 *Royal Holloway Research Impact Toolkit – download no.4 theory of change and assumptions*

**Theory of change**

A Theory of Change (ToC) is a popular tool for researchers to incorporate impact considerations into research projects. In essence, a Theory of Change is a roadmap outlining a sequence of steps you need to take to achieve a goal.

Before you start, make sure you agree on its purpose. You might like to use it as a design tool, a framework for monitoring, or a means to demonstrate value to a funder.

**Why should I create a ToC?**

• It will help you to think beyond research outputs and connect all activities to a desired (often long-term) impact.

• You can avoid investing time and resources in unrelated activities that don’t lead to the impact you are hoping to create.

• If you co-write your ToC with team members and stakeholders, you can gain their buy-in, build trust and establish a shared vision.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **ONE** | **TWO** | **THREE** | **FOUR** | **FIVE** | **SIX** | **SEVEN** |
| What problem are you trying to solve? | Who is going to benefit from your research? | What is the entry point to reaching your beneficiaries?  | What actions are needed to bring about change? Can you back this up with evidence? | What is the measurable outcome/s of your work? | What are the wider benefits of your work? | What is the long-term impact you see as your goal? |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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**Outcome vs Impact**

While the terms outcome and impact are sometimes used interchangeably, there is an important distinction between the two. Outcomes are more immediate than most forms of impact. Outcomes can be considered as intermediate steps towards longer-term impacts. The importance of individual indicators of success varies by discipline and sector, and there can be a significant time lag between inputs and outputs and between outputs and impact.

**Assumptions**

Always write down and assess your assumptions when you create a Theory of Change. Assumptions are what need to be true in order for your plans to succeed. For example, you might assume that your beneficiaries have access to social media and engage with it, but, in fact, that may not be true. Making wrong assumptions could lead to causing offence, a lack of engagement, biased results and other negative consequences. Consulting on and validating your assumptions can avoid flaws in your activities or strategy. You should test to learn more about your assumptions and ensure your work is all evidence-informed.

**The paywall issue**

Don’t assume that policymakers read your work once you have published in a journal. Often, they don’t have access due to the cost of subscribing! Many organisations can only read work published open access (often where you pay a fee to the publisher to make it available to all and/or where the paper is also published as an open access preprint or housed on an institutional archive). Consider how you can ensure your work is accessible to those who can accelerate the impact of your research.

Write down your assumptions on this chart. For each assumption, consider what the opposite opinion might sound like. What would that person say, think, do?

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