

Guidance note - version 1.0 august 2018

Civil Society Fund (CSF):

A flexible approach to Theory of Change and its link to a results framework in programs

Background:

The guidance note is meant as a guiding document for organisations applying for or implementing a programme under the Civil Society Fund (CSF). It is not a step-by-step guide to either Theory of Change (ToC) or how to design a results framework, because the CSF do not require specific formats for applying organisations to do their ToC or their results framework in a specific format (except for a brief results framework format demonstrating the end of programme outcomes which is a formal Danida requirement).

However, there are some key questions and elements that we advise applicants to reflect on, which we believe will be helpful for applicants in order to produce a ToC and an interrelated results framework. Reflections which will be useful both during the application process, but also during the implementation of the programme.

The note will replace the text in Annex 3 to the CSF Program guidelines (Danida guidance note on Theory of Change).

Theory of Change (ToC)

- A guidance note on how to operationalize a Theory of Change (ToC)

Background:

Programme-based CSOs are asked to integrate a Theory of Change into their programme document when applying for a Program in the Civil society Fund (CSF). The organisation is free to decide on the specific format and structure of the individual ToCs/programme documents. The guiding questions listed below provide recommendations to issues to be included in the ToC narrative.

Introduction

There is no pre-defined format for how to work with a theory of change nor a step by step guide to formulate one. It is up to each organisation to decide the most suitable approach to explain and present what the programme aims to change and how. The aim of this guidance note is to make the process of preparing a ToC useful and to make it a management tool which is linked to a results framework.

A “theory” is by definition an evidence-based way of predicting what will happen if we intervene in a given context. It is an evidence-based best guess about the future. The evidence lies in a thorough understanding of the context, e.g. through studies that have been conducted, the data and information we have collected and analysed, as well as the experiences and lessons learned we have documented during previous work either in the same context or in a similar context. The evidence helps us to improve and develop our theory for how to make changes in a given context.

Therefore, it is important to have a solid context analysis and other supporting analyses such as e.g. stakeholder, risk, partner capacity, gender, thematic or sector specific analyses. The better we understand the context and its challenges and opportunities the better we can develop a theory for how to make changes i.e. using opportunities to address challenges. The context analysis and supporting analyses creates our reference point for the situation today relative to the changes we plan to achieve during the programme.

A programme-based ToC needs to be concrete, realistic and achievable within the timeframe of the programme, otherwise it will not be operational. The ToC should, in a structured way, be able to explain the synergy between components and the logic of pathways for the planned interventions i.e. with whom and how we get from A to B, and what we need to look out for during implementation i.e. which assumptions do we base the theory on and what are the most critical externalities and/or risks to monitor and potentially mitigate. It is important that assumptions are linked to the different steps in the ToC including the pathways of delivering results..

A ToC is not a blue-print exercise, but merely an approach to establish a participatory and inclusive dialogue on e.g. what, how and by whom we plan to change in a given context. Hence, a ToC is mostly a tool for dialogue in which we achieve a common understanding and approach to change considering e.g. the what, how and by whom.

In order to ensure ownership of the defined ToC, it is recommendable that all main stakeholders have participated in the discussion on the context, key challenges and opportunities and how previous lessons learned have informed our understanding of the context.

Regardless of approach and process for establishing a ToC, it shall always be presented in a narrative form using clear and simple language. The narrative can be supported by an illustration of the ToC.

Guiding questions in design and planning phase

During the design and planning phase it is recommended that a facilitator of the ToC , e.g. a Programme Manager/Officer, be appointed. The facilitator is responsible for the process of creating a dialogue between key stakeholders on the desired and needed changes relative to the commonly agreed and well analysed context. The facilitator prepares a summary or narrative of the common understanding and elements of the ToC using simple language to explain the logical linkages (pathways) which lead to the desired change. The narrative should reflect main elements of the results framework prepared for the intervention. (See the suggestion below on how to link a ToC to a Results Framework).

Guiding questions for the facilitator to ask during the design process could include the following:

- Is there a common understanding of the context and its key challenges and opportunities to pursue changes? If not, the context analysis may require refining.
- What can the programme realistically achieve and change given the time frame, available resources and boundaries in which the programme operates and the degree to which it controls the process of change?
- Which pathways do we select to achieve the desired changes and who are the drivers for the change process?
- What are the synergies between the themes/components?
- What are the main deliverables/services/products we plan to implement and how will one deliverable/service/product lead to actual changes? – e.g. will mobilisation and training/strengthening of civil society naturally lead to changes in behaviour and action?
- What do we assume will be in place in order for our desired changes to be achieved? – and which external factors might have negative or positive influence on our chances to achieve the desired changes?
- How do we at the end of the programme implementation decide if changes have happened?
- i.e. how would we describe changes in quantitative as well as qualitative terms, and how can we verify that the changes are achieved?
- Who will take leadership of the change process?

Please notice that a number of the above mentioned guiding questions are usually covered by log frame processes (if this is the practice of the organisation) and therefore not necessarily exclusively to the ToC approach.

ToC narrative:

As part of the program document a narrative describing the program ToC is expected. This should be part of the program strategy and include reflections on:

- **What is the long-term change:**
Start with the overall program objective – and then focus on the change (outcomes) you want to see.

- **Why is the program relevant in the context:**
A summary of your understanding of the context and its key challenges and opportunities to pursue the intended changes.
- **Why we think it works:**
Describe the logic in the chain of outputs --> outcome. This can for example be done by constructing sentences using “so-that”, or “if, then, because”. Could also be supplemented by a ToC-diagram.
- **Assumptions and risks for reflection:**
Articulate core assumptions that need to be monitored during implementation, as well as key risks in the ToC. At least one assumption for each outcome - and describe method of assessing the assumption.
- **Yearly learning questions**
Articulate learning questions which can help you respond to and reflect on whether the logic between key outputs to be delivered and the expected outcomes are achievable and working.

Implementation and management

A ToC can become an operational management tool if we monitor the context for significant changes periodically, including an assessment of whether the assumptions for the programme still are relevant and how external factors are influencing the achievement of expected changes.

During our monitoring and management of the programme it may be necessary to adjust the pathways to pursue change and even change the drivers needed to deliver the change. It may also be necessary to adjust (up or down) the level of expected change. The pathways and drivers of change also need to be flexible and adjustable. The planned changes (outcomes) are fixed but the pathways and those who drive the change can be adjusted.

The key deliverables and indicators ie. outputs, output indicators and outcome indicators should also be adjusted and considered on an annual basis. Outputs and the indicators (output and outcomes) are often prepared based on a prediction of the future and what we believed was realistic to implement. If changes in the context or other factors influence on our opportunity to deliver then we should also be able to scale up or down our expectations to the outputs, output indicators and outcome indicators. As long as we keep the expected outcomes.

Setting annual targets for key changes can be helpful to make the ToC realistic and achievable within the timeframe of the programme. In order for all stakeholders to have common and realistic expectations to what can be achieved it is recommended to discuss and adjust the targets annually.

Leadership is critical to ensure that the chosen pathways and drivers are the most appropriate to pursue the desired changes and achieve progress reflecting the agreed plan of implementation. It is recommended that the programme leadership revisit the ToC annually and ensure that the theory behind the interventions is still realistic and achievable. The leadership should also ensure that the ToC is reported against the initial situational context representing a kind of baseline for the change process. Annual Progress Reports should verify that the leadership is addressing changes in terms of

the context, assumptions and external factors and that the pathways, drivers, expected outputs, indicators and targets of the ToC are adjusted accordingly.

Linking the ToC to a results framework - a checklist

It is important that the ToC narrative explains synergies and pathways in how changes will be implemented and who will implement the changes. The narrative shall explain the changes and effects achieved due to the programme relative to the situation today (context). The Table below can help check that the key elements of the Theory of Change have been informing the result framework. Using the table below can assist you in checking whether the key elements of the ToC have informed the result framework, it is advisable to explain how a set of the most important or strategic outputs will lead to changes and effects (outcomes) in your area of intervention (local and/or national context) relative to the challenges and opportunities identified in the context analysis. Additionally, it would be helpful to provide an explanation of which assumptions the design is based upon and which pathways are to be used to achieve the desired changes and effects. The risks and externalities which may negatively affect the delivery of outputs and outcomes should also be explained as well as how to mitigate them. Furthermore, on a yearly basis, explain how you intend to ask key questions relating to the delivery of outcomes and key and strategic outputs and which yearly targets you aim for in order to achieve these outputs and outcomes. Finally, explain how it all contributes to your programme objective, i.e. the broader picture and more sustainable changes due to your programme.

The checklist below may also be used to check whether the ToC is coordinated with strategies in individual program countries if there are individual contextual differences between countries or regional area of program intervention.

| | | <i>Theory of change analysis</i> | <i>Context and baseline</i> | <i>Indicators in relation to current context</i> | <i>Assumptions</i> | <i>Pathways (whom and key drivers)</i> | <i>Risks and other externalities</i> | <i>Yearly learning questions</i> |
|-----------------------|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------|--|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Result Frame | | | | | | | | |
| Program objective | | | | | | | | |
| Outcomes | | | | | | | | |
| Key/strategic outputs | | | | | | | | |

The definitions of the above elements of the results framework are presented in the guidance note on Results Frameworks.

The ToC aims to facilitate a dialogue about what the programmes intends to achieve and which deliverables/services/products are need in order to achieve the desired change (outcomes). The results framework could be prepared based on these discussions which should take point of departure in the context analysis (and other supporting analyses). Targets/milestones should be discussed relative to the context analysis which to some extend represent a baseline for the programme. See also Guidance note on how to prepare a results framework.

Results Framework

- A guidance note on how to prepare a results framework

Introduction

Programme-based CSOs/organisations are required to develop a results framework as part of the overall implementation of the programme. The comprehensive results framework can be finalized after the application and approval process with the CSF. A summary outline of the results framework at outcome level is required as part of the programme application process. There is no format for the comprehensive results framework, but it is anticipated that an overview is provided at Outcome-level, which follows a specific format for a summary results framework (see below).

A results framework comprises: what the programme intends to change in the long-term, which changes can be measured at the end of the programme, and key and strategic deliverables, services or products that will be delivered in order to achieve the changes at the end of the programme implementation. The programme Theory of Change (ToC) should provide the narrative description of the logic, linkages and pathways for how the programme will achieve the planned changes. See also the guidance note on ToCs.

The aim of this guidance note is to provide an introduction to and an example of how to prepare a results framework which is simple but sufficiently comprehensive in order to explain the main logic linkages in a planned intervention with key assumptions and at the same time providing the opportunity to make the results framework a flexible and operational management tool for planning, implementation and monitoring.

The following will distinguish between two levels of a results framework:

The COMPREHENSIVE RESULTS FRAMEWORK: A suggestion - not a requirement:

The comprehensive results framework presented here is not a requirement for applicants. An applicant can use another way of presenting how outcomes are expected to be produced as part of the programme. A comprehensive results framework is not a formal requirement during the application process, but it is required to have a summary results framework for the implementation of the programme. A comprehensive results framework is useful for partners as a management tool during implementation, but is also useful for the applicant when presenting a programme for approval, as well as when presenting progress in programme implementation during annual consultations (see Annex 1 for a possible way of developing a comprehensive result framework).

The SUMMARY RESULTS FRAMEWORK:

According to the Danida requirements an overall results framework (at outcome level only) is mandatory when presenting a programme for approval. The mandatory format for the results framework only focuses on key outcomes (end of program outcomes), key outcome indicators and targets for partners/countries (see format below).

The summary results framework shall contain information on the following (text must be added where brackets):

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Program objective | <i>[formulation of PROGRAM OBEJCTIVE]</i> |
|--------------------------|---|

| | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| Program theme/component 1 | <i>[title of theme/component]</i> | |
| Outcome | Indicator | Target (end of program per country and/or core partner) |
| Outcome 1.1 <i>[formulation of outcome]</i> | <i>[formulation of indicator]</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>[formulation of target]</i> • <i>[formulation of target]</i> |
| Add if needed | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • |
| | | |
| Program theme/component 2 | <i>[title of theme/component]</i> | |
| Outcome | Indicator | Target (end of program per country and/or core partner) |
| Outcome 2.1 <i>[formulation of outcome]</i> | <i>[formulation of indicator]</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>[formulation of target]</i> • <i>[formulation of target]</i> |
| Add if needed | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • |
| | | |
| Program theme/component 3 | <i>[title of theme/component]</i> | |
| Outcome | Indicator | Target (end of program per country and/or core partner) |
| Outcome 3.1 <i>[formulation of outcome]</i> | <i>[formulation of indicator]</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>[formulation of target]</i> • <i>[formulation of target]</i> |
| Add if needed | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • |

The framework is flexible. If relevant more than one outcome can be included per theme/component, and include individual targets for indicators allowing for adaptation to an individual or specific context.

Based on verifiable and justified changes - e.g. in the context and or core assumptions - targets and indicators can be adjusted or scaled up or down. Programme outcomes can only be changed based on major changes in context and particular circumstances, but will require formal approval from the CSF.

Flexibility of the results framework

A well prepared context analysis together with other supporting analyses, the Theory of Change and a description of the expected situation at the end of the programme i.e. the expected end of program outcomes, provide the basis for assessing the relevance and realism of the proposed programme in the targeted community or area of the society. Once approved and agreed, the end of programme outcomes of the results framework becomes leading reference points for the implementation and should only be changed if radical changes to the context occurs. In order to change the outcomes of the results framework, it would entail changing the programme logic which in turn requires a dialogue with CSF, and agreement on a new results framework at outcome level.

The pathways explaining how to achieve the outcomes and the programme objective, i.e. the activities and outputs/deliverables/services/products, as well as the drivers of the change process can be adjusted and revised without a new approval as long as the higher level outcomes remain the same. Changes in context, assumptions, risks and the influence of external factors might justify the

need to make adjustments at activity and output levels. If outputs are adjusted or revised it is important to adjust the output indicators and targets as well. Similarly, it will be necessary to adjust the outcome indicators in order to provide a more realistic framework for the quantitative and qualitative changes (outcomes) expected in a given community or society. It is recommended to use consultations with partners to make the needed and required changes to the results framework.

Annex 1: An example of how to present a COMPREHENSIVE RESULTS FRAMEWORK

A classic example to present a comprehensive RESULT FRAMEWORK

The terminology in this results framework uses OECD terminology [\[link\]](#) - development objectives, outcome, outputs, indicators and targets. It is not necessary to include the activity level in the results framework, but it can for some organisations be useful for planning and implementation purposes.

The **programme objective** should be a clear and concise statement on what the programme intends to change in a given context within a medium to long-term perspective. Knowing that the context changes all the time and that many external factors will influence the success of the programme, the **programme objective indicator** should provide a key indication on how the long-term change can be measured in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Most programmes have one to three key areas of interventions. These are usually thematic, sector or country specific. It is recommended that each of these interventions include only one outcome and as many outputs needed in order to deliver the specific outcome.

| Programme objective | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Thematic/component title 1</i> | <i>Thematic/component title 2</i> | <i>Thematic/component title 3</i> |
| Outcome 1 | Outcome 2 | Outcome 3 |
| Outputs 1.1 – 1.x | Output 2.1 – 2-x | Output 3.1 – 3.x |

The **outcome** level should describe the changes that are planned for in the specific area of intervention i.e. the short- or medium-term effects of each intervention's outputs on the target group.

The **outcome indicators** can be formulated in both quantitative and qualitative terms and should provide a simple and realistic means of how to measure the changes or effects expected to be achieved within the engagement or area of intervention. Reporting on the outcome indicators should be able to tell the story of change relative to the defined theory of change of the programme. The reporting of outcomes should also make reference to what the situation was at the start of the programme i.e. the baseline and a predefined situational or context analysis relative to the target by completion of the programme.

Outputs are the deliverables, services and/or products resulting from the activities implemented which jointly provide the quantitative and qualitative results and changes described in the outcome indicators.

The key strategic outputs could have specific **output indicators**. These indicators should be expressed in quantitative and/or qualitative terms and should provide a simple but realistic means of how to measure the achievement of the deliverable/service/product. Delivering outputs is a step by step approach during the timeframe of the programme. Therefore, it is recommended to develop specific, yearly targets/milestones for monitoring of the achievement of outputs. Examples include the percentage of expected total achievement from the xx process, number of people trained, number of interventions with duty bearers, a draft, final draft or final document/proposal/ guideline

delivered, and level of initiations of new actions or interventions. The annual reporting of outputs and output indicators should make reference to the yearly targets thereby making it possible to report on progress in a logical and incremental manner. By referencing the situation at the start of the programme (baseline), the annual reporting of outputs should be able to progressively tell a story of change relative to the expected outcome indicators and corresponding end targets for the programme.

For a programme to be monitored and verified with respect to results and changes, it is critical that the supporting **context analysis and baseline** are relevant by specifically tailored to the situation that the programme anticipates to change. With a tailored context analysis and baseline relative to the target group or targeted issue, it will be possible to define the yearly **targets** that measure progress in delivering the programme outputs. Consequently, progress reporting on output and outcome indicators becomes easier when there is a clear reference point to the situation at the start of the programme, yearly targets and an end target.

The planned **activities and activity budgets** expected to achieve the outputs are important but are not required to be included in the presentation and reporting of the results framework to Danida. Reporting of activities should guide the reporting of how outputs are being delivered and outcome indicators achieved. Progress reporting should avoid a long list of activities implemented, but merely be used to explain how changes are being achieved.

All programmes build on certain **assumptions** which are conditions, resources, actors and factors that are assessed to be needed for the success of the programme, and that already exist and will not be problematic. Assumptions emerge during the preparation of the context analysis (and other supporting analyses) and may change during the implementation of the programme. Therefore, the monitoring of assumptions is critical. Assumptions should explicitly be incorporated into the narrative of the Theory of Change and the selected implementation strategies.

It is recommended to use the analysis of assumptions and its relevance for the Theory of change to formulate learning questions, which could be relevant to examine qualitatively during implementation. With reference to the program Theory of Change there might be formulated yearly learning questions which are related to the expected level of change that is expected for each year. Learning question can form part of the reporting to annual consultations - and the phrasing of these question could be altered as part of the consultations if the context requires it.

Example of a comprehensive results framework

A programme should aim at having a maximum of 2-4 areas of intervention with one core outcome per intervention supported by multiple key outputs.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Programme | <i>[Title of Programme]</i> |
| Programme Objective | <i>[The intended contribution to a development process in society or a community]</i> |
| Thematic/component Title 1 | <i>[Title of the specific development area of intervention]</i> |
| Outcome 1 | <i>[The short-term and medium term effects of the theme/components outputs on the target group]</i> |
| Outcome indicators | <i>[Quantitative and qualitative factors or variables that provide a simple and reliable means to measure achievement or to reflect the changes connected to an intervention]</i> |

| | | | |
|-------------------|--------|---|---|
| Baseline | Year | | <i>[Situation prior to program activities – context and other analyses]</i> |
| Target (end) | Year | | <i>[Intended situation by the end of the programme (or phase)]</i> |
| Output 1.1 | | <i>[Short-term result in the form of deliverables/services/products which results from an program activity]</i> | |
| Output indicators | | <i>[Quantitative and qualitative factors or variables that provide a simple and reliable means to measure achievement or to reflect the changes connected to an intervention]</i> | |
| Baseline | Year | | <i>[Situation prior to intervention activity]</i> |
| Target | Year 1 | | <i>[Intended situation after first year of implementation]</i> |
| Target | Year 2 | | <i>[Intended situation after two years of implementation]</i> |
| ... | ... | | ... |
| Target | Year | | <i>[Intended situation when activity under the program ends]</i> |
| Output 1.2 | | <i>[Short-term result in the form of deliverables/services/products which results from an engagement activity]</i> | |
| Output indicators | | <i>[Quantitative and qualitative factors or variables that provide a simple and reliable means to measure achievement or to reflect the changes connected to an intervention]</i> | |
| Baseline | Year | | <i>[Situation prior to program activity]</i> |
| Target | Year 1 | | <i>[Intended situation after first year of implementation]</i> |
| Target | Year 2 | | <i>[Intended situation after two years of implementation]</i> |
| ... | ... | | ... |
| Target | Year | | <i>[Intended situation when activity under the program ends]</i> |

NB! Activities and activity budgets supporting the implementation of outputs are still expected for planning purposes, but not need for the formal reporting to CISU/Danida. With detailed activities and activity budgets linked to each output it will be possible to provide output-based budgeting and reporting, which supports broader cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness assessments of programme deliverables/services/products as well as outcomes. Output-based budgeting is not a requirement, but recommendable.