Practical Tips for Developing and Using Theories of Change and Logic Models

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this presentation, you will understand:

- What a “theory of change” is and why it is important to invest in developing one.
- How to develop a good theory of change for your AmeriCorps application
- What are the components of a logic model, and how to translate your theory of change to a strong logic model

What is a theory of change?

- **A theory of change explains why you think your program will make a positive difference in your community.**
  - It identifies the ***problem*** your program seeks to address and **who** your program seeks to benefit (i.e., your target population), and articulates **how** your program works (i.e., your design and dosage)
    - Be sure to specifically describe the role of AmeriCorps members (and any leveraged volunteers) and why it makes sense for them to deliver your intervention
    - Also remember to articulate your expected outcomes and explain how achieving those outcomes will help solve the community problem you identify
  - A good theory of change explains **why** your program can achieve this goal, i.e., your causal hypothesis.
    - Focus on your program's specific or unique approach to achieving its goals

Reasons to develop a theory of change

- **To obtain consensus about what your program is trying to achieve (i.e., your goals) and how you think you can achieve it**
- **Developing a TOC is a good exercise for any organization because it forces the organization to articulate:**
  - The assumptions underlying your program, including why it exists
  - The goals your program is trying to achieve, and for whom
  - The unique contribution that your program makes to achieve these goals

Attributes of a good theory of change

- **Honest--**A TOC should be clear about what are facts and what are assumptions or hypotheses
- **Plausible--**A TOC should be achievable given your resources
- **Unambiguous--**A TOC should be direct and clear; it is not the place for vague or passive language
- **Consensus-driven--**A TOC should reflect input and agreement from all your stakeholders
- **Local--**A TOC should be about your particular program - You can adapt from a national model, but it should be specific to your AmeriCorps program

How to write a good theory of change

1. Start with the goal you are trying to achieve or the problem you are trying to address
2. Explain what underlying aspect of your program enables it to address the problem or achieve the goal
3. Describe how your AmeriCorps program carries out this causal mechanism
4. Connect your causal chain back to the problem and/or goal you started with

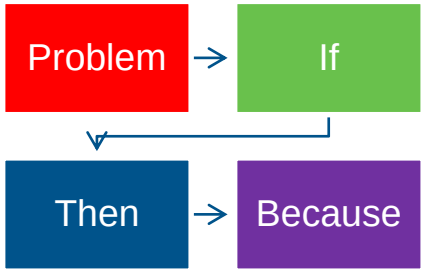
ICF's Recommended Approach: PIT-B

Problem → If

Then → Because

Example theory of change

Adolescents in our city suffer from high levels of obesity and related ailments. We believe this is because adolescents do not know how to make good food choices, and often do not understand the impacts that those choices can have on their health. Our theory is that if adolescents learn about healthy shopping and cooking, then those students will become healthier because they will learn about how to choose better food options and develop positive attitudes toward eating. Our AmeriCorps members help students learn about choosing and cooking healthy meals by delivering a fun and interactive after-school program. By providing adolescents with an age-appropriate nutrition curriculum, we will improve their knowledge and attitudes about healthy food. Ultimately, this will reduce adolescent obesity and related ailments.



Examples

In the next few slides, we'll discuss some sample theories of change. We will use these to illustrate some common pitfalls, and then provide some ways to avoid these pitfalls.

Example 1

Our program seeks to reduce the drop-out rate by deploying AmeriCorps members to implement the ACME drop-out prevention program. We believe that if we implement our drop-out program, then we will encourage more students to stay in school and graduate because we will successfully decrease the drop out rate.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this TOC?

Pitfall 1: Circular logic

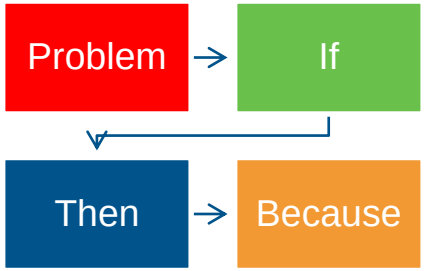
Our program seeks to reduce the drop-out rate by deploying AmeriCorps members to implement the ACME drop-out prevention program. We believe that if we implement our drop-out program, then we will encourage more students to stay in school and graduate because we will successfully decrease the drop out rate.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this TOC?

The main problem with this example is that it uses circular logic to explain why it works. That is to say, it repeats itself using slightly different language, but never explains the underlying reason why its drop-out program works.

A better example:

Our community has a high drop out rate. Our program seeks to address this problem by connecting at-risk students with AmeriCorps members who have overcome challenges to graduate from high school. We believe that if we connect at-risk students with AmeriCorps members who share similar experiences, then they will form meaningful relationships over their shared experiences. We hypothesize that these relationships will help at-risk students envision a better future and see how earning their degree fits in that future, leading to improved attitudes toward school and eventually higher graduation rates.



Example 2

Our program model seeks to help unemployed residents find stable jobs in our community. We achieve this through a two-step process. First, new clients complete a survey about their job skills and interests. Second, AmeriCorps members hold meetings with unemployed individuals to talk about possible options. After clients complete these meetings, we expect them to be able to find a job.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

Pitfall 2: Too process focused

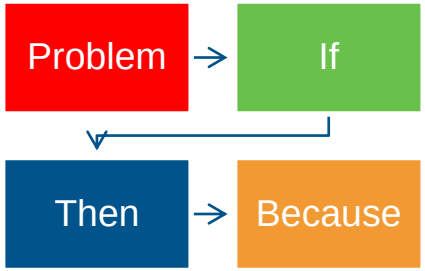
Our program model seeks to help unemployed residents find stable jobs in our community. We achieve this through a two-step process. First, new clients complete a survey about their job skills and interests. Second, AmeriCorps members hold meetings with unemployed individuals to talk about possible options. After clients complete these meetings, we expect them to be able to find a job.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

The main problem with this example is that it focuses too much on the process, but does not address the underlying reason why its employment program works.

A better example 2

The closure of the local paper mill has led to persistent unemployment in our community. Our program model is built on the assumption if unemployed persons focus on building skills in sectors they find interesting, they will be more enthusiastic and persistent at applying for jobs. Therefore, our program deploys AmeriCorps members to work closely with unemployed individuals to find out what their passion is, and then develop a skills development plan suited to their interests. Ultimately, we believe helping people find careers they like will create sustainable improvements in the local labor market.



Example 3

In 1983, a group of idealistic recent college graduates started an afterschool club at an middle school in a low-income neighborhood. Once a week, they would lead lively discussions about their favorite books with students. After doing this informally for 10 years, in 1993 we incorporated as a nonprofit, which we know today as Storytime. With a headquarters in Dallas, Storytime now runs afterschool reading programs at 100 schools across Texas.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

Pitfall 3: Giving a history lesson

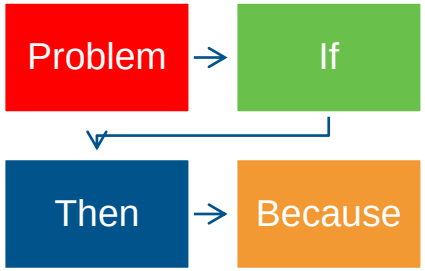
In 1983, a group of idealistic recent college graduates started an afterschool club at an middle school in a low-income neighborhood. Once a week, they would lead lively discussions about their favorite books with students. After doing this informally for 10 years, in 1993 we incorporated as a nonprofit, which we know today as Storytime. With a headquarters in Dallas, Storytime now runs afterschool reading programs at 100 schools across Texas.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

The problem with this example is that it provides unnecessary background information about the program, but does not explain how it works.

A better example 3

Teenagers in poor neighborhoods often have no access to books except those they are required to read in school, so it is no surprise reading scores are low in these communities. Our theory is that if children have more opportunities to read and discuss good books, then they will come to see reading as a fun hobby, and not just something they do for school. The Storytime program, which deploys AmeriCorps members to operate after-school "book clubs," promotes reading as a hobby by providing a setting, refreshments, and reading mentors to lead discussions about age appropriate books. We believe this will foster a life-long love of reading for its own sake, and thereby promote literacy and learning.



Example 4

Several recent studies show that Americans are less active than they were in the past. Our program deploys AmeriCorps members to run sports programming, such as youth and adult soccer and basketball clubs, at the local YMCA. Another organization in Atlanta operated a similar program, and found that participants increased their activity levels substantially. A similar study, published in 2010, showed that participants in organized sports leagues were less likely to develop diabetes over time.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

Pitfall 4: Providing a literature review

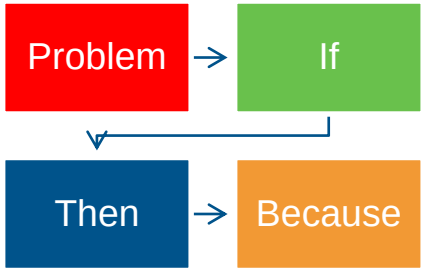
Several recent studies show that Americans are less active than they were in the past. Our program deploys AmeriCorps members to run sports programming, such as youth and adult soccer and basketball clubs, at the local YMCA. Another organization in Atlanta operated a similar program, and found that participants increased their activity levels substantially. A similar study, published in 2010, showed that participants in organized sports leagues were less likely to develop diabetes over time.

- Discussion: Do you see any weaknesses with this theory of change?

The weakness with this example is that it describes the results of previous studies, but does not articulate how the program actually works.

A Better Example 4

The rate of obesity in our community has doubled over the past 20 years. We hypothesize that one factor driving this trend is the decline of organized sports leagues. Our program seeks to address this problem by deploying AmeriCorps members to establish youth and adult soccer leagues at local park facilities. We hypothesize that if we provide organized sports leagues, then more community members will become active because the leagues will make the games more fun and exciting. Ultimately, we believe that a more active community will be a healthier community.



Some common pitfalls to avoid

- **Circular logic:** Repeating the same statement in different words
- **Process Focused:** Going into the weeds on the “how” of your program but forgetting to address the “why”
- **Program Histories:** Giving a detailed looked at every way your program has evolved, but forgetting to explain why it works the way it does
- **Literature Reviews:** Describe the results of research into similar programs, but do not address the underlying factor behind those programs

Connection between a theory of change and a logic model

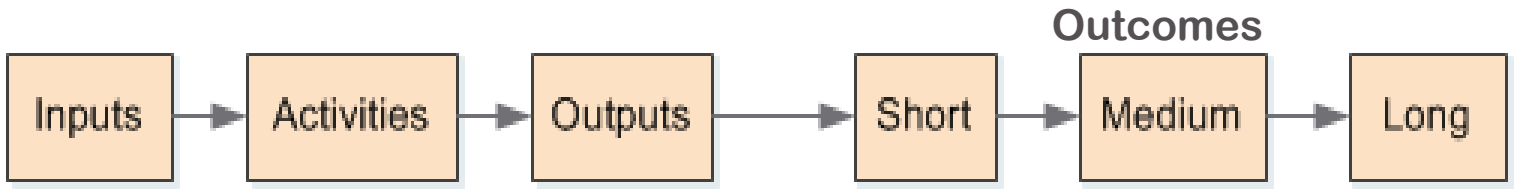
- **A theory of change is a narrative description of *why* your program works**
- **A logic model translates this *why* into a fleshed out *how***
- **A logic model is a visual representation of the theory of change**

Reasons to develop a logic model

- **To visually represent the connections between program components**
  - A logic model can help you visualize the sequence of your program, i.e. how one thing leads to another
- **To communicate your program to stakeholders**
  - A logic model can be a quick guide to your program
- **To meet AmeriCorps requirements**

Key components of a logic model

- Inputs or resources
- Activities
- Outputs
- Outcomes (short-, medium- and long-term)



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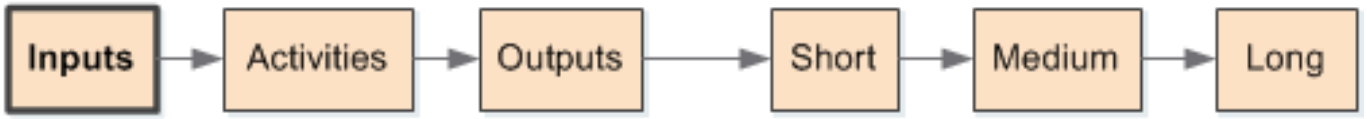
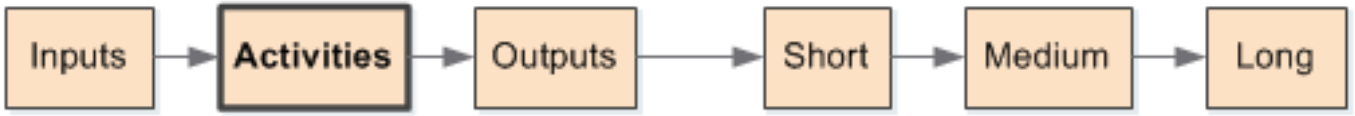


- **Inputs or resources** include the human, financial, organizational, and community resources available for carrying out a program's activities.
- Examples:
  - Funding
  - Program staff
  - AmeriCorps members
  - Volunteers
  - Research

Source: W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook (2004)

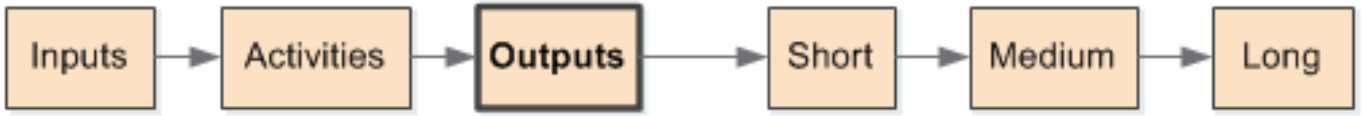
Key components of a logic model



- **Activities** are the processes, tools, events, and actions that are used to bring about a program's intended changes or results.
- Examples:
  - Workshops on healthy food options
  - Food preparation counseling
  - Referrals to food programs and resources

Source: W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook (2004)

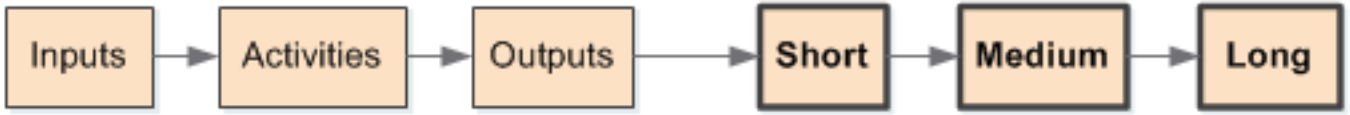
Key components of a logic model



- **Outputs** are the direct products of a program's activities and may include types, levels and targets of services to be delivered by the program.
- Examples:
  - # individuals attending workshops
  - # individuals receiving services
  - # individuals receiving referrals

Source: W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook (2004), Adapted

Key components of a logic model



- **Outcomes** are the expected changes in the population served that result from a program's activities and fall along a continuum, ranging from short to long term results:
  - Short-term: changes in knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes (e.g., ↑ knowledge healthy choices)
  - Medium-term: changes in behavior or action (e.g., ↑ adoption of healthy food practices)
  - Long-term: changes in condition or status in life (e.g., ↑ food security)

Source: W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook (2004), Adapted

Difference between outputs and outcomes

Outputs	Outcomes
• Direct products of a program's activities/services • Often expressed numerically or quantified in some way • Examples: # attending workshops # receiving services # receiving referrals	• Changes resulting from a program's activities/services • Quantify changes in knowledge, attitude, behavior, or condition • Examples: ↑ knowledge healthy choices ↑ adoption healthy practices ↑ food security

Level of Detail

CNCS has certain expectations about the level of detail to include in your logic model.

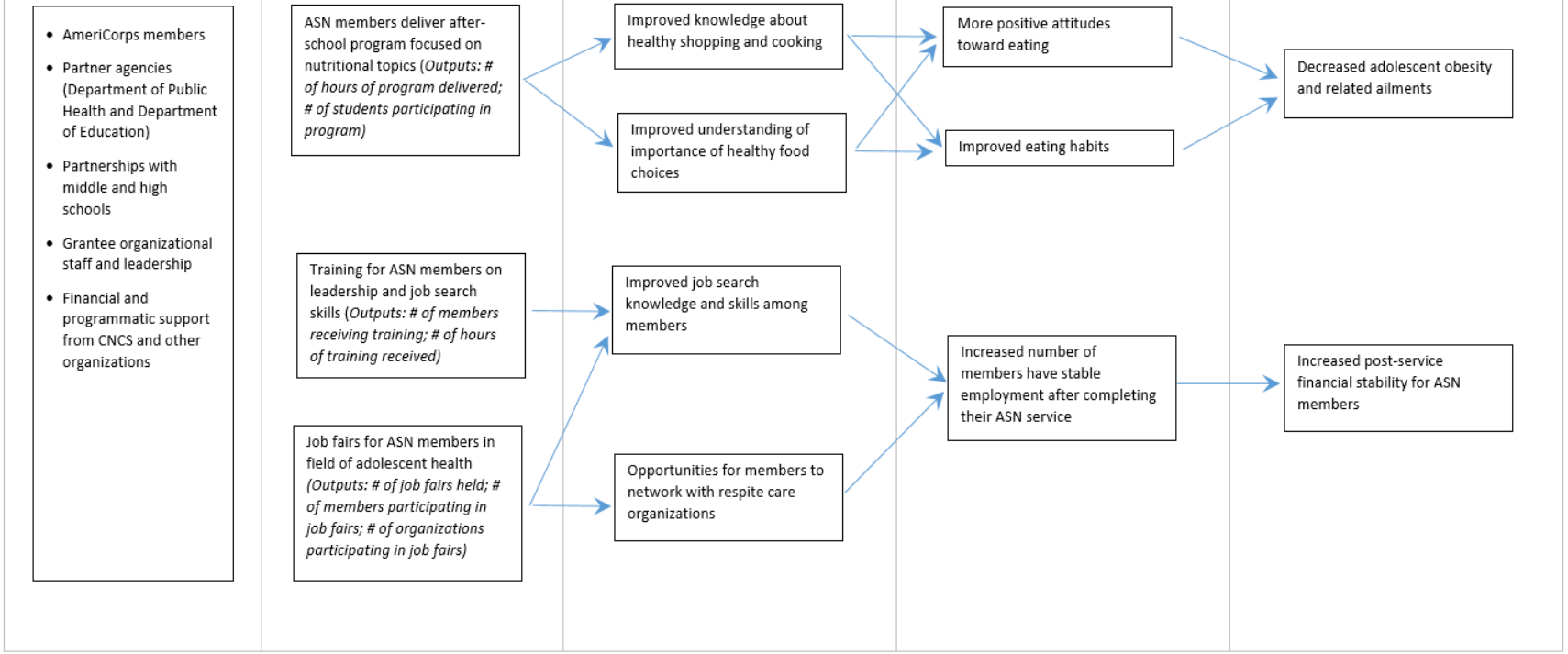
- For your inputs section, specify the **total number** of AmeriCorps members you will recruit, as well as the **number of locations or sites** where members will serve.
- For your activities section, specify the **duration** (i.e., total length of time spent on the activity) and **dosage** (i.e., how many hours/week).
- The activities section should also specify the **target population** for each activity.
- For your outputs and outcomes, include National Performance Measures as appropriate

Putting it all together

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes		
			Short-term	Intermediate	Long-term
what resources go into a program	what activities the program undertakes	what is produced through those activities	Changes or benefits that result from program in near-term	Changes or benefits that occur in longer time frame	Long term changes or benefits of program, often at social level
e.g. money, staff, equipment	*e.g. deliver training programs; build or repair homes*	*e.g. number of booklets produced, workshops held, people trained*	*e.g., improved knowledge/skills/attitudes/behavior*	*e.g., jobs obtained; improved graduation rate.*	*e.g., reduced poverty; reduced homelessness*

Visual Logic Model

Problems/Needs: Adolescents suffer from high levels of obesity and related ailments, at least in part because they do not know how to make good food choices and do not understand the impact that these choices can have on their health.



Benefits of visual representation

- **Using a visual representation clarifies how all elements of a logic model are related to each other**
  - You can follow parallel tracks, e.g., member and beneficiary outcomes
- **Some programs have distinct, if inter-related, elements, a visual representation can reflect this complexity**
  - Consider using arrows and/or color codes to draw out relationships within your program
- **A visual representation can help you uncover whether parts of your program do not fit or need re-working**

Tips

- **If your AmeriCorps program is part of a larger national organization, or is implementing a model developed by another organization (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), see whether you can borrow elements of their logic model**
  - Be sure to adapt it so it reflects your specific AmeriCorps program
- **Think about how to translate your If->Then->Because statement to a logic model**
  - The “If” can be your activities; then “Then” can be your long-term outcomes, and your “Because” can be your outputs and short-term outcomes
- **Your logic model is a living document—don’t be afraid to adjust it as you learn through implementation**
- **Look around the web for examples**

Logic model resources

CNCS Core Curriculum

https://www.nationalservice.gov/resources/evaluation/all-evaluation-resources

W.K. Kellogg Foundation:

https://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resource/2006/02/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-development-guide