Theory of Change and Value Proposition

Ford
Foundation

1

The project does not offer a clear Theory of Change — or, if offered, it is tenuous, misguided, or oversimplified.

🚩 **AT A GLANCE**

→ A clear Theory of Change is necessary to understand how a proposed project will lead to a certain impact.

→ The Theory of Change in "tech for good" projects may be oversimplified or misguided due to insufficient understanding of the problem or overconfidence in a technical solution.

→ To determine if a Theory of Change is misguided, consider the assumptions behind the project and challenge them in conversation with the grantee or vendor.

Theory of Change describes how and why a proposed project is assumed to lead to a certain impact. Sometimes the Theory of Change in "tech for good" projects may be too linear, oversimplified, or misguided. These can be due to the developers having an insufficient understanding of the problem space or the social problems that lie at the center of the issue. It may also be due to overconfidence in a technical solution to a decades (or centuries-old) social issue, sometimes referred to as "tech solutionism" or "technochauvinism." For example, a tool, program, or contract may offer the assumption that increasing surveillance improves policing and thus achieves greater public safety, which is oversimplified and misguided given the disproportionate impact of policing on lower-income Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities.

To understand whether a Theory of Change is misguided or oversimplified, focus on the assumptions that informed the ideation of the project. In your conversation with a potential grantee or vendor, try to challenge those assumptions, understand the sources that informed those assumptions, and introduce hypothetical risks posed by the project. During these conversations, you might also identify whether the project offers a macro-level solution to a hyper-local issue or assumes a "one-size-fits-all" mentality.

EXAMPLE

Researchers in a university turned to machine learning-based solutions – using various data sources such as satellite images, temperature anomalies, and food production indices – to predict future "climate refugee" flows. Their main goal is to help humanitarian actors allocate tailored and timely resources based on estimates of refugee numbers, arrival times, points of entry, etc. Their goal is also to help governments prepare for future population influxes, develop integration policies, assess job market needs, etc.

However, many humanitarian advocates have criticized these types of prediction frameworks for over-simplifying the causes behind refugee flows, which often depend upon a complex and unpredictable web of political, economic, and social factors. Therefore, it's logical to expect that such well-meaning predictive experiments and optimistic assumptions about governments' political will for assisting asylum seekers may result in greater immigration controls or militarization of borders.

Questions to Identify this Red Flag

What is your organization-wide Theory of Change and how does this project fit into that Theory of Change?

How does your Theory of Change relate to others in the community that bring a different Theory of Change to the same problem? What are some examples?

What assumptions informed the development of this project? What information and experiences guided those assumptions?

What risks might your assumptions lead to and how would your project's Theory of Change tolerate or adapt to those risks?

What are some criticisms you have heard about this project from those who share your broader goals?

2

The proposal is a strategic misfit; the product is not related to other projects/grants that the potential grantee works on.

🚩 **AT A GLANCE**

→ Proposed project may not align with grantee's current projects/grants.

→ This strategic misfit might happen due to insufficient preparation, including poor needs assessment, lack of training/expertise, and redirecting funding from proven approaches.

→ To identify this red flag ask about prior experience, needs assessments effort, definition of success, and measurement/revert-back plan.

With the proliferation of data, funders have shown significant interest in funding data-driven and digital technology-enabled solutions. As a result, some NGOs and nonprofits— including many that may not have any experience with digital-enabled solutions — are moving into this field without adequate preparation, developing digital services either by partnering with technology firms or by cultivating in-house capacity.

However, these projects may be prone to failure due to the following factors: insufficient needs assessment, lack of training and in-house expertise in deploying and maintaining services, over-reliance on the service, and diverting funding from already proven approaches to new and shiny digital solutions.

EXAMPLE

A humanitarian organization started developing a chatbot to provide translation services and legal assistance for filling out forms for asylum seekers. As a result, they decided to cut the number of human translators and volunteer caseworkers. The chatbot relies on automated translation services. For some languages, it causes "lost in translation" issues.

However, there is not enough human assistance to troubleshoot issues. This causes delays and confusion among clients. Due to a lack of technical expertise and policy safeguards, there are also concerns about data leaks, identity theft, and exposure of asylum seekers' personally identifiable information (PII) to government agencies in home and host countries.
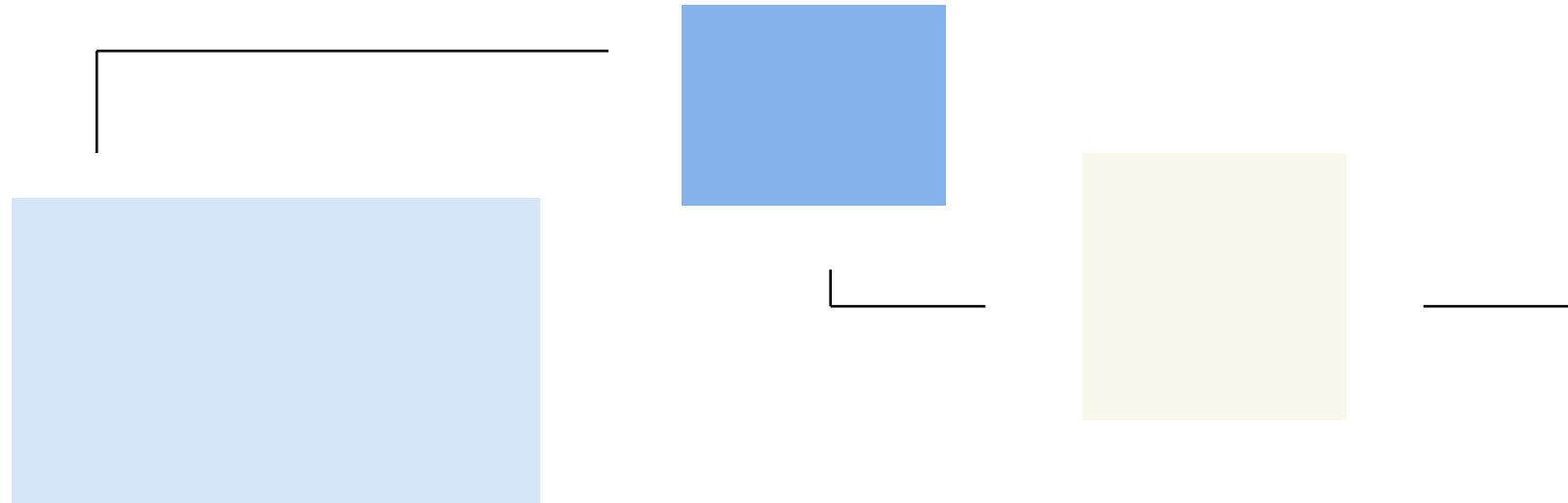
Questions to Identify this Red Flag

Does the organization have prior experience implementing technology-enabled solutions? If not, what is your plan for gaining technical expertise? Have you considered partnering with a group that has more technical expertise? If so, how did you decide on choosing them?

How does this project fit within the current work at your organization? How does it fit within your longer-term organizational goals?

What types of assessments have you conducted to understand the necessity of this project? With whom did you conduct these needs assessments?

What types of organizational changes will you go through as a result of developing this project? (e.g., diverse funding, restructuring teams, new partnerships, new roles, new organizational training)

What does success look like? How does the community you are intending to impact view success?

What is your plan to measure the success of the project, and what is your revert-back plan in case of failure?

3

The project is merely a new product with no prospect of policy, cultural, or systemic change. The solution promises to provide a quick fix ("band-aid") to a long-standing issue.

🚩 **AT A GLANCE**

→ Proposed project may only offer a quick fix without creating policy, cultural, or systemic change.

→ It lacks critical thinking and adequate metrics to measure long-term impact, resulting in a focus on short-term quantifiable metrics and reinforcing systemic discrimination.

→ To identify this red flag ask about the social and economic impacts of the project, evidence of past success/failure, and strategies on supporting necessary policy changes.

During our interview with a civil society member, they mentioned that "tech for good" projects in the public sector are often built "without thinking critically about what they're trying to accomplish and whether or not technology is the best way to accomplish those goals."[1]

This issue arises not only because there is a lack of critical thinking, but also because of a lack of adequate metrics to define and measure success. In software systems, the criteria for "success" are often overtly quantitative. These quantifiable metrics may include the number of active users, the speed and reliability of a system, its efficiency or cost savings, and the accuracy of the output compared to a certain benchmark.

However, the factor that should differentiate public sector digital services from any other digital product is their longer-term impact. And it is not always possible to measure such an impact quantitatively over a short period of time. Focusing disproportionately on short-term and quantitative metrics may distract funders/vendors from assessing the longer-term results of a project such as its impacts on public policies, legal reforms, social movements, and addressing power asymmetries within and between government agencies, companies, and community groups.

This may result in reinforcing systemic discrimination and replicating politics as usual. Moreover, if the technology is trying to fix a systemic problem, the funder should take even greater care to ascertain whether this is a band aid solution to addressing an issue that instead requires larger scale legal or political reform, targeted funding, etc.

EXAMPLE

A location-based algorithmic tool drives a policing program to help predict where crime will occur, derived from technology deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The impact of the project is measured primarily quantitatively, overlooking long-term impacts on local communities. This tool is an example of a short-sighted response to mitigating crime, rather than taking steps to reduce policing and thus mitigating other factors that contribute to crime.

[1] "From an interview with a director of a civil rights organization.

Questions to Identify this Red Flag

How does this project help reveal underlying social and economic issues? (e.g., unjust housing practices, power imbalances in the criminal legal system)

What does "success" look like in 1 year, 5 years, and 10 years? (Depending on the type of the project, the time period can differ.)

Do you have qualitative and/or quantitative evidence relating to how a similar product/service has worked, or why it has failed in the past?

How has the uptake of this product been measured (qualitatively and quantitatively)? How will this lead to harm reduction to affected communities?

What types of policy changes do you envision as a result of this project's uptake?

What policies have to change to make the tech solution truly viable? Are you supporting the advocates pushing for these policies?

RESOURCES

- Smart City Playbook, the City of Boston
- ShotSpotter Alerts Rarely Lead to Evidence from The City of Chicago Office of Inspector General's (OIG)
- Predictive Policing Explained
- Pitfalls of Predictive Policing
- Robinson, David G. Voices in the Code: A Story about People, Their Values, and the Algorithm They Made. Russell Sage Foundation, 2022.