Creating a Theory of Change

Use the instructions below to facilitate a session to develop a theory of change. In the boxes below, we provide examples of what your theory of change could look like and include blank boxes where you can develop your own theory of change.

Step 1. Prepare for the conversation.

- Make the space of the meeting as comfortable as possible. If in person, consider how to seat everyone to create a sense of community and collaboration towards a common goal (e.g., consider round tables over square/rectangular ones that could create a sense of competition). If online, make sure you use technology everyone is familiar with or give participants a walkthrough and a simple way to engage with the technology you will use (e.g., if using a collaborative platform, assign them an easy task to complete before the meeting).

- Refresh everyone on the decisionmaking model you agreed to at the end of Step 4.

- Make sure to provide enough breaks and opportunities for folks to step away and check their email. For most people, problem-solving fatigue tends to set in at the two-hour mark, so you should be sure to have a plan for frequent breaks and to carefully monitor energy levels.

Step 2. Review your community vision statement.

Your community vision statement is your aspirational and ambitious statement about where you want your community to be in the future. To build a theory of change, you'll start with your community vision statement and work backward toward your inputs.

Forest City will be a place where all residents can be healthy, happy, valued, and financially secure.
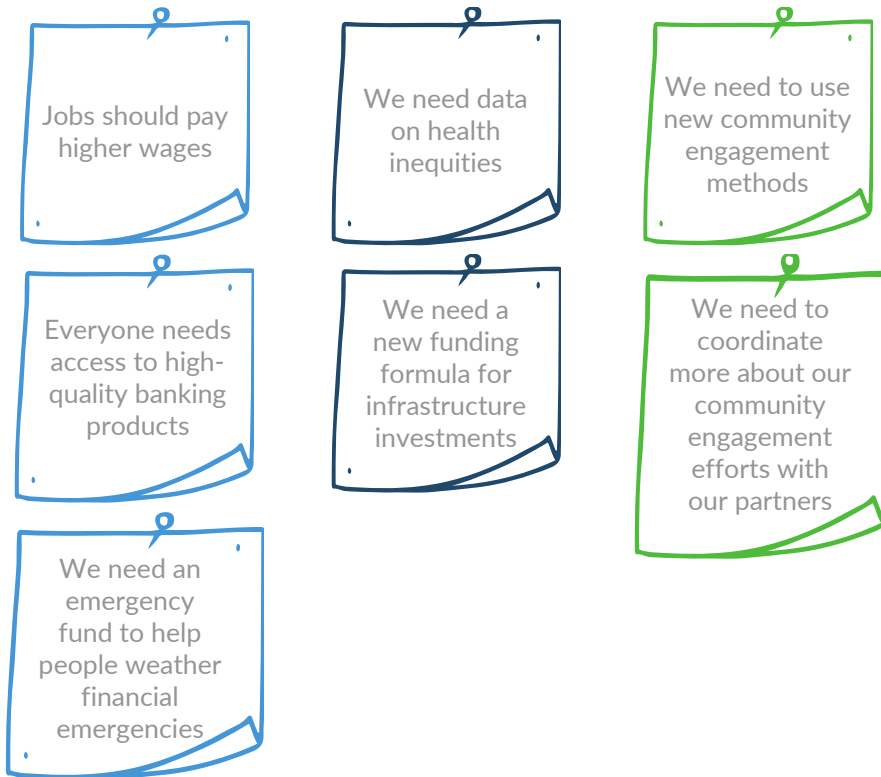
Step 3: Identify the outcomes.

Start by identifying the improved outcomes you want to see in your county or city. Have your participants think back to the visioning exercise you completed already or answer the question "what will you see if you are living in the county or city that you envisioned?"

Sample outcome statements	Your outcome statements
▪ Increase in the number of city residents with low incomes claiming the earned income tax credit ▪ City resources allocated to achieve health equity in our city ▪ Better community engagement practices and coordination with partners.	

Step 4: Define what needs to change to reach these outcomes.

Provide the group with sticky notes (physical or virtual) to write down their ideas about what needs to change in your community for you to realize these outcomes and achieve your community's vision. This will allow you to group ideas based on similarities. As a group, agree on the ideas to keep. The sticky notes below are just examples of what people might suggest.

Jobs should pay higher wages

We need data on health inequities

We need to use new community engagement methods

Everyone needs access to high-quality banking products

We need a new funding formula for infrastructure investments

We need to coordinate more about our community engagement efforts with our partners

We need an emergency fund to help people weather financial emergencies

Step 4. Identify the necessary preconditions for making these changes.

Go through each idea identified in the previous step and ask the group what the necessary preconditions are for making these kinds of outcomes a reality. A precondition is a condition that must be fulfilled before something else can happen.

Sample preconditions	Your preconditions
- Major employers need to see the value in raising wages. - Banks need to remove fees or entry requirements that prevent people from opening bank accounts. - We need banks in our community that are willing to construct branches in low-income neighborhoods. - We need to include an emergency fund in our budget. - The City needs to revise its participant data collection to include questions about race, ethnicity, gender, and disability for all programs. - We need to partner with the local hospital to get additional data. - We need to map our current infrastructure investments by neighborhood. - We need to learn more community engagement methods. - We need to identify which local nonprofits are currently doing community engagement.	

Once you have a good list of preconditions, attempt to group the preconditions into similar themes that represent **the main types of preconditions that must be in place for you to achieve your community's vision**. It's okay for a precondition to be used for several different kinds of conditions.

For example, the above list of preconditions could be grouped into the following themes:

- Major employers, local banking institutions, and other anchor institutions must be included in our work and seen as key partners for success.

- Our budget is an essential tool for achieving the policy and programmatic change we want to have.

- We need as much disaggregated data as possible about access to our city's programs, services, and amenities.

- We need the right staff and technology to analyze our data, identify disparities, and understand trends.

- We must value learning and take time to learn ways to work differently.

- We need strong relationships with nonprofit and community-based organization partners.

- We need to have a foundation of knowledge about the causes of racial inequities in our community.

Step 5. Clarify your assumptions.

Theories of change are rooted in assumptions—things that are accepted to be true without proof. According to Paula Richardson, Director of Collaborative Evaluation, Learning and Impact at international NGO Salanga, assumptions, "whether they are conscious or unconscious, are important drivers behind our work and they are determined by our values, experiences, and beliefs...Our personal and professional beliefs shape our mental models and inform how we understand change to happen; they influence the role we see for ourselves (and our organization), and what we assume other actors in the system will or won't do, and the strategies we choose."[17]

One of the biggest values of developing a theory of change is that it creates an opportunity for you to state your assumptions out loud and for others to share either their acceptance or rejection of those beliefs. Your MAP will be more effective if your assumptions about how and why change will happen are discussed, aligned with your outcomes, and agreed upon by the full group. Consider what assumptions you are making about the following:

- The conditions and preconditions required for change

- The links between your conditions for change and your expected outcomes

- The potential reach of your work

- The roles played by your Mobility Coalition partners and the relationships between the partners, leadership, and the community

- The beliefs, values, and perspectives that have shaped your theory of change (i.e., How are you centering **racial equity** in your approach?)

- The staff and other resources you need and/or have available

As you go through this exercise, keep in mind that people on your Mobility Coalition will have different assumptions—that is to be expected. Everyone in your coalition has different identities, experiences, and histories that shape their beliefs about how change happens. Getting everyone to share their own assumptions will likely be a very personal experience and may even be challenging. However, stating these beliefs openly and having candid conversations about how change happens is a critical step in identifying the right strategic actions for your MAP.

It might be more difficult to get people to agree on a common theory of change than on a shared vision for what the future of their community should be. When the conversation gets off track or heated, leverage the common ground you have identified through the process of creating your vision statement as a way to remind the group that they are all working together to achieve that vision of your county or city.

Write your sample assumptions by answering the prompt, "we assume that....."

Sample assumptions	Your assumptions
▪ Major employers and banking institutions in our region are willing to forgo some profits in exchange for increasing overall prosperity in our community. ▪ We will not have sufficient funds in our budget for new programs, additional staff, and the technology we need, so we will need to seek other funding. ▪ Our data privacy laws will permit us to collect the type of data we want to collect. ▪ Our leadership will accept and allow us to make time throughout our day for learning. ▪ Nonprofits and community-based organizations want to partner with us. ▪ Everyone is open and willing to learn about the history of racism in our community.	

Additional guidance on how to lead your Mobility Coalition members in stating their assumptions about the work can be found in this resource from LinkedIn.

Step 6: Produce your diagram and narrative

Theories of change are effective because they are visual roadmaps that make it easier to understand complex interventions. When developing your theory of change, consider your audience and how they will process the information. To bring your theory of change to life, consider using software like Canva or Piktochart that can help you map out your theory of change (and later, your logic model). You should write each element of your theory of change as a nouns rather than a verb. See the made-up example of Forest City below.

Take care when publishing and making your theory of change publicly available. For example, consider how people might access and use it, and make sure it's available in an accessible format. You should also include a narrative that describes the process you used to develop the theory of change, a short, written summary of what it includes, a description of who was involved in its development, what your assumptions were, and a link to your monitoring and evaluation plan once it gets posted.

BOOSTING UPWARD MOBILITY

FOREST CITY

THOERY OF CHANGE

Forest City will be a place where all residents can be healthy, happy, valued, and financially secure.

OUTCOMES

Increased financial well-being for people with low incomes	City resources allocated to achieve healthy equity in our city	Better community engagement practices and coordination with partners

ACHIEVEMENTS

Higher wage jobs	High quality banking products for people with low incomes	Emergency funds to help people weather financial emergencies
Better and more disaggregated health data	New funding formula for infrastructure investments	New community engagement methods

PRECONDITIONS

Partners who represent major employers, banking and anchor institutions	Disaggregated data about programs, services, and amenities	A budget that can support the changes we need
Staff and technology that can work with qualitative and quantitative data	Foundation of knowledge about the causes of inequities	Time for learning and a high value placed on learning
Strong relationships with nonprofits and community-based organizations		

REQUIREMENTS

- ✔ SHARED LEARNING
- ✔ DATA
- ✔ PARTNERSHIPS
- ✔ FUNDING
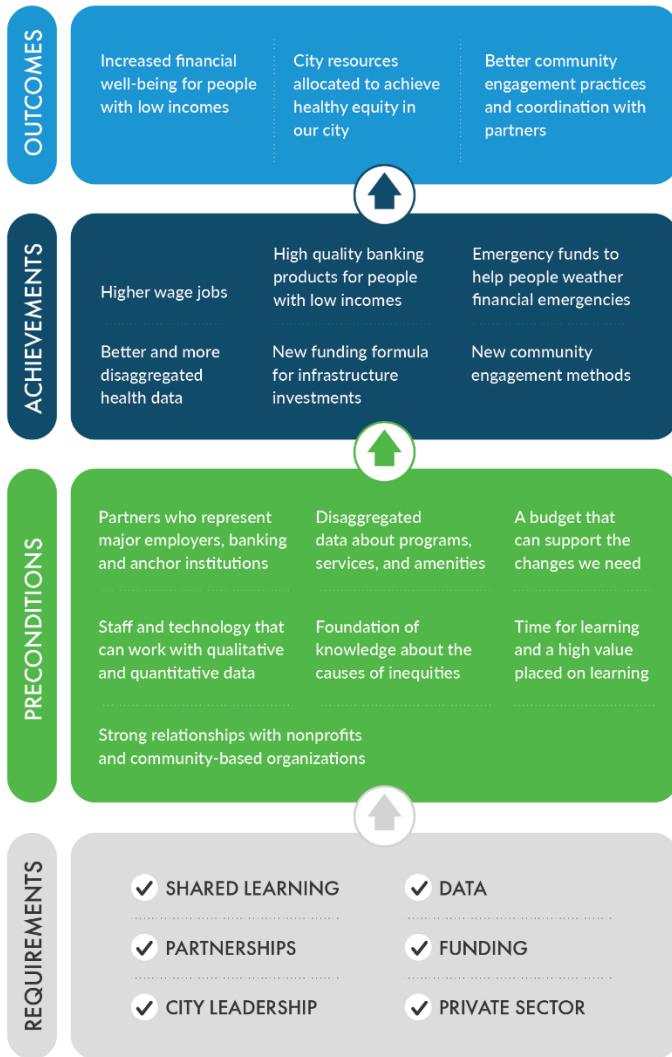- ✔ CITY LEADERSHIP
- ✔ PRIVATE SECTOR

Figure 17: Sample theory of change

Using Your Theory of Change

Your completed theory of change should be used to (1) guide the selection of your strategic actions, and (2) communicate succinctly about your work and the change it is intended to make in the policy ecosystem and in your community.

Other examples of Theories of Change:

- St. Louis County Public Health and Human Services Community Health Assessment and Action Planning Improvement Plan

- Tenderloin City – Health Improvement

- King County, WA

- Fresno DRIVE (this full DRIVE Race Equity Plan also includes an example of how to translate a theory of change into a scorecard for evaluating whether a potential strategic action aligns with the theory of change).