

# CREID Learning Brief: Nested Theories of Change for Adaptive Rigour

## Introduction

The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) is an international development programme which aims to promote freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for inclusive development in sensitive and fragile contexts. As discussed by Christie and Green (2019) and Tadros (2020a), certain programmes operating in fragile contexts have the need for flexible and adaptive programming. In CREID's case, the programme adopts an adaptive 'multitude of smalls' approach which underscores the importance of diversifying the programmatic portfolio to include multiple sites within and across countries and a range of actors within a community in fragile contexts (Tadros 2020b). Within this diverse portfolio, CREID has been required to adapt to changing and uncertain circumstances due to the fragile contexts in which it works as well as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

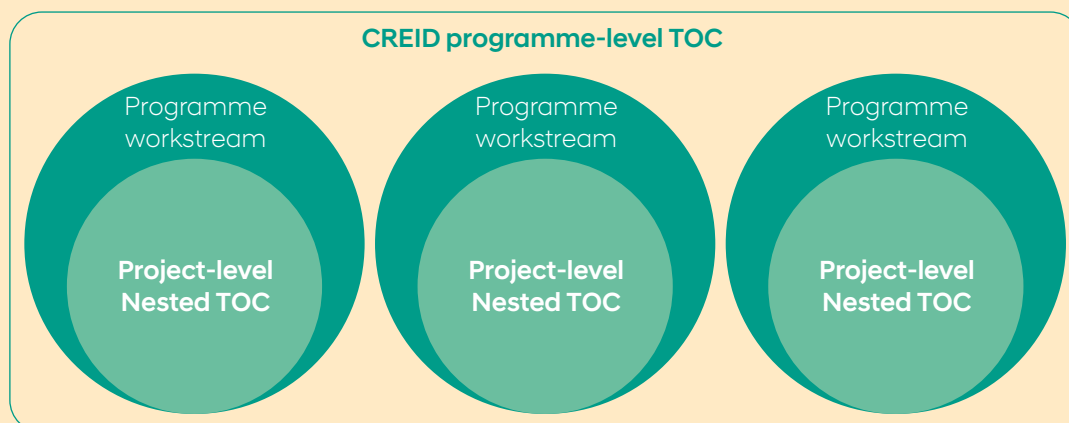
This learning brief provides illustrative examples of three major adaptations the CREID programme has undertaken while working within fragile contexts to promote FoRB. These examples highlight how the programme has utilised embedded monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) strategies to encourage what Ramalingam *et al.* (2019) refer to as 'adaptive rigour,' a concept which underscores the importance of transparent documentation of programmatic decision-making processes during programme adaptations. In particular this learning brief discusses the use of nested theories of change as a mechanism to enable adaptive rigour within the multitude of smalls approach in the CREID programme.

Theories of change (TOC) represent expectations as to how and why an intervention will contribute to an intended result and are usually broken down into smaller pieces that include activities, outputs, outcomes, impact and underlying assumptions. Specifically, CREID adopts what Mayne (2015) refers to as 'nested theories of change' which offer a way to break down a broader theory of change into components that are easily understood and practical. In CREID's case, nested theories of change are developed for each implementing partner at a project-level, which is nested within the overarching programmatic-level theory of change and organised by programme workstream. Nested theories of change are not new to development programmes nor sensitive or fragile contexts (Apgar 2020), but this learning brief aims to discuss how nested theories of change were uniquely suited to support adaptations and improve operations within CREID.

"[N]ested theories of change can help programme staff use theories of change to reflect and adapt an approach in light of changing circumstances and unforeseen challenges... [allowing] for a precise, contextually-specific reflection and response"



Figure 1. CREID's Nested TOC Design



Source: Author's own

## Background

CREID is a 4-year UK Aid Connect programme currently operating in Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Myanmar, Nigeria and Syria. CREID seeks to improve coordination across faith and non-faiths, human rights, humanitarian and development spheres in order to increase recognition of religious inequalities and discrimination in poverty reduction efforts and foster virtuous loops of influence between the local and global levels of engagement. The programme aims to serve individuals and communities where religious inequalities intersect with poverty, gender inequality, social marginalisation and sometimes violence. It does so through interconnected workstreams which focus on:

1. Mainstreaming FoRB in international development
2. Service provision through interfaith engagement
3. Identify, respond and challenge online-offline mobilisation of hate
4. Build the capacity of coalitions that amplify minority voices' issues while eliciting change in public norms and values in favour of religious diversity
5. Make international platforms for FoRB promotion more effective by bringing together stakeholders from different spheres.

The CREID programme theory of change states that through better coordination across faith, human rights and development spheres, we will achieve better recognition of all religious inequalities and discrimination and foster virtuous loops of influence between the local and global levels of engagement.

In its simplest form, a TOC breaks down a programme into component parts and sequences them from input to impact. Done well, the process of building the TOC generates a deep reflective process amongst stakeholders to understand and make explicit how change might happen and what assumptions are in place in order for change to occur (Vogel 2012).

In CREID, the main theory of change developed by the coalition lead, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), as well as the nested theories of change developed by coalition and local partners, are pillars of the MEL system and in turn deeply influence the programme's reflective learning approach.

The following three examples showcase how CREID uses nested theories of change as a tool to monitor and reflect on its programming in fragile contexts to promote FoRB.

### Example 1 - Reflection and Adaptation

For a theory of change to be a useful reflective tool, interrogating the assumptions underlying the causal logic is key and is argued to be one of the primary differences between a TOC and a programmatic logic model such as the 'logframe' (van Es *et al.* 2015). CREID prioritises paying continual attention to the assumptions that inform plans and activities. In Pakistan, project-level nested TOCs allowed implementing partners to interrogate assumptions embedded in the ToC, make comparisons across local contexts, and adjust their approach to each context accordingly.

CREID coalition member, Al Khoei Foundation, partnered with a local organisation, Hive, to conduct consultative sessions with religious minorities who live in low-income urban neighborhoods. The residents of these neighborhoods primarily consist of members of Christian, Hindu and Shia minorities who are also members of a lower caste and subsist as daily wage workers. These vulnerable groups experience severe persecution based on their religious identities including discrimination, exclusion and overt incidents of violence, such as the recent burning of a church. In order to achieve the aims of the CREID programme by redressing religious inequalities, Hive sought to establish 'radavar' committees in those localities. The radavar committees are intended to steer the implementation of community-determined development interventions which aim to support religious minorities. The original project-level theory of change included an assumption that through the co-creation process, members of the radavar committees would develop "a common goal of delivering projects which will lead to a shift in attitudes that demonstrates more empathy and break stereotypes."

In two different neighborhoods in Punjab, residents cited access to clean drinking water as being one of the most prominent problems that needed to be addressed. In Joseph Colony, Punjab, the radavar committee worked with Hive to create a sustainability plan for the construction of a water filtration plant. The Joseph Colony radavar committee then secured access to a pre-existing welfare fund comprised of community contributions in order to finance the monthly electricity bills for the water plant. Thus, the original assumption in the nested theory of change held true.

However, in Youhanabad, the largest Christian settlement in Punjab, the Hive staff initially encountered a lot of resistance to the establishment of radavar committees as well as proposed sustainability plans due to tensions experienced within the locality as well as a distrust of outsiders, particularly civil society, who were perceived to have exploited Youhanabad residents in the past. CREID therefore

decided to pivot to a focus on building trust between Hive staff and Youhanabad residents in order to lay the groundwork for further cooperation to implement a community developed intervention.

The outset of the COVID-19 crisis required the programme team to rethink its engagement strategy in order to respond to critical needs on the ground. Hive developed a relief campaign through which food and other supplies were delivered to residents in Youhanabad and other religious minority communities in five cities in Pakistan. Hive staff reported that the response in Youhanabad was very positive, paving the way for a 3-day cleanliness drive supported by CREID in order to remove excess garbage from the street as well as spread COVID-19 awareness in Youhanabad. The community's participation in the cleanliness drive can be interpreted as a trust-building exercise which potentially supports an amended TOC assumption which states that the community-led development interventions "will strengthen the collaborative bond within the community to work toward any other social cause and development project collectively."

The original set of assumptions did not explicitly discuss the need to establish trust between Hive staff and the community prior to entering into negotiations around a community developed intervention. For example, one assumption stated that community planning discussions and training would "strengthen and build capacity for minority groups to participate in delivering community led projects." However, when Hive sought to replicate the construction of a water filtration plant in Youhanabad, they were met with more resistance to sustainability plans than in Joseph Colony. This led to a shift in thinking in which Hive decided to put forth more effort to build collaborative bonds with the community first and then open discussions about a community developed intervention.

This example highlights how the use of nested theories of change can help programme staff use theories of change to reflect and adapt an approach in light of changing circumstances and unforeseen challenges. While the overarching programme theory of change and workstream remained the same, the use of a nested theory of change allowed for a precise, contextually-specific reflection and response to the changing needs of two different communities in Pakistan.

## Example 2 - Communication and Adaptation

In a second example, CREID coalition member Minority Rights Group (MRG), works with local implementing partners in Iraq and Pakistan to identify, respond and challenge the online and offline mobilisation of hate. As described in a previous CREID learning brief, the CREID programme has learned the importance of having multiple entry points in order to strengthen inclusivity in FoRB which the programme refers to as a 'multitude of smalls approach' (Tadros 2020b). This requires working in multiple sites with multiple partners, both within a target country as well as across countries, within a programme workstream which encompasses MRG's approach to building effective participatory approaches to monitoring hate speech that feed into local and national-level mechanisms to respond to incidents that threaten religious inclusivity.

Given this multitude of smalls approach, clear communication among the different implementers becomes key in order to ensure partners are both adhering to a consistent strategy and developing consensus around approaches which might look slightly different but are bound together by common threads.

At the start of the CREID programme, two project-level theories of change were devised by MRG in collaboration with IDS. These nested theories of change were organised by activities conducted in Iraq and Pakistan. Though the overarching workstream and impact goals were similar, each TOC proved to have variations due to the respective context. The nested TOCs allowed implementing partners to communicate what they are doing and link those activities to the programme's aims for broader impact.

For example, in Iraq, one of MRG's impact pathways focused on the publication of news articles which highlight hate speech, as well as training journalists to responsibly report on hate speech issues in order to 'lessen the power of divisive rhetoric and foster understanding between communities.' In MRG's nested TOC in Pakistan, one impact pathway focused on activities such as a large online survey about the prevalence of hate speech, which will build an evidence base intended to influence the willingness of power-holders "to intervene when dangerous speech occurs." These two very different approaches to respond to incidents of hate speech in ways that strengthen religious inclusivity need to be effectively communicated among a diverse group of implementing partners in order to build consensus around appropriate activities.

At the beginning of the programme, the nested TOCs were circulated amongst three implementing partners in Pakistan and two implementing partners in Iraq which allowed MRG to plan, communicate and build consensus around activities for the year. This was primarily done during a workshop when MRG partners were able to review the nested TOCs in-person. Here MRG partners were given the space to communicate and analyse their endeavours in their particular country as well as learn from colleagues adopting a similar strategy but in a different country by utilising co-constructed common reference points, the nested TOCs. The process ensured that a cookie cutter approach was not applied within each country, while also encouraging MRG partners to bear in mind and communicate the value of their work across contexts.

At the end of the project year, MRG partners reviewed their nested TOCs with the intent to monitor, evaluate, adapt and plan for the year ahead. This process occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic which influenced adaptations as well as the review process. In this instance, MRG country leads revised the nested TOCs and circulated those versions among MRG implementing partners in each country context for input and approval. An example of an adaptation includes the addition of a new outcome which states "COVID-19 response becomes more inclusive of religious minorities" in Iraq. MRG partners envision this can be achieved through an impact pathway that increases media coverage of the challenges religious minorities face during COVID-19 in combination with advocacy strategies that target "national stakeholders greater commitment to enacting human right compliant

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legislation or policy to tackle hate speech & discrimination.” The nested TOC is useful here in that the adaptation is explicitly documented, communicating MRG’s understanding of how changes to its activities will link to programme-level outcomes, as well as providing a common reference point for MRG implementing partners to examine and provide input upon.

Having an increased number of local partners on the ground requires an effective, consistent communication strategy within the programme. The example highlighted by MRG’s work in Iraq and Pakistan shows that the use of contextualised, adaptable, nested TOCs can support an internal communication strategy that builds consensus and buy-in among the numerous implementing partners with whom CREID works. This strategy diverges from a more common use of TOCs as a communications tool meant to convey information to donors during programme design (Vogel 2012).

Nested ToCs allow partners to communicate a ‘bird’s eye view’ of their project, and any changes made to the project, amongst the numerous actors engaged in a multitude of smalls approach, thus supporting adaptive rigour. This allows everyone to build consensus and share a collective vision of their particular project while also framing that vision within the broader programme.

### Example 3 - Learning and Adaptation

Intermittent reviews of specific aspects of the nested theories of change can also provide a useful entry point for learning and adaptation. To support the persistent interrogation of assumptions, CREID has asked coalition and local partners to generate ‘learning questions.’ The learning questions are written by the partners themselves and are based on context-specific lines of inquiry as well as assumptions surfaced while developing their nested TOCs. The contextualised learning questions are intended to be revisited at different intervals during the project cycle. These learning questions allow key CREID stakeholders to focus on how the different experiences and expertise of project partners inform thinking about how change happens and how specific pathways will deliver or are delivering intended outcomes (Clark and Apgar 2019).

One opportunity is provided in an optional section in CREID progress reports, where partners can elect to use the learning questions to reflect upon their experiences during that reporting period in a ‘learning log.’ The format of the learning log itself is open-ended, providing prompts such as ‘what activity or experience are you reflecting on?’ and ‘how is this relevant, what will you do differently now?’ But some partners have chosen to supplement or replace these general prompts by using the learning questions they developed to discuss their learning within their specific approach.

For example, when CREID brought together local implementing partners from Iraq and Pakistan for a MEL workshop, we requested that they generate learning questions after reviewing their project-level nested TOCs. One example of a learning question generated from MRG Pakistan’s nested TOC assumption is:

*Is it possible to reduce public/grassroots receptivity to hate speech, and thereby reduce the effectiveness of speech to the point that it is no longer a strategically beneficial tool for those who engage hate in it?*

This question was built from the nested TOC assumption that ‘decreased acceptability of hate speech makes it less of an effective tool.’ Therefore, CREID has requested that implementing partners continue to inquire into this assumption throughout the programme, delving deeper into if it holds true and identifying evidence to support whether it does or does not hold true.

In this particular instance MRG implementing partners in Pakistan conducted focus group discussions to discuss the prevalence and types of hate speech in the country and regional context. Drawing from CREID monitoring reports, some focus group participants “recommended that to minimise hate-speech more awareness among youth is needed”, thus suggesting that raising awareness of hate speech is a step in the causal logic toward reducing receptivity to hate speech. Additional observations from implementing partners who conducted focus groups that help interrogate and refine assumptions included: “students are more comfortable talking about hate-speech and religious exclusion outside campuses and smaller groups. In formal settings, students tended not to open up.” Therefore, implementing partners in Pakistan began to think about how to adapt in order to engage with students in more informal settings. This shift in thinking was supported by the use of learning questions generated from TOC assumptions.

In another example, COVID-19 influenced amendments made to the nested TOC by the MRG Iraq country lead at the end of the project year. For instance, an assumption was added which states “Partners have contacts and networks to deliver and there will be no major political upheaval or security threat to prevent implementation”. This assumption highlights the importance of paying close attention to changing dynamics around political tensions and security conditions, which became particularly difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the quarterly learning log, MRG Iraq reflected upon a related learning question that focuses on political, socio-economic, and security factors which states:

*“What is the relationship between hate speech and wider inequalities and tensions that are rooted in or determined by political, socio-economic and security factors?”*

MRG Iraq’s reflection notes a significant rise in online activity during Iraq’s country-wide COVID-19 lockdown which was accompanied by a rise in misinformation pertaining to the pandemic. A nationwide survey was conducted by a MRG Iraq partner that included questions pertaining to the prevalence of hate speech observed by over 500 respondents. These survey respondents described an increase in online hate speech, particularly among young people who face unemployment, financial insecurity, and declining access to public services such as healthcare.

Furthermore, the security situation in Iraq has deteriorated due to civic unrest as well as regional conflict with neighbouring countries

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which have been perceived to contribute to an increase in hate speech. As a result of these observations, “Iraq partners have identified that there is a particular need to target young people in counter-hate speech efforts and activities. [They] suggest that there is also a need to train lawmakers, MPs and legislators on the topic of hate speech and the boundaries between freedom of speech and expression and hate.” While discussions around potential adaptations in light of this learning are ongoing within the programme, this example highlights that a process structured by quarterly intervals to encourage reflective learning can be strengthened through the use of nested TOCs and can contribute to adaptive rigour.

## Conclusion

There is a growing body of literature and initiatives that call for donors, development organisations and specific programmes to become more adaptive (USAID 2018). This paper argues that nested TOCs contribute to adaptive rigour by serving as a monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanism that produces ‘a documented, transparent trail of intentions, decisions and actions...that support rigorous evaluative thinking and collective decision-making.’ (Ramalingam *et al.* 2019). Nested TOCs serve as a framework for the programme to reflect upon, communicate, learn from, and feel ownership of why adaptations were made, how assumptions had shifted to elicit the need for those changes, and what learning has emanated from those processes. The ability to refer to and amend the nested TOCs allows for a transparent trail of decisions, enabled by collective decision-making, which builds consensus around programme adaptations.

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## Credits

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