1.0 Background

Oxfam GB has adopted a Global Performance Framework. Among other things, this framework involves the random selection of samples of closing or sufficiently mature projects under six outcome areas each year and rigorously evaluating their performance. These are referred to as Effectiveness Reviews. Effectiveness Reviews carried out under the Citizen Voice and Policy Influencing thematic areas are to be informed by a research protocol based on process tracing, a qualitative research approach used by case study researchers to investigate casual inference.

2.0 Apply Process Tracing to Evaluating Policy Influencing Interventions

Policy and Citizen Voice interventions will be working to achieve specific intermediary and final outcomes. The Evaluator's first task is to help identify the scope of the intervention, including the outcomes, or changes it is seeking (or sought) to achieve, and the activities undertaken that were intended to bring these about. The Evaluator is to then evidence the extent to which the intervention's key targeted outcomes have materialised; investigate the causal mechanisms responsible, i.e. how the observed outcome change came about; and, in light of an evidenced understanding of competing explanations, draw conclusions about the significance of the intervention's contribution.

As such, the purpose of the evaluation is not to simply narrow in on only one explanation for an observed outcome-level change. Rather, the approach is more nuanced and should accomplish three things: a) shortlist one or more evidenced explanations for the outcome in question (which may or may not include the intervention); b) rule out alternative, competing explanations incompatible with the evidence; and c) if more than one explanation is supported by the evidence, estimate the level of influence each had on bringing about the change in question.

3.0 Summary of Steps for Undertaking Process Tracing

These are not intended to be a mechanical sequence of linear steps of how the research exercise should proceed; significant iteration between many of the processes is expected and, indeed, desired. However, together, they form the core of the research exercise's protocol. See section 5.0 for detailed guidance for undertaking Process Tracing in Campaigning Work.

1. Undertake a process of (re)constructing the intervention's theory of change, in order to clearly define the intervention being evaluated – what is it trying to change (outcomes), how it is working to effect these changes (strategies/streams of activities) and what assumptions is it making about how it will contribute to these changes (key assumptions)

2. Work with relevant stakeholders to identify up to three intermediate and/or final outcomes considered by stakeholders to be the most significant for the evaluation to focus on (central to the intervention's theory of change, and useful for learning/forward planning)

3. Systematically assess and document what was done under the intervention to achieve the selected targeted outcomes.

4. Identify and evidence the extent to which the selected outcomes have actually materialised, as well as any relevant unintended outcomes.

5. Undertake "process induction" to identify salient plausible causal explanations for the evidenced outcomes.

6. Gather required data and use "process verification" to assess the extent to which each of the explanations identified in Step 5 are supported or not supported by the available evidence.

7. Write a narrative analytical report to document the above research processes and findings.

8. Summarise aspects of the above narrative analysis by allocating project/campaign "contribution scores" for each of the targeted and/ or associated outcomes.

4.0   Detailed Guidance for Undertaking Process Tracing

As above, the following guidelines are not intended to be a mechanical sequence of linear steps of how the research exercise should proceed; significant iteration between many of the processes is expected and, indeed, desired. However, together, they form the core of the research exercise's protocol.

1. Undertake a process of (re)constructing the intervention's theory of change, in order to get clarity on the intervention being evaluated – what is it trying to change (outcomes), how it is working to effect these changes (strategies/ streams of activities) and what assumptions is it making about how it will contribute to these changes (key assumptions)

- Formal project/campaign documentation, including a logic model or equivalent, may exist for the project/campaign. This is a useful starting point but may not necessarily best articulate or represent the most up-to-date, actual, and specific short, medium, and longer term changes project/campaign stakeholders aimed to have achieved or are aiming to achieve, or the strategies actually employed to affect these changes. It is very possible that the outcomes the project/campaign has worked towards and the strategies it has employed have changed over time. It is important to identify the most recent outcomes that were (or are) being pursued, and actual blocks of activities or strategies rather than focusing on what was initially planned. Given this, discussions should be held with relevant project/campaign stakeholders to verify, augment or make explicit the "official" outcomes the intervention sought or are seeking to change.

- In some cases this will be done in a participatory manner, bringing the various stakeholders together. In other cases, this will be done remotely, developed primarily from intervention documentation and bilateral conversations between the evaluator and select key stakeholders.

- In the event that that a common theory of change is not shared by all stakeholder groups, try to find a working model that will allow you to move forward even in the details cannot be agreed on.

2. Work with relevant stakeholders to identify up to three intermediate and/or final outcomes considered by stakeholders to be the most significant for the evaluation to focus on [1].

- Examples of intermediary changes could include increased media coverage of a campaign issue, increased awareness of a campaign issue among targets or target groups, increased dialogue and interaction between civil society leaders and policy makers, etc. Final outcome(s) likely relate to specific policy and/ or duty bearer practice changes targeted by the intervention or examples of active citizenship.

- It is important for the outcomes that will be investigated to be clearly specified; doing so is important for successfully implementing several of the processes outlined below. These are referred to in the remainder of this document as the intervention's targeted outcomes.

3. Systematically assess and document what was done under the intervention to achieve the select targeted outcomes.

- Process tracing involves linking a cause to an effect by evidencing the processes of how the former translated into the latter. An important starting point is to sufficiently understand the nature of the potential causes, as this will point to possible mechanisms and processes of how they may have caused the effect that needs to be probed. At an even more basic level, it is important to know the extent to which the intervention – one of the possible explanations to be investigated – was implemented; if not much actually took place, the plausibility of it being responsible for any observed outcomes is questionable. As such, it will be important for the Evaluator to have a good understanding of the intervention to inform the research. Documenting what has transpired will also be important for learning purposes.

- This step is essentially about data collection with campaign "insiders" who are implementing the campaign. There is likely to be sufficient documentation relevant to project/campaign's implementation. This should be one – but not the only – source of data used to execute this step; triangulation should take place with OGB, partner staff and other relevant stakeholders.

1 These should be central to the intervention's theory of change, and wherever possible useful for learning/ forward planning

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The aim is to derive a substantive understanding of the breadth and depth of the various activities and initiatives implemented under the project/campaign.

4. Identify and evidence what targeted intevention outcomes have actually materialised, as well as any relevant associated outcomes.

- The starting point will be the intended intermediary and final outcomes specified in Step 2. To what extent is there evidence that these changes have manifested?

- This step is essentially about data collection with outsiders, audiences and/or targets of the campaign[2] (media, policymakers, influencers, etc.). If one of the intermediary outcomes relates to increased media coverage on a targeted policy issue, for example, a time-series analysis of relevant media should be undertaken. Assessing the extent to which targeted duty bearers have changed their knowledge, attitudes, and/or practices on a targeted issue(s) could involve, if possible, directly interviewing them, as well as others informants (e.g. bell-wethers [2]) who may have relevant insights. Analysing speeches, comments made in the media, etc. may be other data sources. (See Coffman and Reed.[5])

- Where possible, all efforts should be made to triangulate information from independent sources. "Triangulation—collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings or using a variety of methods—reduces the risk of systematic biases because of a specific source or method."[6]

- There may also be unintended or associated outcomes – which may be positive or negative – that have materialised relevant to the project/campaign's focus. A wide "scoping net" should be cast to identify any that happen to exist. And, if they are identified, they should be evidenced

in the same way as the intended outcomes[4].

- It is anticipated that, at least in some instances, the number of targeted outcomes and relevant associated outcomes that have actually materialised may be too numerous to invetigate with sufficient rigour, given the resources available for the evaluation. In such instances, it may be both desirable and necessary to work with relevant stakeholders to agree a shortlist of outcomes, both targetted and associated, to focus the evaluation on. In such cases, working with relevant stakeholders, consider, specify and document which of the outcomes are most significant and why. Steps 4-8 should then focus on these outcomes.

5. Undertake "process induction" to identify salient plausible causal explanations for the evidenced outcomes associated with Step 4.

- Drawing on theory and stakeholder consultation, this step is about identifying a number of (preferably competing) hypotheses about how an outcome may have come about, and what should be observed if each hypothesis is true or false.

- It is expected that significant data required for this step will have been captured while carrying out Step 4. However, again, a "wide net" should be cast to ensure that all salient and realistically possible explanations are identified.

- A "causal story" should be developed for each hypothesised explanation (the intervention's theory of change will be one), that sets out a detailed sequence of hypothetical causal processes and mechanisms that might reasonably have contributed to bring about the targeted and/or associated outcomes. What is needed, in particular, is a description of the specific processes/mechanisms of how each alternative explanation could have generated the outcomes identified in Step 4.

- The intervention's theory of change should be revisited at this time, as it may be necessary to embellish it with more detail.

- Consider, specify, and document what kinds of evidence, if found, would both strengthen and weaken confidence in each alternative

explanation. In other words, what one would expect to observe if the "causal story" associated with the explanation is indeed true, as well as what one would expect to see if it is false.

6. Use "process verification" to assess the extent to which each of the explanations identified in Step 5 are supported or not supported by the available evidence.

• This step will involve assessing the extent of fit of each explanation and its "causal story" with the evidence. In other words, the extent of congruence and incongruence between what is expected and not expected to be observed with each explanation should be assessed.

• An important source of evidence in process tracing may be a "signature" – something that happened or is observed that unequivocally points to one of the hypothesised causes,[7] e.g. replication of text used in campaign materials in an official policy document. In the absence of a signature, a theory-based approach should be used to unpack the set of assumptions that explain the connections between the intervention's activities and the outcomes that occur at each step of the causal path, consider the evidence in relation to each causal story's theory of change, and draw conclusions.

• This process may necessitate making efforts to collect additional data in order to meaningfully affirm or reject particular explanations. This may be particularly important for triangulation purposes.

• It is worth repeating here that all efforts should be made to triangulate information from independent sources. Where it is not possible to triangulate information, the evaluator must acknowledge the limitations of the evidence, and avoid drawing conclusions where there is insufficient evidence.

• This constitutes the formal component of the analysis process, when data gathered through the process induction and verification processes are throroughly documented and evidence weighed in order to reach conclusions on the strength of each causal story. The end result of this step, data permitting, should be a 'short list' of those explanations that can be evidenced to have contributed to the outcomes identified in Step 4, and, based on the strength of evidence,

conclusions on the relative contribution of the intervention to each outcome.

7. Write a narrative analytical report to document the above research processes and findings, in particular, documenting the following:

a) The intervention's theory of change (include a visual diagram of the the interventions' Theory of Change, 1 page max)

b) The most up-to-date intermediate and final outcomes the project/campaign sought (or is seeking) to achieve. (If the intervention's targeted outcomes have changed over time, explain reasons for the change, e.g. changes in external environment, improved understanding of context, increased engagement with stakeholders, etc.) Step 2.

c) A focused write-up of what was done under the project/campaign to achieve its targeted outcomes. Step 3.

d) The extent to which the targeted outcomes materialised, as well as any relevant unforeseen/associated outcomes, including supporting evidence. Step 4.

e) Where appropriate, the process and rationale for shorlisting a subset of outcomes, both targetted and unforseen, to focus the evaluation on. Step 4.

f) The alternative explanations for the observed outcomes that were investigated, including their "causal stories," organised by outcome. Step 5.

g) The extent to which each investigated explanation is supported or not supported with the evidence, and, in particular, those explanations that have been evidenced to have contributed to manifestation of the observed outcomes. The reasons why these particular explanations have been 'short-listed' should be clearly explained. Step 6.

h) An analysis of the relative influence each short-listed explanation appears to have had on each observed outcome, given the available evidence. In light of this, a judgement of how significant the Intervention's contribution was, relative to other evidenced explanations?

i) An overall qualitative assessment of the intervention, including the effectiveness and relevance of its theory of change and its strategies, quality of implementation, and programme learning considersations that can be used to strengthen such work in the future.

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8. *Summarise aspects of the above narrative analysis by allocating project/campaign "contribution scores" for each of the targeted and unforeseen outcomes.*

- For each targeted outcome identified in Step 2, as well as any associated outcomes identified in Step 3, make a qualitative judgement on the extent to which the project/campaign contributed to the targeted change.
- Allocate each targeted outcome a score in line with the scoring key.   There are two considerations relevant for scoring – the extent to which a) the targeted outcome in question materialised; and b) the project/ campaign's contribution to this change.
- A table such as the following should be used to summarise the results associated with this step.

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary (including reference to other evidenced explanations as appropriate)

G — Outcome realised in full
Evidence that intervention made a crucial contribution

G A — Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made a crucial contribution
Outcome realised in full & evidence that intervention made an important contribution

A — Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made an important contribution

A R — Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made some contribution
Outcome realised to small degree & evidence that intervention made an important contribution

R — Outcome realised, to any degree, but no evidence that the intervention made any contribution

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Annex 1 - What is Process Tracing?

Process tracing is a qualitative research method that attempts to identify the causal processes – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between a potential cause or causes (e.g. an intervention) and an effect or outcome (e.g. changes in local government practice).[1]

Process tracing is a robust technique to test theories of causality-in-action by examining the intervening steps….It has been used within the fields of political science, comparative politics, organizational studies, and international relations, in addition to examining cognitive processes underlying decision-making, creativity, and problem solving…. It is used to "unwrap" the causal links that connect independent variables and outcomes, by identifying the intervening causal processes, i.e., the causal chain and causal mechanisms linking them.[2]

In more simple terms, process tracing involves evidencing the specific ways a particular cause produced (or contributed to producing) a particular effect.

An important component of process tracing is to consider alternative, competing explanations for the observed outcome(s) in question, until the explanation(s) most supported by the data remain(s).[3] If these alternative explanations have already been identified, "process verification" research is directly undertaken. This involves considering, specifying, and documenting what kinds of evidence, if found, would EITHER validate OR exclude each of these alternative explanations. However, in many cases, some or all of the possible and plausible explanations for the observed outcome will not have been identified in advance. "Process induction" is, consequently, undertaken. This involves undertaking exploratory, inductive research to identify possible alternative explanations, which are then developed into more thorough explanations or hypotheses that can be tested via "process verification," as explained above.

Process tracing therefore works through affirming explanations that are consistent with the facts and rejecting those that are not. This is much like a detective who pursues possible suspects and clues, "…constructing possible chronologies and causal paths both backward from the crime scene and forward from the last known whereabouts of the suspects."[4]

However, there is the possibility that the evidence available is not sufficient to verify or eliminate all investigated explanations. It is possible, then, for the findings of such studies to be inconclusive.

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We are using this protocol to inform tailored impact evaluations ("effectiveness reviews") of our policy influence and citizen voice interventions. However, there is room for improvement, and we would welcome constructive feedback. Please send your comments to PPAT@oxfam.org.uk.

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