A ‘theory of change’ is a model of the process that policy makers and programme designers (like DHET and SETAs) believe will lead to desired changes in their spheres of influence.

The model usually consists of a diagram and a narrative describing the links between the goals, objectives, outcomes and desired impacts, and the logic or assumptions behind these links. As such, a theory of change (ToC) is related to a logic model, a results framework and outcomes pathways. The distinctions between these are technical. More important to consider here, is why there is so much emphasis on theories of change these days, and how DHET, NSA and SETAs could work with them.

The idea of a theory of change is inspired by theory-based evaluations known as the ‘fifth generation’ of evaluation approaches. This incorporates earlier generations of evaluation approaches, and adds the dimension of programme theory. What does this entail?

Each development programme (like a skills plan) is underpinned by one or more theories. These are the theories that drive the programmes we design (such as PSET policy and skills plans). For example, the overarching PSET theory could be that access to relevant, high quality post-school education and training is unequal in South Africa and that this contributes to both skills shortages and gaps, and unemployment, with a stagnant economy being a further factor contributing to unemployment, with this lack of economic growth (while largely not within the SETAs’ area of influence) being exacerbated by skills gaps (which are in the SETAs’ ambit). Figure 1 is an example of the theory or model of how the Mandatory Grant aims to change the current situation.
Programme theories in turn consist of two parts: theory of change (how South Africa should address a problem like the statement above) and a theory of action implementation (what role players will do to make this happen). See Figure 2.

![Diagram showing Theory of Change as a component of Programme Theory]

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Theory-based evaluations use the theory of change as the starting point to plan our evaluation. This is aimed at ensuring that what is evaluated, is what was initially intended. The evaluation findings will then tell us not only about what worked, but also why it worked, or failed to work. That way, theory-based evaluation leads to significant organisational and system learning, which is important when countries face protracted, ‘wicked’ problems. We need to learn from our efforts to improve a situation, in order to further improve, particularly when years of trying hard, have not delivered the desired results. In this case, the theory-based evaluation will also allow policy makers and programme / system designers to rethink the starting assumptions on which policy and programme designs are based, so as to change them where necessary, in pursuit of greater impact.

The use of theories of change to plan and execute evaluations, can achieve the following benefits:

1. System wide and organisational learning – if our assumptions about what is going to work are proven wrong (with evidence), we can change our approach and get better results.

2. It allows for a line of sight between policy, mandate, organisational objectives and activities, for evaluation and strategic planning, with alignment and learning as key desirable features.

3. Evaluations are more focussed – we track, monitor and evaluate what really matters, according to agreed-upon assumptions, rather than anything and everything that comes to mind on any given day or in response to a recent development, or untested assumptions.

4. The process of developing the ToC is beneficial for programme designers and implementers who are then able to surface and articulate their understandings of why they do what they do; they can work through differences between them, and surface untested assumptions and contradictory logic. The ToC can therefore reduce the number of contradictions and illogical actions in the system and prevent people and organisations from working against each other.

5. The ToC helps to surface which factors are within the scope of influence of a SETA and which are not, and how external factors may mitigate against successful outcomes and impact of skills development, for example in enterprise development, even where training is successful, a lack of access to key resources such as finance and markets, could result in minimal enterprise development.
For health workers (every 2–2 years)

The overall PSEF system's theory of change – every 5 years

The programmed and the PSEF system is then implemented, monitoring data on outcomes are collected and evaluated.

At the same time, in the system is designed with indicators that link directly to the intended outcomes and impacts.

Once the TCF is agreed upon, a programmed theory of change and theory of action is developed. This speaks to the system's

VTCT needed by the individual programs.

are capable.

The reason why this is going to work is that the desired change (assumptions) about what needs to be in place

The nature of the programme and its causes

At any stage in the life of a programme, but particularly at the beginning, PSEF partners should review these assumptions.

to review the evidence about whether the intended impacts is being achieved, and why or why not.

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Figure 3: High level logic model in The KEIS Evaluation (Procedural and Final, 2019, p4)

Change: If necessary

After enough evolution evidence and insights have been gained, the TCF and programmed theory can be revised and

From time to time (say, annually).

The programme and the PSEF system is then implemented, monitoring data on outcomes are collected and evaluated.

leadership, e.g. a learning

The (disputed) theory of change for a particular skills programme, e.g.

Suggested time frames for different theory of change processes:

intermediate, Immediate and Final outcomes

Final

Intermediate

Impacts

Outcomes

Intermediates

Outputs
THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A THEORY OF CHANGE

1

Agree on the principles that will inform the Theory of Change.

Q: Do we work with the principles in the NSDP? Or do we go back to more fundamental principles?

2

Describe a vision for the future, e.g. South Africa’s youth use a range of useful skills at appropriate levels to contribute positively to a thriving society and participate fruitfully in a strong economy.

Q: What should the vision be? Has it already been well described? (e.g. in the PSET-WP)
Describe the problem your sector / programme / organisation / programme needs to address, and its underlying causes. As far as possible, use evidence for these causes, rather than conjectures.

Q: What are the problems and their causes? What evidence do we have for this? How do they relate? Has this problem analysis been done already? (e.g. in the PSET-WP)

Who are the different role players addressing these issues and the desired future? What is your (sector’s / organisation’s / unit’s) particular role? Has this already been mapped and spelled out somewhere? Has anything changed with regard to these roles, and why?

Q: Your role?

Other role players and their roles?
Describe the desired impact (summary of the vision) and the pathway(s) of interim outcomes that will lead to this impact. Focus on those for which you can take responsibility, but also draw in other essential outcomes, without which the impact cannot be achieved.

Q: What is your impact statement? Has it already been well described? ..........................................................

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 What train of outcomes will lead to this impact? Show connections between them. Use drawings and narratives describing the assumptions in the linkages between outcomes, which need not be linear.
Test the outcomes and connections between them. Are any interim steps missing? State outcomes in the form of desired states, NOT as actions or inputs.

Q: Have outcomes maps already been drawn? Can you use them?
For each chosen indicator, an indicator protocol and tracking system is needed. To keep the number of indicators manageable and meaningful at each point in the PSET system, divide the outcomes and indicators as follows:

- Impact indicators (highest priority, shared across entities);
- strategic high level outcomes (second highest priority, shared across entities);
- intermediate level outcomes (lower priorities, specific to certain entities);
- initial outcomes (lowest priority; specific to entities);
- input activity level (part of performance management, across all entities).

Q: What are the impact indicators?

Q: What are the high level outcome indicators?

Examples of intermediate level outcome indicators

A Theory of Change also needs to be operationalised (Theory of Action) by identifying appropriate activities and allocating responsibilities and resources, in an implementation plan or road map. Without it, the model of change remains simply a model.