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on Theory of Change

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This Guidance Note is part of a series of practical, programming guidance periodically issued by PBF. The purpose of PBF Guidance Notes is to provide additional information to recipients of PBF funding and PBF Secretariats to improve design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of PBF projects. This Guidance Note on Theories of Change provides a specific peacebuilding lens to guide fund recipients' development of theories of change and should be used to inform project design choices at the outset of project conceptualization.
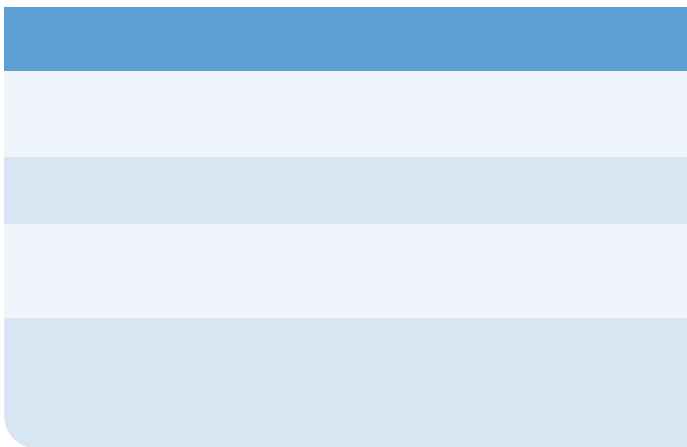
2. EMBRACING COMPLEXITY BY UNPACKING UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The environments we operate in are complex and prone to rapid changes. Complexity within our programming contexts occasionally creates confusion or undermines our confidence about what we know and what we assume will happen. Identifying a theory of change, however, is simply a process of explaining why a given action or intervention is expected to provoke a specific kind of change.

To illustrate this point, consider a hypothetical scenario where a conflict analysis has indicated that confidence in formal state institutions or faith in the peace agreement is undermined by sexual and gender-based violence against young women accessing basic social services (BSS). The below matrix proposes an array of programming pathways for how teams might approach this problem. Each pathway, however, comes with assumptions about what the core trouble is and, thus, what needs to change to see a reduction in SGBV. The purpose of the matrix is to demonstrate the kinds of questions program staff should be asking about their own work by detailing implied assumptions about what is driving the problem for each programming approach.

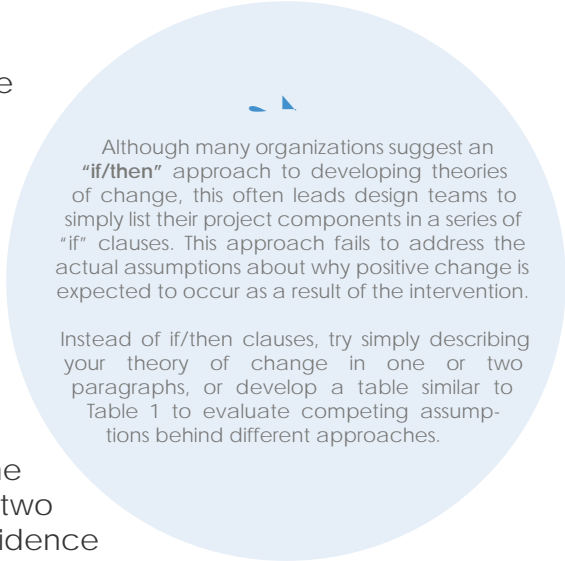## Table 1. Desired program result: Eliminate SGBV against young women who access BSS

Approach	Assumption	ToC requires
Training BSS staff in SGBV protection measures	Staff lack capacity or knowledge about what to do if they witness SGBV in the workplace. If staff members knew about internal policies and protection mechanisms (e.g. whistle blower complaint mechanisms, ombudsmen offices, human resources disciplinary boards, etc.), they would utilize those policies and mechanisms to ensure citizens are protected from SGBV when they access BSS.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that what is lacking is staff knowledge of existing mechanisms and policies rather than the willingness or ability of staff to exercise them.
Hiring more female senior managers	Impunity for SGBV is driven by a male-dominated management structure. If women had decision-making power, they would create and/or enforce internal disciplinary controls that would punish staff who perpetrate SGBV. This is based on a conviction that women are less likely to participate in or condone SGBV and that their authority to enforce discipline will be recognized within the institutions.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that female managers have the knowledge, will and ability to discipline staff members for SGBV.
Awareness raising of women's rights among BSS staff	BSS staff do not understand rights and normative commitments and so staff are not aware of the full range of ways that SGBV is a harmful practice. If they knew, they would cease enabling or perpetrating SGBV because they would not want to cause harm.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that lack of staff understanding that SGBV does harm by violating rights of victims is what drives assault.
Educating young women who are likely to access BSS about their rights and protection mechanisms	Potential victims currently are unable to advocate for themselves or seek effective protection and justice. if young women were aware that SGBV is a violation of their rights, they will either be able to fend off assaults because they know their rights or, if they are accosted, will know where to turn for protection and redress to hold perpetrators accountable. This approach also assumes that protection mechanisms and internal disciplinary measures are efficacious.	ToC for this approach requires evidence that equipping young women with knowledge of how to exercise their rights will reduce violence against them. This is a potentially dangerous ToC, since it 1) implicates victims in their own victimization, and 2) may encourage more interaction with predatory actors without effectively addressing protection and justice mechanisms.

3. IS ONE THEORY OF CHANGE SUFFICIENT?

In reality, most projects will use a combination of several programming approaches to achieve an overall goal, in recognition that complex problems need complex and multi-disciplinary solutions. Teams may wish to utilize tools that promote systems thinking, which appreciates that settings are not only complex but dynamic and call for non-linear, iterative thinking. These tools provide methods for unpacking complexity while recognizing the interconnected nature of many peacebuilding challenges and opportunities.

By delineating how different facets of a complex system reinforce each other, moreover, systems thinking supports project staff to identify inter-connected theories of change at different levels of the project. Such "cascading theories of change" can help teams identify assumptions about how change at one level contributes to higher level changes. In other words, it encourages teams to identify theories of change for the overall impact or goal, for the different outcomes that will contribute to that change, and among the various outputs that contribute relevant changes to achieve each outcome.

Although many organizations suggest an **"if/then"** approach to developing theories of change, this often leads design teams to simply list their project components in a series of "if" clauses. This approach fails to address the actual assumptions about why positive change is expected to occur as a result of the intervention.

Instead of if/then clauses, try simply describing your theory of change in one or two paragraphs, or develop a table similar to Table 1 to evaluate competing assumptions behind different approaches.

In the local governance-focused youth initiative outlined in the introduction, for example, the project appears to have two interconnected high-level goals: increasing young people's confidence in local government, which is expected to subsequently reduce inter-communal violence sparked by competition over scarce resources. To fully investigate the assumptions underpinning this project's approach, project teams will need to provide evidence or articulate their assumptions for each high-level impact.

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Table 2. Increasing young peoples' confidence in local government by…

Increasing transparency in decision-making among local government	**Core assumption:** community members perceive that local officials take decisions "behind closed doors," which raises suspicion that the decisions favor one group or individual rather than the public good. Such suspicions feed perceptions about corruption as well as raise tensions among social groups who feel they are being treated unfairly.	**It's a communications problem:** Despite making sound and fair policy decisions, citizens' perceptions remain negative because they assume local decision-makers are privileging one group over another. In this case, it's not the decision-making that is marred, it's that local authorities need better and more open communication on how decisions were taken.
	Evidence requirements: ToC for this approach requires evidence that when the public has greater access to the process of decision making and can monitor the internal deliberations of public officials, they will have greater confidence in local officials and accept their decisions, even if those decisions do not benefit their particular group.	**It's a lack of fairness problem:** Because decisions are taken behind closed doors, it enables decision-makers to privilege certain groups or disadvantage others. In this case, taking decisions in the open is expected to curb this problem, but only if other accountability mechanisms like free and fair elections give citizens an opportunity to hold decision makers accountable.
Improving local government's responsiveness to citizen demands	**Core assumption:** Whether through disfunction, corruption or by acting in preferential ways toward certain groups, local communities do not have confidence that their needs will be met by local authorities. As a result, they turn to extra-legal means to address problems or access resources, which further undermines local authorities' role and perceptions of legitimacy in the eyes of local community members.	**It's a technical problem:** local government lacks a mechanism or process to understand the population's needs and respond to their demands. This problem calls for establishing clear processes for registering citizen requests or complaints and a means for citizens to monitor the response.
	Evidence requirements: ToC for this approach requires evidence that local community members' confidence in local authorities increases if they feel their needs are getting met in a fair manner.	**It's an institutional cultural problem:** Despite having policies that should produce timely and fair action on the part of local authorities, such policies are not enforced, which opens the way for local authorities to treat groups or individuals differently or ignore citizen requests altogether. Implementing an enforcement mechanism likely includes establishing and exercising effective disciplinary measures against officials and functionaries who are in violation of the rules.

4. DEVELOPING THEORIES OF CHANGE STEP-BY-STEP
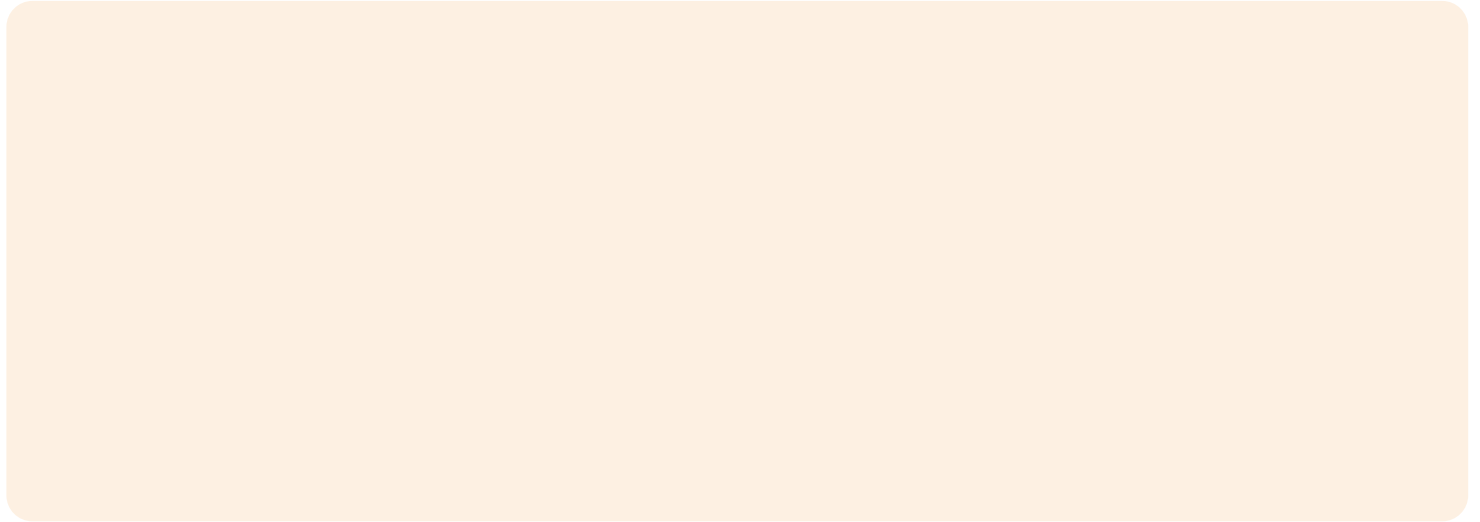
5. SUGGESTED RESOURCES

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