

January 2012



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# **Defining Theories of Change**

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International Alert.



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# 1 Executive Summary

**Focusing on theories of change can improve the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions. A review of 19 peacebuilding projects in three conflict-affected countries found that the process of articulating and reviewing theories of change adds rigour and transparency, clarifies project logic, highlights assumptions that need to be tested, and helps identify appropriate participants and partners. However, the approach has limitations, including the difficulty of gathering theory-validating evidence.**

While they are not a panacea, devoting greater attention to theories of change is a simple and relatively inexpensive means of increasing the quality of peacebuilding interventions. Donors and peacebuilding agencies should review their procedures to encourage and accommodate more widespread focus on theories of change, and ensure adequate resources are set aside to allow appropriate monitoring of these theories throughout the life of an intervention.

A focus on theories of change led to the following key findings:

- Clarifying project logic helps highlight tenuous assumptions;
- Clearly identifying the aims of activities and measures of success strengthens project design;
- Determining the appropriate actors to work with, and not just the easy-to-reach, enables better programme focus;
- More explicit links need to be made between local level activities and national peace processes for desired changes to occur;

- Conflict analysis is critical for determining the relevance of activities but is rarely done;
- Staff often require support in ensuring their theories of change are sufficiently explicit;
- Current project planning tools do not help practitioners articulate their theories of change;
- Gathering evidence to validate a theory of change is challenging, particularly in conditions of conflict and fragility;
- Critical review of theories of change needs to be undertaken in conjunction with other forms of evaluation to have maximum value;
- Theories of change can encourage an overly linear approach, when change in conflict contexts can be more organic or systemic.

## Recommendations:

- 1 Donors should revise their logical frameworks guidance to encourage the use of theories of change, notably to include them within the 'assumptions and risks' column of existing logical frameworks or by adding an additional column.
- 2 Theories of change need to be as precise, nuanced and contextually specific as possible and be based on broad conflict analysis.
- 3 Practitioners need to articulate theories of change within a hierarchy of results and to review these periodically throughout the implementation of a project, particularly if conflict dynamics change.
- 4 Donors should encourage funded agencies to review their theories of change throughout the project cycle and make resources available for this.

## 2 Introduction

**As 2015 approaches, the World Bank reports that no conflict-affected country has achieved any of the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>1</sup> States, donors, NGOs and, most importantly, conflict-affected populations are all concerned with improving the practice of building peace and securing development. This paper coincides with the new vision for statebuilding and peacebuilding agreed at the Busan aid effectiveness conference in December 2011. We hope the findings will lead to strengthened peacebuilding in the future.**

One of the long-standing challenges to successful peacebuilding has been the difficulty of measuring results and generating evidence that can help identify what types of interventions work best. Part of the challenge is that peace itself is an elusive concept, made up of innumerable factors that can be hard to define. Peacebuilding projects often seek changes in people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviours toward one another – areas that are less tangible than, say, their health, or access to credit, and often more difficult to measure. If an intervention is successful in preventing a conflict, a further challenge is demonstrating the counterfactual (i.e. what would have happened in the absence of the initiative). Moreover, agencies have struggled to demonstrate how interventions that target grassroots level actors 'add up' to building peace at the national or even regional level.

Theory-based evaluation is a promising approach to help explain how lower level results influence higher level results, an area of weakness in many peacebuilding projects. The OECD DAC has found that peacebuilding work in particular is often based on "approaches and tactics that are rooted in implicit theories of change", but that in many cases "such theories are subconscious and unstated."<sup>2</sup> Research conducted by CARE and CDA Collaborative Learning Projects in Kosovo<sup>3</sup> found that many peacebuilding interventions were ineffective because of inadequate theories of change.

To advance the use of theory-based inquiry within the field of peacebuilding, CARE International and International Alert

decided to undertake a two and a half year research project to assess how using theories of change in a 'light touch' way could contribute to monitoring and evaluating peacebuilding projects.

This paper is a summary of the findings of research that assessed 19 peacebuilding projects in three conflict-affected countries: Uganda, Nepal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Individual country-specific papers are also available and a 'How to Guide to Using Theories of Change in Peacebuilding' is forthcoming.

### **What is a theory of change?**

Peacebuilding programming is built on numerous assumptions, or "theories of change", about how interventions contribute to peace. In its simplest form a theory of change can be stated as, "We believe that by doing X (action) it will achieve Y (progress towards peace)". For example, "If we train key leaders in negotiating skills, they will become more effective advocates for their interests through nonviolent means". Or, "If we generate jobs for unemployed youth, they will be less available to be recruited to violence".

A theory of change clearly articulates the intended activity (the 'if' part), and the expected change it will bring about (the 'then' part or parts). Articulating a theory of change offers a clearer picture of the intended result from an action, and explains how programme activities and results are connected with each other and contribute to achieving results at different levels. In other words, a well-articulated theory of change represents a testable hypothesis regarding how the planned activities will contribute to achieving the desired results for the programme.

An example of a peacebuilding theory of change that was researched in this project, from the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction in Nepal, is: "If there is evidence of peaceful resolution of conflict, then confidence on and acceptance of peacebuilding mechanisms is increased".

Every action we take, from the overall goal of the project to each single activity, has a theory of change behind it. The theory of change, then, is a tool that can be used to explain and articulate the logical connection between a lower level result and a higher level result. Thus, it can be used to design, monitor and evaluate social change initiatives, including peacebuilding.

1 World Bank, *Global Monitoring Report 2011: Improving the Odds of Achieving the MDGs*, April 14, 2011.

2 DAC Network on Conflict, Peace and Development Co-operation, and DAC Network on Development Evaluation, *Guidance on Evaluating Conflict*

*Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities*, 2008.

3 CARE International and CDA Collaborative Learning Projects; *Has Peacebuilding Made a Difference in Kosovo?*, July 2006.

## 2 Introduction continued

When reviewing a theory of change, the theory should be reviewed in its two components: the 'if', and the 'then'. In the above example, to review the 'if', we would start by asking if evidence of peaceful resolution of conflict was generated. If it was, we would review the 'then'. Did this evidence contribute to confidence and acceptance of [local] peacebuilding mechanisms? This is the starting point for reviewing a theory of change. As most peacebuilding projects do not explicitly articulate a theory of change, it is often necessary to do so retroactively, as was done through this research project.

### What is peacebuilding?

There are many definitions of peacebuilding, but this project used the following: "Peacebuilding is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities that both precede and follow formal peace accords. Metaphorically, peace is seen not merely as a stage in time or a condition. It is a dynamic social construct".<sup>4</sup>

## 3 Methodology

**Three research teams in Uganda, Nepal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were established and guided by a steering committee of advisors. The teams comprised representatives from international and local NGOs, government agencies and academics. (See Annex I for a full list of participants and projects).**

During the two and a half year project, 19 projects of varying size and ambition were selected and 38 theories of change were reviewed. Projects have multiple theories of change within a hierarchy of results, but it would have been too large an undertaking to review them all. We asked partners to select one to three theories of change to review over the life of this project. (The average was two theories of change per project.) Of the 38 theories of change, 15 had an element of capacity building, 10 involved dialogue, seven involved work with the media, and five established peace or conflict resolution mechanisms, such as peace centres or committees.

Prior to the start of the project, only three of the 19 projects had explicitly stated a theories of change. For the other projects, 'retrospective' theories of change were articulated and tested by the country teams. This was done by referring to the project design, consulting implementation staff, and reviewing each project's proposal documents. Each of the research teams participated in three-day workshops that included training components on theories of change, along with other elements of design, monitoring and evaluation.

Articulating theories of change was new to most of the practitioners. As a result, initial theories of change were often vague or unclear as to the project's intended change. Therefore, time was taken to explore imprecise terms, such as capacity building, engagement and empowerment. These terms needed to be refined in order to enable monitoring and evaluation of the associated theory of change. In some cases, the research team members revised their project's theories of change and the project's actual activities. This was seen as a positive sign, as the teams became more confident in their knowledge and application of theories of change. As such, their ability to review their own projects, and the projects of others, increased.

It is important to note that the research effort used a 'light touch' approach to theory-based evaluation in researching, monitoring and evaluating the projects. Our aim was to improve the quality and effectiveness of civil society and government peacebuilding and conflict prevention programming by critically evaluating assumptions underpinning peacebuilding programming. It was envisioned that this would be accomplished through developing and piloting means to demonstrate results, and building local capacity in design, monitoring and evaluation. To fully evaluate the projects using theory-based evaluation would have required teams of expert evaluators to rule out alternative theories of change for projects, which was outside the scope of this initiative.

Since the research team members began articulating and researching theories of change, participating agencies have developed five new programmes/projects with a clear focus on theories of change. Two agencies in DRC and Uganda have recently started programming based on the learning from this project.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1997.

# 4 Main findings

## The benefits of a focus on the theory of change:

### 1 Clarifies project logic and tackles inadequate assumptions

The process of identifying the hierarchy of results, or results chain, unanimously helped clarify the logic of a project, and articulate the intended change from each of the activities and how they link together. The process of developing a hierarchy of results also identified whether the assumptions underpinning activities were sound and helped reveal whether the planned activities would likely achieve the goal. Articulating the theories of change associated with the activities within the hierarchy enabled people to identify the intended change of each activity, what would constitute success of a specific activity, and what was essential to achieve results. This process made it possible to strengthen significantly the impact of the projects reviewed.

In one case, for example, a partner organisation assumed that training a small number of university students in debating methods would have ripple effects and promote non-violent means of dispute resolution amongst a wider body of students and the public more broadly. However, the research process revealed that the project design included no activities for sharing the new debating methods amongst the larger student body. In addition, the project design had not identified how to reach the wider community; it was simply relying on debates in public forums to inspire people to engage in alternative dispute resolution.

### 2 Identifies the appropriate actors to work with

Articulating and researching theories of change enables implementers to more clearly identify who, why and to what end different individuals and groups are targeted in peacebuilding projects. This is important, given that in all three countries it was revealed that the projects were, to some degree, working with people who were easy to reach, and were often working in isolation with beneficiary groups, rather than multiple key actors and stakeholders to the conflict. In Nepal projects focused on youth; in Uganda they addressed victims of conflict, rather than perpetrators of conflict; and in DRC they emphasised the inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes.<sup>5</sup>

Inappropriate or ill-defined targeting was brought out most strongly in Nepal, where all six of the projects reviewed had an element of engaging with youth. The rationale for focusing on youth was that they were seen as a source of violent actions in Nepal. By engaging with youth, therefore, projects could prevent future violent conflicts. However, during implementation it was revealed that one of the projects engaged youth in general and failed to work with 'political youth' as key actors. The project also neglected other political

actors who might have influenced the ability of the youth to participate in decision making, namely elders who were active in decision making structures within the communities and the political party structures. On the positive side, as a result of the findings of this project, the implementing agency decided to amend activities in years two and three to extend to political youth.

Conversely, in one project in Uganda working to address national policy around oil production and wealth distribution, the right actors were identified and engaged in the project design. Credible and knowledgeable national actors and local officials were used to consult and recommend policy creation. By drawing together the right combination of actors, including those who could advise and those with power, the project was able to achieve greater effectiveness. (See text box Case Study: Uganda).

A number of the projects faced the common peacebuilding challenge of finding the right balance between engaging with political groups and being co-opted by them. In some situations key actors attempted to capture the work of the interventions. In other cases, political actors were avoided, as they were seen as too controversial. Researching theories of change can help reveal these challenges and provide a framework for reflecting on them.

#### Case study: Uganda

In Uganda, International Alert (Alert) worked with civil society, the oil industry and Government to reduce the risk of violent conflict by improving space for dialogue and sharing information on possible economic exploitation of newly discovered oil deposits. The particular theory of change articulated and researched during the project stated: 'If there is constructive engagement among key stakeholders on political economy issues, then it will improve information flow and lead to a shift in policy and decision making'.

The research determined that the original context analysis was sound: "The projects were also anchored on contextual realities identified through community analyses and assessments, the identification of relevant stakeholders, constant consultations on issues of peace and development, and analysing previous country reports".

Evidence gathered regarding the 'if' clause found: The key constructive engagement among oil companies, Government and civil society stakeholders was seen in their joint presence at district dialogue meetings set up by International Alert, and the increased responsiveness of oil companies and Government to information requests over the project period.

<sup>5</sup> In DRC, the projects reviewed all related to engaging women as peacebuilders. This was due to the fact that the projects under review were all implementing partners of International Alert's Great Lakes programme, which has a focus

on women as peacebuilders and a history of partnership with women-focused organisations.

## 4 Main findings continued

Evidence gathered on the ‘then’ clause found a change in information flow, policy and decision making. Information flow increased as the Civil Society Coalition on Oil (CSCO) advocated and succeeded in getting the Government to organise further dialogue meetings between civil society and oil companies, where community concerns were discussed. Additionally, after requests from Alert and others, the Government opened up an oil information office in Hoima. The project could also claim results in the policy sphere, since the CSCO made a contribution to the draft petroleum bill and “has been consulted on the development of oil policy in Uganda”. However, details on the nature of the consultation, and whether the CSCO suggested changes were adopted were not gathered, making definite conclusions difficult. The inclusion of the CSCO in consultation might also indicate a change in decision making space, but real evidence of this is lacking at this stage.

Alert’s approach relied on their good links with many of the key stakeholders, which allowed them to foster the constructive engagement, leading to change. Evidence of this includes how Alert positioned this project within the framework of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development in the Ugandan Government, and a 2008 policy that called for an increase in information flows. Similarly, an oil company requested that Alert carry out a conflict footprint assessment on their behalf, based on the work Alert had done providing information to investors on how to avoid contributing to land conflict in Northern Uganda. On the civil society side, Alert played a role alongside other civil society organisations in forming the CSCO to engage particularly on political economy issues.

International Alert and the research team did consider other factors which may have contributed to the changes. It was noted that, even before the project, both the oil companies and the Government were aware of the risk posed by oil extraction to the stability of the region, and both had also been motivated to engage with the public in some manner.

Whether influenced by the project or independently, Tullow Oil has subsequently established a liaison office in one of the target districts to ease tension with communities and civil society and to address rumours around the uses of oil revenue. On the Government side, researchers found that consultative meetings between community members and Government officials had done much to raise community knowledge. This points to the other sources of information available to communities, apart from Alert’s own activities, requiring more research to determine which activities led to the greatest and most valuable increases in information.

### 3 Identifies the gaps between local and national level changes

Exploring theories of change revealed that more explicit links need to be made between local level and national peace processes for desired changes to occur. Eighteen of the 19 projects focussed on local or district levels, with a significant emphasis on local change. Only one project worked at the national policy level. However 14 of the 18 claimed to feed messages up to the national level or to address the ‘Peace Writ Large’. The project review process showed that engagement at the national level was weak or non-existent in most cases. For example, one project in Nepal specifically stated that the lessons from engaging at the local level would be communicated to the Constituent Assembly, but there were no activities in the project to achieve this. This indicates that projects tended to have ‘hope lines’ in which changes at the individual or community level would somehow affect changes at a higher district or national level. In another project ‘hope lines’ extended downwards from higher levels, rather than upwards and also faced problems of linkage. In this case, the aim was to include women in decision making at the national level, but there has been little resulting impact at the local level. Furthermore, it was generally found that local structures that were created for dialogue, such as peace clubs and committees, were often not explicitly linked to subnational and national structures. It was assumed – wrongly – that the links to government institutions would happen naturally.

#### Case study: Nepal

In Nepal, CARE implements the “Women and Youth as Pillars of Sustainable Peace” project. The project’s specific objective is that: By 2012 the capacity of the Shanti Malika peace network is strengthened to advocate for the rights of 500 conflict affected, Poor Vulnerable and Socially Excluded (PVSE) groups of women and youth.

Without conducting a formal conflict analysis, broader situational analyses allowed CARE to identify the structural inequality of PVSE women and youth as a priority for peacebuilding in Nepal.

The theory of change articulated and researched during the project stated: “If peace centres are strengthened and capacities of Peace Ambassadors, Community Journalists, Peace Pressure Groups and Mediators are developed to enable them to raise the issues of PVSEs up, then peace groups will contribute to local peacebuilding processes”.



Evidence gathered on the 'if' clause found that: at community level, capacities were enhanced of peace ambassadors, citizen journalists, community mediation support workers, psycho-social counselling workers and village peace pressure groups. The project has contributed to creating active and functional local peace actors and peace mechanisms. At the district level, establishment of the peace centres has created a space for interacting and discussing PVSE women and youth issues for inclusion and policy advocacy activities.

Evidence gathered on the 'then' clause found that: trained mediators are processing local disputes, citizen journalists are providing updates of the work by the pressure groups to radio stations, pressure groups are raising issues and concerns of PVSEs to local level government committees; and they are facilitating PVSE access to resources through service providers. Peace ambassadors are being invited to attend and contribute to the meetings of other networks. Women from pressure groups are now representing the consulted community groups, and these groups have begun to take collective action against harmful social practises and norms, etc.

These positive changes are welcome however the underlying structures that sustain the inequality of PVSE groups have not yet been addressed.

#### 4 Highlights ineffective activities

The research identified significant problems with reliance on capacity building as an activity. This highlights a need to critically review the rationale for doing capacity building. Is it essential for addressing the underlying causes of conflict, or is it a familiar approach that is used purely as a matter of routine? Capacity development alone will not necessarily bring change. The research on a project in Nepal further highlighted that other activities that are implemented alongside capacity building can have a much greater impact. In that case, the trust building initiatives of Local Peace Committees were much more highly valued by respondents in terms of stronger network building than capacity building activities of the same project.

The research showed that despite efforts to build the skills and abilities of particular groups, the opportunity for those groups to actually make significant change was often constrained by factors unrelated to their capacities. In other words, a lack of capacity was not the (only) problem. Thus projects that involve capacity building need to identify potential blockages (beyond lack of capacity) that would inhibit participants to perform the hoped-for roles.

In Nepal one theory of change related to the capacity building of a range of actors, including women: "If the peace centre is strengthened and the capacities of peace ambassadors, citizen journalists, peace pressure groups and mediators are developed to enable them to raise the issues of poor,

vulnerable and socially excluded, then peace groups will contribute to local peacebuilding processes". The research revealed several structural blockages were preventing the realisation of the enhanced capacity. Mediators reported that there was a lack of acceptance and trust from the communities that prevented them from performing their roles, and that there were sensitivities around sharing private 'household' issues with outsiders. In addition, citizen journalists reported that they did not have any official authorisation to work as journalists, and so had difficulty in collecting information.

#### 5 Emphasises the need for conflict analysis

Working with theories of change ensures that practitioners more effectively assess the conflict context in which they are working, as they need the basis for judging the relevance of their intervention. The importance of starting with a conflict analysis has been stressed throughout existing literature on peacebuilding design, and is reinforced by the findings of this project. Nevertheless, only three out of nine projects in Uganda had performed such as analysis. In Nepal, only two of the project designs were based on a fresh conflict analysis. In DRC, all four projects examined were based on context and conflict analyses, but the research revealed that these were incomplete.

Often practitioners assume that they understand the conflict context. For example, one partner organisation felt that they possessed a good understanding of the conflicts around them and felt confident in their approach, based upon years of experience working in the area. It was only when they reviewed their hierarchy of results and theories of change that they realised that their activities were not sufficiently relevant to the conflict they were trying to address. Conflicts are complex and in constant flux; once a theory of change is articulated, there may well be changes in conflict dynamics that make the planned project pathway no longer relevant. Explicitly laying out a conflict analysis in the first place enables the practitioner to review progress and assess if the activities and results are still relevant to the conflict. In addition, improved conflict analysis will also help to focus efforts on the underlying causes, rather than the more superficial effects of conflict. For example many of the projects focussed on mediation of local land disputes, cattle rustling or access over natural resources, yet few of the projects sought to address land policy at the national level, or customs around dowries required for marriage, which were some of the key drivers of the conflicts.

#### 6 Enhances conflict sensitivity

By articulating the theory of change, peace practitioners involved in this initiative have had to think deeply about what is needed to create results in each specific project. This has led to both minor and major changes in programming. At least three projects were revealed to be contributing to conflict inadvertently, that is to say they were conflict insensitive.

One project in Nepal did not identify or address inequitable power structures. By targeting youth in general, and not specifically engaging women or dalit (lowest caste) people, the project reinforced structural inequality around caste and gender. In Uganda, the research revealed that a food aid

## 4 Main findings continued

project, which also aimed to address local conflict dynamics, was not engaging in peacebuilding activities and was actually causing harm to the vulnerable beneficiaries by making them targets for violent robbery, due to long distances between distribution points. As a result, the partner suspended the project and redesigned the intervention, starting with a new conflict analysis. This learning and subsequent redesign is a worthwhile result of the research project in itself. Too often development and peacebuilding agencies are defensive about their errors, but the most valuable lessons can only emerge from honest appraisals of what has gone wrong as well as what is successful, and is vital for preventing the same mistakes in future initiatives.

### 7 Fosters collaboration between agencies and avoids duplication

No one project/programme can address all the factors relevant to 'Peace Writ Large'. Identifying potential synergies and linkages with other efforts, especially when there are mandate limitations, is key to maximising efforts. As a result of establishing and supporting research teams through this project, agencies became more aware of each other's work, which helped avoid duplication of activities, as well as to build synergies between initiatives and to share in joint analysis processes. In Uganda, a participating organisation conducted a macro level analysis process called Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts and involved the research team as well as their own programme staff.

In Nepal, based on a new awareness of NGO activities, participating agencies decided that any new activities should complement and not replicate the work of another. By working together in research teams to undertake the research, the participating organisations have enhanced their capacity in peacebuilding project design, monitoring and evaluation. The research teams formed 'communities of practice' and, when identifying the theories of change in the research process, team members supported each other by offering feedback.

One success of the research effort derived from the process of convening peacebuilding practitioners within a given context to share and compare their narratives of change and stories of success and failure, enabling them to learn and adapt together. All of the participants in the project agreed that the co-operative learning that occurred in their own projects, and their increased awareness of what others were doing, was immense. The cooperative process also contributed significantly to reviewing their projects, highlighting design flaws that previously they had been blind to, or had lacked the confidence to raise and address. Notably participants learned about the importance of ensuring that an up-to-date conflict analysis supports programming; without it a project could be quite detached from the conflict. Although the research teams are not funded beyond the end of this project, the hope is that these newly formed communities of practice will continue after the project period. In the case of Uganda, the research team has agreed to meet bi-monthly to continue to share and learn from each other's work.

## The limitations of theories of change

### 1 Many theories of change are non-explicit, vague or inappropriate

As with any approach there are limitations to the usefulness of theories of change, especially if the theories are not expressed well, remain vague or are used in the wrong context, or if the sensitivity of the issues being addressed makes it difficult to discuss and articulate them openly. The examples in the section above show how easy it is to target the wrong group, or choose the wrong activity. Using theories of change does not remove the possibility of errors, but rather makes it easier to identify the gaps in a project's logic. Nevertheless, correctly articulating the theory can be difficult, and certainly at first can be a time-consuming process requiring significant support. Most of the partners involved in this research struggled with using theories of change at the outset. This difficulty is compounded by the reality of staff turnover and the challenge of ensuring that incoming staff are confident about the terminology and usefulness of theories of change.

### 2 Current project planning tools don't help people articulate their theories of change

Practitioners are under considerable pressure to use tools that satisfy donor requirements around design, monitoring and evaluation. Agencies may feel that using theories of change is not worth the investment because at present donors do not require it. One way around this problem would be to use the 'assumptions and risks' column of project log frames to articulate the theories behind each intervention, perhaps with theories of change (i.e. assumptions) shown in different typeface to differentiate them from risks. This would clarify the logic behind the proposed intervention and provide a platform for midterm and final evaluations.

### 3 Conflict Analysis is essential but rarely done

Without a conflict analysis to underpin a project, it is hard to critically review theories of change within a project, as theories must grow out of an understanding of the conflict context. Yet as has been noted, very few of the intervention designs reviewed through this project were based on a conflict analysis.

Some of the research team members were troubled that a conflict analysis could point to underlying issues that were significantly removed from their organisation's mandate. For instance, where the conflict related to land policy, a peace education group might struggle to see how they could usefully contribute. This points to the importance of working collaboratively with other organisations operating in the same context to ensure interventions form part of a coherent response.

Given the importance of conflict analysis, NGOs and donors need to invest more resources to ensure staff can undertake 'good enough' analysis, and most importantly are able to apply the findings to the project design.

#### 4 Gathering evidence is difficult

Despite the technical support through this project, the research teams often found it hard to collect evidence to validate their theories of change. Theory-based evaluation is a difficult task, and may require adequate time for results to be demonstrated – often beyond the life of a project that typically lasts one or two years.

Further, when gathering evidence for monitoring and evaluation of the theories of change, not all of the implementers successfully gathered evidence for the ‘then’ part of the theory of change (the result). All projects gathered evidence for the ‘if’ part (the action undertaken), which was easier to measure. By gathering data on the ‘if’ section, they could establish whether the activity was done, and whether it was done in an acceptable way. However, because they did not fully evaluate the ‘then’ part of the theories of change, the hoped-for change remained an assumption rather than a conclusion supported by evidence. Monitoring and evaluation systems need to be designed to capture the ‘then’ part of the theories being tracked.

The DRC research team found that their projects addressed relevant social problems but needed to improve the formulation of objectives, intended results and SMART indicators. Research on the following theory highlights this: “If women occupy leadership positions inside given structures and institutions, then they will be able to bring other women into peacebuilding activities.” Evidence was gathered of the empowerment process but the research did not conclusively prove how the women were now engaged in decision making bodies associated with conflict resolution or peace. By developing the hierarchy of results, they could develop targeted indicators of change rather than simply indicators of performance.

#### Case study: Democratic Republic of the Congo

In DRC, the partner *Caucus de femmes Congolaises du Sud Kivu pour la Paix* works to bring together Congolese women in South Kivu Province from civil society, political parties, public institutions, professions, faith traditions and media to achieve peace and respect for human rights and social well-being through women’s inclusive and effective leadership. The project seeks to contribute to establishing the rule of law and improving local governance through fostering the effective leadership of women in South Kivu province. The theory of change articulated and researched through the project stated: *“If women’s capacities are built and they discover and value themselves, then they will overcome fear and confront men in power”*.

Evidence gathered on the ‘if’ clause found that capacity was built in female leaders and potential leaders and in campaigning, that women’s self-confidence and readiness to vote increased, and that the number of women electoral candidates and election observers increased. However details were missing – for a full evaluation further information would be needed to drill down on each of these elements and ask to what extent these happened.

Evidence gathered on the ‘then’ clause found that women were appointed to decision making positions in the province, increased numbers of women were mobilising for their communities’ interests and women were standing up for their rights. This was demonstrated through women’s rights being increasingly asserted, women speaking up against degrading practices and in defence of their rights, a decrease in domestic violence and an increase in men participating in household chores. It was highlighted that during the 2006 political elections “women leaders and candidates trained in leadership, advocacy and lobbying and political marketing were able to campaign and some of them were elected, while others were appointed to decision making positions”.

Other factors that may have contributed to these changes for women included the involvement of other civil society organisations and the existence of national and international legal instruments for women’s protection. The research team considered these factors, but did not prove or disprove whether these other factors caused the changes observed.

The research was not sufficiently rigorous to prove or disprove the theory of change, but the evidence gathered indicates that it is working, but requires strengthening.

#### 5 Critical review of theories of change needs to be undertaken in conjunction with other forms of evaluation.

Researching theories of change needs to be undertaken in conjunction with other forms of evaluation. Theory-based evaluation looks at how a change occurs, and needs to be supported by an outcome evaluation, which captures the results (the ‘then’ part of the if-then statement). As a result of this project, one organisation has developed a new theory of change-based monitoring and evaluation system. The new guidelines include various frameworks for monitoring context, implementation quality, outcomes and also the theories of change.

#### 6 Theories of change can inadvertently encourage an overly linear approach

Peacebuilding, as any other societal change endeavour, is ultimately about navigating, facilitating, encouraging and enabling an organic process of change, which is far from linear. While theories of change were shown to be helpful in articulating, testing and challenging peacebuilding interventions, there is nevertheless a risk that they become a tool for oversimplifying the contribution of an initiative. Theories of change are just that – theories. They are useful for laying out a hypothesis, but they need to be tested and alternative theories of how the results were achieved must be considered.

# 5 Recommendations

**This research project examined the utility of theories of change in a sample of peacebuilding projects in three countries. Overall, it found that they are helpful in providing clarity, rigour and transparency, improving targeting, and allowing projects to be reviewed and challenged constructively and thus adjusted when necessary. They do have limitations notably that they can encourage an overly linear view of complex social change, and they can be technically challenging. While by no means a magic bullet, they can help improve the effectiveness of specific projects and of the peacebuilding sector as a whole. With this in mind, we make the following recommendations:**

**Overall, we strongly encourage donors and peace practitioners to invest in the theories of change approach as part of a comprehensive design, monitoring and evaluation system for peacebuilding programmes. To do so would have the following implications:**

**a Practitioners need to review theories of change regularly**

Peacebuilding theories of change need to be articulated within the hierarchy of results at the design stage and reviewed periodically throughout project implementation and anytime there is a major shift in the context. Our review of the projects highlighted that each project was underpinned by a variety of assumptions, often unarticulated and untested.

**b Donors should revise their logical frameworks to encourage the use of theories of change**

Given the value demonstrated by the theory of change approach to the projects researched, and to ensure programme quality is enhanced across the sector, donors should integrate theories of change more explicitly into their logical framework template and guidance. Peace practitioners involved in this research project overwhelmingly felt that the clarity achieved through articulating their hierarchies of results and the theories of change within them contributed significantly to the effectiveness of their interventions. However, current design, monitoring and evaluation systems do not sufficiently allow agencies to capture this level of clarity. A straightforward starting point is to require that theories of change are written into the 'assumptions and risks' column of the logical framework template. Revising the logical framework guidance will provide an incentive to agencies to invest in building their staff capacity around theories of change, and will ultimately improve the quality of

interventions because the link between each action and its intended result is systematically considered. It will also assure that this valuable information is not lost, but it is at hand to review regularly.

**c Donors should encourage reviews of theories of change and communicate their flexibility on redesigning interventions**

Donors need to adopt a flexible approach to partner requests to redesign interventions. Through analysis of their theories of change, partners in this project discovered changes that could be made to their interventions, but they were reluctant to request redesigns for fear that it would reflect badly on them or that the donor would not be receptive. Yet redesigning interventions is natural and healthy, particularly in fluid or volatile contexts.

**d Make resources available to critically review theories of change**

Time and resources will need to be integrated into the design, monitoring and evaluation plans for programmes seeking to critically review their theories of change over the course of their intervention. Practitioners will need to add it into implementation, monitoring and evaluation plans, and donors will need to financially support it and to allocate sufficient staff time themselves. Ideally, key theories to be researched would be identified at the design phase and the gathering of evidence built into the project monitoring system, with any design changes occurring as and when needed. Adopting this approach has implications for project budgeting as resources are required to raise the capacity of project staff, and time is required to undertake this process thoroughly. Donors should remain open to and encouraging of this type of review and research.

**e Donors and peacebuilding agencies need to be more flexible in adopting new and different ways of working**

The above recommendations require and imply a combination of rigour, flexibility, long-term thinking and political engagement that are too often discouraged within the peacebuilding sector. To embrace the improved effectiveness in peacebuilding required by the "new deal" on peacebuilding and statebuilding agreed at the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, peacebuilding actors will need to review their systems and approaches to ensure they encourage and incentivise the use of more effective methods such as theories of change. This applies to donors, multi-laterals, NGOs and governments in fragile contexts. Applied research into the most effective ways to implement such changes would be highly beneficial to the sector as a whole.

## 6 Acknowledgements

**This paper summarises the findings of the European Commission-funded project “Strengthening Capacity to Design, Monitor and Evaluate Peacebuilding Programming”. The lead writer was Heidi Ober, with significant input from Rachel Goldwyn, Paul-André Wilton, Phil Vernon, and volunteer steering committee members Diana Chigas, Peter Woodrow, Hans Giessmann and Mark M. Rogers. It is based on research papers produced by project research teams in Uganda, Nepal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.**

Our special thanks to all the research team member organisations and their representatives for providing their time as well as continuous support in the overall process to accomplish the research and produce this paper. The full list of research team members are: Archana Aryal, Bhasker Kafle, Bishnu Khatri, Punya Bhandari, Dipendra Tamang, Prakash Bastola, Shaligram Sharma, Shiva Dhungana, Kumud Rana, Shraddha Rayamajhi, Jackson Omona, Paddy Musana, Narcisio Bangirana, Mark Amucu, Ayub Muhammad, Donnah Atwagala, Joseph Besigye, Patrick Adupa, Rebman Kahima, Richard Businge, Mashanda Murhega, Cishunguluka Kanan Amos, Saidi Alo Ibya Sango, Bisimwa Kabomboro Bertin, Solange Lwashiga Furaha, Bisimwa Faid Anne, Nabintu Helena, Giresse Obed Kakozi, Misukyo Marie and Jeanine Mukoko.

We would like to acknowledge all the interviewees/ respondents from the district-level institutions and participants of the focus group discussions for providing information for the research. We are grateful to the respective project teams in all the districts who spared their valuable time and supported the entire research team during the fieldwork and piloting.

Additional thanks to Ndeye Sow, Howard Mollett and Alice Hutchinson who contributed to the paper.

Finally, our sincerest thanks go to the volunteer project steering committee members Hans Giessmann, Diana Chigas, Peter Woodrow, Rachel Goldwyn and Mark M. Rogers for their technical support and guidance.

# Annex 1 Participating organisations and projects

## Uganda

- 1 Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC)**  
*Securing Sustainable Development through Pluralistic Local Ownership in Rwenzori Region*
- 2 Justice and Peace Commission (JPC)**  
*Debating for Peaceful Conflict Transformation*
- 3 World Vision Uganda**  
*The Karamoja General Food Distribution*
- 4 Teso Initiative for Peace (TIP)**  
*Promotion of Peaceful Co-existence of Iteso and Karimojong through Joint Activities*
- 5 Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS) Programme, Makerere University**  
*Alternatives to Violence Project*
- 6 The African Partnership Alliance for Citizens Transformation**  
*Amuru Integrated Natural Resource Conflict Resolution Project*
- 7 Gulu and Amuru District Reconciliation and Peace Teams (DRPTs)**  
*Supporting Community Conflict Resolution and Peace-building in Northern Uganda*
- 8 International Alert**  
*Aligning the Economy with Peace in Uganda*
- 9 CARE International in Uganda**  
*Conflict Transformation in the Acholi region*

## Nepal

- 10 Youth Action Nepal (YOAC)**  
*Youth Initiatives for Sustainable Peace and Community Development*
- 11 Alliance for Peace**  
*Mobilising Youth for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation*
- 12 Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, Nepal**  
*Local Peace Committees*
- 13 Search for Common Ground (SFCG)**  
*Youth and Peacebuilding*
- 14 International Alert**  
*Public Security and Justice in Nepal: Building a Constructive Role for Youth*
- 15 CARE International in Nepal**  
*Women and Youth as Pillars of Sustainable Peace (WYPS)*

## Democratic Republic of the Congo

- 16 Caucus des Femmes Congolaise du Sud Kivu pour la Paix**  
*Building women's capacity and reactivating Caucus des Femmes' territory centres to improve local governance in South Kivu*
- 17 Dynamique Synergie des Femmes (DSF)**  
*Community reconciliation in Fizi and Uvira territories*
- 18 Réseau des femmes pour un développement associatif (RFDA)**  
*Peacebuilding and promotion of local governance on Ruzizi plain*
- 19 Solidarité des femmes de Fizi pour le bien-etre familial (SOFIBEF)**  
*Social reintegration of women and girls associated with armed groups (WGAAG) in Fizi territory*
- 20 International Alert**  
*Partner in all DRC projects*



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