

# **LOCAL NETWORKS (LOCNET) INITIATIVE THEORY OF CHANGE 2024 to 2027**

## **Theory of change (ToC) as a methodology**

A theory of change (ToC) is a methodology that supports planning, implementation, learning and internal and external project communications. It helps with working out how a desired long-term change can be achieved in a way that is grounded in consultation and collective analysis of the problem being addressed. It draws on evidence and experience from a specific context and guides the people involved through a process of analysis and reflection to identify achievable intermediate outcomes that, if achieved, are expected to create the preconditions needed for the longer-term change to happen. Once these preconditions, or “long-term outcomes” as they are referred to in the LocNet ToC, have been identified, it is much easier to establish which interventions are needed to achieve the preconditions. This in turn helps avoid the trap that so many initiatives that try to address social and economic exclusion fall into: leaping into action and then being caught in a growing web of activities that respond to the multiple needs of affected people and communities, and, as a result, becoming so busy and overloaded that it becomes hard to keep track of why certain activities were chosen in the first place, and what their intended higher-level objectives are.

The value of a ToC extends beyond planning. It is a methodology that makes the underlying rationale of an initiative visible. It provides a kind of map that links the problem being addressed to a long-term vision for sustainable change. It helps ground and guide the day-to-day activities intended to find solutions and to strengthen the agency and capacity of the communities and people involved. When, as is the case with LocNet, an initiative works within a broader ecosystem made up of multiple support organisations, communities, and other partners in different parts of the world, it becomes essential to make the logic of the work visible in this way. It can help others understand where they fit, how their actions contribute, where the intended benefit is located, and what the proposed path is to achieving longer-term impact.

A theory of change also provides a framework for learning. Because it articulates a set of assumptions on the causes of the challenges being addressed, and on what factors can bring about positive change, it makes the proposed strategy and how this strategy is expected to achieve results explicit. Periodically revisiting these assumptions in relation to evidence gathered and results achieved (or not achieved) during implementation of a strategy is a way of assessing its suitability, and identifying if, and where, course corrections are needed.

## **LocNet’s ToC for 2024-2027**

The LocNet theory of change for 2024-2027 emerged from the team reassessing its longer-term vision and strategies based on results and learning from LocNet’s first six years of working on local access and community networks. It also responds to the evaluation concluded in 2022. Steps used to develop the theory of change included:

- Assessing the context of community-centred connectivity and LocNet’s approach during its first six years and identifying where changes in this approach are needed.
- Agreeing on a long-term vision.

- Agreeing on the assumptions that underpin the basic logic of the context in which LocNet works.
- Revisiting some of the core concepts, approaches and terminology towards building a common understanding of LocNet's context and work.
- Identifying preconditions, also referred to as long-term outcomes, that, if achieved, will make a substantial contribution to achieving the long-term vision.
- Identifying short- to medium-term outcomes needed to achieve these preconditions.
- Identifying the interventions, expressed as activities, needed to achieve these outcomes, for the period of 2024-2027.

**activities → short- to medium-term outcomes → long-term outcomes/preconditions → vision**

It is helpful to look at the theory of change starting with the activities, following the flow of outcomes intended to establish the preconditions needed to achieve the vision.

### **Looking back and thinking forward**

LocNet started in 2017 as a collaboration between APC and Rhizomatica. The team and the scope of its work have since grown significantly. Much has also changed in the technology and policy options for local access, but digital exclusion continues to be a huge, and in some respect growing, challenge. In March 2023 the LocNet team reflected on the context they work in, their goals, their past achievements, and the recommendations of the external evaluation report. They revisited the LocNet vision and identified aspects of LocNet's approach to implementation that, going forward, need to change for the initiative to be sustainable and have the desired impact. The team also agreed that to achieve concrete, measurable results, it was necessary to focus implementation in fewer countries – referred to in the ToC as focus countries. However, when it comes to wider awareness raising, knowledge building and advocacy for enabling policy and regulation, LocNet will continue to operate at a global level and engage in regional and global policy spaces.

Further analysis and consultation on these proposed changes and other recommendations in the evaluation report were facilitated by consultants contracted to support the strategic planning process. These changes are reflected in the "vision" and "assumptions" below, and in the intermediate outcomes and strategies in the ToC.

### **Long-term vision**

LocNet's foundational belief in the power of community-centred connectivity to catalyse positive change for communities remains, and this is reflected in the updated long-term vision of the change it wants to contribute to:

"Rural, remote and marginalised communities have the opportunities, capacities and resources to achieve and shape meaningful community-centred connectivity that contributes to the strengthening of local well-being, economies and cultures."

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions that inform the strategies in the ToC reflect LocNet's analysis of how connectivity relates to specific aspects of digital exclusion and how LocNet's vision – and digital inclusion – can be achieved sustainably over the longer term.

- i. Many marginalised and rural communities still do not have the opportunities, capacities or resources to shape and achieve meaningful connectivity.
- ii. Policy, regulatory and investment environments in most countries do not yet enable or create incentives for community-centred connectivity.
- iii. Digital inequality exists between and within countries and regions, and also inside local communities, where, for example, men often have greater access than women to digital devices and skills.
- iv. Large private sector connectivity providers generally do not see extension of services to marginalised and rural communities as commercially viable.
- v. Even when policy incentives are in place, the connectivity provided by large private sector providers is frequently neither meaningful, nor affordable, to marginalised communities.
- vi. Connectivity that is shaped by the community itself in a manner that reflects the different interests and relationships within the community can be described as “community-centred connectivity”, even if the community does not directly provide the infrastructure and services itself.
- vii. Community-centred connectivity is more likely to meet local needs, particularly those of people in the community who are poorer and more marginalised, and to take into account dynamics of power and gender, than connectivity provided by external service providers with little to no engagement with the community.
- viii. Community-centred connectivity allows communities to shape the connectivity they build and use in ways that are positive for the well-being of the community, strengthen local economies and cultures, and minimise the risk of potential harm.
- ix. Opportunities for community-centred connectivity providers to offer meaningful local services and digital technologies and become sustainable over time increase if they are accompanied at different stages by support organisations that assist them to acquire the necessary skills, confidence and resources, and interact effectively with the broader national telecommunications ecosystem.
- x. Community-centred connectivity can influence, diversify and shape wider internet access markets, including by encouraging greater awareness and use of environmentally sustainable technologies and sources of energy.
- xi. To thrive in the longer term, community-centred connectivity providers and the support organisations they work with need oversight systems, capacity and the capability to effectively manage administrative, financial and stakeholder relationships involved in providing sustainable and meaningful community-centred connectivity.
- xii. Providing meaningful connectivity in local communities creates opportunities for younger people and can reduce migration to urban areas, thereby contributing to stronger local economies and cultures.

### **Long- and short- to medium-term outcomes**

Four long-term outcomes were identified as intermediate preconditions to achieving the long-term vision. The first three are directly related to achieving the vision, while the fourth relates to LocNet’s internal capacity to sustainably implement activities that will generate results in outcomes 1, 2 and 3. Outcomes 1 and 2 are targeted towards focus countries while outcome 3 primarily target non-focus countries. There is also a cross-cutting outcome of gender

integration within all outcome areas. For each long-term outcome, more immediate short- to medium-term outcomes were also identified, and it is these that the activities will focus on achieving. The following section of the plan elaborates on these.

### **1. Viable community-centred connectivity is available in previously unreached and marginalised communities in LocNet focus countries [Enabling community-centred connectivity]**

Viable community-centred connectivity is a basic precondition for communities to be able to catalyse this connectivity to use it, and other digital technologies, to meet their needs and respond to broader opportunities for strengthening local economies and cultures. The emphasis is on “community-centred connectivity”, not just any connectivity. For LocNet this means connectivity that is shaped by the community itself in a manner that reflects different interests and relationships within the community, even if the community does not directly provide the connectivity infrastructure and services itself. This involves many factors: affordability, trust, safety and accessibility. It also involves viable and affordable access to electricity and devices needed to use the connectivity, and consideration of gender dynamics. Finally, participation in policy and regulatory processes need to be activated, and it could involve the capacity to understand and to comply with newly established frameworks in focus countries.

Short- to medium-term outcome needed to enable community-centred connectivity:

- Effective support, capacity development and policy advice are available to local communities that need viable community-centred connectivity.

### **2. People and communities in LocNet focus countries shape, use and benefit from local services and digital technologies, catalysing meaningful community-centred connectivity [Shaping meaningful community-centred connectivity]**

This outcome represents a shift introduced into LocNet’s 2024-2027 strategy. The team agreed that the original focus of working largely on internet connectivity in communities was limiting, as it did not place enough emphasis on the local services and digital technologies which were addressing community needs and, in many cases, driving increased interest towards appropriate connectivity. Outcome 1 reflects that LocNet’s work will still include connectivity provision, but it will aspire to achieving meaningful “community-centred connectivity”. Outcome 2 reflects recognition of the need that LocNet identified for a participatory approach in focus countries that applies effort towards use of local services and digital technologies that meet their information and communication needs, increases people’s agency and ultimately contributes to local economies and cultures. Results in this outcome area will serve as a proof of concept for why community-centred connectivity can increase digital inclusion.

Short- to medium-term outcome needed to shape meaningful community-centred connectivity:

- Effective support, capacities, tools and services enable communities to utilise local services and digital technologies to meet expressed community needs.

### **3. Recognition, opportunities and an enabling policy and regulatory environment exist for community-centred connectivity across a growing number of countries**

## **[Seeding community-centred connectivity]**

Knowledge products and enabling policy and regulation related to community-centred connectivity that are curated, customised for different contexts, available in multiple languages and easy to find are relevant for LocNet's work in focus countries. This precondition provides relevant resources for communities and initiatives primarily for non-focus countries but are also available to focus countries. These resources will facilitate the ongoing growth of the community network movement. But this is also a precondition for broader awareness raising of how, and why, community-centred connectivity can increase digital inclusion.

Short- to medium-term outcome needed to seed community-centred connectivity:

- Knowledge resources and expert support activities are available to increase awareness, transform policy and regulation, and seed community-centred connectivity, especially in the global Majority.

## **4. The LocNet global team has the internal capacity, systems, structure and resources to deliver on its mission [Strengthening and sustaining LocNet]**

Long-term outcome 4 is an internally focused precondition for LocNet itself having the capacity, people, partners and systems needed to support achieving outcomes 1, 2 and 3.

Short- to medium-term outcome needed to strengthen and sustain LocNet:

- The LocNet team has the people, skills, systems, organisational structures, management, decision-making tools, and financial and knowledge resources needed internally to sustain its partnerships, which enable, shape and seed meaningful community-centred connectivity. The LocNet team has the documentation of its lessons and the measured impact.

**Cross-cutting outcome:** Gender is integrated into all LocNet outcome areas, impact is measured, and lessons learned are documented.

Short- to medium-term outcome needed to integrate gender:

- Effective support, capacity development, and sensitisation enable diverse individuals within the support organisations, communities and within the LocNet team to undertake gender activities under community-centred connectivity initiatives.

# LocNet Theory of Change 2024 to 2027

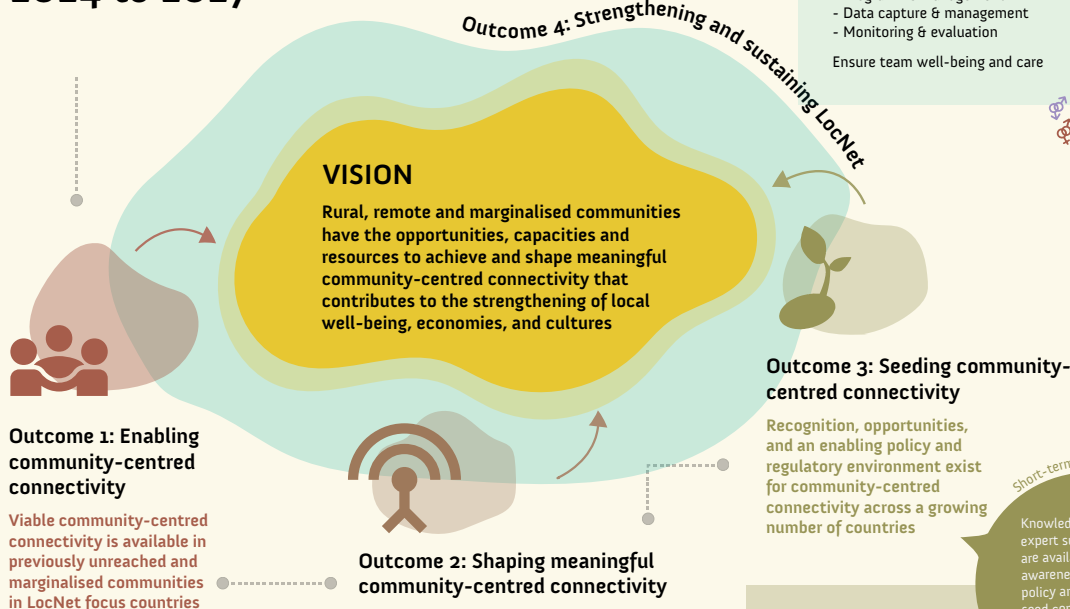
Short-term to medium-term outcomes

The LocNet team has the people, skills, systems, management, organisational structures, decision-making tools, financial and knowledge resources needed internally to sustain its partnerships which enable, shape and seed meaningful community-centred connectivity.

The LocNet team has the internal capacity, systems, structure and resources to deliver on its mission

## Activities

- Develop updated organisational structure and systems
- Streamline decision-making processes and institutional agreements
- Implement fundraising / financial management strategies
- Coordinate integration of gender into LocNet strategies
- engage in gender sensitisation for team members
- Enhance use of project management tools for:
  - Internal knowledge-sharing
  - Programme management
  - Data capture & management
  - Monitoring & evaluation
- Ensure team well-being and care



### Outcome 1: Enabling community-centred connectivity

Viable community-centred connectivity is available in previously unreached and marginalised communities in LocNet focus countries

Short-term to medium-term outcomes

Effective support, capacity development and policy advice are available to local communities that need viable community-centred connectivity

### Outcome 2: Shaping meaningful community-centred connectivity

People and communities in LocNet focus countries shape, use and benefit from local services and digital technologies, catalysing meaningful community-centred connectivity

Short-term to medium-term outcomes

Effective support, capacities, tools and services enable communities to utilise local services and digital technologies to meet expressed community needs

### Outcome 3: Seeding community-centred connectivity

Recognition, opportunities, and an enabling policy and regulatory environment exist for community-centred connectivity across a growing number of countries

Short-term to medium-term outcomes

Knowledge resources and expert support activities are available to increase awareness, transform policy and regulation, and seed community-centred connectivity, especially in the global South.

## Activities

- Review existing learning management systems & repositories
- Build an online resource centre (examples, case studies, policy briefs etc.)
- Facilitate Community of Practice dedicated to cross-regional sharing, advice giving and co-creation of enabling tech and methods, bridging communities to expertise networks
- Create guidelines for National Schools development
- Document experience, including around gender, to capture & share learning
- Implement strategic communications actions that advance Outcome areas, based on communications plan
- Develop and implement regional courses in collaboration with partners, for policy makers and practitioners
- Participate in policy advocacy in global and regional forums
- Assess effectiveness & track implementation of policy and regulation
- Develop & share policy briefs & submissions



## Activities

- Analyse country and community contexts (i.e. infrastructure, policy environments, community processes, relationships, capacities, etc.)
- Identify and build relationships with support organisations
- With support organisations, identify and build relationships with communities
- With support organisations, conduct participatory assessments of community needs, resources & opportunities
- Build country strategies
- Accompany capacity development of support organisations
- Support national schools of community-centred connectivity
- Provide gender-specific capacity building, sensitisation and mentoring for support organisations and their communities within focus countries
- Facilitate processes towards enabling technologies for sustainable community-centred connectivity infrastructure
- Support cross-regional learning and collaboration through peer exchange
- Facilitate financing
- Support efforts to provide connectivity, local services and digital technologies at community level
- Identify additional sources of support or expertise
- Develop agreements on roles & responsibilities
- Provide policy support & guidance, including through collective drafting of written submissions

\*Activities are common across outcomes 1 and 2. In "Enabling" they focus on establishing community-centred connectivity. In "Shaping" they focus on meaningful use of local services & digital technologies

Identify and address gender issues within all of the above outcomes and activities

