

Tactical Theories

Unlike Global theories, theories about particular tactics (e.g., “Messaging and Frameworks” or “Diffusion of Innovation” theories) are not mutually exclusive. Many tactics are part of an advocate’s “toolkit” and may be selected, amplified, or minimized depending on the particular context of a campaign or advocacy effort. For example, advocates within a campaign may focus on spreading policy innovations among highly influential insiders (“Diffusion of Innovation” theory) while simultaneously engaging in organizing an affected community (“Grassroots” theory) to have an additional set of advocacy tools at hand.

TACTICAL 1 THEORY

“MESSAGING & FRAMEWORKS” Theory of Change

With the Messaging and Frameworks theory, also known as Prospect theory, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman challenged a conventional school of thought that suggests people make rational decisions by weighing different options’ costs and benefits and then choosing the one that will benefit them the most. Their research proved that individuals develop different preferences based on the ways in which options are presented or framed.

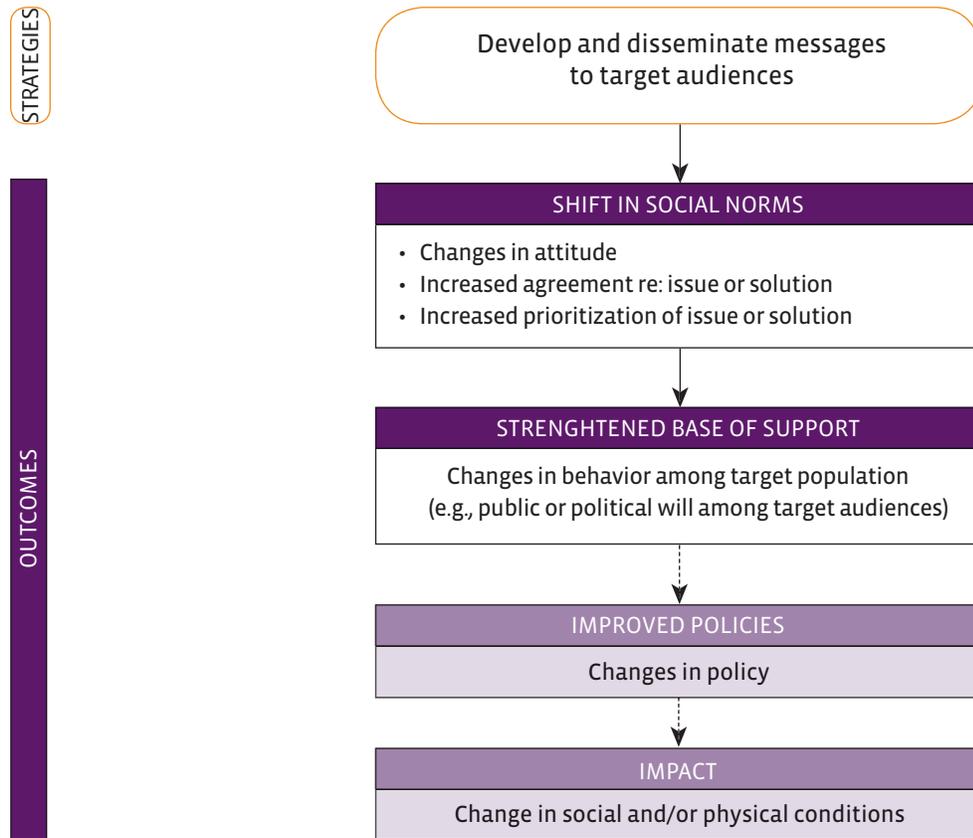
Underlying Assumptions

- Issues and choices can be framed in multiple ways.
- The frame individuals use to make decisions is controlled partly by the way a problem is presented and partly by a decision maker’s norms, habits, and personal characteristics.
- People prefer options that seem certain rather than ambiguous, even if the end results are less beneficial to them personally.
- People tend to simplify decision making and evaluate options in terms of their direct consequences rather than connect their decisions to previous choices or acts.
- Decision making can be inconsistent. People may make choices that are less beneficial to themselves or riskier than might be expected based on how information is presented.
- Even though the results may be the same, people may make different choices given different contexts or scenarios.

Application to Advocacy

- Promising strategies include issue framing (or re-framing), message development, targeted communications, or media advocacy.
- This theory is likely embedded as one strategy in a broader communications campaign rather than as a stand-alone activity.

“MESSAGING & FRAMEWORKS” Theory of Change



Max McCombs and Donald Shaw’s Agenda-Setting theory, informally known as Media Influence theory, suggests that mass media, namely news media, significantly influences the public agenda. Political issues that are salient and ever-present in the media tend to be the same issues that the public have awareness of and consider key. Media may or may not shape what constituents think *about* issues, but it generally determines which political or campaign issues voters prioritize. McCombs and Shaw formulated this theory at a time when traditional media entities (e.g., TV, newspaper, news magazine, and radio) owned content creation and served as the central gatekeeper for content distribution. The theory has since matured to make room for the agenda-setting influence of less traditional or elite media entities, namely social media and new media channels. Today, many independent political bloggers generate a readership rivaling that of the traditional news media, and their lack of affiliation with the traditional media monopoly strengthens their perceived neutrality and credibility. The independent blog platform has redistributed gate-keeping power to the extent that traditional news media is considered one force among many competing influences.

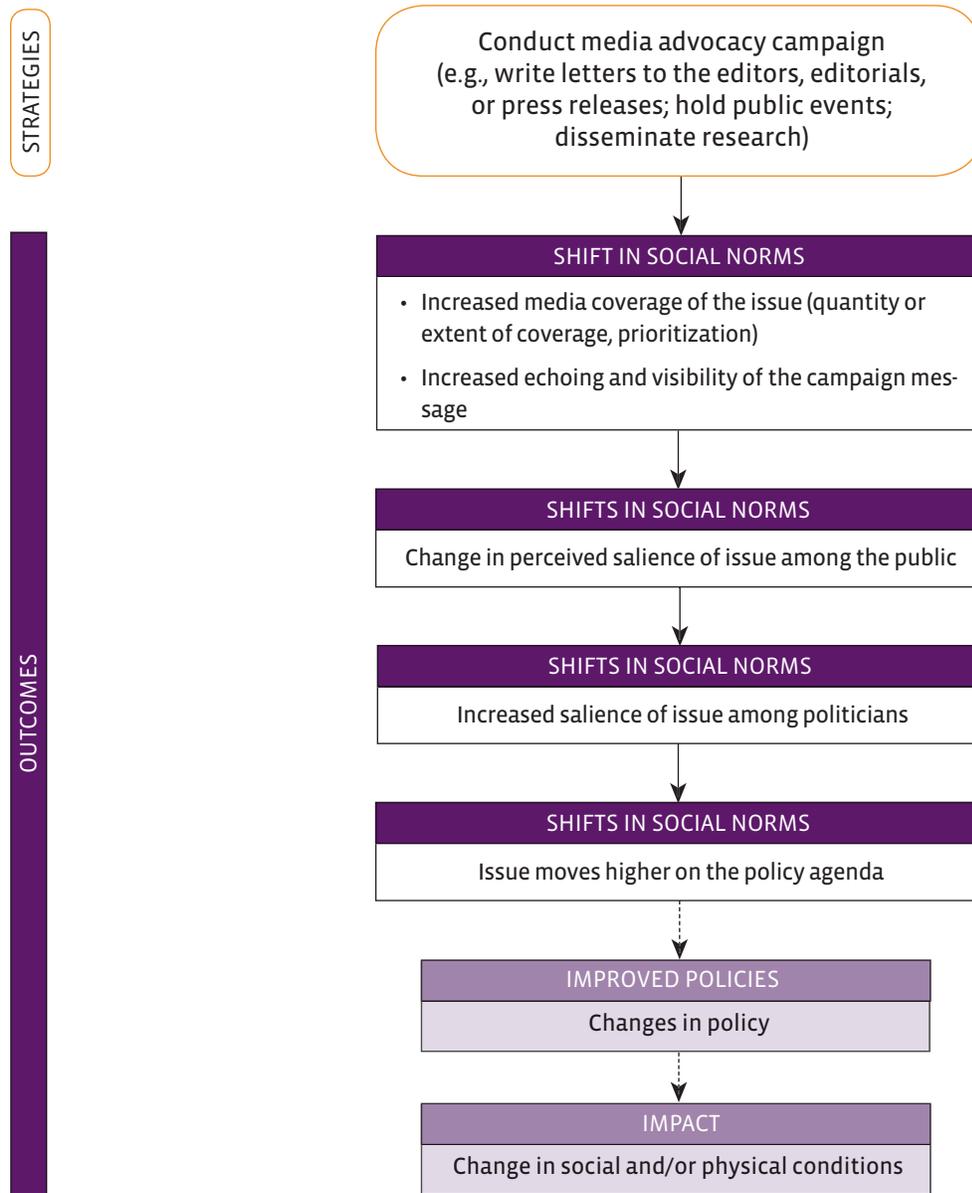
Underlying Assumptions

- Media shapes reality, as opposed to reflecting it.
- The media does have a point of view, and sometimes extreme biases.
- Different media sources have different agenda-setting potential. The size of the audience, the consistency and emphasis of the message, and the degree to which the source is perceived as credible, affect this potential.
- In modern society, the news media is generally one’s primary source of political information. People vary in their appetite for, and attention to, mass media and in their level of political interest. Some individuals actively seek political information; most seem to acquire it with little-to-no effort.

Application to Advocacy

- Efforts are focused on the broader public as opposed to a targeted audience or decision maker and can raise the prominence of an issue, which may or may not change public will around the issue.
- Promising strategies include news media and social media campaigns, as well as general communications.
- According to this theory, media and communications work should be coupled with advocacy toward decision makers who will act upon issues that have risen on the public agenda and/or build a base of support to take action on an agenda that has reached a high level of salience.

“MEDIA INFLUENCE” Theory of Change



“GRASSROOTS” Theory of Change

Unlike the Power Politics theory, grassroots or community organizers view power as changeable and dynamic, not something held exclusively by elites. Proponents of the Grassroots theory believe groups of people can create power by taking mutual action to achieve social change. Saul Alinsky laid out the foundation for this theory in his 1971 book, *Rules for Radicals*.

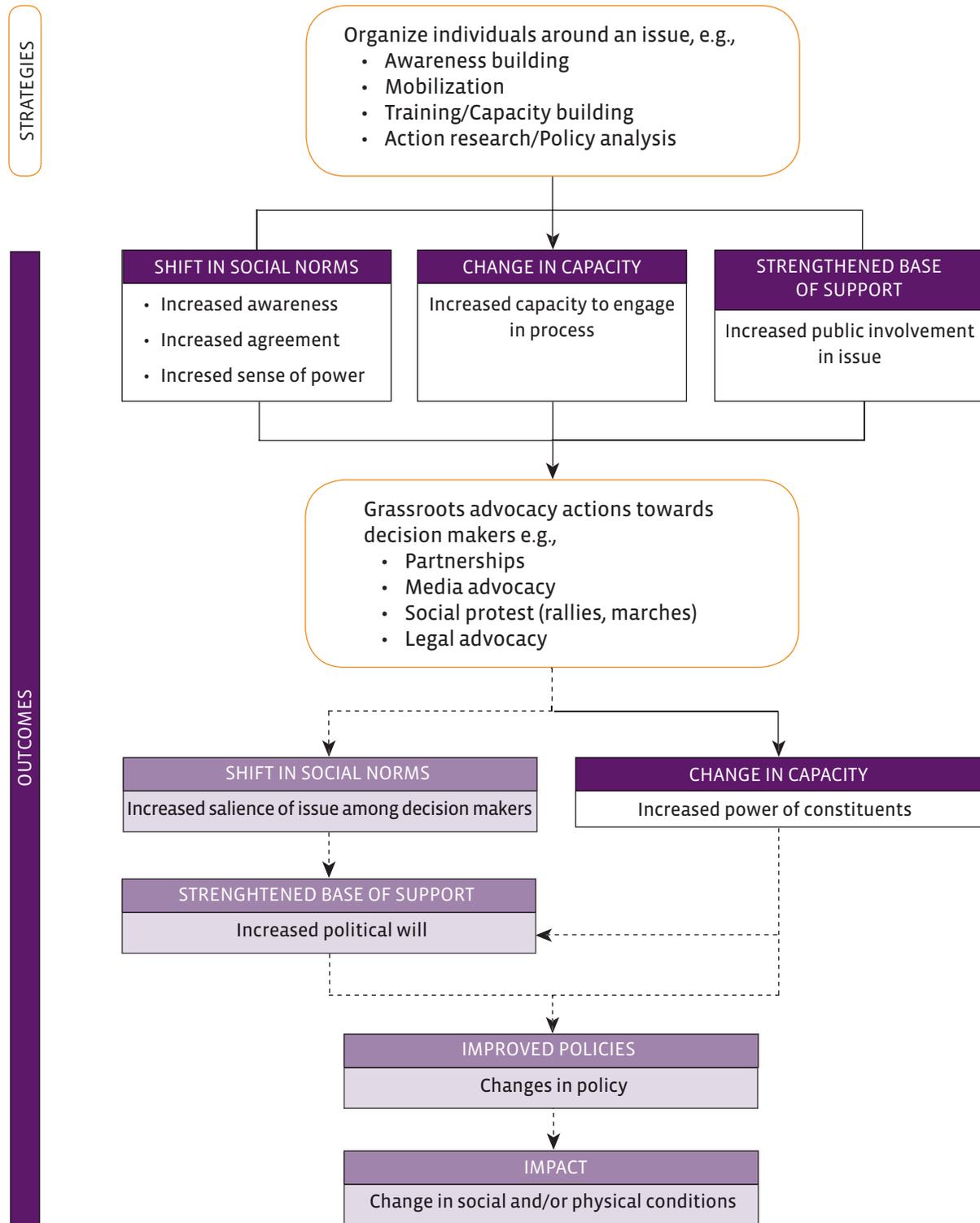
Underlying Assumptions

- Power exists when (or because) people cooperate or obey.
- Power bases can be shifted through actions and events.
- Organizing efforts should reflect the wishes of people directly affected by the problem.
- Organizing requires building the capacity of those affected by the problem to address it.
- Efforts should focus on changing institutions and policies, not on changing individuals.

Application to Advocacy

- Advocacy efforts are focused on working with the many, not with the few.
- The advocacy organization is not the leader; rather, it helps facilitate the efforts of a collective to achieve social change.
- Promising strategies include training/capacity-building, community mobilizing, awareness building, action research, policy analysis, media advocacy, social protest, and whistleblowing.

“GRASSROOTS” Theory of Change



Self-Categorization theory, attributed to John C. Turner, refers to group formation as the process that makes social cohesion, cooperation, and influence possible. The theory looks at identity—how one perceives and defines him- or herself—as a motivator for group formation. Individuals identify with groups or social categories based on their perceived similarities concerning attitudes, values, experiences, or in the application of advocacy, the desire to collectively solve a problem or accomplish a goal. As members of a distinct social category, individuals learn the norms of that category and assign those norms to themselves (in the same way we might assign stereotypic characteristics to others). Members tend to accentuate, or make salient, in-group norms and similarities (and out-group differences) to stand out relative to neighboring groups and, thus, achieve a positive social identity.

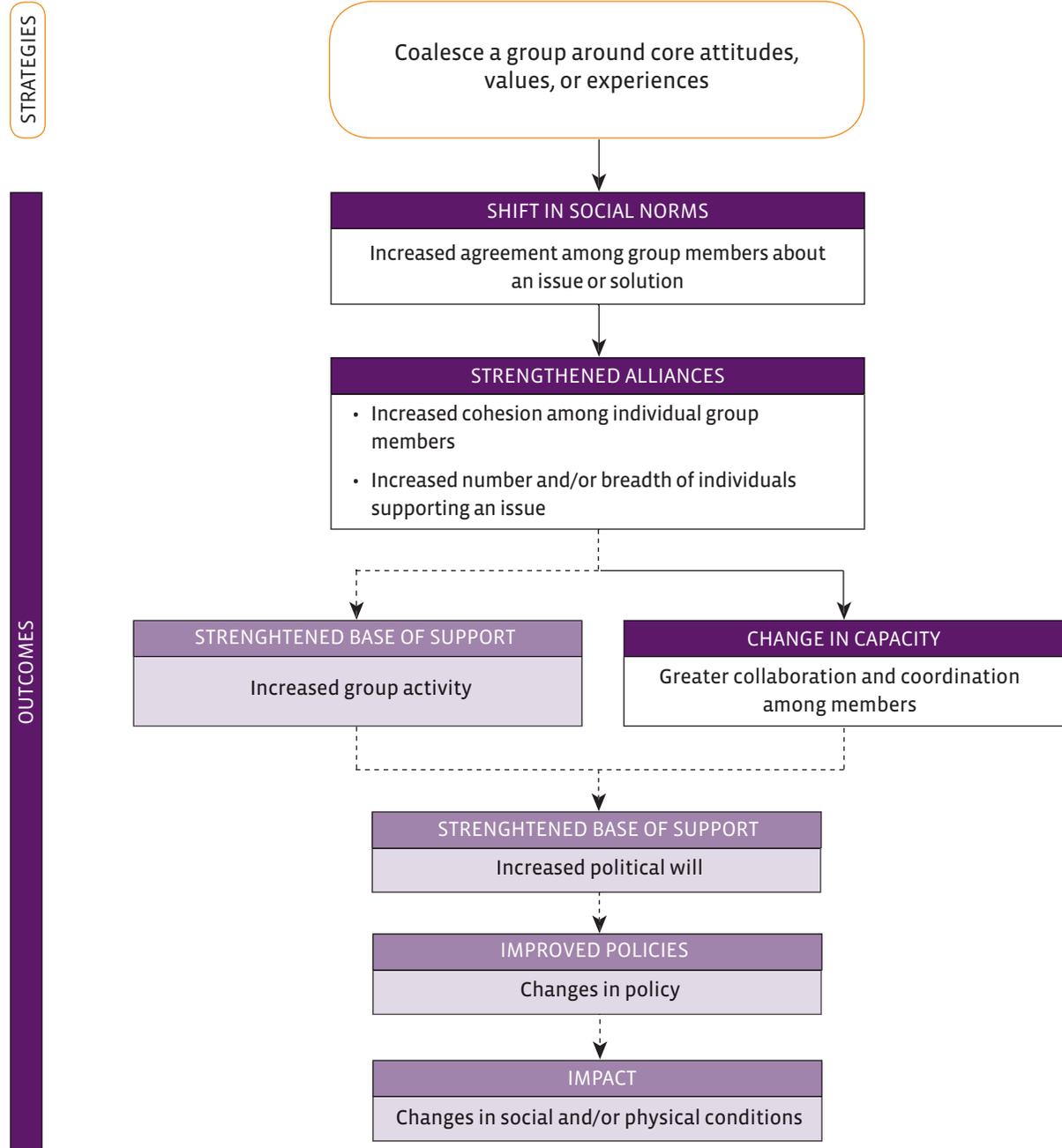
Underlying Assumptions

- Individuals possess multiple concepts of self. It is assumed one can activate (“switch on”) a particular self-concept or identity.
- Members are dependent on their social group or category membership for information.
- Cooperation and cohesion among individuals can stem from the perception of a common category membership.
- Members of a social group or category might exaggerate group norms or compete with each other to enact the group norms as a way of demonstrating that they are closer to the ideal than other group members; this may result in over-conformity or even polarization among members.

Application to Advocacy

- To build coalitions or unlikely allies, advocates may be able to align existing groups or create new groups by finding something around which individuals can identify. Conversely, advocates may tighten group identity by differentiating their group from others.
- To prevent group polarization, an advocacy organization can provide its members with consistent, strictly informational messaging that supports group alignment.
- Promising strategies include:
 - utilizing a network approach to “knit” or “weave” individuals into groups;
 - developing a common agenda that ties to attitudes, values, or experiences of a potential group; or
 - increasing awareness of group principles and messages among members.

“GROUP FORMATION” Theory of Change



⁸ Other sources detailing relevant considerations, tools, and techniques that may be useful companion pieces to this brief can be found in the Advocacy Evaluation Resources, following the Bibliography.

Everett M. Roger’s Diffusion of Innovations, or Diffusion theory, refers to the process by which a change agent (e.g., individual, informal group, or organization) models or communicates an innovation. The innovation can be as diverse as a product, practice, program, policy, or idea. Over time, the innovation may move onward to certain types or categories of adopters: early adopters, the early majority, the late majority, and laggards. Should the innovation reach a critical mass, it either will be adopted or rejected by members of the social system. An innovation is more likely to be adopted if it is relatively easy to comprehend; perceived as better than the idea it supersedes; and/or is compatible with the values, beliefs, and needs of the potential adopters. The degree to which the innovation, or results of the innovation, is visible and communicated to others, can influence the rate of adoption. When new ideas are invented, diffused, and adopted or rejected, social change can occur.

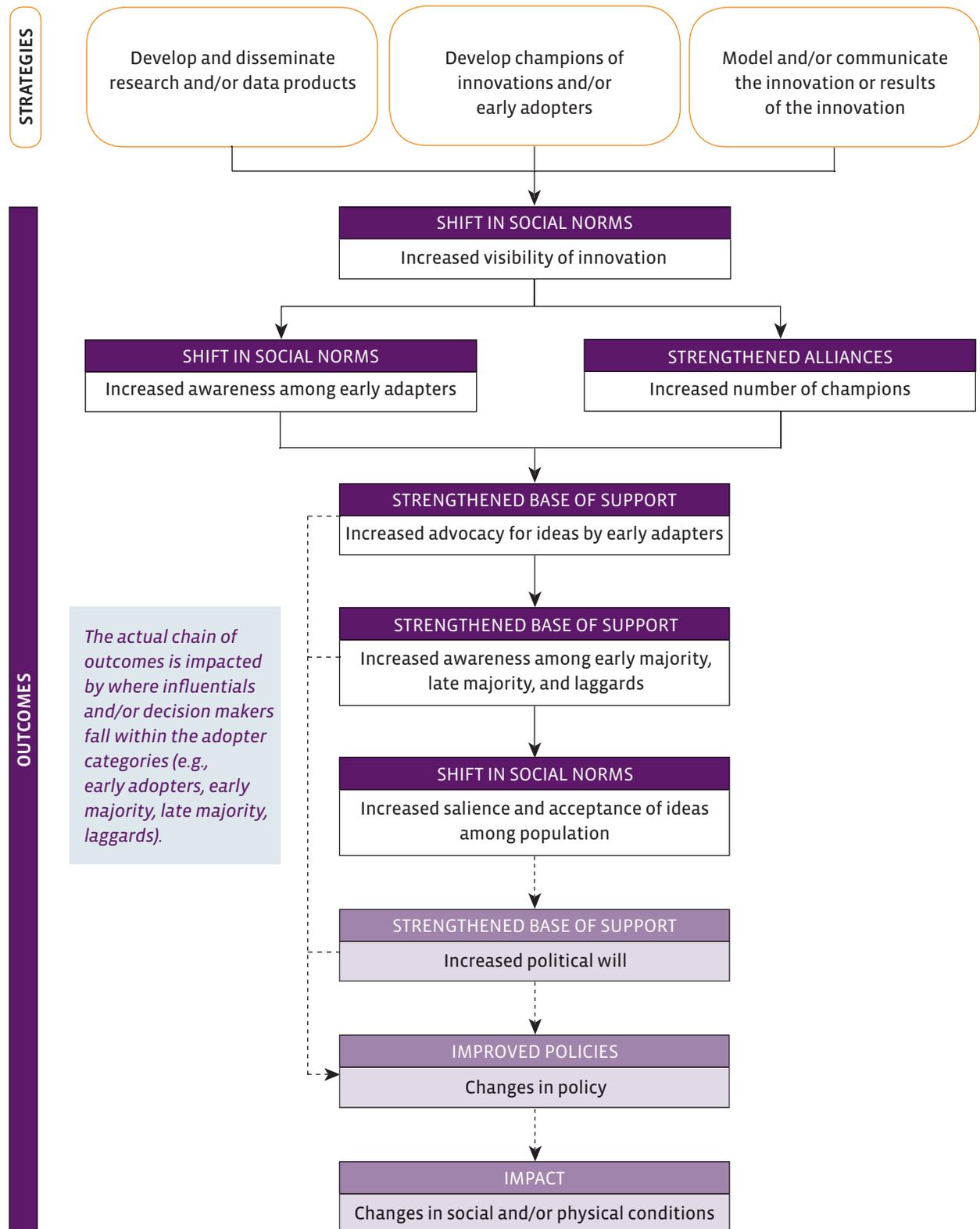
Underlying Assumptions

- Diffusion includes both the planned and spontaneous spread of new ideas.
- Newness means that some degree of uncertainty is involved in diffusion. However, an idea can feel familiar or normative if it is compatible with the potential adopter’s existing values and belief system.
- Potential adopters’ perceptions of the change agent(s) or opinion leader(s) affect their willingness to adopt a new idea. Thus, if the innovator is an outsider to the social system, there may be greater skepticism or opposition to the innovation.
- It should not be assumed that the diffusion and adoption of all innovations is necessarily desirable for a social system.

Application to Advocacy

- Policy and law can force individuals to adopt an innovation. However, individuals seem more open to the innovation or persuadable when the relative advantages of adoption are communicated and/or made visible by peers or media.
- Organizations may appoint a champion or charismatic individual who throws his or her weight behind an innovation and the diffusion process.
- Promising strategies include research, policy solution development, dissemination activities, champion development, and communications.

“DIFFUSION” Theory of Change



Putting Theories into Practice

Talking about theories can feel like an academic exercise. However, knowledge and use of the existing theories highlighted in this brief can further the work of funders and advocates in various ways, including the following:

Shine light on competing and complementary theories: Advocates come from many disciplines (e.g., communications, lobbying, data and research) and different fields of study (e.g., economics, political science, sociology). The interdisciplinary nature of this world often is a strength, but can sometimes lead to lack of alignment as views and assumptions about how the world works collide. Having a framework for recognizing that different theories exist, and being able to identify when they are overarching theories about how policy change happens (e.g., Policy Windows) or theories about particular tactics (e.g., Messaging and Frameworks), can help advocates, partners, and funders have a common language for talking about similarities and differences in approaches and theories of change.

Confirm assumptions: When developing a theory of change, participants in the process draw from a combination of research, personal experience, and “gut” to create their own particular map of their work. By comparing elements from an organization’s or campaign’s theory of change to the relevant theories documented here, advocates, funders, and evaluators can confirm or refine the assumed linkages and outcome paths documented from the group process based on social science research.

Provide fodder for theory of change refinement or enhancement: Considering new or alternate approaches based on the theories outlined in this brief may help advocates, funders, and evaluators “pressure-test” current approaches and assumptions or consider new pathways for change.

Focus activities: Advocates can sometimes suffer from a “kitchen sink” syndrome of doing a little bit of everything and expecting change in all areas. Identifying where a group can have the greatest leverage or which strategies are most promising within a particular theoretical framework can provide some guardrails and guidance for making strategic choices within limited resources.

Clarify alignment across organizations: By clearly articulating their particular worldview or theory guiding their work, funders can select grantees that are more closely aligned with their strategy. Similarly, advocates can make decisions about the degree of overlap between their organization’s work and the funder’s. Advocates also can more effectively partner with other groups by better understanding whether the partnership is jointly pursuing a common approach or if partners are aligning across different but complementary theories of change.

Support identification of evaluative opportunities: As mentioned in the Introduction and well-documented elsewhere,⁷ using theory of change as a tool to clarify the connection between activities and chains of outcomes has become a best practice for evaluating advocacy and policy efforts. Having a strong theory of change helps advocates and evaluators speak a common language and creates a basis for determining what to measure and evaluate. A specific evaluation approach will depend on the audience, the purpose, and the resources available, but evaluators, funders, and advocates can use a theory of change to consider what kinds of outcomes would be reasonable to achieve in what sequence, which outcomes are most important to achieve, and what assumptions should be monitored or assessed when creating a measurement plan or evaluation design.⁸

Provide structure for measurement, but not too much: Many advocates fear that documenting a theory of change will create rigidity and hamper their ability to be nimble and responsive as conditions evolve. However, a theory of change should allow for these kinds of adjustments by capturing the categories or kinds of interim outcomes that are sought. For example, if advocates adjust the degree to which particular advocacy activities within a theory of change are dialed up or down (e.g., grassroots mobilizing, champion development) or how a particular tactic is deployed (e.g., specific message used, partners sought), the same *type* of interim outcomes included in the theory of change should be achieved. While aspects of the work have changed, the same path toward impact is being pursued. Alternately, evaluators, funders, and advocates may find it useful to recognize if an organization is making a wholesale change in strategy and significantly changing their theory of change, as opposed to making changes within a consistent overall direction. In such a case, evaluators should work with advocates to consider the ramifications of a broad change in theory to evaluation efforts.

Conclusion

The 10 theories presented here provide a social science-based grounding in how policy change occurs and what advocacy tactics can achieve. You may have read about one theory and realized it is closely aligned with your own worldview and lived experience; alternatively, another theory may not resonate for you at all. Regardless, understanding underlying assumptions and theories related to different ways of thinking about advocacy and policy work can help organizations more effectively choose strategies, focus evaluation efforts on critical intermediate outcomes, and ultimately be better positioned to achieve desired impact.

⁷ For example, see Organizational Research Services. (2007). *A guide to measuring advocacy and policy*. Prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Seattle, WA. See also: Guthrie, K., Louie, J., David, T., & Crystal-Foster, C. (2005). *The challenge of assessing advocacy: Strategies for a prospective approach to evaluating policy change and advocacy*. Prepared for The California Endowment. Woodland Hills, CA.

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Advocacy Evaluation Resources

Introductions to Advocacy Evaluation

Advocacy and Policy Change Evaluation: A Primer

Organizational Research Services (2010)

This primer details areas of consensus and learning in the field of advocacy evaluation, and it includes a set of data collection methods and tools for building the field.

The Challenge of Assessing Policy and Advocacy Activities: Strategies for a Prospective Evaluation Approach

Blueprint Research and Design, Inc. (2005)

This publication begins with an overview of the advocacy evaluation field and outlines a “prospective evaluation approach,” which (in contrast to a retrospective approach) allows evaluation to become a management and planning tool. The publication then offers steps for developing such an advocacy evaluation.

Advocacy Outcomes and Data Collection

A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy

Organizational Research Services (2007)

This guide puts forth a framework for naming outcomes associated with advocacy and policy as well as directions for evaluation design. It includes a broad range of methodologies, intensities, timeframes, and purposes.

A Handbook of Data Collection Tools: Companion to “A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy”

Organizational Research Services (2007)

Funded by and prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this handbook offers practical advice for capturing and documenting influences and leverage in a Making Connections community. This guide provides clarification, concrete examples, and suggested approaches for documentation of these often-elusive concepts.

A User’s Guide to Advocacy Evaluation Planning

Harvard Family Research Project (2009)

This tool takes users through four basic steps that generate the core elements of an advocacy evaluation plan, including what outcomes will be measured and how.

Unique Methods in Advocacy Evaluation

Julia Coffman and Ehren Reed (2009)

This brief describes four new data collection methods that were developed to respond to advocacy’s unique measurement challenges, specifically bellwether methodology, policy maker ratings, intense period debriefs, and system mapping.

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Sarah Stachowiak is CEO of ORS Impact, (formerly known as Organizational Research Services (ORS)). ORS Impact was established in 1989 and has developed an international reputation as a leader in outcome-based planning and evaluation, providing consultation to philanthropic, nonprofit, and public sector organizations that promotes strategic learning, accountability, and decision making. Since co-authoring the 2007 publication, *A Guide to Measuring Policy and Advocacy*, Sarah has consulted with and presented to many philanthropic and nonprofit groups to develop theories of change and evaluate their advocacy and policy change efforts.