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What is a 'theory of change'?

Theories of change' are the ideas we have about how change happens in our communities, society, environment and economics. They are the ideas we have about how we can get from the current situation we face, to realising our visions and hopes of the future.

Traditionally experts, academics and theorists come up with what we learn about and base our political action and political identity on (for example 'I am a Marxist', or 'we are anarcho-syndicalists'). However, without the need for experts, abstract ideas and confusing academic theorising, we all have ideas about what kinds of action we think are and aren't effective. We all have ideas about how we think the change we are aiming for will occur.

Assumptions

The ideas behind our opinions and decisions (the answer to the question 'why do you think that?') are often unsaid and even unconscious. Many groups don't spend much time discussing why and how they think their actions will contribute to positive change. If the group has agreed on aims and visions for the future, then the conversation often goes from aims to action without much discussion about how and why we think that the proposed actions will achieve those changes. We don't often spend the time going a bit deeper behind our ideas and assumptions.

We often assume that other people in our groups who have similar political beliefs have similar ideas and theories of change. However, in reality, there is often uncertainty, disagreement and contradictions between people's ideas (and even within an individual's ideas).

Spending some time talking through and clarifying our ideas about how we think change happens - as well as acknowledging where there are agreements and disagreements - can make our campaigns more effective and strategic, and can prevent conflict and confusions arising in the group due to unspoken and unconscious disagreements. You do not need to share identical political goals on everything - the aim is to come to common agreement on a 'working theory of change' that the group can agree on, in relation to the particular campaign.

Our intuition and gut-feelings can be just as valuable as rational reasoning, and can be much quicker in times of urgency and reaction. However, in the process of questioning our assumptions and discussing our beliefs we learn to understand ourselves and each other better, bond, and inspire creativity to see options we might not otherwise see.

Example 1: UK Uncut

UK Uncut is a UK-based, grassroots movement that takes action to highlight alternatives to the government's spending cuts and 'austerity' economics after the 2008 financial crash.

Aims

- To raise public awareness that the government's cuts to public spending are not necessary or fair.
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To cause public and corporate disruption

- To play a part in stopping the government's spending cuts to public services.

UK Uncut's theories of change

- Disruptive action at popular shops is likely to get mainstream media attention.
- The reason many people believe that the government's cuts are necessary is that they are presented with biased (and untrue) information in the media. Being shown facts and ideas that oppose these will change the minds and hearts of at least some of the population. Disruption of the public during their usual activities of shopping, along with information (through leaflets, banners and conversation) and performance can open people up to new information and to change their opinions and behaviour.
- The way that the super-rich get away with not paying tax - while the vast majority of people do pay their tax - and the government claim there is not enough money for public services, is a clear example of an injustice. This should mean mass support for the groups' protests, and more amplification of the ideas and messaging.
- Disruption affects the profits of the company, so disruption is a way to pressure the company to change. Negative media affects the image and brand of the company, and this puts pressure on the company to change.

Actions used by UK Uncut, based on their theory of change:

Sit-ins to disrupt the business of high street shops (of companies that avoid paying tax), street performances and theatre (such as symbolically transforming a shop into a library or sexual health clinic, or other services that are being cut by the government).

Example 2: Diverse social movements

Theory of change:

Social movements that do not have significant participation of oppressed groups such as women, transgender, working class, black, disabled, young and older people will not be successful in their aim of radical social change, because without the experiences of these people informing social movements, dominant cultures will prevail. There will not be the true motivation, understanding or skills needed to break and transform oppressive social relations, unless marginalised and oppressed groups are represented.

Different Scales

You can see that these two examples are quite different, and demonstrate that theories of change can be applied on different levels: specific and broad, small scale and large scale. UK Uncut have a broad aim of stopping the cuts to public spending in the UK, and even broader aims of changes to our social and economic systems globally. Their theory of change is quite specific, and made up of the ideas behind why

they think that raising public awareness is necessary to stop the austerity measures, how direct action will contribute to this, and why they think that stopping the cuts is necessary for even bigger social changes.

The broader social movement theories of change considers the nature of the change they want to create, and what and who that involves; the sort of change they hope to create – of equality, emancipation and freedom – is understood to be only possible if the people most often effected by oppression and violence are considered equal within the movement.

Knowing your place

Understanding and working on Theories of Change in your groups/organisations can also help you to understand the bigger picture of how change happens, where you are placed in it, and who your allies and adversaries are.

To support your discussions about your theories of change, you can use the following questions:

- How do you (as an individual or group) think change happens?
- Who needs to be involved to make change happen?
- How do your theories of change relate to others working on similar issues?
- Will a variety of different theories and approaches from different groups bring about the change you want?

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