homes. This, in turn, will promote reintegration, stabilisation of the environment and will reverse one of the negative consequences of the conflict.

Theory #2: Engaging community members in participatory decision making and the implementation of development activities can strengthen community relationships.

Theory #3: Promoting co-operation across ethnic lines regarding non-political issues of common interest (HIV/AIDS, drug use, business and entrepreneurship, women's rights, infrastructure, etc.) can build stronger inter-ethnic ties and understanding.

B. Training and peace education

Training in conflict resolution, human rights, nonviolent communication and related topics was done in many communities, and, with dialogue, was one of the most popular approaches to peacebuilding programming. Youth camps, peace camps, archaeological camps, art camps and many others were widespread, as were multi-ethnic programmes of technical training in computers, project management, marketing, and other technical or professional topics. To a lesser extent, school-based peace education programmes were developed and included human rights education and tolerance education for children.

Theory #1: Providing people with better skills for conflict resolution will increase the ability of communities to settle disputes non-violently and reduce the likelihood of violence.

Theory #2: If people talk and play together they will build relationships and break down stereotypes.

C. Multi-ethnic projects and institutions

Along with dialogue and training, joint (inter-ethnic) projects and institutions comprised a significant proportion of the peacebuilding programming in the communities that were included in the Kosovo study. Some of the projects were the outcome of or

follow-up to dialogue, aiming to take the communication and relationship building beyond mere talk.

Theory #1: Developing activities that provide economic benefits to both ethnic communities (economic interdependence) will give people incentives to resist efforts to incite violence.

Theory #2: Providing opportunities for people to work together on practical issues across ethnic lines will help break down mistrust and negative stereotypes, as well as develop habits of co-operation.

Theory #3: If people have jobs and economic stability, they will be less hostile to the other ethnic group.

D. Democratic governance and capacity-building

Many international donors, agencies and NGOs have implemented peacebuilding activities designed to strengthen municipal government institutions to support integration of minorities, better communication and dialogue, and sustainable returns. They work on the following theory:

If we can improve administration and service delivery and establish non-discriminatory policies, this will reduce inter-ethnic tensions and demonstrate the viability of a multi-ethnic Kosovo.

Many programmes and policies integrated **several approaches and theories of change**. For example, a programme to facilitate returns of Kosovo Serb minorities included activities and approaches that reflected a combination of different theories:

- dialogue between the host community and returnees was facilitated on the assumption that dialogue would allay fears and re-establish relationships that would allow returnees to return to their homes in peace (Theory A #1);
- multi-ethnic committees to decide community priorities for development aid (Theory A #2);
- provision of equipment and seeds to a multi-ethnic agricultural co-operative (Theories C #1, 2).

Once the theories had been identified, they could be assessed in relation to the driving factors of conflict and the factors contributing to the absence of violence in some places in March 2004. The Kosovo study identified patterns of inter-ethnic violence and factors that contributed to the prevention of inter-ethnic violence – through extensive interviews in communities, some of which experienced violence in March 2004 and some which did not. The team then examined the programming approaches and any relationship to the factors that helped communities avoid violence. The study found that the failure of peacebuilding programming to achieve desired impacts was due partly to faulty theories of change and partly to problems in programme design and implementation.

Design problems included failures in the participant selection processes, fragmentation of programming, insufficient follow-up and limited resources for "soft" aspects of programming. As for implementation strategy, returnees were not central actors with respect to violence, although they were important victims of the conflict. The channelling of aid to returnees and to communities that accepted them, it turned out, prompted resentment and led to increases in inter-ethnic divisions rather than improved relations between groups.

In part, the theory of change on which the programming was based was faulty. With respect to inter-ethnic dialogue between host communities and returnees, the study found

Table B.1. **Common theories of change**

Theory of change	Examples of methods
Individual change: If we transform the consciousness, attitudes, behaviours and skills of many individuals, we will create a critical mass of people who will advocate peace effectively.	Individual change through training, personal transformation or consciousness-raising workshops or processes; dialogues and encounter groups; trauma healing.
Healthy relationships and connections: Strong relationships are a necessary ingredient for peacebuilding. If we can break down isolation, polarisation, division, prejudice and stereotypes between/among groups, we will enable progress on key issues.	Processes of intergroup dialogue; networking; relationship-building processes; joint efforts and practical programmes on substantive problems.
Withdrawal of the resources for war: Wars require vast amounts of material (weapons, supplies, transport, etc.) and human capital. If we can interrupt the supply of people and goods to the war-making system, it will collapse and peace will become possible.	Campaigns aimed at cutting off funds and national budgets for war; conscientious objection and/or resistance to military service; international arms control; arms (and other) embargoes and boycotts.
Reduction of violence: If we reduce the levels of violence perpetrated by combatants and/or their representatives, we will increase the chances of bringing security and peace.	Ceasefires; creation of zones of peace; withdrawal or retreat from direct engagement; introduction of peacekeeping forces and interposition; observation missions; accompaniment efforts; promotion of non-violent methods for achieving political, social and economic ends; reform of security sector institutions (military, police, justice system/ courts, prisons).
Social justice: If we address the underlying issues of injustice, oppression/exploitation, threats to identity and security, and peoples' sense of injury/victimisation, it will reduce the drivers of conflict and open up space for peace.	Long-term campaigns for social and structural change; truth and reconciliation processes; changes in social institutions, laws, regulations, and economic systems.
Good governance: Peace is secured by establishing stable and reliable social institutions that guarantee democracy, equity, justice, and the fair allocation of resources.	New constitutional and governance arrangements and entities; power-sharing structures; development of human rights, rule of law, anti-corruption; establishment of democratic, equitable economic structures; economic development; democratisation; elections and election monitoring; increased participation and access to decision making.
Political elites: If we change the political calculus and perception of interests of key political (and other) leaders, they will take the necessary steps to bring peace.	Raise the costs and reduce the benefits for political elites of continuing war and increase the incentives for peace; engage active and influential constituencies in favour of peace; withdraw international support/ funding for warring parties.
Grassroots mobilisation: *"When the people lead, the leaders will follow."* If we mobilise enough opposition to war, political leaders will be forced to bring peace.	Mobilise grassroots groups to either oppose war or to advocate positive action; use of the media; non-violent direct action campaigns; education and mobilisation effort; organising advocacy groups; dramatic or public events to raise consciousness.
Peace agreements/accords: Some form of political settlement is a prerequisite to peace – we must support a negotiation process among key parties to the violence.	Official negotiations among representatives; civil society dialogues to support negotiations; track 1½ or 2 dialogue among influential persons.
Economic action: People make personal decisions, and decision makers make policy decisions based on a system of rewards and incentives and punishment and sanctions that are essentially economic in nature. If we can change the economies associated with war making, we can bring peace.	Use of government or financial institutions to change supply and demand dynamics; control incentive and reward systems; boycotts and embargoes.
Public attitudes: War and violence are partly motivated by prejudice, misperceptions, and intolerance of difference. We can promote peace by using the media (television and radio) to change public attitudes and build greater tolerance in society.	TV and radio programmes that promote tolerance; modelling tolerant behaviour; symbolic acts of solidarity/unity; dialogue among groups in conflict, with subsequent publicity.
Transitional justice: Societies that have experienced deep trauma and social dislocation need a process for handling grievances, identifying what happened, and holding perpetrators accountable. Addressing these issues will enable people to move on to reconstruct a peaceful and prosperous society.	Truth and reconciliation commissions; criminal prosecutions and war crimes tribunals; reparations; community reconciliation processes; traditional rites and ceremonies; institutional reforms.
Community reintegration: If we enable displaced people (IDPs/refugees) to return to their homes and live in relative harmony with their neighbours, we will contribute to security and economic recovery.	Negotiation and problem solving to enable returns; intergroup dialogue; ex-combatant community engagement; processes for handling land claims; trauma healing.
Culture of peace: If we transform cultural and societal norms, values and behaviours to reject violence, support dialogue and negotiation, and address the fundamental causes of the conflict, we can develop the long-term conditions for peace.	Peace education; poverty eradication; reduction of social inequalities; promotion of human rights; ensuring gender equality; fostering democratic participation; advancing tolerance; enhancing the free flow of information and knowledge; reducing the production of and traffic in arms.

that while dialogue activities opened space for inter-ethnic interaction that might otherwise not have happened, produced some powerful effects on individuals, and led to some co-operative activities across ethnic lines, they neither strengthened community relationships nor led to collective opposition to violence.

The assumption that the changes in attitude resulting from dialogue would lead to changes in political attitudes and actions, or trickle out to influence others in the community or trickle up to influence key decision makers, proved to be wrong. In both Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities, implicit intra-community pressures, or "rules of the game", restricted the boundaries of permissible interaction to generally non-visible business interactions and made maintenance and expansion of inter-ethnic linkages difficult.

The examples from Liberia and Kosovo illustrate just some of the common theories of change underlying policies and projects working for peace. Others are listed, along with example methods for each, in Table B.1. An initial list of these theories was derived from reviewing the case studies in *Reflecting on Peace Practice* CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2004). The table is not intended as a check list or menu of theories. It is designed to be purely illustrative, helping to clarify the concept of theories of change and provide concrete examples. It is by no means exhaustive and the theories it lists are not mutually exclusive – one or more could underlie a single programme.
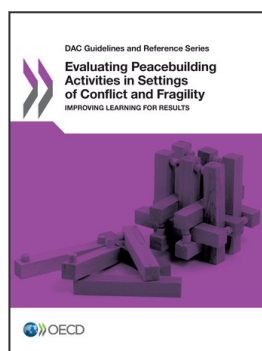
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