

OURFOODFuture

GUELPH-WELLINGTON – Canada's
first food smart community

A Smart Cities Challenge initiative



Envisioning a Circular Food Economy Theory of Change for Smart Cities

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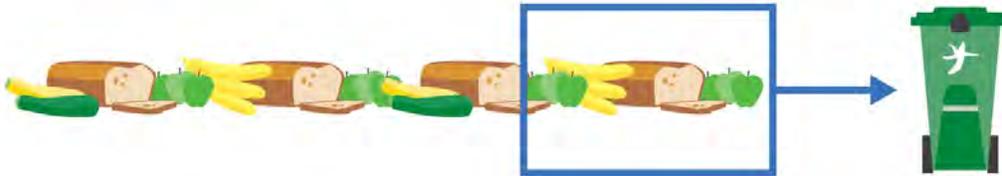
OUR FOOD FUTURE



1 in 6 families in Guelph and Wellington is food insecure.



The cost of healthy food has **increased 27%** in eight years.



Yet, in Canada we throw away roughly **one-third** of our food.

This has enormous economic and environmental impacts.

Source: foodfuture.ca/our-food-future/

Guelph and the County of Wellington imagine a food system where everyone can access nutritious food, nothing is wasted, and the impact on our environment is minimal. We imagine a system where food experts and entrepreneurs come together to tackle our most complex food challenges.

Guelph/ County of Wellington will become Canada's first technology-driven Circular Food Economy with three bold goals:

- 50% increase in access to affordable, nutritious food;
- 50 new circular food businesses, collaborations and social enterprises; and
- 50% increase in economic revenues by reducing and reimagining our food waste.

To reach our goals of 50-50-50 by 2025, we will work together, sharing our ideas, data and technology solutions to move from the current "take-make-dispose" system to a sustainable and thriving food economy that contributes new jobs, and values our planet, health, equity and dignity for everyone.

† 2018, September. Our Food Future Vision. Retrieved from <http://foodfuture.ca/our-food-future>

This Concept Paper

This paper explores what a theory of change is, its use as the foundation for evaluation and impact assessment, and how these are processes that will facilitate the success of Our Food Future. These insights are drawn from Openly's years of practice as an evaluator, strategist, and project partner in the social change/innovation space and from KAP Design's extensive experience in facilitating and communicating social change initiatives.

In the discussion that follows, "change maker" is used to refer to those individuals who are leading or otherwise committed to effecting a meaningful difference in social, economic, and/or environmental conditions to enhance wellbeing and quality of life.

Navigating the Creative Tensions of Social Change

At the heart of Our Food Future are three bold goals that, in achieving, require substantive change in how we think, feel and act together. These goals of 50-50-50 by 2025 have inspired diverse groups of stakeholders to come together and create ways of doing things differently. At the same time, while there is substantial potential in Our Food Future, there are also a great number of pressures and challenges associated with effecting community-wide and multi-sector change.

Whether the issue is focused on addressing homelessness, carbon emissions, or food waste and insecurity, any initiative that disrupts the status quo is going to encounter questions, resistance and roadblocks. Commonly, these challenges include:

- Different stakeholders holding different, and potentially competing, ideas about the "right way" to address the issues and move the needle
- The pressures of needing to meet a range of priorities for action
- Focus on project activities with limited resources for investing in up front design work, in cultivating systems leadership and planning for sustainability
- The influence and intersection of other areas of need, like the intersections between food insecurity, poverty, housing, underemployment, instability, and health; or between consumer perceptions, economic drivers, business priorities, technology, and innovation
- Confusion about which level of intervention to design for and how different levels of intervention are connected to each other, and how to be strategic about where and when should focus be on individuals, on the community and/or on broader systems
- Changing conditions across social, political and economic contexts, where norms, policies, political directions and policies can all shift over time
- A sense of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issues
- Comfort and ease with the way things have always been done
- Scepticism about the value of the approach and any impact that is being made

These kind of challenges can easily disrupt and delay the work of change makers, and though there is no single solution to resolving these sources of tension, there can be significant advantages to holding the kind of strategic clarity that comes with using a theory of change. Theory of change is designed specifically to connect our vision and our actions. The process of undertaking a theory of change for Our Food Future to navigate some of the common dynamics that limit social impact was essential for focusing energy and effort.

What is Theory of Change?

Theory of change is a way to clarify and articulate the relationship between the kind of difference we want to see in the world and what we think it will take to get there. As a process, theory of change engages stakeholders in thoughtful, and at times challenging, conversation to describe and map the change they want to make, who they want to make the change for, and how they think they will achieve that change. As a product, a theory of change can be a narrative or framework that is used to guide strategy and evaluation.

In its simplest form, theory of change can be positioned as a series of if-then statements that connect the dots between potential activities and the intended difference. For example:

If we make greater use of local data, then we expect to make more informed decisions and design more relevant strategies.

If our decisions and strategies are more informed and relevant, *then* we can make smarter and more effective investments for improving quality of life within a community.

In this form, a theory of change provides the opportunity to test one's logic and assess the likelihood of the relationship between the *if* and *then* of our theory. Working through theory of change will expose where there are unfounded assumptions, or where change makers are expecting broad or complex outcomes from simple, program-focused activities.

How does theory of change benefit change makers?

Theory of change benefits social change makers by providing a foundation for strategy and measurement. In developing strategy, theory of change helps change makers surface their assumptions about:

- The nature of the problem they wish to address, such as drilling down into why a problem exists and what factors maintain it
- The needs that exist in the community, who experiences those needs and in what ways
- What to do about those needs, including what actions are most likely to influence the kind of change needed, and
- What difference will be made by planning and implementing a set of activities.

In this way, change makers can refine their interventions to be more focused and intentionally aligned with their mission and the kind of contribution they are in the unique position to make.

In measuring social impact, a theory of change provides testable hypotheses and points to relevant indicators for collecting data. Gaining insight through measurement is a critical part of social change. Learning what works well and what doesn't, allows change makers to refine their approach and strengthen their theory of change. Its role in adaptive learning and reflective practice is a key advantage to using theory of change.

How does theory of change compare to a logic model?

A logic model maps the direct pathways between program activities and program outcomes. A theory of change is embedded in a logic model, and may or may not be explicitly articulated. Because of their linearity and strict attention to a temporal progression of outcomes, logic models tend to work well for defined programs with clear activities and expected outcomes. The structure of logic models, however, can be limiting under conditions of innovation and complexity. Theory of change, on the other hand, is more versatile. It can be applied at different levels of intervention, can accommodate emergence and complexity, and can capture more of the context and conditions that are likely to play out over the course of an intervention.

How did we use a theory of change to support Guelph-Wellington's Smart City initiative Our Food Future?

For Guelph and the County of Wellington, intent on making a real difference in our community and creating a replicable system with Our Food Future that benefits the world, investing in a **theory of change** has served to address disconnects, focus energy and efforts, and with reflective, adaptive practice, will support greater and more meaningful social impact.

After Guelph-Wellington were named finalists in Canada's Smart Cities Challenge, there was energy and momentum around supporting the bold and exciting vision of creating Canada's first circular food economy. There was a strong partnership between the City and the County of Wellington, and commitment from stakeholders across sectors, including: community development, food security and poverty reduction, business, economic development, research, and innovation. The impact goal of 50-50-50 by 2025 had been stated, and interest and ideas on how to best achieve these goals were percolating. Three working groups were established to design projects aligned with Our Food Future's impact goals of:

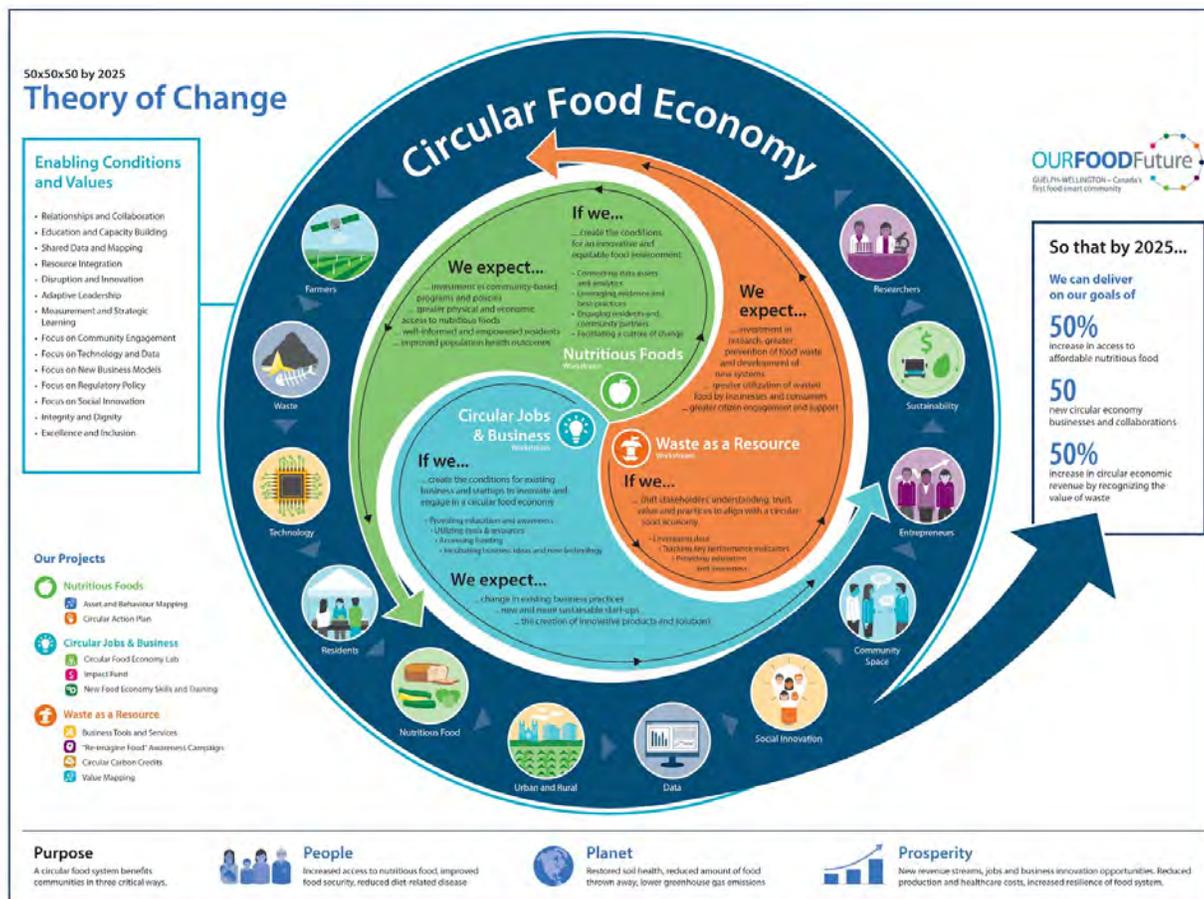
- 50% increase in access to affordable, nutritious food;
- 50 new circular food business and collaboration opportunities; and
- 50% increase in economic revenues by reducing or transforming food waste

Our Food Future leaders recognised the potential risk of a siloed approach between each of these working groups. They also recognized the temptation to quickly brainstorm and move right into action on long lists of activities, that could spread capacity too thin and drain resources. At the same time, leaders were aware that all talk and no action would lead to frustration and disengagement. Finding the balance between strategy and action was a priority. The groups needed a shared understanding of where to focus energy and efforts, and so Our Food Future brought in theory of change.

Guelph-Wellington worked with KAP Design and Openly to design and facilitate a series of theory of change workshops to help prioritize and set a critical path moving forward. The workshops engaged steering committee and working group members both separately and collectively in reflective conversation about the concepts, projects and goals for a circular food economy. These workshops were guided by key questions designed to drill down into the 50x50x50 by 2025 impact goals and work through what it would take to get there.

Outcomes of each meeting were collected and synthesized and a visual summary was designed with information organised and presented clearly for efficient information uptake. Visual techniques were used, such as color coding work stream and using icons to define project types, to support communication and understanding of the theory of change.

Through the fall, the working groups and steering committee worked to refine the Our Food Future theory of change so that it captured the key conditions for a circular food economy and showed the ways each of the three pillars - Nutritious Foods, Business Development, and Waste as Resource - were interconnected. The theory of change was then used to prioritize high-level activities into shorter and longer-term outcomes, which were then translated into a logic model for each of the working groups.



Over the course of the initiative, the theory of change will be used as a touchpoint, supporting strategic learning, adaptation, and the understanding of the initiative's impact. There is no pretense that this version of the theory of change will remain static. As a set of hypotheses, it will be pressure tested within the first few months of the full launch of the projects. Using ongoing evaluation, the theory of change will be refined until it becomes more robust and reflective of what it really takes to achieve a circular food economy. Lessons learned through pressure testing the theory of change can then support replication and scaling of the circular food economies in other communities.

How can other Smart Cities approaches benefit from a theory of change process?

However a community focuses their Smart Cities approach, there are clear benefits to using theory of change, including:

- **Designing for resident outcomes** - too easily we can become reactive to the changing world, allowing technology and external interests to drive what happens in our cities. Theory of change creates the space for change makers to be future-looking, proactive and intentional about how to influence shifting social and economic systems in a direction that benefits and strengthens their cities.
- **Scoping** - There is a sweet spot between being too broad and nebulous, and being overly specific and short-sighted in designing new initiatives. In asking questions about what needs and assets exist, where there are gaps, and what change makers can reasonably expect to accomplish given resources and competing priorities, using a theory of change process can help Smart City leaders first scope and then successfully scale their intervention.
- **Engaging stakeholders** - Different stakeholders can hold varying mental models about the nature of the issue, why it exists, what is needed to address the issue, and how to best move the needle. Using a theory of change process will help surface differences between stakeholders and build shared understanding of intended impact and how to develop the mutually reinforcing activities to achieve that impact.
- **Clarifying the role and contribution of data and connected technology** - The effective use of data and connected technology requires contextualizing these strategies in a clear understanding of their contribution to the overall vision and impact goals. A theory of change process will articulate the fit and role of data and connected technology within a framework that aligns these with other strategies for achieving new outcomes.
- **Providing a framework for making sense of data** - When using data for informing social change and supporting improvement in community outcomes, a theory of change will point out where there is uncertainty and need for data, as well as provide the framework for asking the right questions and interpreting data within the context of what one is trying to achieve. We often encounter leaders who are overwhelmed by data, not knowing how to filter or avoid the rabbit holes. Keeping aligned to a theory of change can overcome such *paralysis by analysis*, and better support the process of strategic learning.

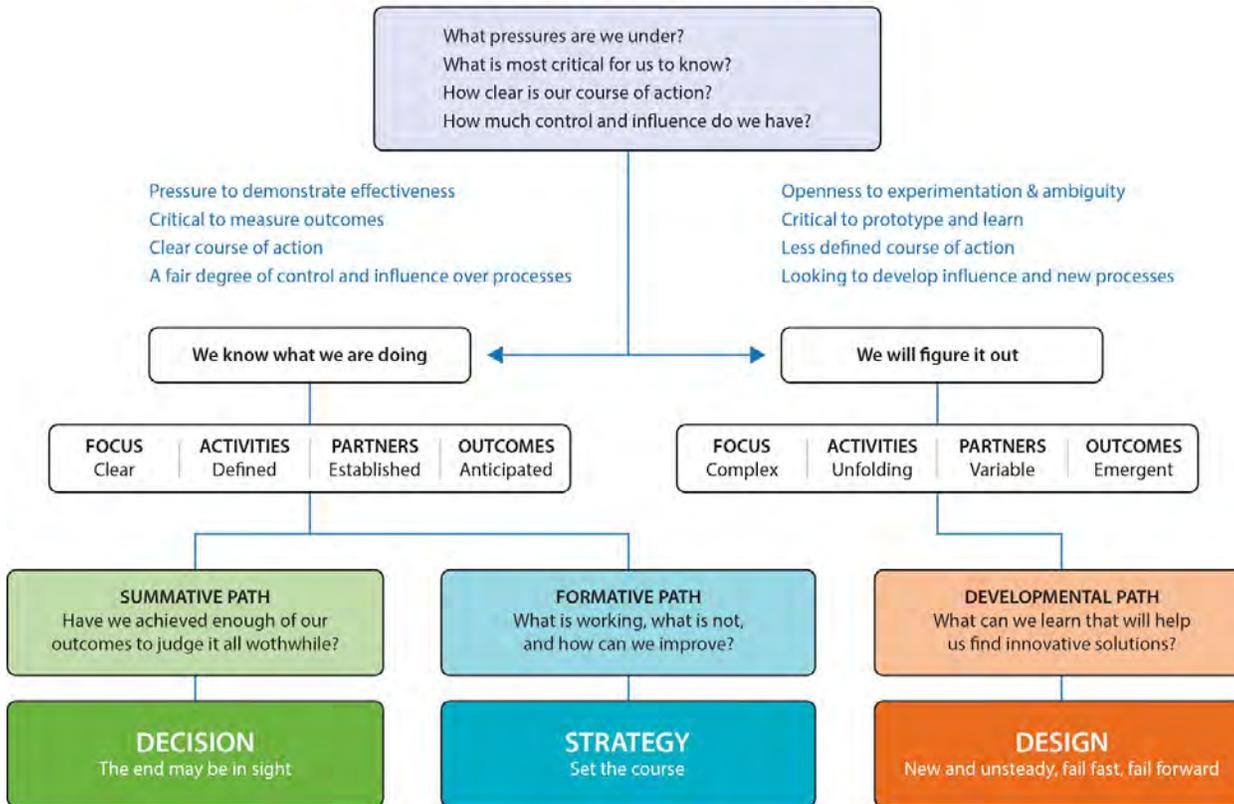
How does theory of change connect to evaluation and impact assessment?

The need to evaluate progress and measure impact is one of the core pressures of social change work. For multi-dimensional initiatives that are tackling complex economic, environmental and social issues, like Our Food Future, there is no quick answer. However, the theory of change can help to clarify evaluation and measurement by helping to resolve uncertainty about:

- What to be accountable and take credit for
- What questions to ask
- Who key stakeholders are
- What expectations are realistic in what timeframe
- What indicators will best capture relevant data

By bringing forward hypotheses and learning questions, a theory of change can also help situate the type of evaluation that makes sense for an initiative.

Which evaluation path should you follow?



For Our Food Future, the theory of change process pointed to a hybrid approach that reflects both developmental evaluation and impact assessment.

1. **Developmental Evaluation.** Developmental evaluation (DE) is an approach that supports innovative, emergent initiatives where adherence to program fidelity is inappropriate and counterproductive. It gives leaders the space to learn and adapt activities in ways that will best drive towards desired impact. Using theory of change in developmental evaluation can help Our Food Future leaders pay attention to where and how interventions are being take up, where there is momentum or roadblocks, what moves towards outcomes and what stalls or goes off the rails. Equipped with this kind of learning orientation, leaders can then adapt and make course corrections along the way. At this stage the theory of change and logic models are untested. A DE approach will facilitate the refinement of these tools to better support scaling and replication.
2. **Impact Assessment.** Impact assessment focuses in on measuring what changes are occurring and the value of those changes within the context of the overall mission and vision. Bringing developmental evaluation and impact assessment together means that expectations about what impact should look like evolves over the lifecycle of the initiative. As the theory of change develops through the practice of implementing activities, and as leaders and stakeholders get feedback on their progress and contribution, the impact of the work should become clearer and measures should be appropriate to where the initiative is within its lifecycle. Theory of change is the foundation for the contribution analysis that will answer key questions about what difference Our Food Futures is making for whom and in what ways.

What is next?

Next steps for Our Food Future includes using the theory of change and logic models to develop action plans that include evaluation and measurement. The theory of change can also be used to hold the space for ongoing reflection and sense-making, honouring an innovation-oriented design. This approach helps to helps leaders to be more intentional and strategic, which can save future frustration by enhancing action, learning and ultimately, impact.

Questions for stakeholders to help guide the Guelph-Wellington Circular Food Economy Theory of Change:

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1. What are you most confident about in the theory of change? Where are you most uncertain?
 2. What assumptions do you notice? Are there any disconnects for you? Where do we seem most likely / least likely to succeed? Why is that?
 3. In activating our theory of change, what should we pay attention to? Where should we expect the greatest challenges? What would help us achieve our outcomes?

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