

Event Brief

Webinar: Developing Project Theories of Change

May 19, 2021

A [recording](#) of this webinar is available

Purpose

As part of phase 2 of the Mental Health Promotion and Innovation Fund (MHP-IF), project teams will develop a theory of change to describe how intervention activities contribute to desired changes. This Hub webinar provided information about theories of change (ToC) with emphasis on components most pertinent to the phase 2 application, the process to develop ToCs, and their uses.

Participants

The webinar was hosted by the Hub Secretariat. It was attended by 35 MHP-IF project team members, three Public Health Agency of Canada MHP-IF team members, and six Hub team members (Secretariat and a Hub consultant).

Meeting structure

- Barb Riley, Hub Scientific Director, gave opening remarks and introduced [Steve Montague](#), a leading evaluation consultant on ToCs. Barb positioned the content and approach of the webinar in the context of requirements for phase 2, which include the development of a ToC.
- Steve presented information about ToCs, including what they are, why they are important in the context of the MHP-IF, their essential elements, as well as examples. A [PDF of presentation slides](#) is available.
- Participants then took part in three polls: 1) In thinking about the information presented so far, what is new, unfamiliar, or surprising? 2) What are your biggest unanswered questions about theories of change? 3) What Hub supports might be of most interest to you?
- The webinar concluded with Steve sharing a list of ToC resources.

What did we learn?

Summary of learnings from the presentation

- Broader than logic models, ToCs show *how* an initiative might contribute to a set of outcomes and explain *why* this might be the case. ToCs include a focus on context, assumptions, and factors that are relevant to the initiative.

- ToCs are gaining traction because they provide a detailed contribution story. The inclusion of ‘reach’ is (re)gaining popularity, in part because understanding the extent of engagement amongst key actors can help address equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- ToCs can be used to: describe the situation and define the problem; tell a performance story; develop management approaches, cycles, and structures; develop and implement monitoring and evaluation plans; and inform accountability and learning.
- Essential elements of ToCs include the situation, inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts, assumptions, and factors.
- The situation is the foundation for ToC development and may be the most important step. A situation assessment can help define the problem that an initiative is trying to address by asking the ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘who’, and ‘for whom’ of the problem (e.g., why is it a problem and for whom does the problem exist?).
- Assumptions should be considered at the outset of a ToC. These can include an exploration of audience experience, cultural sensitivity, or unintended (good or bad) consequences.
- External factors can greatly impact the outcomes of an initiative, particularly when dealing with complexity. Their impacts tend to increase with a decrease in what is directly in our control (i.e., the further we move up a results chain, from inputs to outcomes).
- Initiatives can only be accountable for what they can control. This includes inputs, activities, outputs, and to some extent, reach (though this too may be heavily impacted by external factors). When it comes to outcomes (short- through long-term), the dialogue should centre around ‘contribution’ and ‘influence’ rather than ‘attribution’.
- Describing what is known about external factors at the individual, inter-relational, institutional, and infrastructural levels can help more accurately anticipate outcome and influence.
- ToCs can be conceptualized in a variety of ways and can be informed by different worldviews. The dialogue they facilitate is more important than the end product.

Learnings from webinar polls

- The variety of types and styles of theories of change was most surprising or unfamiliar to participants.
- ‘How to identify key assumptions’, ‘how to use a ToC to build an evaluation plan’, and ‘how to revisit and adjust ToCs’ were the top three questions of ongoing interest.
- Hub supports of greatest interest were a template for developing a ToC and a workshop on developing ToCs.

How will learnings from this event be used?

- A blog post including a selection of tools and resources shared in the presentation will be posted to kdehub.ca.
- The feedback provided by webinar participants and MHP-IF phase 2 requirements will help guide the development and roll out of additional Hub supports on theories of change.

