The Social Framework as an alternative to the Logical Framework

Posted on 1 February, 2008 – 12:00 PM

Caveat: This post describe a proposal by Rick Davies that is still a work in progress, being tested to see how well it works and where it works. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Please use the Comment box at the end of this posting.

A Social Framework...

- is a detailed description of an expected pathway of influence through a wider network of people, groups or organisations.
- is a way of summarizing the theory-of-change within a development project, in a form that can be monitored and evaluated. And which can be easily explained to others.
- is a Logical Framework re-designed as if people and their relationships mattered

Network diagrams are useful visual tools for mapping and modelling the complex contexts in which many development activities take place. The Social Framework is a separate but complimentary tool, for providing a summary textual description of project intentions within that context, but in an alternate form to the Logical Framework

The structure of a Social Framework:

Different versions can be created:

- Varying in detail
  - Simple versions will only show a chain of actors (blue rows below)
  - Detailed versions will also describe the relationships connecting them (yellow rows below)
- Varying in length
  - The shortest version may have a chain of only two or three actors (two or more rows)
  - Long versions may have a chain of four or more actors (four or more rows)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of expected changes in</th>
<th>Observable indicators</th>
<th>Who will have this information</th>
<th>Assumptions about other actors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actor 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>their relationship</td>
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<td>Actor 3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>their relationship</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Actor 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>their relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Actor 1</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
This chain of relationships has some similarity with the concepts of [Value Chains](#) and [Supply Chains](#).

**The differences between the Social and Logical Framework**

The two frameworks appear similar in that both describe an intended process of change as a series of events taking place across a sequence of rows. Starting at the bottom and going upwards. But there are important differences…

**Time versus people**

In the Logical Framework this vertical dimension represents *the flow of time*, starting from the present at the bottom and moving to the future at the top. This flow is broken into different stages, represented by each row. The types of events taking place in each of these rows are given different names, typically: Activities, Outputs, Purpose (or outcome) and Goal (or impact). One of the challenges facing users of the Logical Framework is agreeing on where events should be placed within which categories. For example, as activities or outputs, or as outcomes or impacts. Communicating the difference between these categories to non-specialists is even more of a challenge.

In the Social Framework the vertical dimension represents *a chain of actors connected by their relationships*. Actors can be individuals, organisations or groups, or larger categories of organisations or groups. This choice depends on the scale of event that need to be described by the Social Framework. In the Social Framework, the *relationships* between actors are the means by which change happens. In the Logical Framework change is often described in more abstract terms.

**Length and direction of influence**

Unlike the four rows in the Logical Framework, this chain can be as long or short as is needed. Unlike the Logical Framework causation is likely to work in both directions, up and down the chain of relationships. Actors influence others, and they are also influenced by those others.

**Using the traditional four columns**

Both the Social and Logical Framework involve the use of four columns: a narrative description of the expected change, observable indicators of those changes (OVIs), sources of information on those indicators (MoVs), and assumptions about those changes’ relationships to wider events. The Social Framework design has deliberately kept, but adapted, these elements of the Logical Framework.

The narrative column describes the *expected changes in the actors (and their relationships with each other)*. In the Logical Framework the narrative description is expected to be written in a depersonalised passive voice. In contrast, the the actor-centred description in the Social Framework will make it much easier to understand, and communicate, the “storyline”.

The MoV column does not simply say where the necessary information (about the expected changes) can be found, but also *who will know about these changes*. 
Information needs to be known about by someone to be of any use. Information that exists but is not known to anyone is in effect useless.

The assumptions column describes *what other relationships will also be important*, because their actions (or inaction) may affect what happens to the actor in each row of the Social Framework. It is important to remember that most Social Frameworks will describe a chain of actors forming a pathway through a wider and more complex network of relationships. As shown in this imagined example below.

In a Social Framework there is still a connecting logic, as there is in the Logical Framework. However it is a social logic, with this type of form:

**If …. happens in the relationship between A and B**

**And**, if P, Q and R continue to help B as they have done in the past (= Assumptions)

**Then …. will happen in B’s relationship with C**

![Diagram of social framework](image)

**Distributed accountability**

One of the potential benefits of the Social Framework is that because there are change objectives for each actor in a pathway, responsibility for the whole chain functioning as intended is distributed amongst all the actors in that pathway. In Logical Framework descriptions of projects, responsibility for success often seems to lay almost solely with one organisation, usually that one closest to the intended beneficiaries. For more on this idea, see my blog posting on [distributed accountability](#) in the Katine project in Uganda.

**Potential complications**

**Multiple pathways**

In a given setting there may be more than one pathway. The diagram below describes in simplified terms the kinds of actors and relationships in the Guardian funded [Katine project](#) in Uganda. In the longer term it is the functioning of the pathway that connects
Elected representatives (1) to Government administrative structures (2) to Government services (5) and Households (7) that is most concern to AMREF.

But in the short term AMREF is involved in other shorter pathways in order to help realise these longer term changes. Its top priority, in terms of where it is investing time and effort, is probably the pathway connecting AMREF (4) with Community groups (6) and Households (7). It is training Village Health Teams (VHTs), helping establish Water Source Committees, and supporting Parent Teachers Associations (PTAs). In doing so it is making various assumptions about the surrounding actors. For example, that the district health centres (part of 6) will supervise the VHTs.

The pathway connecting AMREF (6) to Government services (5) and Households (7) could be described as second in priority. In that pathway AMREF might be providing training to health centre staff, including how to supervise the VHTs. It might also be providing training to teachers, including how to make best use of PTAs. While providing this training it is also making assumptions about other actors. For example, that government policy on VHTs and PTAs will continue to be supportive of their involvement.

The pathway from AMREF (6) to Government administrative structures (2) to Government services (5) and Households (7) is probably third in importance. In that pathway AMREF will be sharing information with government officials (2) and may also be invited to contribute to some annual planning processes at that level.

In summary, the project strategy involves the use of a number of pathways, and could be described using a number of social frameworks. The contents in the assumptions column in each social framework will show how events along that pathway are expected to be linked into events happening in other pathways. Within the set of social frameworks, there are some describing where the long term changes need to be made. And there are others describing the interventions that will be needed to achieve those changes.

**Multiple views of how someone should change**
For any given actor in a chain of relationships there may be different views about how that actor should change (e.g. they will have their own view, and so will others in immediate relationships with them). How do you reconcile these different views?

If the Social Framework (or even a Logical Framework) was developed through a participatory process then these differences should be expected to arise during that process, and may be resolved. It should be relatively easy to design a Social Framework by participatory means because each stakeholder should be able to see where they fit in to the picture, either directly as an actor in the pathway, or indirectly via an Assumptions statement in one or more of the rows.

If the Social Framework (or a Logical Framework) was developed to reflect the views of one stakeholder, then their conflicting view of how another actor needs to change may limit their ability to affect change down a given pathway. Or, on discovering that there is a difference in views, they may then try to persuade the other to change in the way they think is needed, and end up being successful.

**How do you fit short term, medium term and long term changes in Social Framework?**

For a given actor there may be different objectives (expected changes) for different time periods. In the short term they may be to be able to do x, in the medium term they may hope to be to do y and in the long term they may want to be to do z. Multiple objectives can be listed, in time order. Similarly with the indicators for each of these in the next column.

Changes in the short versus long term can also be captured by describing different kinds of pathways. In the Katine example above, AMREF would like to see changes in the pathway connecting Elected representatives (1) to Government administrative structures (2) to Government services (5) and Households (7). But in the short to medium term it needs to be involved in other pathways, such as that connecting AMREF (4) with Community groups (6) and Households (7).

**How does all this relate to Outcome Mapping?**

I am not an advocate of Outcome Mapping, but there is an overlap in approach with the actor focused structure of the Social Framework. Elsewhere, I have written a [one-pager](#) looking at the similarities and differences between Outcome Mapping and Network Models (which Social Frameworks relate to).

If people are using Outcome Mapping but also want something like the Logical Framework to summarise the project intentions (and theory of change) then the following interpretations might be useful:

- In a Social Framework, adjacent actors are each others’ *Boundary Partners*. Other actors mentioned in the Assumptions column of a given actor might also become their Boundary Partners.
- *Outcome Challenges* are the expected changes to be describing in the first column, for each actor in the Social Framework.
• Progress markers could be listed in the Indicators column, for the respective Boundary Partner
• Strategy maps could be described using a network diagram similar to the one used immediately above. Each pathway would need to be highlighted, including their relative importance.

For related posts see:

• Social Frameworks: An improvement on the Logical Framework? (the original posting on the idea, on the Rick on the Road blog)
• Network models for representing project settings, plans and outcomes
• The Editor’s concerns (about uses of the Logical Framework) (scroll down the page to the end)
• VisuLyzer software: for visualising and analysing networks

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1. 4 Responses to “The Social Framework as an alternative to the Logical Framework”

2. Hi Rick,

I grabbed a moment to look at this site. It reminds me of making sociograms - that were part of my teacher training - to map the intensities of connections between pupils to see who were the ‘opinion leaders’ through which influence could be exerted over the whole class. What also resonated were the (overlapping) PRA chapati diagrams mapping actor/institutional relations. Finally, what sprang to mind are the Actor+Transtacion+Motivation (ATM) units of analysis that I used for a grounded theory approach to identify patterns of helping relationships between poor people. (There is a monograph on this if you are interested.) Finally, stakeholder analysis assesses relationships from the point of view of power which probably need to be factored into the mapping somehow. So, I think that the approach you are exploring has a range of supportive ideas and mechanisms.

I particularly like the specific attention to different time frames and the notion of boundary spanners as a distinct analytic category within organisational analysis.
Organisational transactions are often highly personalised (E.g., donor desk officers) and may not represent the organisation as a whole.

Methinks that a starting point for practical use would be in mapping (complex) contexts, separating this from an application akin to log framing of interventions.

Thoughts for now. More later.

Travel well,

Alan

By Alan Fowler on Aug 30, 2008

3. Nice article, I am a student from Mumbai. Doing my MBA in social enterprise and currently working on a project of Performance evaluation of NGOs.

   I really like the model suggested by you but I have a query. I am not clear how it can be directly used. In the sense can you explain the table of actors, OVI and assumptions with a concrete example of an NGO as I am little confused on how to use it.

   Regards
   Sonam Chawla

   By Sonam on Feb 10, 2009

4. To add more to what I said above. If you give an example of say evaluating a website like Mande.co.uk. How would it fit in a social framework of this kind???

   By Sonam on Feb 10, 2009

5. Hello Rick,
   Very interesting thoughts!
   I myself have been working with and on the Logical Framework for 2 decades. I still find it useful, although it has its limitations - like any other tool has. Within the context of project management, I have worked on adapting the Logframe towards the “lower end” of its hierarchy, because I always found the use of “main activities” little helpful. They are generally so highly aggregated that they don’t explain very much. Therefore, I have connected the output level with the WBS (Work Breakdown Structure) and other tools, in order to get closer to a realistic strategy and operational planning.
   As far as I understand, you have been concerned with the “upper end” of the Logframe, which are the outcomes and impacts. And you are right, in fact, these are actually what matters. And it is definitely true that development project must focus on behavioral changes. Therefore, your approach lies exactly within the actual mainstream of development institutions, which stress very much on the impacts.
However, I don’t see the Social Framework and an alternative to the Logical Framework, but rather a complementary tool. For projects or programs, one will always need to construct and explicit its rationale, but I can see the Social Framework as an excellent tool to work with the stakeholders to make clear what changes in behavior and relationships have to occur, in order to achieve development goals.

I would appreciate very much if you could provide an example of a filled in framework, to make clearer how you actually apply the tool.

Thanks in advance,

Peter

By Peter on Feb 28, 2009