

Logic Models v. Theories of Change

What's the Difference?

June 8, 2026



Learning Objectives / Presentation Layout

- Define a Logic Model (LM) and a Theory of Change (ToC)
- Highlight the differences/similarities between the LM and ToC
- Explain the structure and function of each approach
- Cover some FAQs
 - Why distinguish between a LM and ToC?
 - When do we use a LM v. a ToC?
 - Do we need both?
 - Which comes first?

Definition

- A Logic Model is a visual representation of the program that connects all its components
 - Inputs/resources
 - Activities
 - Outputs
 - Outcomes



Disclaimer

- No industry standard **definition** of a Theory of Change
- However, there **are** industry standard beliefs about contents, components, purpose, etc.



Theory of Change

- Depicts strategic activities working through a network of linear as well as non-linear pathways to outcomes
- Explains mechanisms that lead to the desired goals, outcomes, change
- May use creative visuals such as lab experiments, trees, or eco-systems



What is a Logic Model?

- a one-page description of your program that shows the connection between resources, day-to-day activities, and your outcomes.
- can be a chart, illustration, or table.



What is a Theory of Change?

- shows **all** the different pathways that might lead to change, even if those pathways are not related to your program.
- describes **how** and **why** you think change happens.
- shows the context, assumptions, external factors
- can be a chart, illustration, table, visual, narrative, etc.



Common Questions

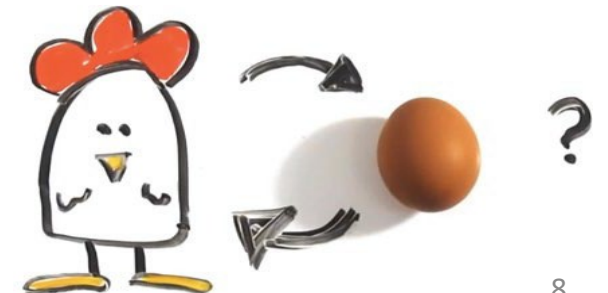
- **When/why** do you use a LM v. a ToC?
 - **LMs** illustrate your program at-a-glance, and are best for program implementation and monitoring, for reporting progress towards goals, and for tracking evaluation of a program
 - **ToCs** illustrate the **research** behind your program, dig deeper to explain **why** the change will take place (why you think/know/believe it will work), focus on the pathways to and determinants of change

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Common Questions

- Which comes **first**?
- Logic Models are a more approachable first step

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Components of ...

Logic Model

- Outcomes,
- Outputs,
- Activities,
- Inputs / Resources,
- Assumptions,
- External Factors

Theory of Change (can vary)

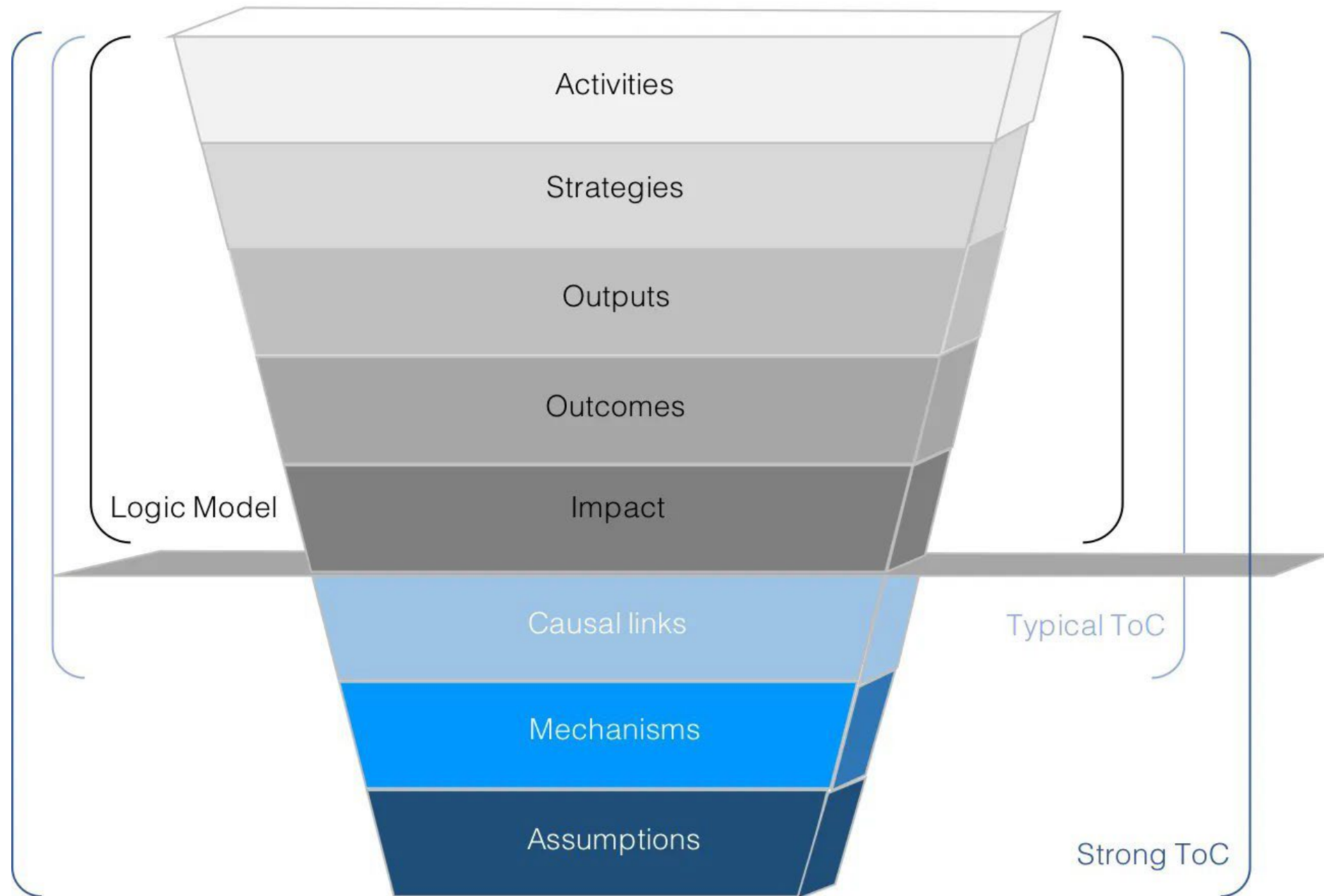
- Impact / Outcomes,
- Outputs,
- Strategies / Activities
- Generic Causal Links, Pathways
- Specific Causal Links, Pathways
- Mechanisms,
- Assumptions,
- May include a narrative and / or contain an "If → Then" structure

Do the components sound similar?

That's because they are!



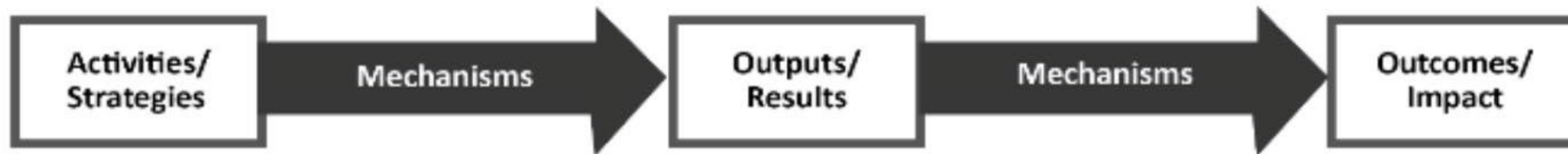
LAYERS OF A THEORY OF CHANGE



Logic Model...

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes

Theory of Change...



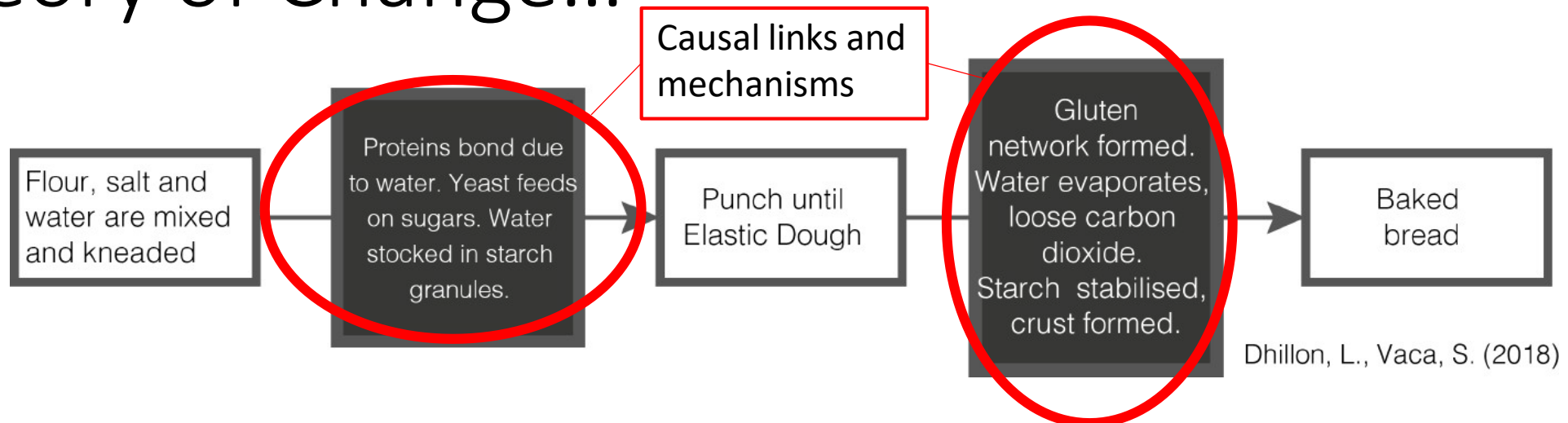
But I have arrows in my logic model...

- May be those are showing superficial or relational link
 - a resource leads to an activity because having resources leads to using resources towards achieving an outcome
 - but does not show the underlying research/hypothesis as to **why** the activity will create the desired output/outcome
 - in other words – it's a link but not typically **causal**
- Arrows in the theory of change are meant to be **intentionally causal** with a mechanism (explanation of how having resources leads to doing an activity)

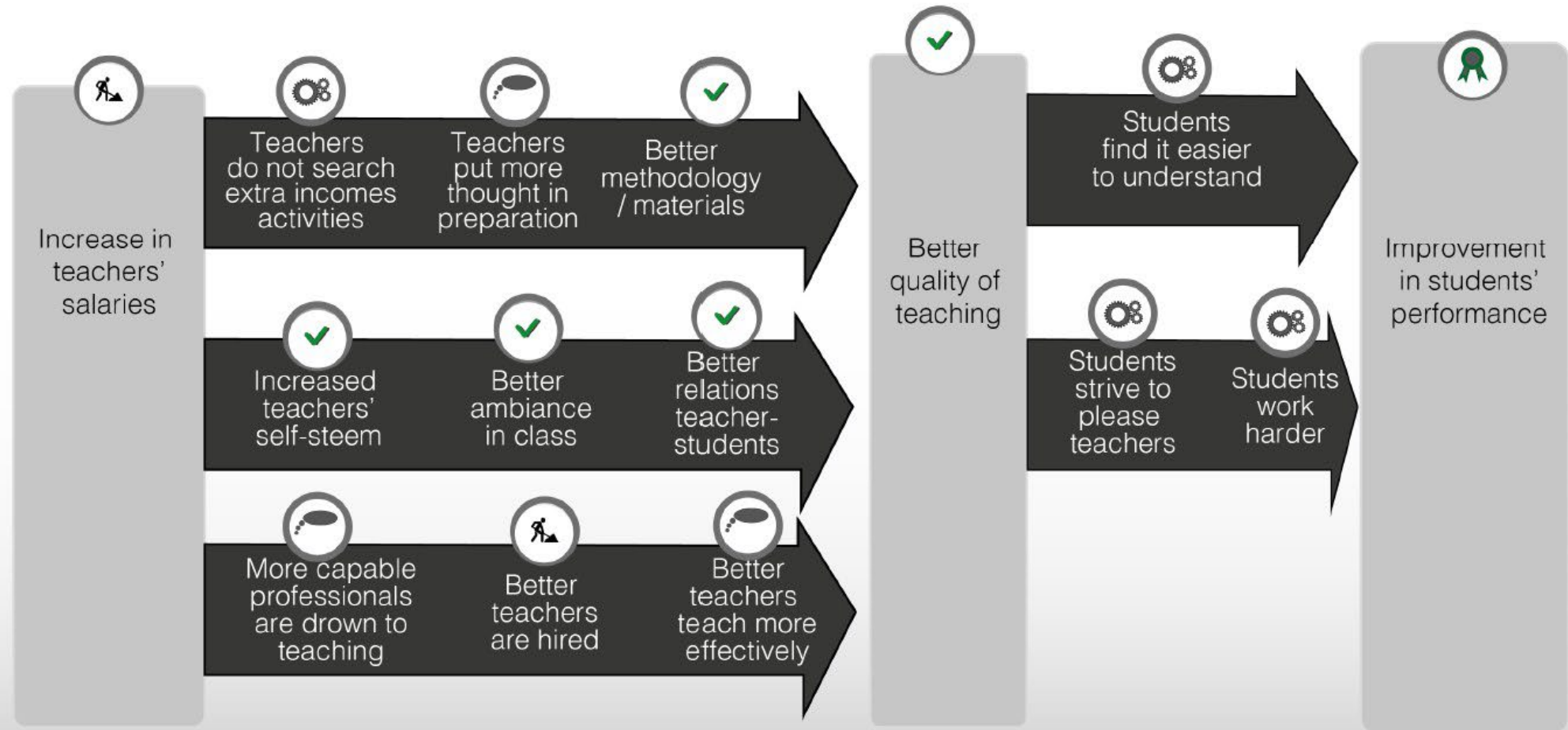
Logic Model...

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
Flour Salt Water Yeast	Mix Knead Let rise Bake	Elastic-y, supple dough	Delicious Bread

Theory of Change...



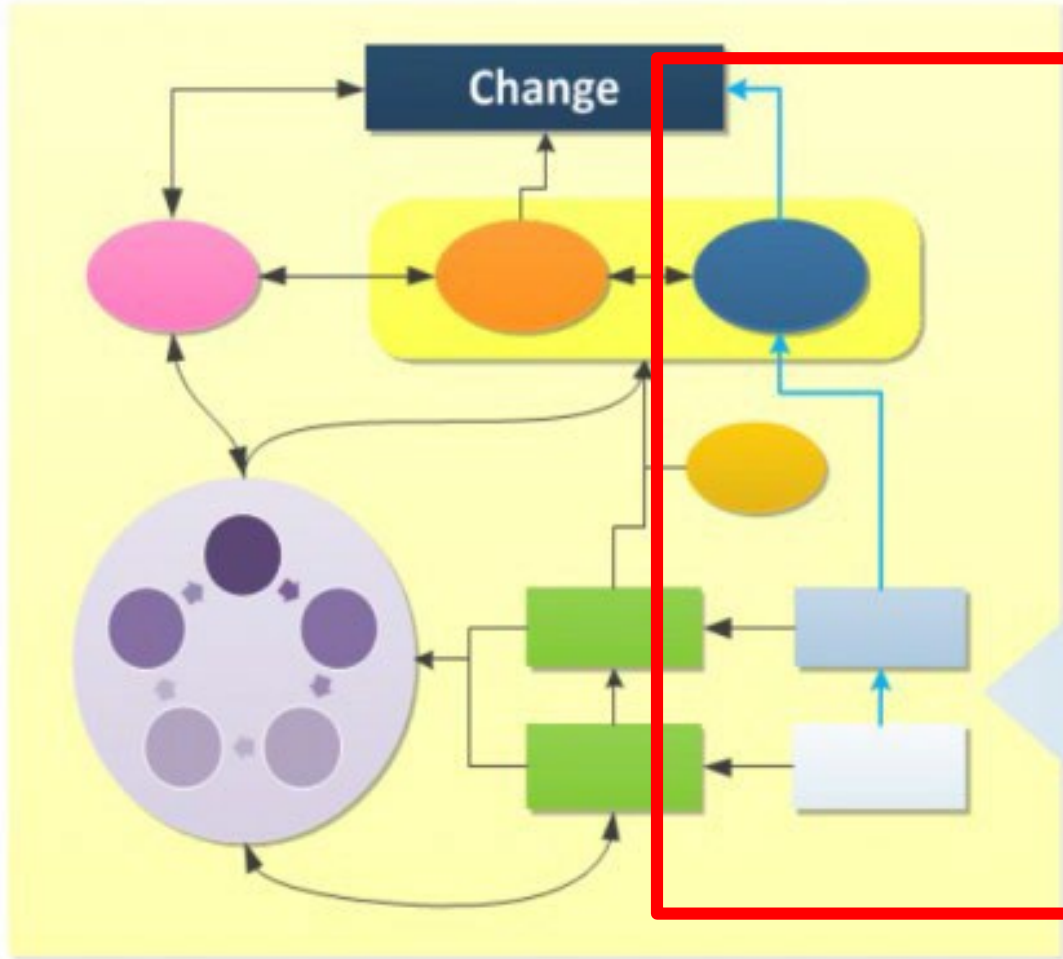
THEORY OF CHANGE OF AN EDUCATION PROGRAMME





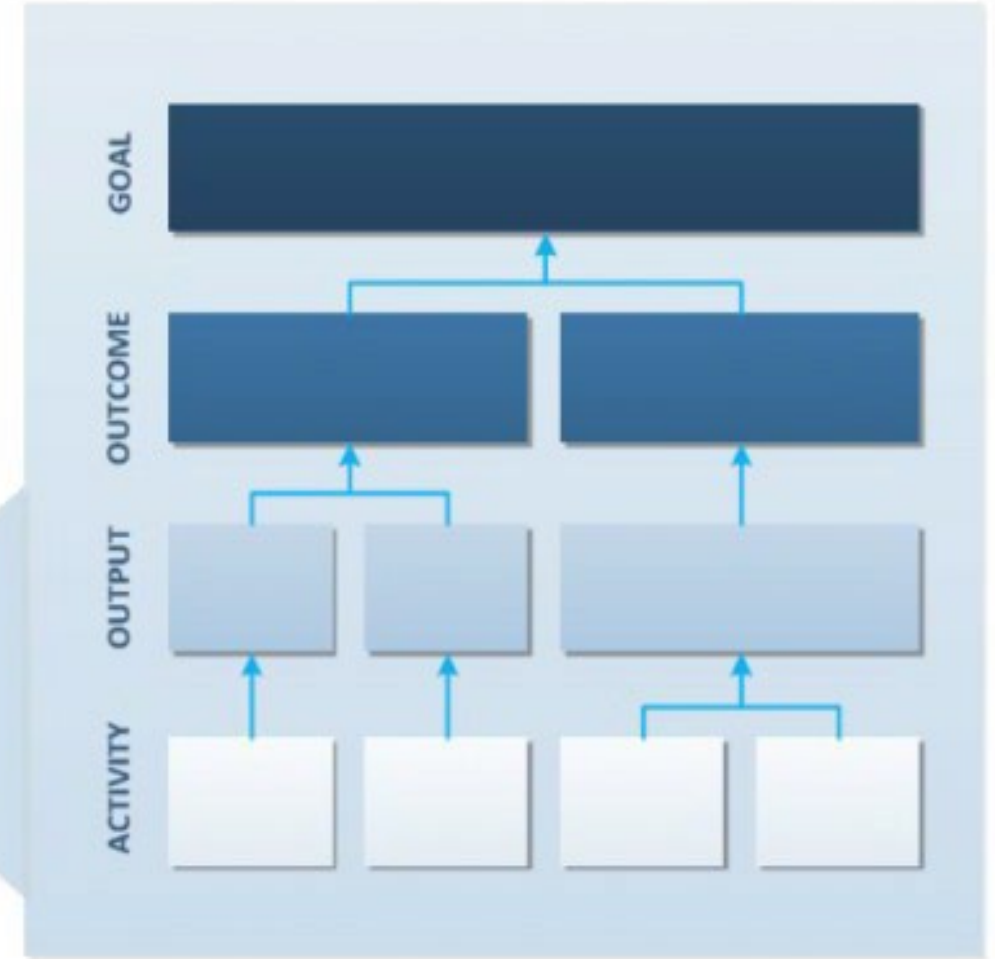
Theory of Change

Shows the big picture with all possible pathways – messy and complex



Logical Framework

Shows just the pathway that your program deals with – neat and tidy





Side-by-Side Comparison

Logic Model

- Answers “What” – descriptive/representative
- Completes the sentence “we plan to do X, which will give Y result”
- List of components, normally shown as a **matrix**
- Is linear: all activities lead to outputs which lead to outcomes and the goal – **there are no cyclical processes or feedback loops**
- Includes space for risks/external factors and assumptions, although these are usually only basic
- Doesn’t include **evidence** for **why** you think one thing will lead to another
- Is mainly used as a tool for monitoring and program evaluation.
- Can be **part** of the Theory of Change!

Theory of Change

- Answers “How” & “Why” – explanatory, critical thinking
- Completes the sentence “if we do X then Y will change **because...**”
- Pathway(s) to change
- Is normally presented as a diagram **accompanied by narrative text**
- The diagram is flexible and doesn’t have a particular format – it **could include cyclical processes, feedback loops, one box could lead to multiple other boxes**
- Describes **why** you think one box will lead to another box (e.g., if you think increased knowledge will lead to behavior change, is that an assumption or do you have evidence to show it is the case?)
- Is mainly used as a tool for program design
- Can contain **several** Logic Models

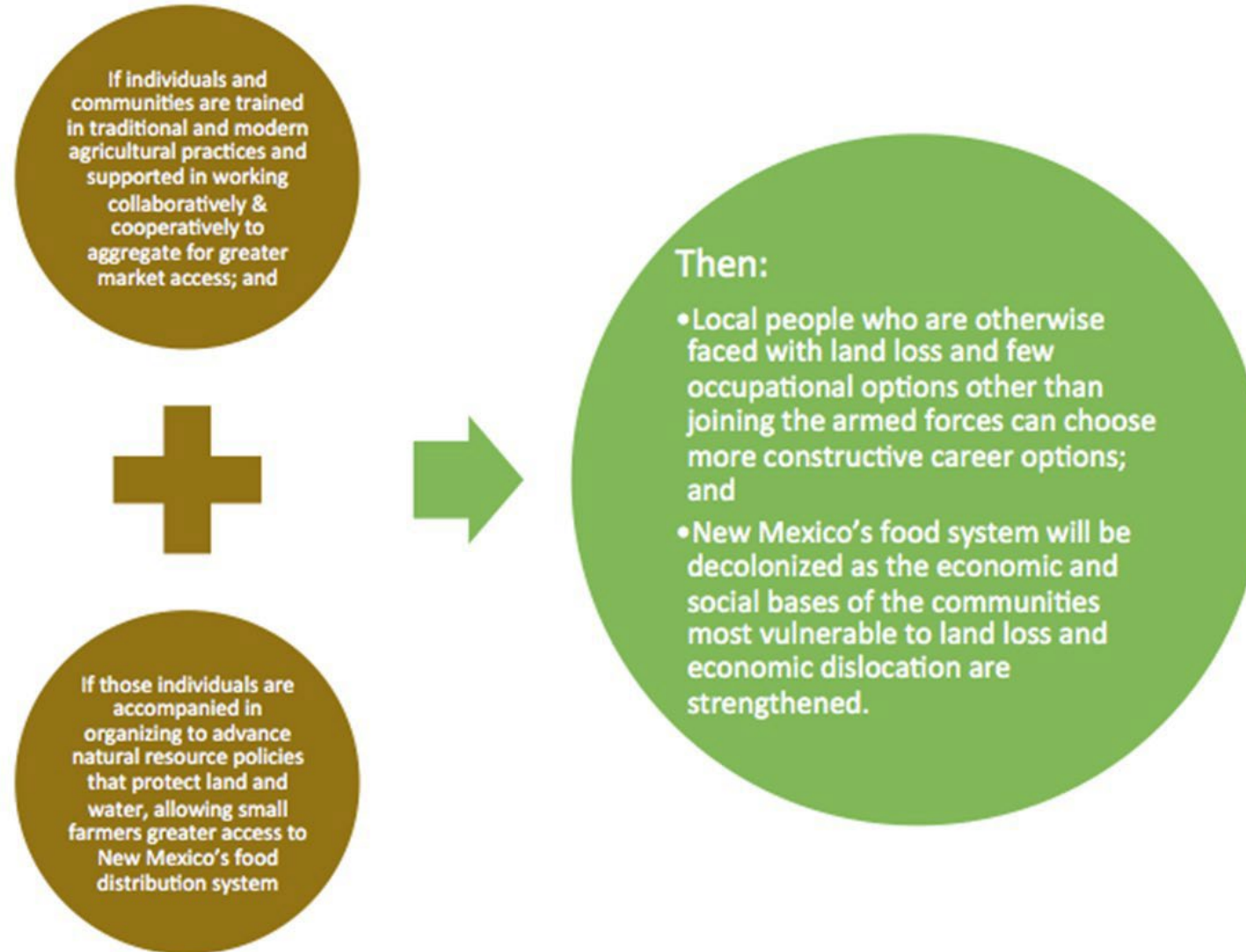
Bottomline

- Logic models are a snapshot of what you do in your program, without much detail about WHY
- Theories of change provide the context and assumptions – the WHY, the research and experience, and the mechanisms of change behind the logic model

Other examples of ToC

Theory of Change visual for AFSC-NM

Because the security of Indo-Hispano and Indigenous NM communities depends upon self-determination and the preservation of land, water, and culture:



IDEX'S ROLE

IDEX exists to effect systemic change, shift unequal power dynamics, influence giving to adopt egalitarian practices, balance learning between the global south and north, and facilitate connections.

STRATEGIES



Investing in authentic partnerships



Maximizing Organizational Potential



Bridging Networks



Amplifying learnings from the Global South



Brokering resources



Advocating



Impact consulting

Communities are organized to access resources, embrace their socioeconomic, ecological, cultural and political rights, and are empowered to live free from poverty and all forms of discrimination.

Robust civil society organizations in the global south are building new, alternative systems & ensuring that governments are working for the excluded and marginalized.

Community based organizations are working in alliance regionally for rights-based national policy change and are participating in global movements for justice.

Donors, affinity groups, foundations: Broad change in attitudes, language, skills, and knowledge to mobilize resources in favor of social justice giving.



Local solutions and women's leadership are improving community conditions.



Community members are empowered leaders building dignified lives for all.



Healthier, well-respected communities have created transformational change.



CBOs are strengthening their systems to achieve meaningful impact.



CBOs with a strategic understanding of their capacity and role within civil society are scaling their programs.



CBOs are resilient and well-networked with long-term sustainability, advocacy and fundraising plans.

Organizational Resilience



Dialog and interconnectedness



Strengthened movements



Last people first and all rising together

Global Solidarity



Increased financial resources to international grassroots groups



Building a donor community engaged in deep partnerships with CBOs.



Mutual trust and reciprocal learning drive resources for social justice giving.

Social Justice Giving

Community Self-Determination

SOCIAL CHANGE IN ACTION

THERE ARE MANY PROBLEMS.

- Existing economic and political systems: 1) exclude and marginalize populations; and 2) disrespect the rights of Mother Earth.
- Community based organizations (CBOs) in the Global South have historically faced challenges in mobilizing resources.

BUT, THERE ARE JUST AS MANY SOLUTIONS!

- People in the Global South have the wisdom and strength to develop holistic, sustainable solutions to end poverty and injustice.
- Community based organizations (CBOs) have the power to build local skills, leadership, capacities and mobilize resources.

Example of a Completely Text Based Theory of Change

With these INPUTS

If civil society organisations are carefully selected and respond to individual support tailored to their programming and internal systems, they will be able to utilise grants

Assumptions from inputs to process:

- the AcT teams selection process is successful in identifying organisations that are committed to bringing about change (as opposed to just administering aid money with a governance spin on it)
- the AcT team has the skills and judgement to provide appropriate support, manage risk, and pro-actively manage the portfolio
 - the CSOs have the relevant sectoral and district-specific knowledge and understanding
- The CSOs can develop familiarity with, and confidence in, working with the changing dynamics of political economy and/or develop organisationally to facilitate working with this understanding

and the following PROCESSES

to develop better targeted strategic interventions which are sensitive to changes over time and in the broader political economy, as well as their geographic location, their sector, institutional mandate and values; and if these organisations also commit to systematic learning individually and collectively the work they do will be more the effective.

Assumptions from process to outputs:

- Systematic learning enables CSOs to grow and move beyond:
 - 'business as usual' – rolling out the same approaches and methodologies
 - 'copy cat approaches' e.g. the spate of PETS training and studies that were carried out
 - 'chasing the money' i.e. following donor priorities rather than their own analysis
- CSOs become aware of the positive and negative lessons learned by others working in similar fields
 - CSOs monitor their own effectiveness and make changes as appropriate
- The learning strategy, to which CSOs contribute and derive benefit, enables them to document 'lessons learned' in a way which will be useful to themselves and others.
 - CSOs maintain ethics and integrity

We can expect the PROCESS OUTPUTS

CSOs implementing programmes will engage in a range of knowledge generating and information dissemination activities as well as developing the capacity of other stakeholders to articulate their roles and responsibilities.

Assumptions from process output to programme output:

- Citizens are stimulated to respond to the knowledge and information made available either by being directly engaged in the process, or in planning action on the basis of findings.
 - Citizens see the value of taking action based on knowledge, information and capacity built.
 - Participatory approaches are empowering and can stimulate action
 - Citizens overcome fear and apathy and encourage others to join action
- Decision makers recognise that they will not retain power unless they respond to the increasingly assertive citizen
 - Decision makers are open to citizen and civil society action.

That will result in the PROGRAMME OUTPUTS

Some participatory activities build directly into citizen action and civil society strengthening, whereas others focus on influencing the behaviour of elected and appointed officials and of the judiciary – at local and national levels.

Influencing activities can be formal or informal, inside track or outside track, and CSOs become more adept at selecting which is going to be most effective under what circumstances.

Assumptions from outcome to purpose:

- Individual elected representatives, appointed officials and members of the judiciary are able to influence the politics and systems that frame their actions.
 - Legislation, state systems and official processes are open to change.

That will ensure the PURPOSE WILL BE ACHIEVED

The result of the behaviour changes on the part of key stakeholders is the purpose level of the programme: 'Increased responsiveness and accountability of government through a strengthened civil society

Want to learn more?

- Sara Vaca's journal article:
https://journals.sfu.ca/jmde/index.php/jmde_1/article/view/496/444
- Piroska Bivists Bullens article: <http://www.tools4dev.org/resources/theory-of-change-vs-logical-framework-whats-the-difference-in-practice/>
- Helene Clark & Andrea Anderson presentation from AEA in 2004:
[https://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/TOCs and Logic Models forAEA.pdf](https://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/TOCs_and_Logic_Models_forAEA.pdf)
- Sara Vaca's blog post: <https://aea365.org/blog/the-difference-between-magic-i-mean-logic-models-and-theories-of-change-by-sara-vaca/>
- Another take on similarities and differences: <https://www.acacamps.org/news-publications/blogs/research-360/curious-friendship-between-logic-models-theory-change>
- Examples of Theories of Change, with checklist for components:
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a66ed915d622c000703/Appendix 3 ToC Examples.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a66ed915d622c000703/Appendix_3_ToC_Examples.pdf)