**Purpose**

This is one of two Monitoring for Results tools intended to help NGOs develop strong, results-oriented monitoring plans. Unlike the other tools in this toolkit, this is not an editable document or worksheet. Rather, this tool provides information on how to monitor complex programs to increase confidence in intended outcomes. This tool should be read and discussed as it applies to each organization’s theory of change.

**How to use this tool**   
This tool should be read individually by all members of a project team and discussed during the creation of a monitoring plan. Although it may be helpful to take notes during the discussion to inform the development of a monitoring and evaluation schedule, there is no tangible deliverable from this exercise. The outcome of this tool should be a thought-provoking conversation and a change in mindset, allowing NGOs to avoid oversimplification and embrace the complexity of conservation and development programs.

Through the process of creating a theory of change, practitioners will often feel overwhelmed by the interlinkages between activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. Discussing these connections while recognizing that there is no one solution to any problem can deepen team relationships, foster innovation, and strengthen the logic of a model. With the project planning committee, discuss the following topics as they relate to your programs:

* With a simple theory of change, an NGO can have greater confidence in its model, or hypothesis. Greater confidence in a model means that implementers can be more certain that the activities planned will result in the intended goals. However, oversimplifying a theory of change can lead to unintended consequences and overlooked influences and risks.   
  + Is your theory of change too simple?
  + Are you overlooking internal or external influences?
  + What unintended outcomes (positive or negative) could result from your activities?

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* A complex theory of change with sound logic is often preferable to a simple one since it demonstrates thoughtful planning and recognition of assumptions. However, the complexity may be confusing to some donors if it is not adequately described. Having a complex internal theory of change and a simplified model for external use can be very useful.   
  + Does your theory of change meet the logic and graphic requirements of your donor?
  + How can you make a complex theory of change understandable for donors and partners who do not know your programs or context?
  + How can you balance the complexity of your model with the simplicity of many donors’ requirements?
* As you introduce more complexity into a model, you will inherently introduce more assumptions which may or may not be accurate in the real world. If the assumptions in a model are accurate, it is likely that the theory of change will hold true. If the assumptions are not accurate, or if there are influencing factors that were not considered, the theory of change developed with the project planning committee may need to be revised.   
  + What assumptions are you making in your theory of change?
  + How confident are you in each assumption?
  + If some of your assumptions are not accurate, how will your theory of change—and your activities—adapt?

There is a way to increase confidence in a theory of change even if it is very complex! *Monitoring* a theory of change allows NGOs and partner communities to measure the expected results of inputs, outputs, and outcomes. By measuring the results at each level of a theory of change, NGOs can test their assumptions and revise their theory of change as needed.

Monitoring output-level indicators is often simple, based on project reports and NGO records. It is therefore low cost and may take little time. However, while valuable for marketing and general reporting, monitoring outputs does not significantly increase confidence in a theory of change.

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Monitoring outcome-level indicators requires additional analysis, time, and funding. Depending on your indicators, it may require surveys, interviews, spatial analysis, or other combinations of quantitative and qualitative data collection. This extra effort is rewarded by significantly increasing your confidence in your logic model or demonstrating areas where your model needs to be revised.

Monitoring impact requires evaluative effort, often in the form of program evaluations, comparative studies, or other experimental designs. Impact, in the monitoring and evaluation sense, is the difference between what occurred and what would have occurred in the absence of an intervention, also known as the counterfactual. Thus, baseline data, control groups, and other forms of reconstructed counterfactuals are necessary to truly measure impact.

Of course, this type of evaluation requires significant funding and often takes years. Small projects will rarely have the time or funding to measure impact. Thus, impact evaluations are generally feasible only for very large projects. Further, not all projects will lend themselves to true impact evaluations if their theories of change do not include high-level impact indicators. Impact-level indicators often measure behavior and perspective changes, ecological restoration, and other long-term trends for which both qualitative and quantitative data are imperative. When impact is measured and expected results are achieved, confidence in a theory of change escalates greatly. At this stage, the results from impact studies can inform decisions on program expansion and even influence high-level policy and academic theory. So, while impact is challenging to measure, the result is well worth the effort.

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The graph below shows the relationship between a theory of change, monitoring costs, time, and confidence.



**Figure adapted from** Vedder, A., and B. Weber. *Tools for conservation project design and management*. Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, Yale University.