Women's Empowerment Impact Measurement Initiative (WEIMI)

Part IV: Testing the Theory of Change

Content adapted from: *Picard, M. and Gillingham, S. (2012) Women's Empowerment Impact Measurement Initiative Guidance*

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Introduction: Women's Empowerment Impact Measurement Initiative (WEIMI)

What is WEIMI?

WEIMI was launched by CARE USA and from **2010 to 2012** provided **technical support** to select country offices (COs) **to operationalize key women's empowerment and gender-sensitive high-level indicators**, in the **context** of their **long term programs (LTPs).** The initiative was designed to build on CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII) and the P-Shift efforts. The initiative worked with technical teams in 6 COs to support efforts to **build coherent systems** which **link** rigorous **initiative-level monitoring and evaluation to impact measurement systems**.

WEIMI COs

- Bangladesh
- Burundi
- Egypt
- Mali
- Niger
- Tanzania

What is the WEIMI Guide?

The WEIMI Guide is a harvesting of the lessons learned and good practices of the WEIMI CO teams. A few important things to note about the content in the WEIMI Guide are:

- In view of the impact groups of the six WEIMI COs, the **experience** presented **relates more to women than to girls**.
- The guide only goes as far as the WEIMI COs progressed by the end of the initiative. Hence, the **experience** is **richest in Parts I & II**, while **Parts III & IV** draw more on **external sources**.
- The guide **on its own is not sufficient** to enable a CO to create their impact measurement system – it is **simply a tool for COs to reference** when creating an impact measurement system with the **support of individuals with** the **expertise** to fully support that process.
- The guide provides information on the approach that was taken by the COs as part of the WEIMI initiative and **illustrates one of many ways to approach the development of an impact measurement system** (i.e. it is not "the" guide to creating an impact measurement system for women's and/or girls' empowerment programs).

Who is the WEIMI Guide for?

The target audiences for this guide are:

- **CO teams already engaged in similar work** in women's and/or girls' empowerment or the promotion of gender transformation
- **CO teams that are planning** to develop similar programs
- **Regional teams** working with CO teams to build similar programs

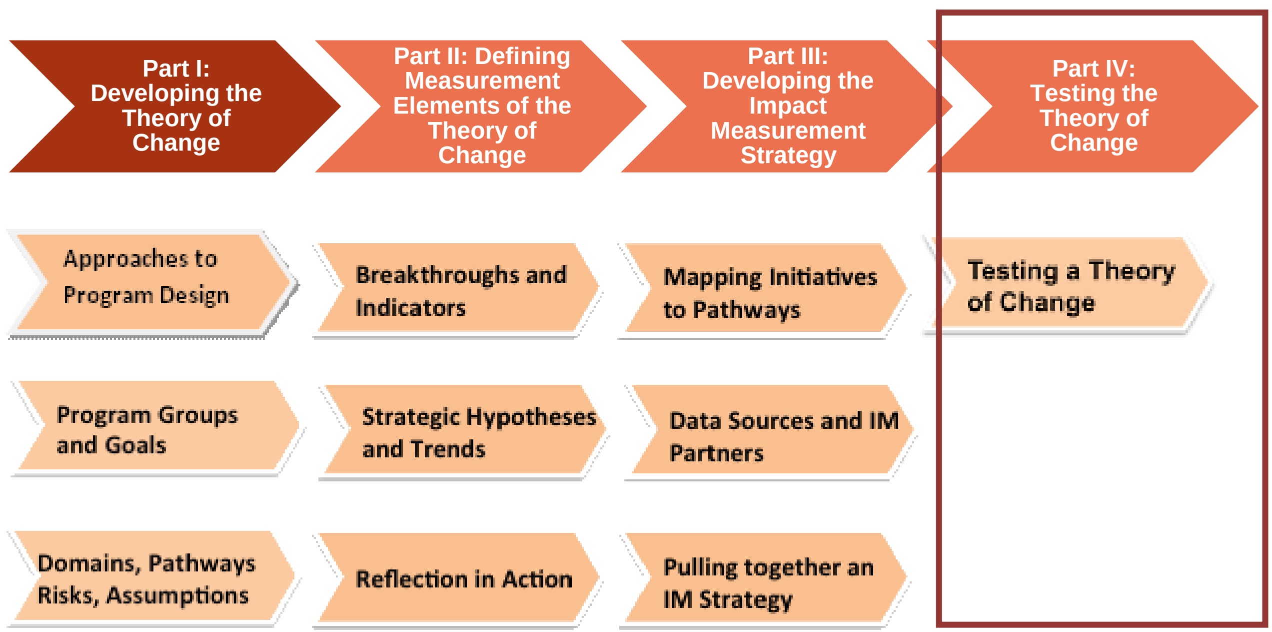
What you will find in the WEIMI Guide?

In the WEIMI Guide you will find the following information organized across four parts:

- **Part I Developing the Theory of Change**: Here you will find the basics of a theory of change (TOC), key considerations for developing a TOC for a women's and/or girls' empowerment program and some tips on how to ensure the quality and robustness of your TOC. This section also includes 3 briefs that illustrate how different CO's approached the development of their LTP; guidance on how to conceptualize impact, sub-impact, target, and stakeholder groups; and how to define domains of change, pathways, assumptions and risks.
- **Part II Defining Measurement Elements of the Theory of Change**: Here you will find ideas on how to conceptualize "impact", the challenges of measurement, areas to focus on for measurement, and key considerations of developing an impact measurement system in the context of women's and/or girls' empowerment programs. This section also includes 3 briefs that provide guidance on defining breakthroughs and indicators; developing hypotheses and monitoring trends, assumptions and risks; and reflection in action.
- **Part III Developing the Impact Measurement Strategy**: Here you will find good practices for measuring your TOC. This section also includes 3 briefs that describe how to map initiatives to pathways; identify and select data sources and partners; and the planning and implementing of a impact measurement strategy.
- **Part IV Testing the Theory Change**: Here you will find lessons from WEIMI COs on testing the TOC. This section also includes 1 brief that speaks to what it means to test your TOC; how to sequence the testing of your TOC; and guiding questions for validating your TOC.

How is the WEIMI Guide Organized?

The WEIMI Guide is organized like a roadmap consisting of 4 Parts with discrete Briefs within each as shown here:



This section of the WEIMI Guide will focus upon **Part IV: Testing the Theory of Change.**

Part 4: Testing the Theory of Change

While you may still be developing strategic hypotheses, designing new initiatives aligned with your TOC, or finalizing your impact measurement system, you may already be taking steps to "test" your theory of change. Testing your TOC is distinct in moving you from the conceptual to the empirical world. You will see that testing your TOC is a continuous process. This section will provide some pointers on how to test and validate your TOC.

What can we learn from the WEIMI COs on testing WE theories of change?

WEIMI Country Offices are in different stages of developing their impact measurement system / strategy and in testing their WE theory of change. They are still on a learning journey, discovering what it takes to set up a measurement system, seeing what is feasible in terms of resources and costs, and taking small steps forward rather than waiting for all the parts of the puzzle to be in place.

Their experience suggests:

(a) Start testing elements of the theory of change, as you implement and design new initiatives. Develop the tools, standards, and policies as you move ahead and gain confidence in what you need to support program measurement and what actually works for you.

(b) As you develop results, share them with others and allow the reflection to generate the next round of questions, in an action-planning cycle. Get into the practice of documenting and sharing knowledge.

(c) Learn from other COs, rather than reinventing the wheel.

Brief 4.1: Testing a Theory of Change

What it means to "test a theory of change"

Testing the theory of change in a very general sense is tantamount to putting into practice any number of elements of your TOC within your women's and/or girls empowerment program. When you implement an initiative that is testing a pathway hypothesis, you are, in essence, testing your TOC. In stricter terms, though, testing refers to a scientific process, using impact measurement tools / methods, to test hypotheses (pathway or strategic) and monitor achievement of breakthroughs, domains of change and the impact goal, using indicators for the latter two.

Testing is really what we intend here, whereas in operationalizing your TOC, you may be implementing your program in accordance with the expected outcomes in your TOC, but not actually measuring the change. So, if you have designed new initiatives that align with one or two pathways in your TOC, that is good; but if you measure change only as it pertains to the donor's M&E requirements and not the your program requirements (specific indicators, hypotheses and breakthroughs), then you are not really testing the TOC. The only way you can be sure that you are testing your TOC is if you have already collected measurement data and have generated results that can be shared.

The importance of testing the theory of change

A theory is nothing more than a theory. Over a 15-year period of a program, much will change within the country context and depending, partially anyway, on the quality of your contextual analysis, some of it may not be so predictable. You will need to adapt your theory as a result of a changing environment, but your empirical evidence of the changes occurring within your impact group will (and should) inform your theory of change. Remember that your theory of change is about making explicit your assumptions not so that you can prove you were right but to question those assumptions and be open to what the evidence is teaching you about social change processes. You will need to update and re-validate your theory of change, as you learn and new evidence becomes available.

Research or evidence from other organizations may also shed light on some of the assumptions in your theory of change. They may also cause you to modify pathways or domains of change in some fashion or to prioritize certain pathways and initiatives. In the end, the impact and quality of your WE program will hinge on a dynamic use of theory of change and not as a static framework. As previously mentioned, make sure your theory of change does not fall into the same trap as a logical framework when experienced as a "lock-frame" that remains fixed and acts as a control tool.

As mentioned in **Part II**, testing the theory of change should enable triple-loop learning – questioning the principles and paradigm of CARE's work in empowering women and girls, if necessary. To aspire to organizational "wisdom," a gender equality/empowerment program must be willing to learn from the evidence it generates and transform these into good practices. This is knowing what you stand for.

As WEIMI COs did in developing their theories of change, inviting other stakeholders into the periodic review of the theory of change to validate it should be part of regular practice. This might include a peer review by an external expert, as CARE Burundi did.

Sequencing in testing the theory of change

It is most unlikely you will be testing the entire theory of change all at once. This would mean that all 10, 12 or however many pathways you have are being tested, through hypotheses, in addition to monitoring progress towards all breakthroughs and measuring against DOC, pathway and goal indicators systematically. You would also be testing all your strategic hypotheses at once. Why is this unlikely?

You may have identified breakthroughs at 5-year intervals, in which case you are monitoring only those breakthroughs in the next five years.

Strategic hypotheses are pieces of research that require a certain investment or the right opportunity. They also require staff time and resources. Moreover, your 3-4 hypotheses may not all be equally urgent.

In the early phase of a program and testing the theory of change, not all initiatives in your CO portfolio will align with the program. It takes time to achieve a level at which most of your pathway hypotheses can be tested.

The order in which you test hypotheses and measure changes should be based on your best judgment and available resources. You will inevitably need to prioritize, as you continue to align initiatives and new funding opportunities with gaps in testing the theory of change. **(See Annex A4.1 Country Office Reflections on the Gaps in the TOC and Annex A4.2 Monitoring Progress toward Pathways)**

The sequencing also begs the question:

"Should you start with the "big picture" hypothesis (the links between the DOCs and the impact goal), then make your way down the levels of the TOC? Or should you first test all the ones within pathways, then proceed to the level of domains and so on?"

There is no one answer to this question or any particular order to follow to test the hypotheses. The answer will vary depending on the situation in each CO and with each TOC. For example, if you have a particular hypothesis that is really crucial for how you proceed with your program (in which case many of your strategies and approaches are organized around it), but there is so little evidence that you cannot proceed, then you may want to consider testing that hypothesis first. You would not want to go ahead with a TOC based around a single hypothesis that remains unverified, nor would you want to invest resources into strategies and approaches without knowing the validity of your assumption.

Furthermore, the CO can be opportunistic in terms of testing the TOC. If there is a planned evaluation for a project, which you are going to conduct anyway and there are resources available for that, you can look into ways to incorporate elements of testing the TOC into that evaluation.

For instance, an annual evaluation may be planned for a women's empowerment project which has "engaging men and boys" as a strategy to empower women. At the same time, you may have designed a TOC for a program on women's empowerment and chosen men and boys' engagement as one of the major pathways. You should take the opportunity of that project evaluation to test a hypothesis from this pathway. This situation of testing a hypothesis may not reach all the way to testing how the domains of change contribute to the impact goal in your TOC. But it can certainly give you nice ways to test hypotheses within your pathways.

A set of guiding questions for validating the theory of change

As you test your theory of change, you will be producing evidence at pathway, domain of change, and impact levels. Use your reflection events as an opportunity to create the learning loop between the evidence and the theory of change. The overall guiding question is:

Is the theory of change or parts of it still valid? What needs to be modified or updated?

There are in fact two excellent external guides for assessing your theory of change:

Guide	Description
Criteria for Assessing the Evaluability of a Theory of Change	This addresses the question of assessing the evaluability of a theory of change and is a summary of an eval online discussion. It will give you a sense of what the broader community of evaluators are saying about theories of change (See Criteria for Assessing the Evaluability of a Theory of Change).
Theory of Change: A Thinking and Action Approach to Navigate in the Complexity of Social Change Processes	This has guidance to assess the quality of your theory of change. It is the already cited UNDP/Hivos publication (see Assessing the quality of your theory of change) that includes a set of questions for each methodology stage in developing the theory of change.

Otherwise, you are encouraged to rely on the following set of guiding questions that builds off of the draft impact measurement strategy for CARE Egypt:

Relating to indicators and breakthroughs:

- How are partners contributing to progress
- What is the distribution of impact over geographic area and the impact group population? How can the differences be explained?
- Are there rival explanations for the achievement of outcomes that may lie outside the hypitheses and causal relationships in the TOC?

Relationship between pathways and domains of change:

- Were these the right pathways to achieve the domain of change?
- How did the pathways contribute to achieving the DOC indicators?
- Are the pathways sufficient to achieve domains of change? If not, what else needs to happen?

Relationship between DOCs and the impact goal:

- Are these the right domains to change to focus on the coming years?
- How is the synergy between domains of change shaping progress (or not)?

Relating to macro-level trends and context:

- Are macro-level trends in accord with your expectations? Which assumptions need to be modified which still hold?
- How do contextual changes affect expected changed in the theory of change?
- How is the political, socila, and economic environment affecting the pace of change or possibilities for achieving high-level impacy?

Achieving impact:

- How are you collaborating or joining forces with others at regional and national level to achieve impact at the population level?
- What can you learn from other development actors to spread impact?
- Will overlap with other programs in the CO portfolio help to chieve greater and more lasting impact because of synergy?
- How well are you doing in scaling up strategies (eg: what effect is advocacy having)?
- In which geographic areas do you need a greater investment?

These are questions that can be discussed in reflection workshops and with a broader spectrum of stakeholders whose work is also contributing to the empowerment of the impact group. Cast the net wide, at least during program evaluation events, to validate your theory of change.

ANNEXES for Brief 4.1 (**Annex A4.1-4.2**)

Annex A4.1: Country Office Reflections on the Gaps in the TOC

CARE Tanzania

Tanzania first did a mapping of initiatives to pathways and came up with the following observations:

- Some initiatives, such as WAGE and SAGE, were designed to encompass several pathways. SAGE was also designed to capture all three signature programs. Others, such as WEZESHA, were designed to bring initiatives into one operational area.
- There is a preponderance of initiatives clustered around the first pathway on utilization of services.
- There should be more initiatives on pathway 6 than what is documented.
- There are no initiatives addressing pathway 4.

The distribution reveals some of the gaps and should guide prioritizing design work, however, as participants pointed out, this is often difficult – to find a donor interested in CARE`s particular priority area – in the current funding environment.

CARE Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been particularly adept at a process for developing new initiatives and proposals with program gaps in mind. This is a 'filter' for bids and proposals. The Program Development Unit looks to see which domains of change are lagging behind and tries to fill those gaps. Consultation is done with the PQ Unit, to also ensure impact indicators are included in the M&E systems for initiatives. "The PDU does an analysis [of a tender] and shares it with ACDs and with Directors, then they make go/no-go decision. ACDs, Directors, and CD are involved and form a team. Also look at resources and timeframe and whether we need to hire a consultant. Generally, in the case of winning proposals, the win rate is higher for those designed internally" (PDU Director).

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Annex A4.2 Monitoring Progress toward Pathways

Track progress against indicators for each pathway and during your annual (or more frequent) reflection sessions, note the progress and graph it to compare where you are vs. where you expect to be, for each indicator.
Using the graph is a visual that can be helpful in triggering a discussion such as:

- Why have we made so little progress on pathway 1 and 2? Was this to be expected?
- Did we not invest enough in some pathways? Why not?
- Is the lesser investment and allocation of resources to a specific pathway affecting progress for other pathways?

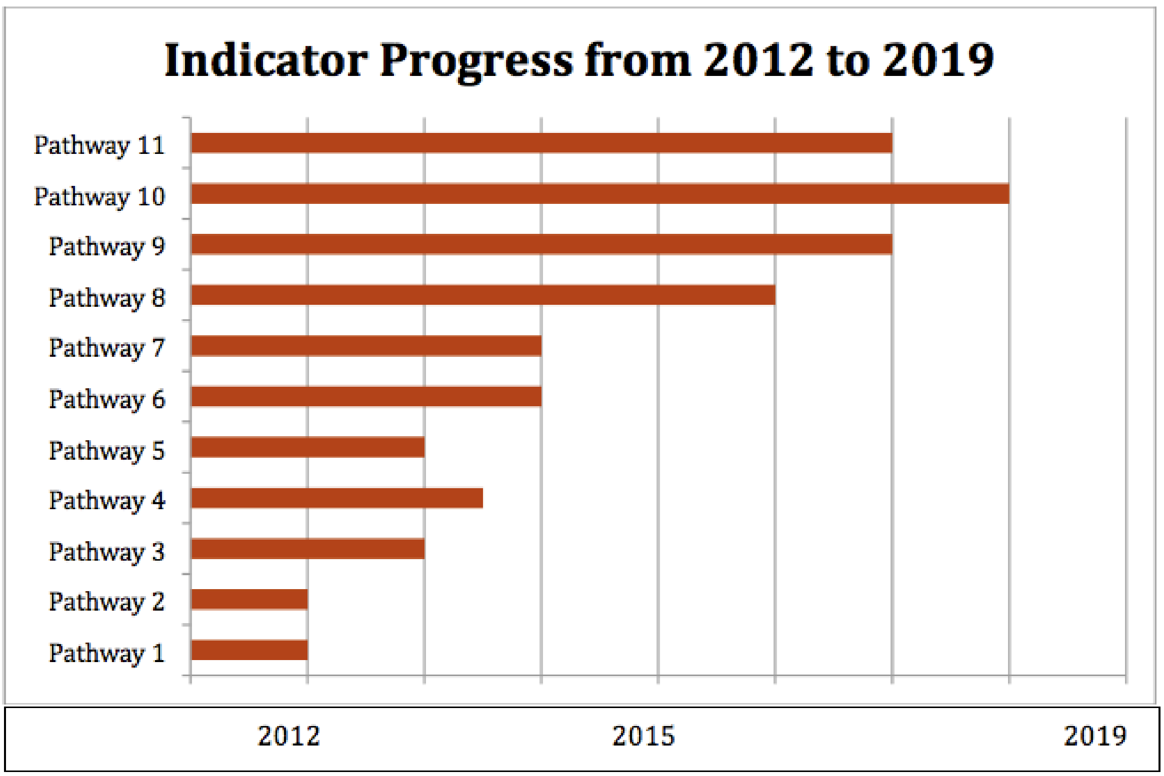

Illustration of Progress by Indicator over Time
(For the sake of simplifying here, it assumes one indicator for each pathway. This is not always the case. Also, it does not show values, it is simply for illustration purposes.)

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