

# Ensuring ESPA Impact: A framework for research project design and management



This document provides an introduction to impact for ESPA researchers. It aims to support the ESPA research community to design and implement their ***Pathways to (Development) Impact***, a critical component required for the successful implementation of ESPA projects.

**When preparing proposals for ESPA research, applicants should refer to the relevant Announcement of Opportunity (AO) for information about the call and types of research likely to be funded. Applicants should note that proposals will only be evaluated against their fit to the criteria stipulated in the AO.** This document is intended as supplementary guidance to support researchers and their partners. It should not be viewed as prescriptive, as the teams implementing individual proposals are likely to be best placed to design effective processes within their projects to deliver impact, based on their own knowledge of local conditions, stakeholder groups and institutional contexts. ESPA project teams should also refer to the closely related note on the ESPA Knowledge Strategy and Research Framework.

## ***The pathways from research excellence to development impact.***

The overall aim of the ESPA programme is the development of new knowledge through excellent research that seeks to understand and explain the complex relationship between ecosystem services and poverty alleviation. **All ESPA projects should recognise that delivery of development impact and research excellence are interlinked.**

ESPA's impact activities aim to ensure that new knowledge and evidence generated by ESPA research projects are utilised in the right way by people and organisations to achieve pro-poor benefits in the context of sustainable and inclusive growth and development. Projects will be encouraged to work with the ESPA Directorate and local stakeholders to build impact. As a first step, we suggest that the pathway to impact should clearly describe how the research will contribute to a process that will improve the lives of the poor. Three elements provide the basis for achieving impact:

- Clarity in Conceptualising Impact
- Strategy for getting Research into Use (Building Impact)
- Effective Communication

The design of the Pathways to Impact should address three inter-linked components (see below for explanation of each):

- Scenarios of change
- Stakeholders in those change scenarios
- Enablers, or drivers, of change

## ***Conceptualising impact***

A project's **Pathways to Impact** needs to be explicit in describing the way that impact might be achieved by describing change scenarios, the stakeholders involved in those change scenarios and the key enablers of change. Taken together, these three components will provide the means to

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understand better how to build long-term sustainable benefits for the poor. The pathways to impact provide the link between the new research knowledge that will be generated by ESPA projects and the benefits to the poor in developing countries.

Generating a concept of the type and scale of potential impact of ESPA research is a valuable step. One of the best ways to achieve this is to work with potential users of ESPA research. These people should, where possible, be identified at the start of projects and involved in the design, implementation and uptake of ESPA research. ESPA researchers will be supported by the ESPA Directorate to consider how proactive engagement with non-academic partners such as local communities, politicians, policy-makers and the private sector can enhance the utilisation of research results and new knowledge (**Research into Use** and **Communication**, see below). Specific actions might include looking beyond science for advocates of change, brokering alliances, or working with the private sector (for instance, in the search for pro-poor business models). Individual projects will also be asked to share their experiences with others in the ESPA community through the ESPA Global Forum.

### ***Change scenarios***

In framing their research hypotheses and defining research questions, researchers are essentially defining a model for understanding changes within and between different components of human and natural systems. This logic should carry through in the articulation of the pathway to impact, stating in simple terms what changes the research seeks to capture, explore and explain, and then hypothesise what those changes might mean for ecosystem services and for poverty alleviation. The testing and validation of these change hypotheses then lead to the growth and evolution of the pathways to impact.

### ***Stakeholders in the change scenarios - beneficiaries and losers***

In any complex ecosystem and in society there will be winners and losers as a result of changes that may occur, either as a direct result of human interventions or as a result of natural changes. Researchers should establish within their change scenarios who the different stakeholders are, who may be beneficiaries or losers and which are active or passive. In doing so, it should be remembered that many beneficiaries and losers may be external to the specific ecosystem services under examination or the communities based within that ecosystem. Alleviating poverty in one context may thus be at the expense of greater poverty in another context. Researchers should be alert to such potential tradeoffs when constructing their **Pathways to Impact**.

### ***Enabling conditions***

Change enablers can be characterised as those drivers, whether natural or human, which act to cause, facilitate or prevent change. In natural contexts enablers might be the weather patterns or species migrations or extinctions, and in human systems change enablers might be policies, practices, technologies, cultural norms, etc. In constructing their change scenarios within their research domain, ESPA researchers should be explicit about the potential linkages between change enablers, or drivers, change scenarios and the relevant actors.

### ***Research into use***

Turning research into use requires considerable thought at the outset of a project on how best to engage the intended target audience and beyond. Many of the examples from DFID's Research

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into Use Programme<sup>1</sup> are relatively simple but can be very pertinent and practical to the situation at hand.

A primary consideration should be that the teams responsible for the research may not necessarily be the best placed to get that research into wider use beyond the research community. Research should be viewed as part of a much broader value chain, leading researchers to think more broadly of building partnerships and alliances beyond the primary partners involved in the research. This wider group of partners, some of which may be new and untraditional, need to be involved throughout the project and not treated as an (optional) add-on towards the end of the research process.

Consideration should be given to the incentives for this broader set of partners to get involved - this will be very different for groups such as the private sector, community-based organisations and policy makers. Consideration needs to be given to what brokerage arrangements are required, the capacity these new types of partners have to use new research results or evidence and how strengthening of that capacity might be required to reach the desired goal of reducing poverty.

### ***Scalability, extension and sustainability***

ESPA researchers will need to consider the scale at which they are conducting their research and the scalability of their research findings. Research at a local scale carries the question of scalability and relevance beyond its narrow spatial or social context, whilst conversely research at either regional or global scale may produce results which are difficult to apply by people in specific local contexts. In most cases ESPA researchers will be expected to demonstrate that their projects will have the potential to generate benefits that go beyond the scale or location at which they are operating either through extension to other locations or shifting to other scales.

Whilst most research projects are of limited duration, the issues and problems under investigation can have temporal dimensions that run into decades. Hence, understanding and articulating the potential for sustainability in any given context is crucial. Time lag effects and temporal trends (e.g. climate change) need to be considered in addressing notions of longer-term sustainability of specific ecosystem services and the human communities reliant upon them.

### ***Communication***

A proactive communication strategy will be essential for all ESPA projects. Researchers should consider a range of communication possibilities, linked to their **Pathways to Impact** to ensure that their research makes a significant contribution to delivery against ESPA's aims. Researchers should explore a range of communication possibilities: - for engagement and scaling up, for information and knowledge sharing, for advocacy, and for awareness raising. The Directorate will seek to add value to project communication plans and researchers will be expected to cooperate with the Directorate on communication activities beyond their immediate project design, for instance in the synthesis and dissemination of outcomes from multiple projects.

Communication activities provide the tools or channels through which to influence, inform or build relationships with key stakeholders. ESPA researchers will need to have a good understanding of how to use different communication methodologies to get their research into use. Communications for influencing change need to “pull” people in, to facilitate dialogue and engagement, to understand the context in which policy makers and other actors are working, and to supply relevant information at relevant times.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.researchintouse.com/>

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It will be important to identify stakeholders who can help provide countervailing pressure on policy environments like the media, civil society organisations and other practitioners. Communications for sharing information may need to “push” information out by appropriate means to broaden an understanding, by providing factual guides and ‘how-to’s or other more contemporary media. Communication strategies should have clear objectives that fit within the chosen pathways to impact, they should identify a key strategy for what kind of communications activities are chosen and should highlight particular activities and indicate what results are expected from that activity. The ESPA Directorate will work to share wider learning and support project communications teams wherever possible during the life of ESPA projects.

### ***Reporting, Monitoring and Evaluation***

The ESPA Directorate will support an interactive approach to reporting, monitoring and evaluation that captures and describes impact as the project proceeds. This will cover standard reporting requirements to the funding agencies (e.g. reporting against the ESPA logical framework<sup>2</sup> and NERC Research Outputs Database (ROD)<sup>3</sup>) and a narrative approach or impact storyline. In addition to complying with these standard reporting requirements, funded projects will need to develop an impact storyline, which like any good story will have a start, middle and end that can be communicated throughout the lifetime of the project and beyond.

All funded projects will be subject to independent, external evaluation on completion of the research project. Researchers will not be required to source and resource this independent evaluation. This will be undertaken by the ESPA Directorate. However, in line with best practice, the first stage of this evaluation process will be self-assessment by researchers themselves, and this requires researchers to have some concept of what would be an appropriate evaluation framework in the context of their project. A well-designed evaluation framework is the cornerstone for addressing funding agency accountability requirements but the question for researchers is how to determine the scope and the scale of the evaluation framework for their projects. There are many evaluation models that might be appropriate, and researchers are free to adopt any appropriate model. For those looking for a simple framework, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)’s Criteria for Evaluating Development Assistance<sup>4</sup>, whilst not specifically designed for research projects, may provide a useful starting point for researchers. These criteria provide a useful and comprehensive tool for determining the areas to be addressed in their evaluation frameworks. It is important to note that not all DAC criteria will be relevant to each project. Researchers need to select the criteria that are the most appropriate to both the project’s objectives and the resources/capacity within the research team.

### ***Establishing baselines***

Establishing the state of current knowledge is a necessary precursor for articulating research questions and hypotheses in a new research project. In impact frameworks the equivalent formulation is the establishment of baseline conditions against which changes can be monitored, assessed and verified. In ESPA projects, for example, baseline data could include a description of the status of an ecosystem, the poverty status of communities or society reliant on the ecosystem services for their wellbeing, and a description of the relevant policy environment(s) that are relevant to that context. ESPA researchers will need to consider what data exists or is needed to establish appropriate baselines that can then be used to monitor, test and validate their change

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/programmes/espa/documents/espa-programme-plan.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://rod.nerc.ac.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> See: [http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_34435\\_2086550\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/22/0,2340,en_2649_34435_2086550_1_1_1_1,00.html)

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scenarios. This should be an integral and explicit part of their research design and associated pathways to impact.

For complex projects it is recognised that appropriate baseline data may not be available and indeed the collection of baselines may be a first step in the research design and delivery. Provided researchers have established which baseline conditions they intend to use, the ESPA Directorate will be available to help funded ESPA projects to develop further and populate those baseline data.

This can be a major challenge for new projects as researchers inevitably give priority to implementing the initial project activities. The key to establishing a successful baseline is to start simple and increase complexity over time. Researchers need to determine a core area where the project should be having an impact (e.g. health, education, access to material benefits, and social and human capital) and to determine the most effective methods for assessing change (quantitatively or qualitatively), and establish a mechanism for data collection (internal to the project or external).