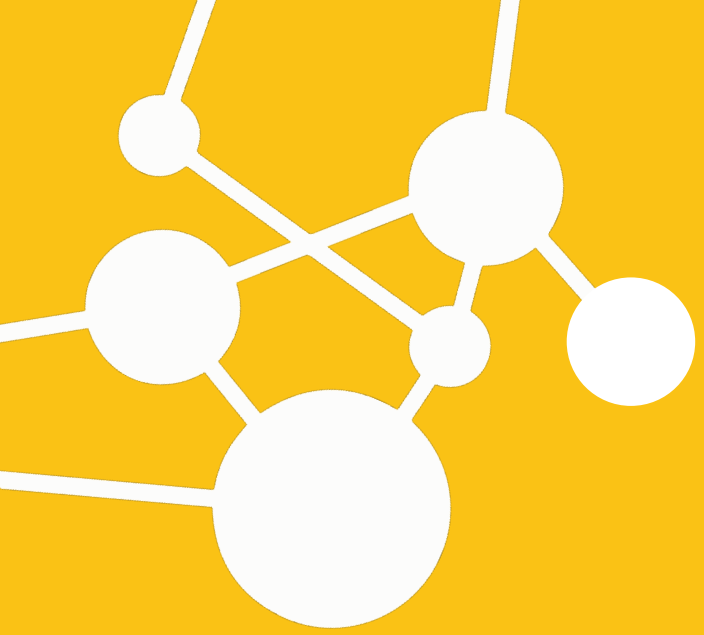

Theory of Change Guide
No. 3 : Outcomes Pathway

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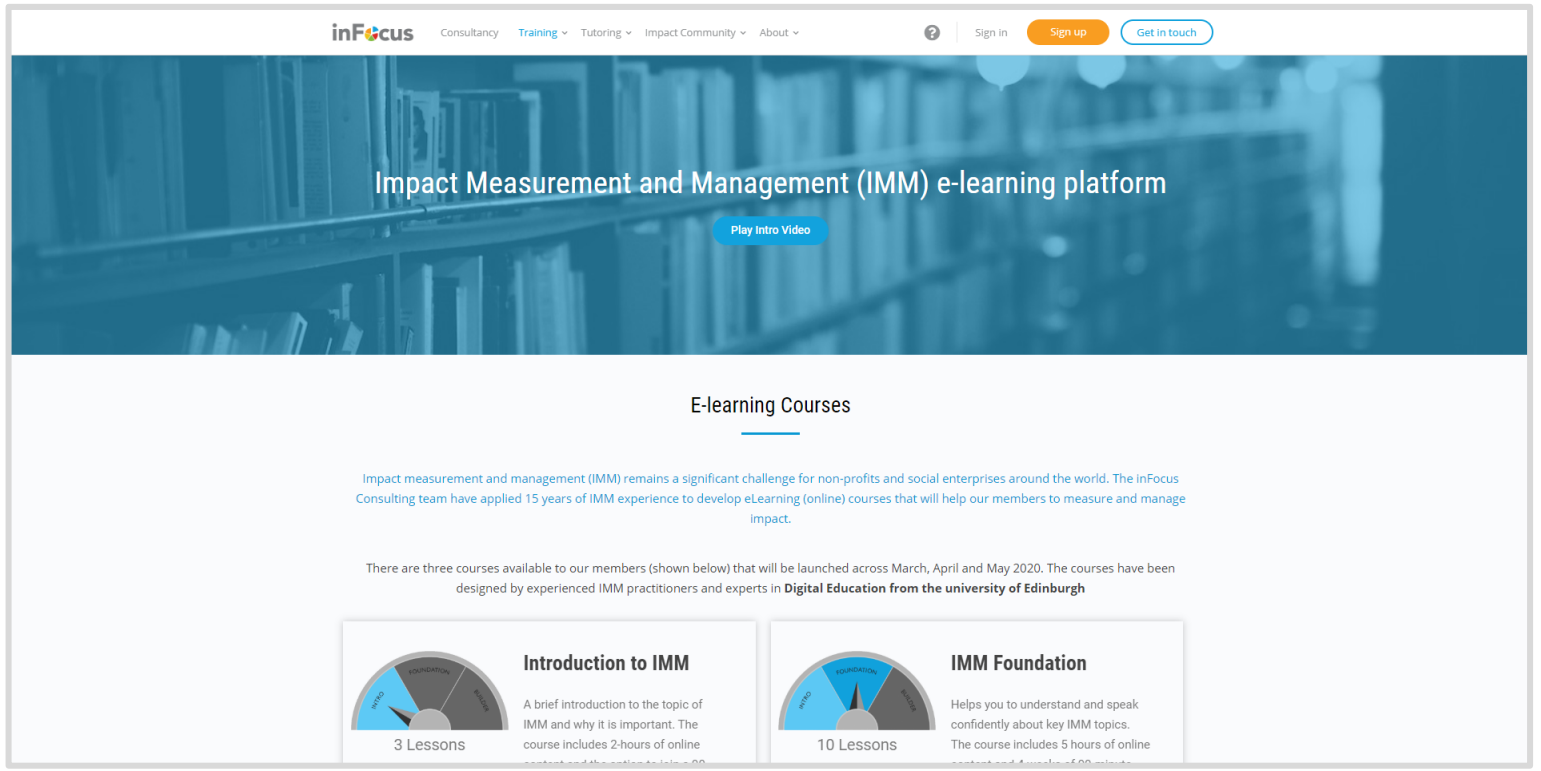
Introduction

This guide forms part of the inFocus Impact Measurement and Management (IMM) eLearning course (https://impactinfocus.com/e-learning/). This is one of a series of five guides that each look at how to develop each section of a theory of change.



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When to develop an 'Outcomes Pathway'

At inFocus we develop the outcomes following the impact, as these are the changes (from your services or products) and from other stakeholders, that lead to the impact.

1. Situation

Problem

The social or environmental problem or challenge that the organisation is seeking to address

Target Audience

The target audience that will be directly supported by the organisation's services or products

Stakeholders

The stakeholders that can influence the problem positively, or negatively

3. Outcomes pathway

Outcomes are the changes needed from the organisation and in the wider system for the impact to take place. These are often called preconditions, as they relate to the conditions required for the outcomes or impact to occur.

2. Impact

Impact refers to the longest-term social or environmental change that your service or product contributes to in your local and wider social context.

4. Activities and Inputs

The specific activities that are directed towards bringing about outcomes and impact through a service or product. This could also include activities of partner organisations. These are mapped against the outcomes or outcomes pathway to identify any missing outcomes and the extent to which organisations are contributing to impact.

5. Assumptions

Assumptions explore existing beliefs about how the theory of change works.

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What is an 'Outcomes Pathway'

What is an outcomes pathway?

´Outcome mapping is a methodology for planning, monitoring and evaluating development initiatives in order to bring about sustainable social change. As the name suggests, it´s niche is understanding outcomes; the so-called ´missing middle´ or ´black box´ of results that emerge downstream from the initiative's activities but upstream from longer-term economic, environmental, political or demographic changes.´
(betterevaluation.org)

Outcomes are the changes generated by your services and products, and by stakeholders in the wider system, for the impact to take place. An **outcomes pathway** is the chain of outcomes that leads to impact. Outcomes are sometimes called preconditions, as they relate to the conditions required for the impact, or outcomes further down in the chain, to occur.

A simple outcomes chain relating to wellbeing follows below:

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Why develop an 'Outcomes Pathway'

Why develop an Outcomes pathway

- Outcomes pathways represent the connections and triggers between your outcomes and the order in which they occur. For this reason, outcomes and their pathways are key building blocks for impact measurement, as many of your most important *indicators* will be derived from your outcomes.
- As with theory of change as a whole, establishing outcomes pathways can lead to a greater understanding and consensus about how change occurs.

"The theory of change process allowed us to, as a group and as an organisation, come together and really articulate our vision which then allowed us to think consistency, so it's be actually able to articulate that vision so everyone is on the same page along the lines of outcomes, the environment and context that our young people are in"

Participant in an inFocus theory of change workshop

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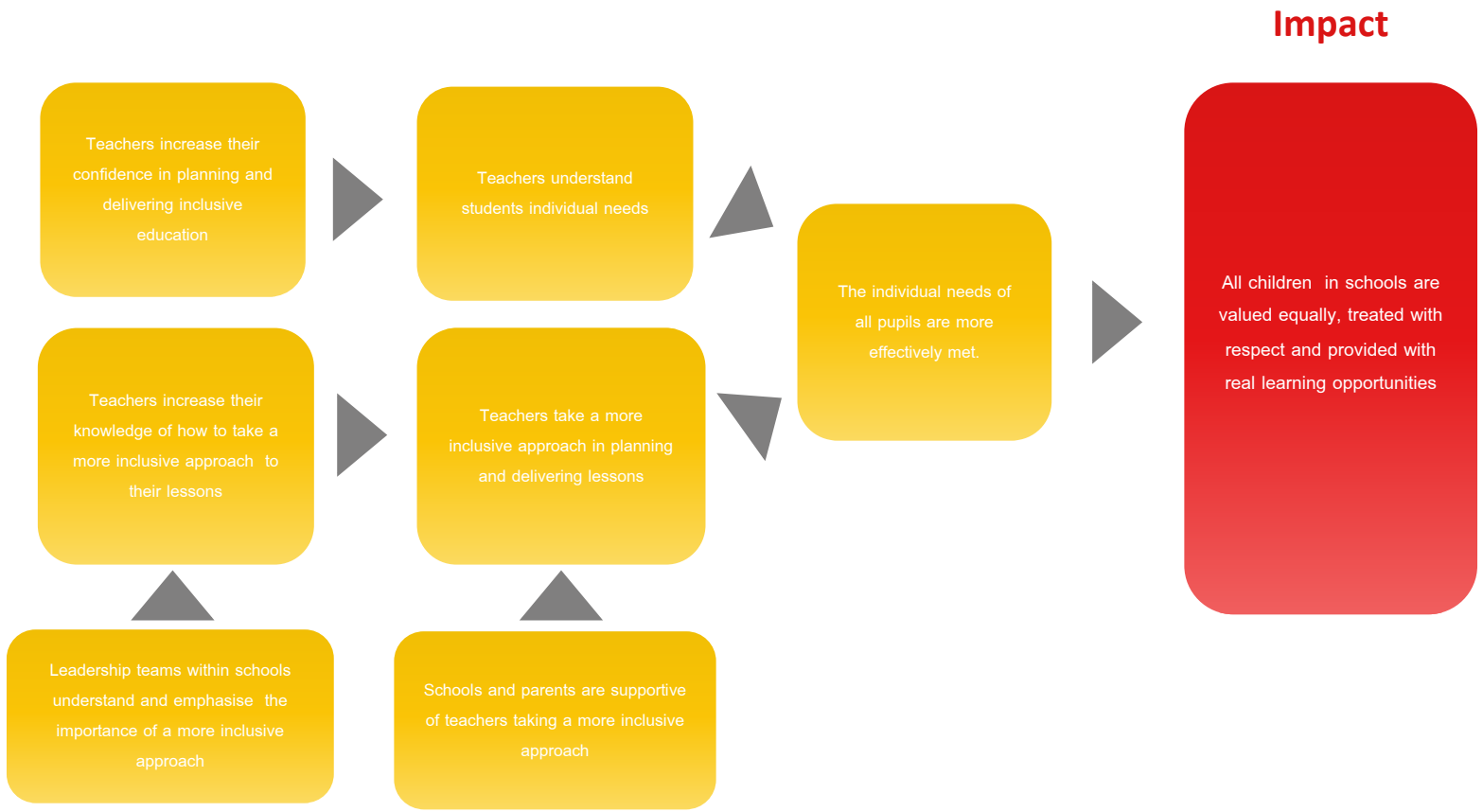
How to develop 'An Outcomes Pathway'

Backwards mapping

When mapping outcomes we start with the impact and work backwards (either individually or within a group in a workshop setting) exploring what changes are needed for each of the subsequent changes to occur, as in the example below of the more detailed outcomes pathway for inclusiveEd:



The outcomes mapping should also include changes that are more outside the scope of your organisation's activities and take place in the wider system, as with the example of the two boxes able. It may be that you can influence these outcomes through advocacy or forming partnerships with stakeholders.

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How to develop An 'Outcomes Pathway'

Guidelines for developing outcomes

- The priority at this stage is to complete a first version of the outcomes pathway, so don't worry too much about specific wording. This can be revisited, reviewed and verified later.
- It can be easy to slip into describing activities that lead to outcomes, rather than outcomes. Make sure that you are describing changes rather than activities.

- It is okay to go forward as well as backwards in your pathway. Once you have started your backwards mapping there will be times when it's easier to work forwards and think what outcomes are coming next in the chain.
- The situation, the problem, stakeholders and target audience can be a useful reference point for your outcomes. Thinking about what changes are needed in relation the problem and target audience, and how stakeholders could influence or generate outcomes.
- We recommend using language that reflects a change, like verbs such as 'increased', 'better', 'improved' etc. Notice too that all of these terms are used in the past tense, which can help to distinguish from other areas of a theory of change.
- Like indicators, outcomes should ideally be S.M.A.R.T – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely.