P6. Strengthening theories of change (ToCs) for rigorous and actionable evaluations
02 September 2025, 11:00 am – 12:30 pm

SESSION TAKE AWAY

This panel will explore how robust, context-sensitive Theories of Change (ToCs) can strengthen the design and effectiveness of evaluations. Speakers from research, government, and international financial institutions will discuss the role of ToCs in clarifying outcomes, embedding monitoring and learning, anticipating risks and unintended consequences, and enabling course corrections in policy and program implementation. The session will emphasize cross-sectoral collaboration and institutional incentives as critical for making ToCs both technically rigorous and operationally relevant.

SUBTHEME

Topical Area: Role of evaluation in the private sector

Moderator: Divya Pandey, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)

- The importance of comprehensive theories of change (ToCs) in understanding feasibility, effectiveness, and scalability of transformative social change programs was emphasized.
- Highlighted the current challenging geopolitical and funding environment
- Stressed the need for theories of change that can adapt to changing circumstances, respond to dynamic situations, and delivery meaning impact.

Emily Sharp, SPC

- Shared experiences at the Pacific Community, focusing on the importance of context, culture, and capacity in designing ToCs.
- The role of realist evaluation in uncovering context-specific mechanisms and outcomes, the importance of building trusted relationships and contextualizing international methodologies was highlighted.
- Emphasized the need for dynamic and adaptive ToCs that consider long-term systemic changes and the importance of involving youth and emerging professionals in program design.

Marie Gaarder, 3ie

- Explained evolution of 3ie's ToC over years, using a "balloon squeezing" approach to test underlying hypotheses and address obstacles to using evidence in development policies.
- Discussed the challenges of accessing and using evidence, the need for organization culture changes to promote evidence use, the importance of learning and adapting ToCs over time.

Mitchell Rakusin, ADB

- Discussed the challenges of integrating ToCs into the project design process, the need for leadership, collaboration, and intentionality, and the role of internal quality assurance and capacity building.
- Highlighted the importance of surfacing assumption and risks, prioritizing indicators, and fostering a stronger evaluative mindset.

Neeta Goel, ADB

Session Flow

- Discussed the challenges of operationalizing ToCs at the ex-ante evaluation stage, often requiring collaboration with project teams to create retrospective ToCs
- The quality of Theories of Change (TOCs) often depends on the level of interest and engagement from project teams during the design phase. When teams are invested, TOCs tend to be more robust and meaningful.

Q&A SUMMARY

1) How can we improve learning mechanisms within the system?
   Answer: highlighted challenges in creating an environment where teams can openly discuss project failures; suggested using midterm reviews as opportunities to reflect on TOCs; emphasized the need for systems that encourage honest reporting about project challenges
2) How can we keep TOCs a live document?
   Answer: use midterm reviews as reflection points, encourage project teams to periodically review ToCs, create flexible opportunities for dialogue between operations and evaluations teams.
3) How to bridge the gap between evidence generation and use?
   Answer: suggested evaluating different messaging strategies; proposed researching how to curate messages from different audiences; recommended conducting studies on evidence communication effectiveness

SESSION COORDINATOR

Isabelle Pia Sison