

• Participatory theory of change and the agroecological transition

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Background

In many countries, the agricultural sector stands at a crossroads: on the one hand we have intensive, industrial methods based on chemical inputs, while on the other we find innovative agroecological systems employing a vast array of more environmentally and socially virtuous practices: agroforestry, integrated agriculture and livestock farming, conservation agriculture etc. Such practices help to regenerate soils and biodiversity, and to avoid water shortages; they also facilitate adaptation to climate change and the attenuation of its impact. The ASSET project (Agroecology and Safe Food System Transitions in Southeast Asia) aims to capitalise on the potential of agroecology to transform food and agricultural systems in a manner which is compatible with the sustainability goals. The project as a whole is informed by the participatory theory of change, which involves forging a shared vision of the agroecological transition, identifying impact pathways to be explored collectively, and defining the respective contribution of each actor to these transformative processes.

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Further reading

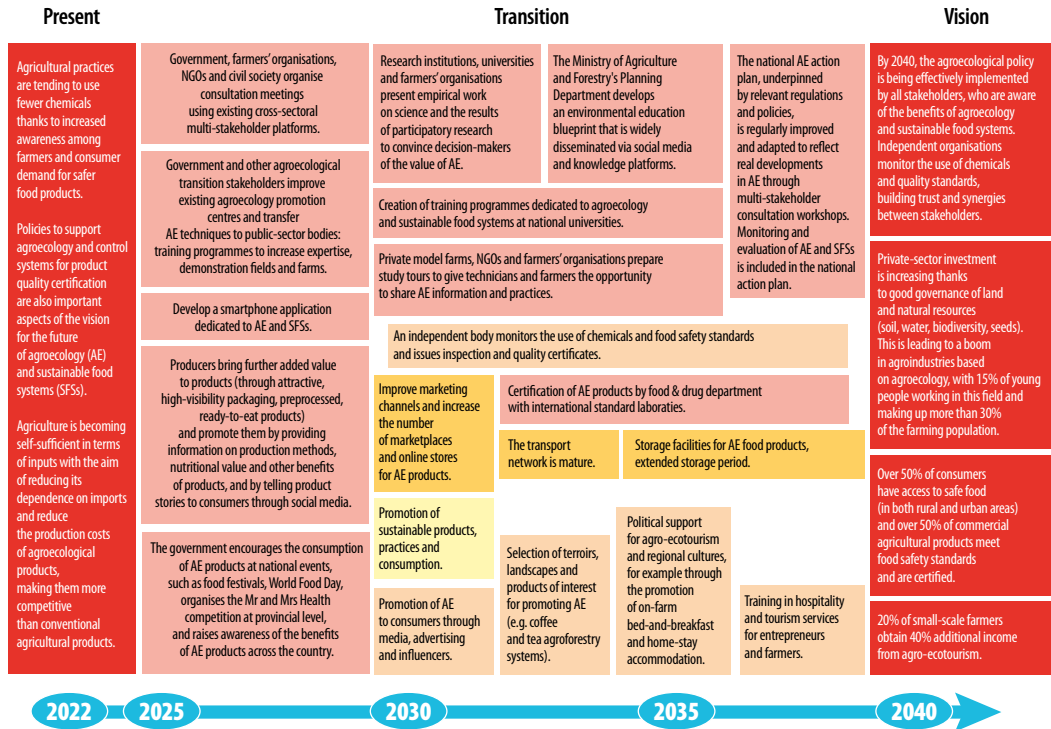
<https://www.asset-project.org>

What is theory of change?

Theory of change (ToC) is an approach used to develop an explicit model for how an action (e.g. a project or policy) will contribute to a chain of results or events, laying bare the process of change we expect to see, the actions put in place to trigger that change, and the underlying hypotheses. Such models may be used at different moments: early in the project design phase (*ex ante*), as a projection of the future impact pathway which will guide the intervention; during implementation, to monitor progress and steer adaptive management and reflexive learning (*in itinere*); or once the intervention is complete, in order to assess the change it has helped bring about (*ex post*). In the case of the ASSET project, we produced specific ToC models *ex ante* for the participating countries and territories, in order to facilitate the coordination of a complex raft of actions led by a heterogeneous collective of actors comprising representatives of civil society (including farmers and producers' organisations), government agencies, development specialists and national and international research centres. The fundamental questions we asked in order to construct these *ex ante* ToC models in a participatory fashion were: what is our shared, desired vision of the future? What sort of impact do we hope to have? What changes need to occur to make this impact possible? When are these changes (results) and their consequences (impacts) likely to happen? What are the obstacles and opportunities associated with these changes? What can we do to ensure that these changes are realised with and for territorial actors?

Co-constructing impact pathways

The process of co-construction which defined the ToC dimension of the ASSET project yielded a narrative vision of the agroecological transition at the territorial and national levels (see illustration): mapping desired changes; explaining the underlying hypotheses on how these changes will come about; identifying opportunities and obstacles to change, taking different perspectives into consideration as well as the roles played by different actors. The project protocol and plan of action were then constructed with a view to supporting changes in practices, behaviours, interactions, capacities, knowledge, motivation and opportunities for the actors involved, as well as clarifying the manner in which these actors – and the context within which they operate – are liable to change. These changes are what we would call results. In this case, concerned with sustainable agroecology and food system tradition across the Mekong region (Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam), we proposed a participatory, multi-level ToC combining shared visions of the objectives to be attained with action plans to be collectively deployed at the different scales on which the project operates: from territorial interventions (within specific districts or provinces) up to the national and regional levels. Specific ToC were developed collectively by the actors involved at each level. Participatory ToC incorporates the existing knowledge and experience of partners, as well as the perspectives of the actors who will be tasked with putting the changes into practice, and who will experience their consequences.



Elements of the theory of change for the agroecological transition in Laos (national level).

Participatory workshops to catalyse collective intelligence

In order to build a participatory *ex ante* ToC, we need to begin by analysing the recent history of the territory in question and how it has defined the current state of food and agricultural systems, mapping the principal actors and activities which define the present situation. There follows a process of co-construction to establish a set of project specifications: working backwards from a shared vision of the future to the changes required to make this vision a reality,

thence to the obstacles and opportunities pertaining to these changes, the risks involved, and the individual and collective actions required to make the changes happen. Last but not least, it is important to ascertain whether or not the actors involved have the motivation, capacities and opportunities needed to change their behaviour, their practices and their interactions. In other words, ToC invites a group of actors to discuss the values which underpin their vision of the future and the changes they wish to see. This process results in a shared vision, which may not necessarily correspond to the

preferred scenario of all actors: it is a reflexive, critical exercise during which power imbalances may make themselves felt, impinging upon the group's capacity to collectively construct pathways to change. Facilitation plays an essential role here, in order to address and make clear the imbalances of power liable to affect negotiations. Moreover, it is necessary to manage participants' expectations with regard to the scope of their action plans. A balanced selection of participants – along with proper training for a team of facilitators, including individuals with an understanding of the power dynamics between actors – can help to ensure that different points of view are aired and discussed at the local and national levels.

Strengths and limitations of the theory of change

By involving people from diverse backgrounds in the definition and implementation of a

shared objective, ToC can play a crucial role in transformative actions. The process of collective construction is based upon the pooling of multiple sources of knowledge: academic literature, data from the field, expert and informal knowledge etc. ToC thus yields actionable knowledge of direct use to monitoring and impact assessment systems, and the learning loops they engender. Nevertheless, the recent wave of enthusiasm for ToC brings with it the risk that the approach could become largely normative, more of a superficial simulacrum than a genuine exercise in building a shared vision and pathway. ToC could thus become a commonplace of project design, meeting the same fate as the “logical framework” which it was originally intended to replace. In order to avoid such pitfalls, ToC must be used as a compass, indicating the direction of travel when planning actions, but evolving as actors engage with these actions and their understanding of how change happens is tested against reality.

KEY POINTS

Theory of change is a concrete manifestation of the principle of knowledge co-production, of particular interest when designing projects to support socio-environmental transitions. It seeks to clearly establish the different visions of change in play, along with the obstacles and opportunities they face, and thence to co-construct a shared vision conducive to a unified plan of action. ToC transforms knowledge into action, forging connections between different actors, sectors and levels of intervention. By breaking down silos, it can make solutions feel tangible. In doing so it paves the way for large-scale change, bringing political decision-makers on board via local, national and regional networks.

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