

Our approach to Theory of change in research

This document offers learning from the Agile Initiative for researchers, research facilitators, administrators, and others interested in using theory of change in fast-paced, policy-facing research.

What is theory of change and why should you care?

A theory of change (ToC) is an approach or process for understanding and articulating how change happens in a given context, and how a project, programme or intervention can contribute to that change. It can be used to support programme design, strategy, implementation, reporting, evaluation and impact assessment.

Having a ToC in place, whether for a short research project or a large research programme, can help teams stay focused on the change they hope the research will support, while recognising that findings, opportunities and impacts may evolve. It can help to keep aims and expectations realistic and manageable, and help to make assumptions and risks explicit.

A ToC is particularly useful because it helps teams think beyond core research activities and publications, and articulate the outcomes and impacts they hope the research will contribute to. This can be difficult, because researchers do not know at the start of a project what the findings will be or what impacts may follow. However, setting out the change the project hopes to support can strengthen the research design, clarify assumptions, and make engagement with stakeholders more purposeful.

How we approach theory of change in Agile

For the Agile Initiative we developed a simple tool to help Sprint research projects create their own ToC (see diagram on next page). This can then be used throughout a project to keep on track, monitor progress, and shift direction in response to changes in context.

Our tool is deliberately simple and linear. It does not capture all the interconnections, feedbacks and shifting pathways that shape research projects in practice. However, it worked well for Sprints because it could be explained quickly, shared easily, and built into proposals and project discussions. All the terms used in this diagram are explained in the next section.

Defining stakeholders

Agile works with many different stakeholders. Stakeholders in this series refers to non-academic groups who have an interest in, may be affected by, or hold relevant knowledge, rights or responsibilities in relation to the research. These may include policymakers, practitioners, civil society groups, private sector actors, Indigenous Peoples, communities, and other knowledge holders. The relevant groups will depend on the project context.

The Agile Initiative Theory of Change tool

Context/ Policy Pull: *what's the problem the sprint is trying to solve?*

Sprint Objectives: *how will the sprint produce a solution?*

- Objective 1
- Objective 2



Assumptions *(which form the basis for a risk assessment):*

- Assumption 1
- Assumption 2

A step-by-step approach

The following steps can help you to use this tool. These can be undertaken in a workshop with stakeholders, or in small teams of those directly involved in a project.

- 1. Start with a reflection on the context:** what is the problem that the project is trying to solve? What is the evidence gap that the research is trying to fill? Why is academic research needed? Why is it needed now? In Agile we consider 'policy pull' as part of the context: what is the policy demand for the research?
- 2. Then move to objectives:** what is your proposed solution to the problem? In other words, "to address the evidence gap, this project aims to [X]". We recommend no more than three objectives for a short research project.
- 3. Use the objectives to set out the goal.** In other words, if X is the problem, and you think Y is the solution, then what does the research aim to achieve during its lifetime? The goal should be achievable and be within the control of the project as much as possible. The goal can also be used to articulate the overarching **research question**.
- 4. Define the desired impact.** If the project is successful, what are the long-term effects or changes that should occur? These tend to be similar to the basic aims or goals of the project but are often outside the direct control of the researchers. If you are actively working with key stakeholders throughout the project, you will stand a better chance of achieving your desired impact. You can read more about co-creation in 'Our approach to co-creation'.
- From here, jump back to the left-hand side and complete the sections on **Inputs** (the financial, human, data and knowledge resources that support the research) and **Activities** (the actions you will take). Activities may also be set out in a workplan or Gantt chart and detailed within work packages. Summarising these into the diagram can be helpful with iterating ideas, surfacing assumptions about the resources needed, and showing the connections between specific inputs and activities.
- 6. Outputs** are the products and results of the research activities, e.g. data sets, papers, models, guidance, policy briefs. Outputs can also include workshops, webinars and briefings with stakeholders. You should check with key stakeholders that what you are planning to produce is in formats that they will be able to engage with and use.

7. Finally, complete those outcomes. These provide the bridge between the research outputs, the goal and the desired impacts. Many ToCs include intermediate (short-term) outcomes as well as medium and longer-term outcomes. In our experience, this is the aspect of a plan that research teams find hardest to articulate. Think hard about what you want people to do with your research. If someone attends a workshop or reads your paper, what are the desired effects of that engagement? How do you want them to apply the knowledge, use the tool, etc.? What tangible change do you want that to lead to in policy or practice? What will a successful result be in the short- to medium-term? If you work with stakeholders on your research design, they should be able to help you to think through the Outcomes to Impact part of the ToC. While these outcomes may be beyond your control, articulating them gives you a greater chance of achieving them.

8. Once you have completed your outcomes, it's worth revisiting your outputs and checking that what you are planning to produce will help achieve the desired Outcomes. Throughout the project you can revisit these sections of the ToC as the research advances and the context within which the research is taking place evolves.

9. Consider and interrogate your Assumptions. Prompting yourself to be specific and realistic will likely surface many assumptions about how the Sprint will work, and how people and organisations may respond to it. For example, are you assuming it will be possible to hire a research assistant quickly? Are you assuming that you can access data that is crucial to the research? Where assumptions feel particularly important, contested, or uncertain, we recommend capturing them in the diagram, either with boxes and connections or with annotations. You can then use the assumptions to articulate risks and how you might mitigate them.

10. Use it, then iterate. It can be tempting to aim for a perfect or 'finished' ToC straight away. However, in almost all contexts, it is much more useful to think of your ToC as a living document, which can and should be critiqued, refined and updated as a research project unfolds.

Testing the ToC

A powerful way of forcing realism into your thinking is to ask about 'theories of no change' and 'theories of negative change'. Why might the project have no effect? Why might a particular output fail to influence policy or practice? Could the research have negative effects or unintended consequences? Asking these questions helps teams identify weak assumptions, risks and possible mitigations.

Do you need a ToC diagram?

Our diagram is very simple, but there are many great examples of ToC diagrams which you could explore to identify a layout that works for you. You do not have to use a diagram. A narrative ToC can work just as well, and is often useful for communicating the logic of a project. If you do use a diagram, the format should fit the project's purpose, resources, level of stakeholder engagement and communication needs. A diagram may be used as a simple communication tool, a proposal aid, or a more detailed framework for project design, monitoring and reflection.

Top tips

These tips are based on learning from Agile, and our commitment to inclusive, collaborative and transparent research that will have long-term impact.

Use a theory of change as part of research design to think through the change you want the research to result in, and to set out the pathway from research activities to impact.

Working on your ToC as a team, including with non-academic partners, can strengthen inclusivity and enable different voices and perspectives to be heard.

Use a diagram to articulate and communicate the pathway in brief.

Use throughout your project to **keep track of your progress** towards your goals, and to embed learning and reflection.

Be open to **refocusing and pivoting** in response to emerging results and opportunities to have impact.

Explore why you might fail to achieve aims and impacts, and develop strategies to mitigate any risks.

Resources

[Barbrook-Johnson, P. and A. S. Penn \(2022\). 'Theory of change diagrams' in Systems Mapping: How to build and use causal models of systems. Palgrave Macmillan Cham.](#)

[INTRAC \(2024\) Theory of Change. M&E Universe.](#)

[Laing, K. and L. Todd \(2015\). Theory-based methodology: using theories of change for development, research and evaluation. Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University.](#)

[Vogel, I. \(2012\) ESPA guide to working with Theory of Change for research projects.](#)

[Wolfe, R. \(2013\) Pathways of impact: a theory of change approach to research uptake. RESYST, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.](#)

Webinar recording. ["The Agile Initiative: Using a theory of change" YouTube, 2024.](#)

About the Series

The “How to do a Sprint research project” series was produced in 2026 by the Agile Initiative at the Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford.

The Agile Initiative aims to revolutionise how research responds to the urgent needs of policymakers on critical environmental issues through rapid research projects called Sprints.

The aim of this series is to provide guidance on how to run a Sprint research project in contexts outside of the Agile Initiative, based on learning collated by the programme support team and researchers.

Rachel Hayman and Pete Barbrook-Johnson led the writing of this briefing, with contributions from research support staff and researchers across the Agile Initiative. This document should be cited as:

The Agile Initiative, 2026. Our approach to Theory of change. University of Oxford. Available online.

Other guides in the series include:

- Equality Impact Assessment
- Co-creating research
- Managing rapid research projects
- Interdisciplinary research

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