



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

THEMATIC THEORIES OF CHANGE FOR PRIORITY AREAS CONTRIBUTING TO AGENDA 2030

Key messages

To support results management, reporting and accountability, Finland created thematic Theories of Change for its priority policy areas such as gender equality and democracy, as well as for its humanitarian assistance. This has enabled clarity on its holistic contribution to Agenda 2030 and application of the “leave no one behind” principle. The process of reflecting together on priorities, assumptions and interlinkages was found to be as important as the theories of change themselves.

Keywords

[Management systems](#) | [Managing for Sustainable Development Results](#) | [Policy and guidance](#)

Key partner

[Finland](#)

Challenge

A request by Finland’s parliament for a report on results of the country’s development policy made clear that the policy priorities were too vague, and therefore didn’t facilitate accountability. It was necessary to define in more detail the expected results and the assumptions guiding Finland’s contribution to the expected outputs, outcomes or impacts.

The policy priorities defined by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) were thematic, while its organisational and budgetary structure was not. Departments and units were either regional or organised by partnership (multilateral, civil society, private sector etc.). In the Agenda 2030 era, managing for results required a cross-organisational approach and clarity on the expected results in each thematic result area. It also required knowing how these results contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principle of leaving no one behind.

Approach

Four [thematic Theories of Change \(ToC\)](#) were developed, along with one humanitarian ToC. They are structured at the impact, outcome, output and input levels, with assumptions on how change will be achieved in between. The link with or contribution to an SDG or target is defined for each expected result.

The internal process of developing the ToCs was as crucial as the resulting document. Reflecting on expected results across the relevant development co-operation modalities, including policy influence, was considered extremely useful for collective learning and sharing. The original ToCs drafted in 2018 were updated in 2020 and have since improved methodologically. External consultancies supported the process in the first round, while the second round was conducted internally by the MFA.

The management committee for development policy agreed that the ToCs provide the basis for strategic guidance, portfolio management, and monitoring and accountability at aggregate level. Voluntary aggregate indicators were defined collectively with stakeholders on the basis of the ToCs.

Results

The ToCs have clarified how Finland sees its contribution to the SDGs and identified the areas for which development policy makers are accountable to parliament.

- The ToCs were used as the basis for identifying which results to include in the first holistic results report on Finland's development policy in 2018. In the report, which focused on priority areas, only 12 aggregate indicators were identified. The ToCs and indicators were attached as an annex.
- The ToCs were updated in 2020 after elections and the formation of a new government. The update defined changes in emphasis or priority, but also supported the important notion of continuity over government periods.
- The ToCs were used to develop aggregate indicators. Most are based on existing SDG indicators, in support of international harmonisation. Others are based on results from programmes across themes, in line with the interconnectedness and systemic nature of Agenda 2030.
- The ToCs are used for annual strategic management of Finland's development policy portfolio. Thematic reviews are conducted to ensure that the portfolio supports the relevant expected results outlined in the ToCs.

Lessons learnt

- A collective reflection process is an effective way to define the ToCs. Two rounds of reflection have improved the ToCs as well as increased internal ownership of the theories.
- Thematic ToCs require thematic leadership across the organisation, in particular to counter the risk of the ToCs being sidelined as a tool for strategic guidance. The ToCs should aim to represent the expected contribution of a combination of financial support and policy dialogue.
- Including the expected results of policy influence and policy coherence in the ToCs was not easy, even though they are an important part of Finland's contribution.

Further information

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (2021), *Theories of Change and Aggregate Indicators for Finland's Development Policy 2020*, <https://um.fi/documents/35732/0/theories-of-change-and-aggregate-indicators-for-finlands-development-policy-2020.pdf/7bc4d7f2-ffc8-5f4d-8382-43193fd887e8?t=1584355537316>.

OECD resources

OECD, *Results in development co-operation*, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/results-development>.

OECD, *Guiding Principles on Managing for Sustainable Development Results*, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/managing-for-sustainable-development-results_44a288bc-en.

To learn more about Finland's development co-operation see:

OECD (2021), "Finland", in *Development Co-operation Profiles*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/dbcd0a36-en>.

OECD (2017), *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Finland 2017*, Development Co-operation Peer Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264287235-en>.

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