

ANNEX A – THEORY OF CHANGE

The content of this annex and the concepts developed are based on the workshop [Working with an Impact plan](#), produced by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), which provides valuable explanation on how to build a theory of change for a research project.

1.1 Purpose of the Impact Plan

The ambition of the Partnership is to support impact-driven R&I projects and to create significant societal and environmental impacts, in line with the objectives of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030). For this reason, it is requested from the applicants to include an Impact plan in their proposal. The Impact Plan describes how the project is expected to contribute to the long-term impacts targeted by the call and how the consortium will maximise these contributions throughout the project. It should therefore explain not only what the project will deliver, but also how these results are expected to be taken up and used by relevant actors. The Impact Plan should address, where appropriate, the following aspects:

- ▶ *the potential for impact beyond the academic world, such as in societal, technical, environmental, economic, policy-making, or behavioural realms.*
- ▶ *how quadruple-helix stakeholders can be involved in, and/or benefit from, the design and achievements of the R&I project.*
- ▶ *to what extent the project addresses the uptake of research findings and innovative outputs into decision-making processes and policymaking.*
- ▶ *how approaches for achieving impact are integrated into the R&I design and conducted by the consortium.*

To develop the Impact Plan, applicants are encouraged to use a Theory of Change approach. Within this approach, the Impact Pathway provides a structured representation of how the project's activities and outputs are expected to contribute to outcomes and, ultimately, to long-term impacts. It describes the route from scientific research towards impact, describing the logical links between well-specified outputs and outcomes. It is seen as a tool to help in the development of a strategy for societal impact of the research. The Impact Plan builds on this analysis by describing the project's strategy to maximise these contributions.

1.2 Developing an Impact Plan using a Theory of Change

A Theory of Change is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why expected changes are anticipated to occur in a specific context. It explains how research and innovation (R&I) activities

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contribute to societal, economic, industrial and environmental changes, taking into account the broader system in which knowledge is co-created, produced and used.

A Theory of Change is used to make explicit the logical and causal links between project activities and the expected changes they are intended to influence, as well as the assumptions underlying these links.

It consists of two interrelated components:

1.2.1 Problem Analysis

The Problem Analysis is a joint exercise involving researchers and relevant stakeholders. It aims to:

- *clearly define the problem addressed by the project;*
- *identify its underlying causes and drivers;*
- *clarify the knowledge gaps that the research intends to address;*
- *establish a shared understanding of the context in which the project operates.*

1.2.2 Impact Pathway

The Impact Pathway is the structured representation of the change process triggered by the project. It describes how:

- *activities lead to outputs;*
- *outputs, through interaction with relevant actors and systems, contribute to outcomes;*
- *outcomes contribute to long-term impacts.*

Outcomes refer to changes in behaviour, practices, relationships, organisational processes or decision-making that occur when project outputs are taken up and used by relevant actors.

The development of an Impact Pathway follows a reverse logic: it starts from the desired long-term impacts and works backwards to identify the necessary preconditions, outputs and activities required to achieve them.

1.3 Assumptions and external factors

The Theory of Change is based on a set of explicit or implicit assumptions that influence whether the expected change process can materialise. These may include assumptions related to stakeholder engagement, institutional conditions, policy developments, technological feasibility or broader contextual factors.

Applicants are encouraged to make such assumptions explicit, as this strengthens the coherence and credibility of the Impact Plan and allows for reflection on the robustness of the proposed pathway.

1.4 Structure of the Impact Plan

Applicants are encouraged to structure their Impact Plan according to the following logic:

- ▶ *Activities: what the consortium will do during the project (research, innovation, coordination, engagement);*
- ▶ *Outputs: the tangible results generated by the project (knowledge, data, methods, models, tools, prototypes, guidelines);*
- ▶ *Outcomes: the changes resulting from the uptake or use of outputs by relevant actors (changes in knowledge, awareness, behaviour, practice, decision-making, ...);*
- ▶ *Impacts: the broader, long-term societal, environmental, economic or policy changes to which the project contributes (typically 5-10 years and beyond, depending on the sector and context).*

1.5 Outcomes and pathways to change

Outcomes refer to the changes that occur when project outputs are taken up, used or applied by relevant actors. These may include, depending on the context:

- ▶ *increased knowledge or awareness among users;*
- ▶ *changes in professional practices or operational procedures;*
- ▶ *adoption of new tools, methods or technologies;*
- ▶ *changes in organisational behaviour or strategies;*
- ▶ *contributions to policy development or implementation*

Outcomes are therefore distinct from outputs, as they depend on external uptake and use beyond the production of results.

1.6 Assumptions, external factors and barriers

Applicants are encouraged to identify:

- ▶ *Assumptions: conditions assumed to hold for the pathway to function (e.g. stakeholder engagement, data availability, regulatory stability).*

- ▶ *External factors: contextual elements outside the control of the consortium that may influence outcomes (e.g. policy developments, market conditions, funding availability).*
- ▶ *Barriers: potential obstacles to uptake or implementation of project results (e.g. lack of interoperability, institutional resistance, limited capacity).*

Where relevant, applicants may also describe mitigation strategies to address key barriers.

1.7 Monitoring progress towards outcomes

Given its construction based on logical-linked outputs and outcomes, the Theory of Change can serve as a basis for monitoring progress towards expected outcomes. Applicants are encouraged to identify qualitative or quantitative indicators that may help assess whether:

- ▶ *outputs are produced as planned;*
- ▶ *interactions with stakeholders are effective;*
- ▶ *outputs are being taken up or used;*
- ▶ *progress towards outcomes is occurring.*

It is recommended to develop a limited number of indicators, and these should not be rigid, but should support learning and adaption throughout the project.

1.8 Productive interactions

Productive interactions are the mechanisms through which project outputs are translated into outcomes. They refer to meaningful exchanges between researchers and relevant actors that generate mutual learning and increase the likelihood of uptake and use of results.

These interactions may be:

- ▶ *direct (e.g. meetings, workshops, joint work)*
- ▶ *indirect (e.g. reports, tools, publications)*
- ▶ *financial or contractual (e.g. co-funding, collaboration agreements)*

1.9 Strategic Activity Plan

The Strategic Activity Plan describes how productive interactions and engagement activities are organised throughout the project. It should explain:

- ▶ *which stakeholders are involved at which stage of the project;*
- ▶ *which activities are planned to facilitate uptake and use of results;*
- ▶ *how these activities contribute to expected outcomes;*
- ▶ *how engagement evolves over time (from co-design to uptake and scaling).*

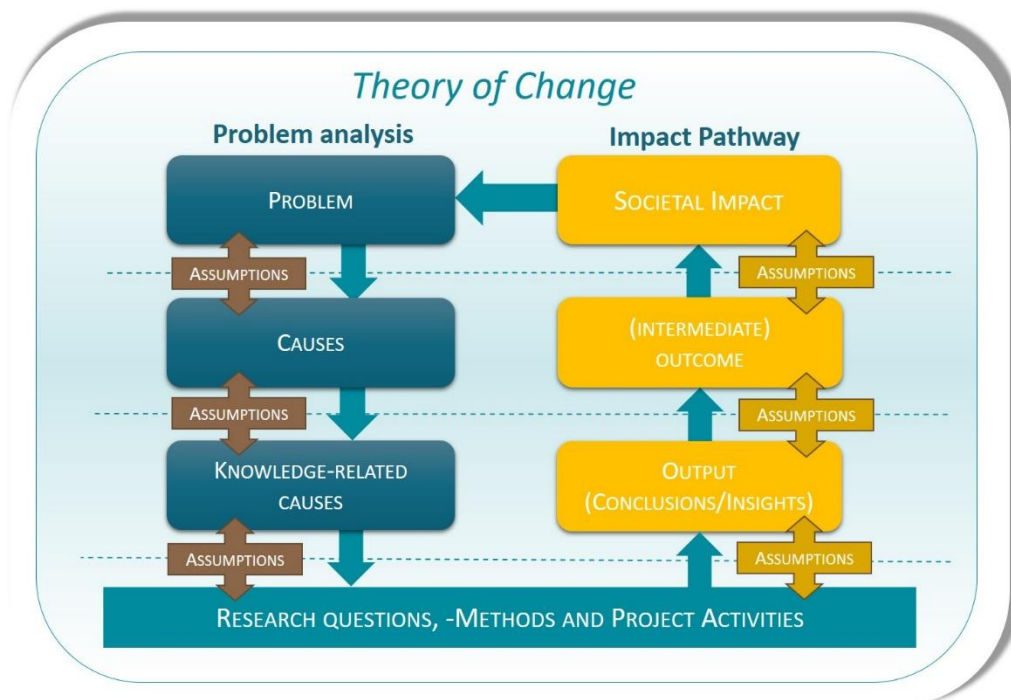
The Strategic Activity Plan is therefore a key operational component of the Impact Plan. It spells out how the proposed productive interactions contribute to achieving outcomes. Outputs do not automatically lead to outcomes; thus, strategies are needed of the research consortium to plan and monitor how their efforts will enhance the potential for outcomes. This planning should include specific activities for:

- ▶ *Stakeholder engagement: Who are the relevant stakeholders to engage with according to context analysis, how and when are the productive interactions organised?;*
- ▶ *Communication strategy: How are engagement dialogues organised and results exchanged and translated, and whose responsibility is it?;*
- ▶ *Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: How are results of activities monitored and evaluated, such that assumptions can be tested and activities adjusted accordingly and whose responsibility is it?;*
- ▶ *Capacity strengthening: How are required capacities (of consortium partners and stakeholders) strengthened to achieve the outcomes, how is this organised and whose responsibility is it?;*
- ▶ *A Risk assessment entails a description of potential risks for the successful execution of your project and options for handling or mitigating these risks.*

Box 1: Defining output, outcome and impact and illustrations of the theory of change.

- ▶ **Outputs** relate to the direct and immediate insights obtained by a research project or programme.
- ▶ **Outcomes** relate to the changes in behaviour, relationships, actions, or activities of stakeholders because of sharing and uptake of research. These processes start during the project but continues after the end of the project.
- ▶ **Impact** is defined as changes in economic, industrial, environmental, and social conditions that a project or programme is aiming at. The actual impact is often long after the project ends.

Graphical representation of the theory of change – from [Working with an Impact plan](#) (NWO): The path toward impact at society level at large is made of the Problem analysis as a first step and of the Impact Pathway. Assumptions between step are made explicit.



Circles of influence - from [Working with an Impact plan](#) (NWO): Spheres of Control, of Influence, of Interest. The Sphere of Control goes slightly further the co-creation of outputs by the Consortium and key stakeholders, toward the outcomes.

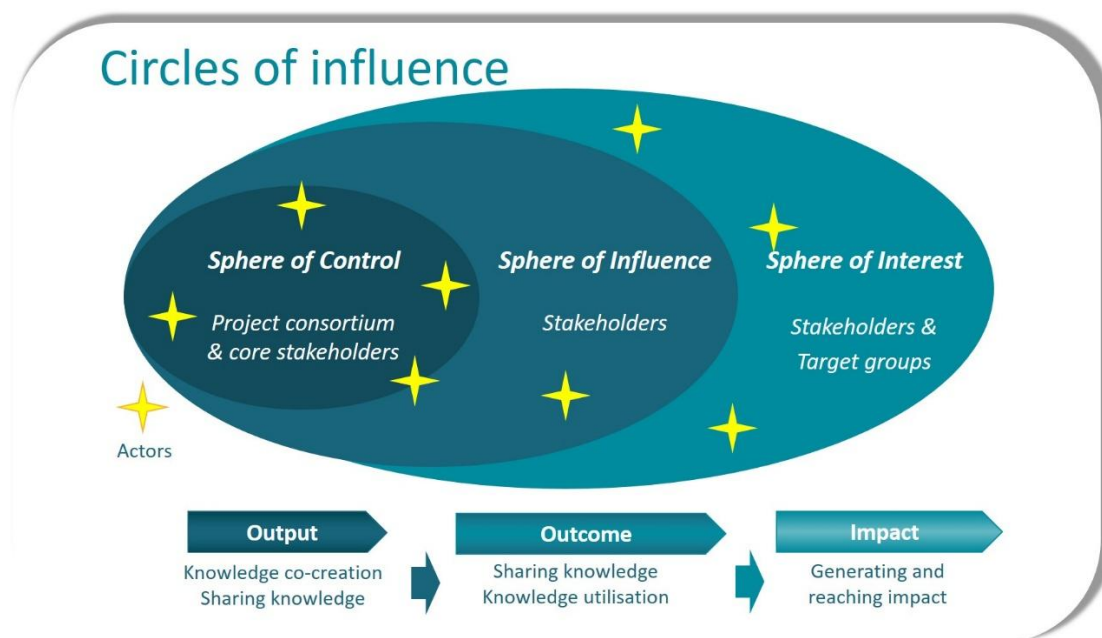


Diagram of Impact Pathway – from [Working with an Impact plan](#) (NOW): When drawing up an Impact Pathway, you from back to front.

