Developing an organisational Theory of Change: Concern Universal's experience

As management guru Peter Drucker once stated, the challenge of strategic level change is to combine 'doing things well' (greater efficiency) with 'doing the right things' (increased effectiveness). Developing a Theory of Change has been one part of our wider ongoing journey to better understand what we do and why we do it.

There were three basic drivers behind Concern Universal developing a Theory of Change. Firstly, some of our country programmes were already developing country level theories and there was an internal push to have an organisational level Theory of Change. Secondly, our main funding partners had begun asking us to explain our Theory of Change. Finally, we saw developing a Theory of Change as a useful tool for a mid-term review of our organisational strategy.

Developing our Theory of Change

It took us seven months to develop our Theory of Change. Making the most of a strategy review meeting attended by staff from across Concern Universal, we set time aside for an introductory Theory of Change workshop. The workshop sought buy-in and understanding for the process and allowed us to explore what a Theory of Change is and how it can be used.

During the workshop we formed a working group to lead the process, comprising UK and in-country staff. Their first task was to develop a paper on poverty and vulnerability, helping us to think through the processes of social change.

The paper explored the underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability; how does (social) change happen, how does our work promote change, and how can we incorporate change into programme planning? The poverty paper and organisational strategy formed the basis of our discussions throughout the process of developing our Theory of Change.

The Theory of Change went through several iterations as drafts were commented on by colleagues across the organisation. It was based on the principles of our organisational strategy, starting with the main challenges facing people living in poverty and finishing with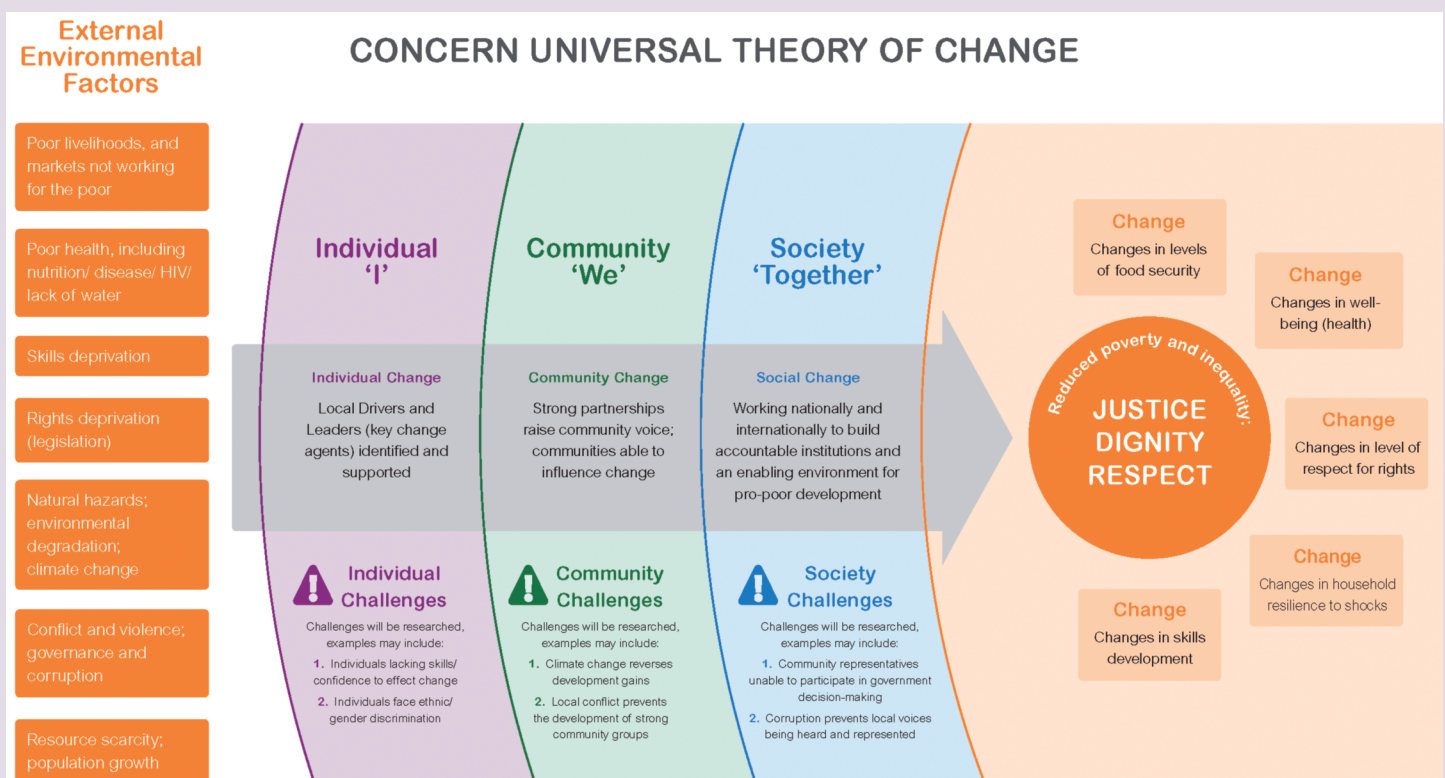 our vision – a world where justice, dignity and respect prevails for all. But where the Theory of Change differs from our strategy is that it focuses on how our vision can be attained; in other words the pathway to change.

Once we had a Theory of Change it took much longer than expected to decide on its graphical representation. The design process brought up a number of fundamental issues and we almost ended up going back to the drawing board. While putting the final design in place we wrote up brief explanatory notes.

We had originally envisaged that the background paper on poverty would be enough of a guide to the paper but actually the explanatory notes have proved the more useful tool and now form an integral part of the Theory of Change.

Challenges

The greatest challenge that we faced as we developed the Theory of Change was securing the commitment of colleagues to the process. This was partly because colleagues were busy

CONCERN UNIVERSAL THEORY OF CHANGE

External Environmental Factors

- Poor livelihoods, and markets not working for the poor
- Poor health, including nutrition/ disease/ HIV/ lack of water
- Skills deprivation
- Rights deprivation (legislation)
- Natural hazards; environmental degradation; climate change
- Conflict and violence; governance and corruption
- Resource scarcity; population growth

Individual 'I'

Individual Change

Local Drivers and Leaders (key change agents) identified and supported

⚠ **Individual Challenges**

Challenges will be researched, examples may include:
1. Individuals lacking skills/ confidence to effect change
2. Individuals face ethnic/ gender discrimination

Community 'We'

Community Change

Strong partnerships raise community voice; communities able to influence change

⚠ **Community Challenges**

Challenges will be researched, examples may include:
1. Climate change reverses development gains
2. Local conflict prevents the development of strong community groups

Society 'Together'

Social Change

Working nationally and internationally to build accountable institutions and an enabling environment for pro-poor development

⚠ **Society Challenges**

Challenges will be researched, examples may include:
1. Community representatives unable to participate in government decision-making
2. Corruption prevents local voices being heard and represented

Reduced poverty and inequality:

JUSTICE DIGNITY RESPECT

- **Change** Changes in levels of food security
- **Change** Changes in well-being (health)
- **Change** Changes in level of respect for rights
- **Change** Changes in household resilience to shocks
- **Change** Changes in skills development

with country level priorities, and because not everyone within the organisation was convinced that a Theory of Change would add anything that wasn't already outlined in our organisational strategy. Some questioned the value of the Theory of Change as a strategic planning tool.

Now that we have the Theory of Change everyone can see how it relates to their work. However, we also recognise that the full benefits of the approach – as a planning tool and leading to improvements in project design – will only be fully achieved when we develop country and project level Theories of Change.

Benefits

We believe we will be able to use the Theory of Change in many ways: as a means to explain to donors what we do and how we learn; as a reference point by in-country teams to develop country programme (or project) Theories of Change; as an aide memoire in project planning; and in setting more specific terms of reference for impact assessments.

Since developing the organisational Theory of Change two country programmes have already developed country level Theories of Change and have begun to use the Theory of Change tool in project planning.

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Concern Universal is an international development organisation tackling poverty from the grassroots.

We create opportunities for people around the world to improve their lives and shape their own futures. By building skills and connecting people at all levels in society, we help communities deliver practical solutions with long-term impact.

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