Thinking Space No.21

Developing a Theory of Change

Giulia Parola, Munich Business School, March 2019

Developing the Theory of Change (ToC) is about analyzing the underlying assumptions on which a program or intervention is based and explaining the causal relationship to produce the desired change. A ToC comprehensively illustrates how and why the desired change is expected to happen in the particular context, where the planned interventions take place.

Besides being useful evaluative methodological tools, ToCs should also be seen as an approach to enhance cooperation within and among organizations. Being specific about the theory and assumptions guiding the work of practitioners forces them to reach consensus about what they are trying to do and why (Weiss, 1995). Program designers and implementers should interpret a ToC as a collaborative effort that starts with an agreement on the central problem one wants to solve, and the long-term goals to be accomplished. Additionally, a solid ToC includes a detailed description of all mini-steps needed to achieve the long-term goals previously established, as in the example provided below (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. ToC of YES! Young Entrepreneurs Succeed project.
Source: Author.
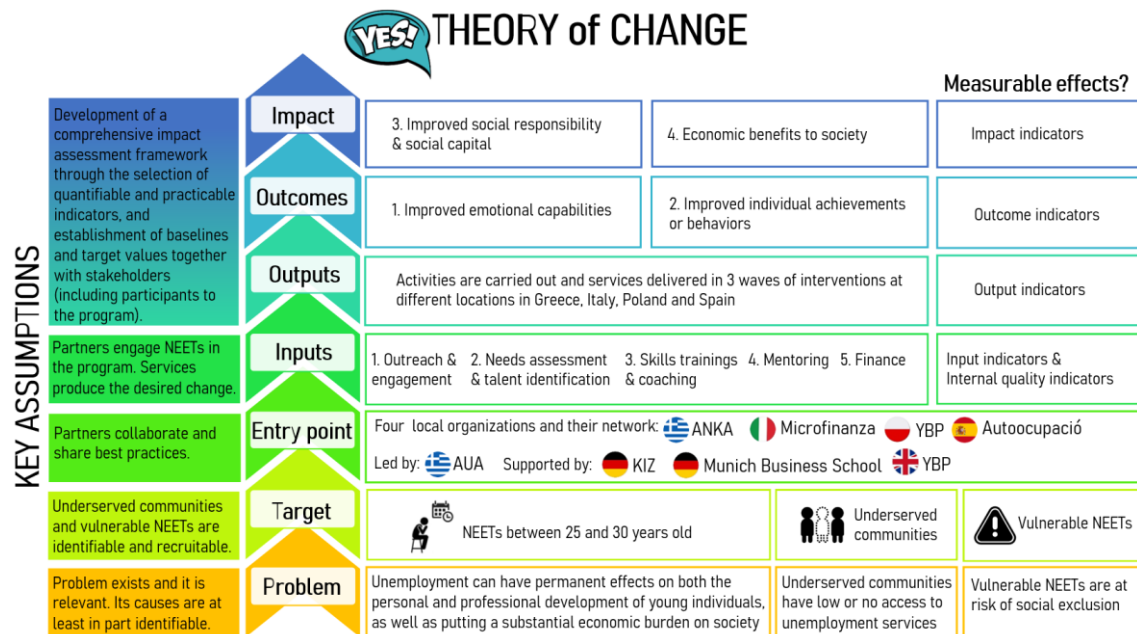
Various resources that can help you in the process of creating a ToC are available online. For examples of ToC templates, you can look at www.diytoolkit.org and www.informingchange.com. The company ActKnowledge is even piloting the Theory of Change Online (TOCO), a free, web-based application to create Theories of Change and to learn more about the methodology.

References

Weiss, C. H. (1995). Nothing as practical as good theory: Exploring theory-based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families. In Connell, J., Kubisch, A., Schorr, L. B., & Weiss, C. H. (Eds.), New approaches to evaluating community initiatives. New York: Aspen Institute.