Guide to Creating a Local Theory of Change

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Introduction

National Community Action Theory of Change

A Theory of Change (TOC) is the articulation of underlying beliefs and assumptions that guide selection of service delivery strategies that are critical for producing change and improvement. It is a framework which addresses the systems and activities that support the outcomes to be accomplished.

> *"Theory-based frameworks support implementation efforts as well as strategic planning and evaluation processes by helping stakeholders reach consensus about the populations they plan to serve, strategies they implement, and the results they expect to achieve."*
>
> Theory of Change, International Network on
> Strategic Philanthropy, May 2005

Defining the work of the Community Action Network in such a theory-based framework can help to identify the links that connect the purpose of the network, the understanding of the network's national system, and the actual strategies implemented by local Community Action Agencies (CAA). Creating this clear link requires articulation of ideas about the best approaches for selection of programs and reasons to expect certain solutions.

In the past, we found it to be difficult to talk about a single "Theory of Change" that will encompass the work of over 1000 different local Community Action Agencies, especially since the mandate for the network's unifying funding source is to "meet local needs." This mandate means that each local CAA identifies the specific needs that face individuals and families with low-income and the communities in which they live. It also means that each CAA must identify the resources that are available, through funding support, partnerships, etc., and this mix of resources varies dramatically from community to community across the country. Once the needs and resources are identified, the Board of Directors and agency management staff consider what will happen in the community, and this is different in each community.

An understanding of the diverse nature of the CSBG network has led to support for the development of Local Theories of Change while continuing to recognize the value of a National TOC (appendix C).

The network's work at creating the National Theory of Change has provided a more focused set of National Goals for the network (see appendix B) and has identified the overarching framework that all agencies across the country can fall within. As the network moves toward ROMA Next Generation, local agencies are asked to step back and look at the idea of both family and community well-being in a way that identifies the agency's assumptions and beliefs as well as its capacity to achieve results.

Local Community Action Theory of Change

With the development of the Results Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA) performance management system in the 1990s, the network also established Six National Goals that were identified as the common outcomes toward which the entire Community Action Network was working (see appendix A). While many agencies used these National Goals as a foundation for making decisions and strategy choices at the local eligible entity (or Community Action Agency) level, many other agencies also promoted the use of Logic Models for program planning and evaluation, and have used the goals of other funding sources (other than CSBG) to make these decisions.

Logic models, as they are used in ROMA, are about program management and accountability. They are limited, either to specific needs that may include multiple services, outcomes and indicators, or to specific services that may have multiple outcomes and indicators. But they generally do not address the "big picture" of an entire agency or the multiple needs of a community or target population well-being.

The process of creating a local agency Theory of Change (TOC) is a process of thinking about how the agency is supposed to work and what is supposed to change because of their work. The TOC thinking process essentially answers the question "How will this agency affect the movement of people with low-incomes to stability and economic security?" and also, "How will it affect the well-being of the community?"

Additionally, in a local TOC, the agency's own needs, outcomes and strategies should be included. In the National TOC, agency capacity building is considered to be a strategy to assure that local agencies have the means to help individuals, families and communities meet the new National Goals. The foundational statement and performance management framework in the National TOC reference the systems in place to support agency capacity building (e.g. a national network and the Organizational Standards). At the local level, the focus must include building, increasing and maintaining agency capacity. As agencies consider doing more community level strategies and/or more than just what they have a specific grant to fund, this may reveal issues of agency capacity that need to be addressed. Agencies will clearly articulate how they identify needs, what outcomes they expect to achieve and what strategies will produce the outcomes. They will also identify indicators and measures that will allow them to observe and report progress.

The local TOC also provides a kind of "checklist" for follow-up at the end of a year, for agencies to consider "what has worked" and "what could we do better?" It is a tool that can help validate the initial assumptions (about choice of strategies and services) and decide what resources are needed for the next program cycle.

The following pages include worksheets to help an agency work through the process of identifying assumptions (both generally about poverty and the causes and conditions that

effect the local community, and about the agency's role as an anti-poverty agent), and then thinking about the connections between identified needs, population served, outcomes that are realistic and possible for the population and the community, and finally about how the services and strategies provided will do what they are supposed to do.

Expectations for the Process

In this process, clear connections among identified needs, expected changes that will be supported and produced, and the actions of the agency (the direct services for individuals and families and the strategies related to agency and community work) are identified.

A connection between the outcomes at all three levels should be established. An understanding of the inter-related nature of family and community level work has to be a part of the local TOC as we move into ROMA Next Generation. Individual and family outcomes cannot be expected if communities are not supportive and healthy.

Theory of Change for_____

Agency Mission Statement:

Does your mission statement identify the following?
(Circle in the mission statement above or write in here)

1. The population you will serve:

2. The outcomes you expect to achieve:

3. The strategies and services your agency will provide to achieve the outcomes:

4. The relationships your agency has to help achieve the outcomes:

Assumptions about Poverty in our Community

What does your agency assume about poverty in your community?

(e.g. Identify causes and conditions of poverty, how the conditions impact people with low-incomes and the community at large)

Identified Needs

Identifying the individual, family, community and agency needs

A. State the top three to five needs identified in your community assessment and analysis process:

B. Identify if these are family, agency or community level needs. Enter "f," "a," or "c" in the column to the right.

C. Of the needs above, which are integral to your agency mission? Are you already addressing these? *(In the column to the right, indicate yes or no)*

D. Of those needs that are integral to the agency mission, identify those that require community level strategies and/or partnerships to address.

E. Of those that are outside the immediate focus of your agency mission, are there things you can do to contribute to community wide or other efforts to address them?

Identifying Outcomes

Identify your agency Overall Outcomes

These are the outcomes that are based on the community needs and resources, the agency's priorities, and the agency planning process. They may be achieved by multiple agency strategies, which you will be asked to identify below. _Note: information will be added into the far right column in the next activity._

A-1		
A-2		
A-3		
A -4		
A -5		

Connect the Agency Outcomes with the National Community Action Goals

Once your agency has identified your <u>Overall Outcomes</u> the next step is to think about how the agency outcomes connect with the National Goals.

These are the goals that have been identified by the network as common to the fundamental work of Community Action and are found in the National Community Action Theory of Change.

1. Individuals and Families with low incomes are stable and achieve economic security.

2. Communities where people with low incomes live are healthy and offer economic opportunity.

3. People with low incomes are engaged and active in building opportunities in communities.

Note: Notice that these do not include a national goal for Community Action agencies as the original Six National Goals did. This is due to a better articulation of the outcomes that the CAA network expects to achieve for the individuals, families and communities they serve.

This does not mean that Local Theories of Change should not include consideration of agency capacity. Indeed, the National TOC references the strength of local agencies and their ability to partner with a variety of entities with similar goals and missions. As you think about what the agency plans to accomplish, you should also be thinking about how the agency will achieve these plans (i.e., what resources are needed?)

<u>Go back to the list of Overall Outcomes that you have identified on the previous page, and consider how they are connected to one or more of the National Goals.</u>   Add the number of the connecting Goal in the far right column on the chart on the previous page.

Identifying the Program Outcomes

These may be identified by program funding source or by the specific focus of the individual program. You will be asked to state how these Program Outcomes contribute to the Overall Outcomes of the agency. *(Note: you may have "divisions" or "departments" or other ways that you organize your programs – if so, you may have outcomes associated with a set of programs that are so grouped.)*
(Add additional pages and numbers if necessary)

B-1	
B-2	
B-3	
B-4	
B-5	
B-6	
B-7	
B-8	
B-9	
B-10	

Identifying Customers

There are two kinds of customers that most agencies serve: the Service Population (those who are served, but for which no outcomes are expected) and the Target Population (for which the organization holds itself accountable for the achievement of specified outcomes).

Who are your customers? Do you document outcomes (OC), count outputs (OP) or services provided?

Identify the population you currently serve	OC/OP	1/M*

note: the last column will be completed after the next section on Identifying Services and Strategies

Identifying Services and Strategies

The relationship between services and outcomes can be simple (as in the case of one service to one outcome), or may be complex (as multiple services leading to multiple outcomes). Consider these circumstances.

One Service -> Multiple Outcomes
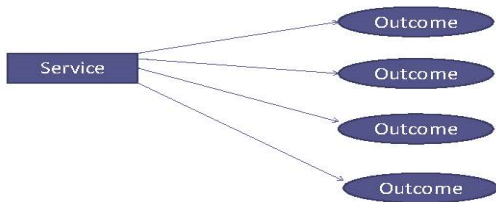
Multiple Services -> Single Outcome
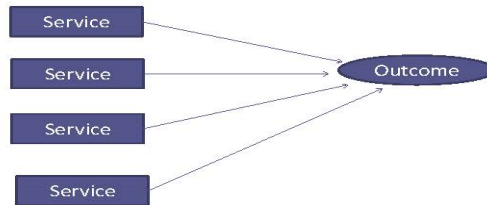
Multiple Services -> Multiple Outcomes
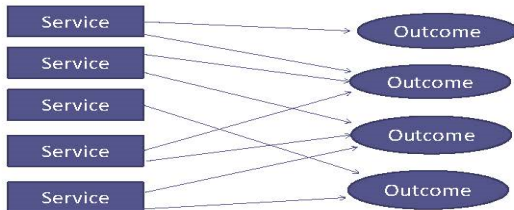
One Service -> Single Outcome

We must also recognize one other circumstance, where the service is provided without follow up to track outcome. These are circumstances where the individuals receiving services may not be identified with demographic data, may not be considered to be a "client" of the agency, or where single or short term services produce a "service count" but where there is no expectation of a change in status.

Services for which outcomes are not expected (or where there is no follow up)
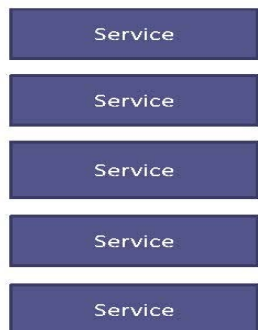
List the services you provide or strategies in which your agency participates. Connect the service to one or more of the outcomes you identified.

Service or Strategy	Outcome

Of the customers you identified in the previous activity, indicate if they receive single or multiple services (in the last column on that page).

Connecting All the Elements

Connecting all the elements to understand what the agency will achieve, for whom, and how it will function. Use the Local Community Action Theory of Change template in Appendix D to build a Theory of Change for your agency. *Notice the flow of the chart as services and strategies contribute to the program outcome, and program outcome fulfills the community needs.*

Appendices

Appendix A: Original Six National Goals for Community Action

These were the goals that guided the CAA Network for twenty years from 1996-2017.

They are included here for the historic value of seeing the seeds of the three National Goals that are included in the current National Community Action Theory of Change.

Goal 1: Low-income people become more self- sufficient. (Family)

Goal 2: The conditions in which low-income people live are improved. (Community)

Goal 3: Low-income people own a stake in their community. (Community)

Goal 4: Partnerships among supporters and providers of services to low-income

      people are achieved. (Agency)

Goal 5: Agencies increase their capacity to achieve results. (Agency)

Goal 6: Low-income people, especially vulnerable populations, achieve their

      potential by strengthening family and other supportive systems. (Family)

Appendix B: National Community Action Goals

These are the three national goals that are included in the National Community Action Theory of Change as approved on August 17, 2017. They demonstrate movement of the CAA network to a clearer understanding of what we expect to achieve with the individuals, families and communities we serve.

Goal 1: Individuals and Families with low income are stable and achieve economic security.

Goal 2: Communities where people with low income live are healthy and offer economic opportunity.

Goal 3: People with low incomes are engaged and active in building opportunities in communities.

Appendix C: National Community Action Theory of Change

The National Community Action Network Theory of Change

Community Action Goals

Goal 1: Individuals and families with low incomes are stable and achieve economic security.

Goal 2: Communities where people with low incomes live are healthy and offer economic opportunity.

Goal 3: People with low incomes are engaged and active in building opportunities in communities.

Services and Strategies

Employment

Education & Cognitive Development

Income, Infrastructure & Asset Building

Housing

Health/Social Behavioral Development

Civic Engagement & Community Involvement

Core Principles

- Recognize the complexity of the issues of poverty
- Build local solutions specific to local needs
- Support family stability as a foundation for economic security
- Advocate for systemic change
- Pursue positive individual, family, and community level change
- Maximize involvement of people with low incomes
- Engage local community partners and citizens in solutions
- Leverage state, federal, and community resources

Performance Management

How well does the network operate?   What difference does the network make?

- Local Organizational Standards
- State and Federal Accountability Measures
- Results Oriented Management and Accountability System

- Individual and Family National Performance Indicators
- Community National Performance Indicators

A national network of over 1,000 high performing Community Action Agencies, State Associations, State offices, and Federal partners supported by the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) to mobilize communities to fight poverty.

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Appendix D: Local Theory of Change Template

Local Community Action Theory of Change

ASSUMPTIONS
What Matters to your CAA?

Strategies
What will the agency do?

Outcomes
What will change?

Self-Sufficiency

Revitalized Communities

Describe the Change.

How will you know?

What will you measure?

What NPIs will you use to report?

Connect your outcomes to the long-term goals to be achieved.

DATA ANALYSIS & REFLECTION: Describe how you will put the data to use.