YOUTH LEADERSHIP, ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

THEORY OF CHANGE

OXFAM
**INTRODUCTION**

Young people\(^1\) have tremendous potential to be both present and future drivers of inclusive sustainable development. In recognition of this potential and the power of collective action, Oxfam has developed a Theory of Change (ToC) to explore what needs to happen so that young people, institutions and communities can create equitable, transformative and sustainable change together. This meta-theory of change was developed through a series of workshops in 2015 with young leaders, Oxfam partners and programme staff from around the world. Following practical application of the ToC in multiple youth initiatives, Oxfam’s Youth as Active Citizens Community of Practice co-created a new version of the meta-theory of change through a process of learning and reflection in 2019-2020.

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**PURPOSE**

This document is a tool for Oxfam, Oxfam partners and others working in the sector to help design and guide strategies for collective impact by supporting youth leadership, engagement and participation\(^2\). The ToC is an overarching theory illustrating the avenues through which young people are already creating change, how these dynamics of change can be further supported, and the roles that different actors can play to create broader, transformational societal change. It is important to bear in mind that this is a theory: it is envisaged that this ToC will continue to be modified and improved as we learn more about how best to support youth leadership, engagement and participation in a rapidly changing world.

It is important to note that an organization or group does not need to work across all areas of the ToC. Rather, it should consider which area it is best placed to work within and how it can strategically connect with stakeholders working in other areas to achieve broader societal change.

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\(^1\) For statistical consistency across regions, Oxfam aligns its definition of youth with that of the UN, i.e. ‘youth and young people interchangeably to mean 15–24 years,’ while acknowledging that youth represent a more fluid category than a fixed age group would suggest.

\(^2\) Youth participation is a fundamental human right recognized in international conventions and a process where young people take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them (Farthing, 2012). ‘Engagement is closely linked to participation, though it differs in being a broader articulation of the public-facing aspect of participation’. (UNICEF).

Cover image: Épiphanie is a young activist from Chad. A slam poet, she promotes women’s rights and raises awareness on the importance of a vibrant civil society. She discovered slam in 2010, in Niger, through the voices of other women artists and brought it back home. Now, through rhythmic poetry, Épiphanie reaches young people across Chad with her critical perspectives on governance and justice. She has launched a powerful artistic movement, which is already blooming with new young women slamming.

Photo: Chad - Sylvain Cherkaoui/OXFAM
VISION OF CHANGE
A TRANSFORMATION OF UNEQUAL POWER RELATIONS
The current youth population is the largest the world has ever seen and represents an enormous opportunity to create large-scale transformative change if we give young women, young men and non-binary youth the opportunity to fully contribute to their societies. Despite facing numerous barriers to their full participation in society, young people have consistently shown that they are determined to actively challenge established ideas, norms and structures and bring about inclusive and innovative social change. They are organizing around the world out of a shared sense of deep injustice – and of their collective capacity to transform current inequalities. They are highly mobilized, both online and offline. They are challenging norms, shifting the debate and making themselves heard. They are leading change on the biggest global issues of our time – the climate crisis, racial injustice, gender-based violence, economic precarity and exploitation, and political exclusion, to name just a few. At the same time, young people are a highly heterogenous group for whom inequalities and discrimination – based on gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality among others – intersect, meaning the lived experiences of young people differ substantially.

Oxfam envisions a transformation of the current unequal power structures, which inhibit the advancement of youth rights and gender equality, into more equitable social, economic and political relations. We seek a world in which young people’s rights and needs are understood and respected, and young people in all their diversity lead and participate in decision making that affects their lives and communities. This is highlighted in the Oxfam Global Strategic Framework 2020-2030, which recognizes that young people are at the forefront of transformative change and identifies the need to ‘invest in young people’s leadership, autonomy, and agency [...] working in ways that suit their decentralized movements and networks.’

Oxfam is working with young women, young men and non-binary youth around the world to amplify their knowledge, their skills, and their capacity to create change and fight against exclusion, inequality and injustice. To achieve this goal, Oxfam is constantly adapting its role depending on the different contexts it operates in and engaging with these strategic questions:

- What are the systems (social, economic, political and environmental) in which Oxfam is seeking to enable youth leadership, engagement and participation?
- How can Oxfam build on and connect current work in the space of youth leadership, engagement and participation to amplify the voices of young women, young men and non-binary youth who are already creating change?
- How can organizations such as Oxfam create space within their own decision-making processes for their youth partners?

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3 These barriers include marginalization, political risk and economic security, as well as the dominant strategies of civil society, which often lack the voice of youth and specific funding, and have limited agility to work in partnership with informal youth groups and movements.

4 Oxfam Global Strategic Framework 2020-2030.
THREE PATHS TO SUCCESS

This ToC has identified three crucial paths to support youth leadership, engagement and participation for collective impact. To understand the three paths, it is important to note the following:

- There is no sequence or priority between the paths; rather, they offer different avenues to achieving change by working in partnership with young women, young men and non-binary youth, and creating the preconditions that need to be met throughout each path.

- Accountability is critical and needs to occur up and down the paths and between various actors. This means not only that power holders, institutions and groups must be accountable to young people, but also that young people (as individuals or groups) must be accountable to each other\(^5\) and to other stakeholders.

- These are not standalone paths; making connections between the paths is an essential element in achieving societal change. See ‘Strategic Alliances’ below for more detail.

PATH A:
Young women, young men and non-binary youth engage with issues they care about and lead change for themselves and their communities

For young people in all their diversity to actively lead and/or contribute to decision making, they must first be clear about issues that impact them and their communities, and must feel empowered to propose and implement solutions. This requires: strong communication between young people, community members and formal decision makers; recognition of young people’s right and capacity to contribute to and/or lead community development processes; and strong youth commitment to mobilize and pursue the change they aspire to for themselves and their communities.

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\(^5\) For example, young leaders and activists being accountable to the wider groups of young people whom they represent.
PATH B:
Young activists in all their diversity connect, develop joint agendas and strengthen their collective action for transformative change

For young activists, groups and movements to create change, they must connect, form joint agendas and work together towards shared objectives. Recognizing and addressing intersectional and gender inequalities and power dynamics are critical in this process. Their vision of change and their networked approaches also need to be backed up by flexible resources and support. To achieve large-scale transformative and sustainable change, young people must also develop strategic alliances with different stakeholders and create ways to meaningfully influence power holders, communities and institutions.

PATH C:
Young women, young men and non-binary youth positively influence formal and informal institutions and social norms

For young people to influence formal and informal institutions (e.g. governments, NGOs, corporations, traditional authorities) and social norms (e.g. gender roles), opportunities and safe spaces (offline and online) must exist for young people to meaningfully engage with decision-makers and promote their agendas. Leaders must be motivated to work with young people and see the value of youth inclusion. In turn, young people must build an understanding of the social norms, policies and practices which enable or impede youth leadership, engagement and participation.
YOUTH LEADERSHIP, ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

META-THEORY OF CHANGE

AIM
Young people, communities and institutions create positive, equitable and sustainable change

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

YOUTH ACTIVISM
Young people strengthen their collective action for transformative change

INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL NORMS
Young people positively influence institutions and social norms

INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES
Young people create change for themselves and their communities

ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

YOUTH ACTIVISM
- Young activists create movements and coalitions around joint agendas
- Young people’s agendas recognize and address intersectional and gender inequalities
- Young activists have access to resources to support their agendas and approaches
- Young people in all their diversity organize and engage in collective action
- Young activists create strategic alliances with other stakeholders to drive and influence change
- Young activists support young people to promote their agendas
- Leaders of formal and informal institutions are motivated and understand the value of youth participation
- Opportunities and safe spaces (offline and online) exist for young people to promote their agendas
- Formal and informal policies and practices enable young people to participate

INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES
- Young people identify issues which they and their communities care about
- Young people’s leadership and decision-making abilities are recognized, and they have opportunities to exercise them
- Young people in all their diversity organize and engage in collective action
- Leaders of formal and informal institutions are motivated and understand the value of youth participation
- Young people understand institutions, policies and social norms in their own contexts

ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS
- Inclusive spaces for open communication and decision making between young people and their communities
- Young people in all their diversity organize and engage in collective action
- Young people positively influence institutions and social norms
- Opportunities and safe spaces (offline and online) exist for young people to promote their agendas
- Formal and informal policies and practices enable young people to participate

INTERNAL EMPOWERMENT

08. YOUTH LEADERSHIP, ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION
UNDERPINNING FACTORS INFLUENCING CHANGE:
INTERNAL EMPOWERMENT AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

A set of underlying factors must exist across the ToC to enable collective impact and transformational change. These factors can be grouped into ‘internal empowerment’ and ‘enabling environments’. These elements must be present throughout all paths and at multiple levels – individual, family, community, institutional, national, global – in order to shift traditionally held beliefs and behaviours that inhibit meaningful youth leadership, engagement and participation.

- **Internal empowerment:**
  These factors relate to the individual capabilities and attributes that support active citizenship:
  - Knowledge\(^6\), skills and motivation;
  - Confidence, self-esteem and agency;
  - Awareness of oneself, one’s view of the world and how they affect behaviours;
  - Awareness of power dynamics and how they can result in the exclusion of marginalized young people;
  - Ability to handle tensions and conflict and turn difficult situations into a positive force for change;
  - Leadership skills to co-create a collective vision of change.

Internal empowerment factors are especially important for young people experiencing multiple discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc. Internal empowerment is also crucial to enabling interpersonal support, which must be present between peers, family members, colleagues and other stakeholders in favour of youth leadership, engagement and participation.

- **Enabling environments:**
  These factors relate to broader environmental influences that extend beyond the individual, supporting young women, young men and non-binary youth as activists, change makers, innovators, etc.
  - Opportunities for young people to lead, engage or participate in decision making;
  - Access to secure physical and digital spaces and resources in which to learn, innovate and exercise leadership;
  - Special measures to support young women and marginalized young people;
  - Robust practices for the safety and protection of youth activists and young feminist leaders in critical contexts.

Enabling environments involve both creating new spaces and seeking out spaces where change is already happening, and amplifying these efforts.

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\(^6\) Knowledge includes awareness of the diversity of and inequalities between young people – this includes the gendered experiences, needs and perspectives of young women, young men and non-binary youth, as well as the behaviours and practices that exclude other marginalized young people, such as those living with a disability or HIV-positive status, and those from indigenous, ethnic, class, caste and sexual minorities.
Strategic alliances

KEY TO ACHIEVING CHANGE

A key feature of the ToC is that, while organizations and groups do not need to work across all paths, broader, transformative societal change will only be achieved when strategic connections are made between paths. Each path must therefore be considered in relation to the others.

For example, if youth-led groups and networks do not collaborate with leaders in communities and institutions, it is less likely that transformational change will occur at multiple levels. Leaders from youth groups, communities and institutions must therefore work together in strategic alliances towards a shared vision.
ASSUMPTIONS

There are several assumptions that underpin this ToC and affect whether or not transformational change will ultimately occur. These assumptions include:

• Young people (women, men and non-binary) want to participate in decision making and have the potential to be leaders in all areas and at all levels;
• Young people, in all their diversity, are in the best position to understand their own realities but have limited access to decision making that affects their lives;
• Young people hold the greatest potential for shifting restrictive gender roles and other discriminatory obstacles that perpetuate inequality within our societies;
• Young people bring different ideas, perspectives and energy to development processes that will have a positive impact on achieving broader societal change;
• Youth-led groups, movements and organizations can be supported to form a meaningful and sustainable part of civil society at all levels, a part that is truly representative of its constituencies;
• Development actors are willing to share their space with youth-led organizations;
• Youth activists, especially young feminists, may refrain from engaging in activism due to harassment and threats.

This document was originally written by Oxfam Australia Youth Advisors and updated by the Oxfam Youth as Active Citizens Community of Practice.

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