

Theories of change are popular but could prove perilous as well

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The bundling of funds with fallacies that cause more harm than good is common in the social sector

Scientific theories offer explanations of the way things are and make predictions about what will happen if conditions change. And the successful ones are often held in awe, even after they get superseded. Newton's theories, overshadowed later by Einstein's, are an example. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the belief gained ground that human society too was subject to such theories and laws. This often had unfortunate consequences. Marx's theories of social change were implemented with determination in the 20th century in many countries. Marx would probably have disowned the manner in which they were used and the egregious outcomes and human costs it entailed.

These are two good examples of how the notion of a 'theory' has vastly different implications—when used to explain and act upon the physical and natural world, versus phenomena that are human and social. The point is simple. The kind of certainty and universality that successful theories of the natural world offer is fundamentally impossible in the social-human realm. This point is well understood in the social sciences.

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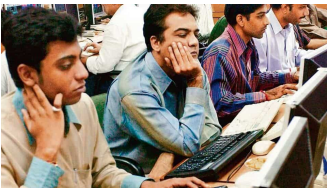
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Beginning the mid-1990s, the Theory of Change (ToC) has grown increasingly popular in the world of development, philanthropy, governance and others working towards social change. ToC is supposed to offer a methodology for planning, participation, management and evaluation for social change. It explains how a given set of interventions leads to specific development changes based on causal analysis. Perhaps the choice of the word 'theory' was merely an oversight of the basic wisdom that theories are impossibilities in the social realm, particularly when the intent is to determine actions. Or it is another well-intentioned manifestation of what James Scott calls "high-modernist thinking" in his book *Seeing like a State*, which refers to the devastatingly misguided notion that social-human behaviour can also be reduced to mathematics-like functions ('If this is done, then that will happen, and so, actions can be taken on this basis'). Yet, over these last 20 years, ToC has deeply infiltrated the thinking and language of the development sector. Funders, when deciding to support any project, often ask for the ToC of the agency that will run the programme. Projects are then run as per that ToC, with the evaluation of outcomes done on the same basis.

Funders often have their own ToC and hunt for agencies to work on that basis. There is a virtual tyranny of ToC in vast swathes of the social sector. The basic flaws of the application of a 'theory' in the social-

human realm manifest in many forms and are exacerbated by the dynamics of the development sector.

The pet ToCs of funders have all the maladies described by Scott in his book. Of over-simplification, reductionism, false claims of universality, and no (or low) weightage given to particularity. Given that this ToC commitment comes along with money, however unreal or impractical, it finds agencies willing to embrace the idea despite knowing its limitations. On the other hand, agencies required to have a ToC end up constrained by lines of action that may be at odds with ground reality.

A ToC creates a comforting illusion for funders, who are almost always at a great distance from ground reality. Explicably, they want their money to be deployed with good methods and clarity on how their goals will be achieved. But reality is messy, with no clear causal pathways from a set of interventions to outcomes; and can be deeply disorienting—unless you are immersed in that reality and have a good sense of the limitations of your own agency and the uncertainty and unpredictability of people, local communities and systems around you.

Aside from a bit of hubris among some people, usually a few well-informed funders, in the vast majority of cases, the use of a ToC has no negative source. It is all done with good intentions and a commitment to intellectual honesty. But the consequences, unfortunately, can be very real. Among other effects in the social sector, it has contributed to the narrowing and technocratization of action over the past few decades. Since a ToC, even if some other phrase is used, becomes a 'must have', the human-social uncertainties of social action gets minimized at the design stage itself. For example, if gender empowerment is to happen through the development of women's self-help-groups (SHGs), which support household businesses with credit and other inputs, then action must focus narrowly and sharply on that. This often ignore the fact that many women in those SHGs are victims of domestic violence or their earnings are hijacked by errant husbands. This is because if you try to deal with the latter two issues, the likelihood of your achieving any goal declines, confronted by entrenched power hierarchies in communities; whereas if your efforts are only aimed at increasing family income, why would you face any resistance?

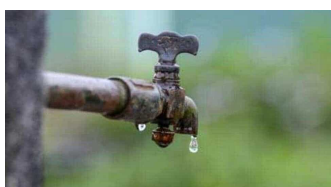
Dumping the notion of theory from the social sector is one part of the solution. But the actual source of this and many other problems in the sector is the desire for certainty of funders (and others with power) who are both distanced and divorced from ground reality and frequently tend to overestimate their own agency and competence. It would do everyone some good to read Scott's Seeing like a State.

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