Theory of change guidance for Living Lab Projects

1. Purpose

A Theory of Change (ToC) provides a simple explanation of how and why a Living Peace Lab project expects its activities to contribute to societal change.

It helps project teams move beyond describing what they will do to clarify what they expect to change, for whom, and how they will know whether change is occurring. This distinction is important: activities and outputs are under relatively direct project control, while outcomes and longer-term impacts are increasingly influenced by other actors and contextual factors.

The Theory of Change should be developed during project design and reviewed during implementation and evaluation. It should be proportionate to the scale and complexity of the project rather than becoming an additional administrative exercise. This reflects the wider principle that impact measurement should be relevant and proportionate to the initiative concerned.

2. Developing the Theory of Change

Project teams should develop their Theory of Change with relevant societal stakeholders wherever possible. Stakeholder participation is particularly important in Living Labs because co-creation should extend from problem framing through implementation and evaluation.

Start with the change you want to contribute to and work backwards to identify what needs to happen for that change to occur. A simple Theory of Change should answer the following questions:

Element	Guiding question
Challenge	What societal challenge or opportunity are we addressing, and who is affected?
Intended change	What change do we ultimately want to contribute to?
Outcomes	What realistic changes do we expect for people, organisations, or practices?
Outputs	What will the project directly produce or deliver?
Activities	What will we do, and how will stakeholders participate?
Assumptions	What needs to be true for one step to lead to the next?
Evidence	How will we know whether the expected changes are occurring?

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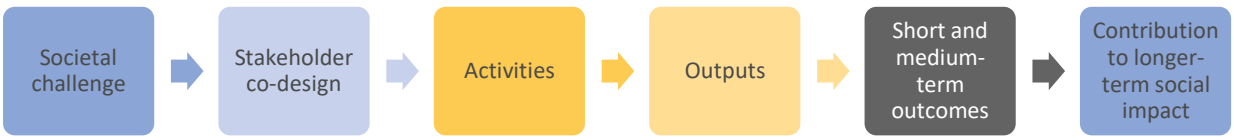
3. A simple project logic

The resulting logic can be represented as:

Figure 1. *Simplified Theory of Change for Living Peace Lab projects.*



Outputs are the immediate products or deliverables of an activity, whereas outcomes describe changes in knowledge, skills, behaviour, relationships or organisational practices. Impact concerns broader and more sustained societal change. Projects should therefore avoid presenting activities or outputs as impact.

For example:

Activity: co-creation workshops with young people and local organisations
Output: four workshops and a jointly developed intervention
Outcome: stronger collaboration between participating organisations and increased participation of young people
Impact contribution: greater social inclusion and community participation

4. Define a realistic contribution

Living Peace Lab Projects are not expected to solve complex societal challenges independently. Longer-term social change is influenced by many actors and contextual factors. The Theory of Change should therefore describe the project's credible contribution to change rather than claiming that the project alone caused the eventual impact.

This distinction is particularly appropriate for Living Labs: outcomes generally lie within the project's **sphere of influence**, while longer-term impacts are largely beyond its direct control.

A useful question is:

If this project is successful, what should be different for the people, organisations or communities involved—and how could that contribute over time to more peaceful, just and inclusive societies?

5. Identify assumptions

The links in a Theory of Change are not automatic. Teams should identify the main assumptions underlying their proposed pathway.

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For example:

Activity: students and community organisations co-design a new service.
Assumption: community partners have sufficient time and capacity to participate meaningfully.
Expected outcome: the resulting service responds more effectively to community needs.

Only the most important assumptions need to be recorded, particularly those that could affect whether expected outcomes are achieved. Making assumptions explicit is a core function of Theory of Change and supports subsequent monitoring and adaptation.

6. Identify evidence of change

For each main output and outcome, identify one or more realistic sources of evidence. Evidence may include quantitative and qualitative information, such as participation data, surveys, interviews, focus groups, stakeholder feedback, observation, testimonials, project records or evidence of changes in organisational practice.

Indicators should be selected after the intended change has been defined, rather than allowing available indicators to determine project objectives. Detailed requirements for indicators, evidence collection and evaluation are provided in **Section X – Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Reporting** of the Living Peace Lab Guidelines and the associated Monitoring and Evaluation Resources.

7. Use the Theory of Change throughout the project

The Theory of Change is a working tool, not simply part of the project application.

Teams should use it to:

- design activities around the intended change;
- monitor whether activities and outputs are leading towards expected outcomes;
- review assumptions and unexpected developments;
- adapt implementation where necessary;
- evaluate what changed and what the project contributed; and
- communicate the project's results and learning.

The Theory of Change may therefore be updated as evidence and stakeholder feedback emerge. This iterative use is consistent with Living Lab practice and supports both ex-ante planning and ex-post evaluation.

8. Quick checklist

Before finalising the project proposal, check that the Theory of Change:

- ✓ identifies a clear societal challenge and target group(s);
- ✓ reflects the perspectives of relevant stakeholders;

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- ✓ distinguishes activities, outputs, outcomes and longer-term impact;
- ✓ describes a realistic contribution to the EUPeace aims of peaceful, just and inclusive societies;
- ✓ identifies the main assumptions behind the expected pathway to change;
- ✓ includes feasible evidence or indicators for the main outputs and outcomes; and
- ✓ can realistically be used for monitoring, learning and evaluation during the project.

9. Resources and further reading

For teams wishing to develop their Theory of Change or impact approach in greater depth, the **following resources are recommended:**

Forbat, J., Sahakian, M., Annaheim, J., & Sentic, A. (2025). Assessing processes and results of living labs: Toward a general framework. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy, 21*(1), Article 2526892. https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2025.2526892 ⇨ Particularly useful for understanding why Theory of Change is appropriate for Living Labs and how stakeholder participation, different time horizons and spheres of control/influence can be incorporated into evaluation.

Hehenberger, L., Harling, A.-M., & Scholten, P. (2015). *A practical guide to measuring and managing impact* (2nd ed.). European Venture Philanthropy Association. https://www.impact-europe.net/sites/www.evpa.ngo/files/publications/IMM_Guide_2015_EN.pdf ⇨ A more detailed reference for teams requiring additional guidance on setting objectives, analysing stakeholders, defining outcomes and indicators, verifying impact, and monitoring and reporting.

About EUPeace

EUPeace is the European University for Peace, Justice, and Inclusive Societies.
Our mission is to provide tomorrow's citizens with the skills, knowledge, and experience to cultivate Peace, Justice, and Inclusive Societies. We explicitly address all sciences and fields, from the humanities and social sciences to the natural and life sciences as well as engineering, and are inspired by the rebuilt bridge of Mostar – the symbol in our logo – as a testament to how dialogue can overcome conflict.

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