

**Growth
Research
Programme**

Achieving policy impact

Guidance Note

Louise Shaxson

ABOUT DEGRP

The DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme (DEGRP) funds world class scientific research on issues relating to inclusive economic growth in low-income countries, with high potential for impact on policy and practice. Our four core research areas: Financial sector development and growth; Agriculture and growth; Raising productivity and innovation; China's engagement in sub-Saharan Africa.

ABOUT THIS GUIDANCE

This guidance note has been written to support grant holders of the DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme (DEGRP). It is intended to help them think, in a structured way, about how to improve the impact their research will have on policy and practice. All DEGRP projects set out impact pathways in their project proposals, and it is worth revisiting those pathways once projects are well advanced to re-assess the different impacts they might have. For more DEGRP resources, visit degrp.sqsp.com.

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Introduction

The goal of DEGRP is to support the production of world-class research and ensure it has an impact on policy and practice in LICs. The programme's success will be assessed via the quality of the research it funds, the contribution it makes to debates around economic growth in LICs, and the changes to policy and practice that result from those debates. Individual research projects are not expected to directly influence decision-making but will be expected to make a plausible and distinct contribution to it. This note helps define that contribution and develop a set of indicators by which it can be assessed.

Using research evidence to inform decision-making is not a neutral process of identifying and implementing a 'best practice' option. Decision-making processes are affected by the context in which they take place, how different stakeholders use evidence to inform their positions, how they relate to each other, and how evidence is brokered between them (Jones et al, 2012). Providing more evidence is part of the story, but an equally important part is ensuring that the evidence informs policy goals, strategy, policy design and implementation by adding value to what is already being done¹.

Each DEGRP project will only be one of many contributors to change, and the story of how that contribution may change over time. As well as individual indicators of impact, we will use *stories of change* to assess the impact of DEGRP research on policy and practice. These are narratives about how research has influenced the opinions and actions of key stakeholders and contributed to change—recognising that it may take many years for the full extent of any changes to unfold and the full contribution of a particular project to be realised.

Setting a realistic baseline for these stories of change means understanding the current policy context and developing a credible understanding of what 'policy impact' and 'change' might look like. It means constructing a set of indicators to assess whether and how research has contributed to change. These indicators will relate to whether research has contributed to how policy outcomes are defined, how institutions reorganise themselves to deliver more effectively, how government interacts with other institutions, or a broader conceptual understanding of the issues. Developing these indicators is an art rather than a science, as we cannot be sure beforehand how information will be received and used and therefore how 'impact' might be defined².

¹ See [du Toit, A. 2012. *Making sense of evidence: notes on the discursive politics of research and pro-poor policymaking*. PLAAS Working Paper 21.](#)

² See blogs by [Louise Shaxson](#) and [Justin Parkhurst](#).

DIFFERENT TYPES OF IMPACT

In both policy and practice, it is generally impossible to predict which types of impact will be achieved and in what proportion. As [du Toit](#) (p3) notes, 'pro-poor policy interventions take place in complex, dynamic, open social systems' and they are generally implemented via messy partnerships ([Guijt, 2008](#)). A further complication is that many different stakeholders, at many different levels, are involved in debates about both ends and means: about what policies are intended to achieve and for whom, and about the most cost-effective and equitable approaches to policy implementation.

DEGRP projects will probably have more than one impact over the lifetime of their research. In some cases we may be able to establish a direct link between a piece of research and a particular change. In others it will only be possible to demonstrate that the research has made a plausible contribution: one of many contributions that together have helped bring about change.

At a programme level, the EPG will be collecting examples of impact to demonstrate the return on investment in DEGRP research and give coherent accounts of how this has come about. Because the lifetime of a research project is not the same as the lifetime of a piece of research knowledge, the EPG will collect instances of discrete impact as well as overarching stories of change which tie the different impacts together.

DEGRP delineates between four types of impact projects can have³:

- **Conceptual:** impacts on knowledge, understanding and attitudes;
- **Instrumental:** impacts on changes in policy and practice
- **Capacity building:** impacts on the ability of researchers to conduct similar work in future
- **Enduring connectivity:** impacts on the existence and strength of networks of people and organisations who understand and can make use of the research

Projects may be able to demonstrate all four types of impact, but not in any predetermined proportion. It is up to individual projects to develop their line of argument for how the different types of impact are prioritised and what proportion of effort is put into achieving each one.

Achieving impacts requires that research is communicated well: over a project's duration and for a while after it has ended. This means developing a clear understanding of who to communicate it to and knowing who is best placed to broker research knowledge into policy and practice (both during and after the project's lifetime). For this to happen it is important to clarify who is involved, how change happens, and what impacts might be possible in the first place.

Having read through this note, researchers will be well placed to revise their impact pathways and develop a suite of indicators that they, and the programme as a whole, can effectively and efficiently monitor over the lifetime of their project and for some years afterwards. And a clear impact strategy will help define a good research communications strategy, to ensure that messages from research reach those who can make a difference throughout the decision-making processes.

This note outlines the basic set of activities that will need to be undertaken to revise an impact pathway. Projects wanting to dive into this in more detail can ask for support from the EPG team

³ These come from ESRC-preferred definitions of impact as set out Meagher, L. (2012) [RELU Societal and Economic Impact Evaluation](#). The fifth category used to evaluate RELU, fostering interdisciplinarity, is not used here as it is not a focus of the DEGRP.

who can review and comment on the impact plans, or have one-on-one discussions with grant holders.

Box 1. Assessing impact: the problem of over-optimism

Using a variety of methods to define impact should reduce the pressure to be over-optimistic about what can be achieved.

Over-optimism is a natural response to the pressures put on projects and programmes to demonstrate impact, but it tends to build in failure from the outset. The process of assessing what projects have achieved then becomes more of a bureaucratic exercise (with creative attempts to avoid awkward questions) than an opportunity for learning. It can also lead to a lack of recognition of what others are doing in the same field, and how different elements and contributions from others can build to effect change.

DEGRP is attempting to be more realistic about what can be achieved by research in a relatively short timeframe in difficult environments. For example, in situations where policy officials are known to be difficult to access and the bureaucracy moves slowly, getting research results onto the agenda of a standing technical committee meeting may be the best impact that can be hoped for from those particular stakeholders.

Even if the final decisions cannot show a direct line through to the project's evidence, it will have contributed in some way to the final decisions that are taken. And the process of getting it onto the agenda will indicate that the research is being taken seriously within the department. The fact that the project cannot make any grand claim to having influenced a particular decision does not diminish the importance of 'research is on the agenda' as an indicator of impact: it means that the project has made a realistic assessment of the challenges of ensuring that research is heard in that group.

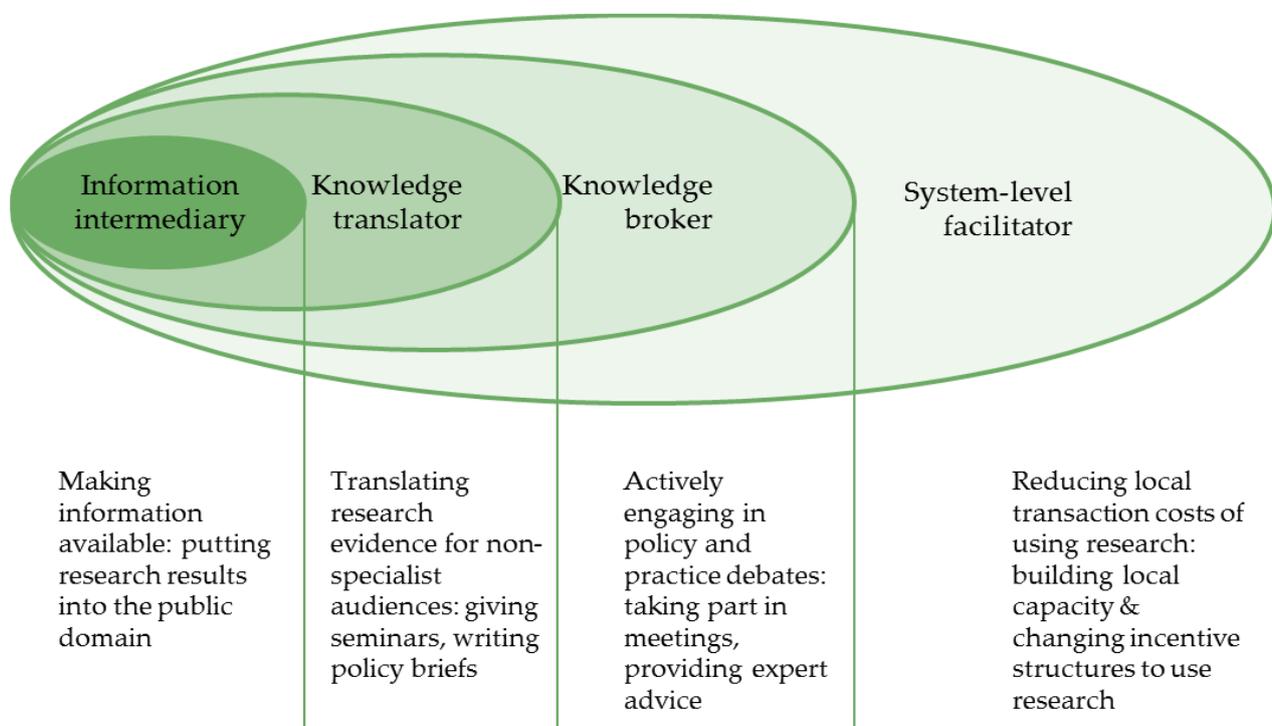
On its own, an indicator such as this would not be enough: it would suggest that the project is placing all its eggs in that particular basket. Projects will naturally disseminate their work to academic audiences, hold seminars, run workshops, write policy briefs and engage with a range of collaborators. It is the story of how all these discrete activities build on each other that will show how a particular project has made a plausible contribution to change.

Understanding impact

It is not enough just to put research results into the public domain and hope for impact. The argument about publicly-funded research being a global public good means that it should be disseminated as widely as possible. For research to have an impact on policy and practice it needs to be heard and debated in decision-making forums and it needs to be placed there by design more than by chance. But those who produce the research might not be the best at getting it into these forums: DEGRP projects will need to think broadly about how to work through others who may be more able to access those debates and communicate the evidence more effectively. These might include collaborating organisations, the media or key individuals; projects may have a direct or indirect relationship with them. Understanding who they are and how they operate will be key to developing a targeted communication strategy.

Ultimately, projects should be able to situate themselves, and the broader list of project stakeholders, on the following broad spectrum of communication activities. This will allow them to be clear what their role is, where they will be able to have direct and indirect impacts, the limits to what they can achieve, and who else can help. In the main DEGRP projects would be expected to fulfil the knowledge intermediary and translating functions, making their research available and translating it for their major audiences through the production of policy briefs or similar. They may occasionally act as knowledge brokers and will contribute to system-level functions by improving local individual and organisational capacity to conduct research.

Fig 1. A spectrum of knowledge communication activities⁴



⁴ Adapted from [Shaxson, L., A. Bielak et al. 2012. Expanding our understanding of K* \(KT, KE, KTT, KMb, KM, KM etc\). Concept paper emerging from the K* conference, April 2012. Hamilton, Ontario: UNU-INWEH](#)

Two steps are needed before a project can think about how best to communicate to its stakeholders:

- Mapping stakeholders
- Developing a theory of change

Mapping stakeholders formally and developing a theory of change will help projects broaden their thinking about where impacts could be achieved and why. The depth of analysis undertaken under each of the two steps will vary by project depending on timing and resources: all three steps could be undertaken in one day with minimal discussion or they could form the basis of one or more workshops with project collaborators. How they are completed is up to individual grant holders, but the more people involved the stronger the end result will be.

Mapping stakeholders

While all project proposals contain impact summaries and descriptions of the pathways to impact, not all of them include a stakeholder analysis. Developing maps of how well the various stakeholders are aligned with the project, and the degree of interest they have in the issue, is a valuable exercise, as it is ultimately through these stakeholders that change will happen.

An AIIM (Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix) can help ensure you consider the full range of stakeholders who may be influenced by your project in some way. It is a simple stakeholder-mapping tool with three dimensions: the degree of interest in the research topic, the degree of alignment with the thrust of the research, and the degree of influence they have within the policymaking process.

Box 2. Alignment, interest and influence: definitions

Alignment

Is the research likely to lead to policy that the stakeholder broadly agrees with? Do they share the same sense of its potential importance?

Interest

Are they committing resources to this issue? Do they want something to happen? Are they speaking openly about it?

Influence

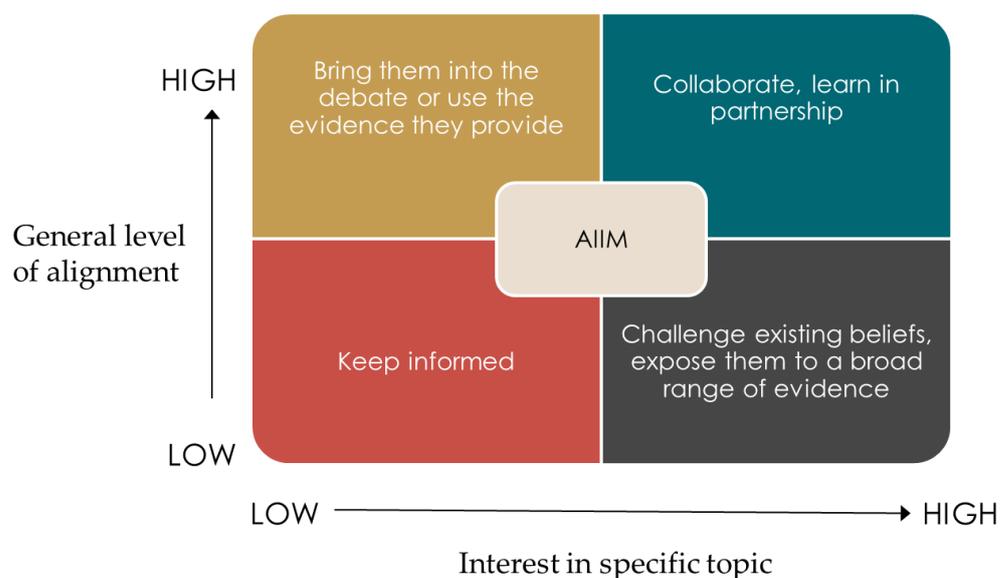
To what degree can they sway the debate? Are they in a position of authority and can they use it to put pressure on decision-making?

High alignment/low interest would be characterised by a stakeholder that broadly shares the same objective but is unable or unwilling to commit resources to it—such as a civil society organisation with a very limited budget, or an NGO for whom the issue is just appearing on the agenda (so has not budget apportioned to it). Low alignment/high interest would be a stakeholder that is funding work in the same area as the project, but with an opposing research objective—such as a lobby group for a particular vested interest.

The RAPID team at ODI uses AIIM extensively in workshops with researchers and their collaborators, not only at the beginnings of projects and programs. It can be done at any stage: in the initial stages of a project to understand the scope of possible engagement, or part way through to consolidate a team's thinking about who is involved and how they can sequence their communication and engagement activities as results begin to emerge.

The tool is best developed in a group; the point is not just to produce a map, but to use the mapping process to focus discussions around who might be interested in the results of your work and the different ways you could engage with them. It generally helps identify a broader list of stakeholders than are identified at the outset of research projects, and gaps which might otherwise be 'blind spots' in terms of new or emerging audiences, or potential enablers or blockers of change.

Fig 2: Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix (AIIM)



An AIIM can be constructed both for projects that lead to clear and precise policy recommendations, as well as for those that do not but which offer important insights on a range of different options that need consideration by policymakers. The steps are:

1. Identify the project’s overall objective: is it to produce precise recommendations on an issue or to provide evidence about the range of options policymakers need to consider?
2. With reference to that objective, list all the stakeholders you can think of (listing them on post-it notes is helpful).
3. Draw the axes of the map on a large sheet of paper and place the post-its on the map: their absolute position is less important than their positions relative to each other. Their placement on the map should be informed by some form of evidence as to why you have chosen that position.
4. Don’t be limited to a single post-it per organisation: if different teams or people have different degrees of alignment or influence, separate them out.
5. If the project is working in more than one country, or at both national and international levels, it is best to do an AIIM for each.

Constructing the map in a group will ensure you consider the full range of people and organisations that need to be included. Consider whether any stakeholders can be grouped and what their requirements are: it will help target your communications and engagement strategy. One of the early DEGRP projects set this out as follows:

Stakeholder group	Requirements
Procurement agencies	More reliable, suitable supplies
Private businesses	Better market knowledge and access.
Business associations	Better access to policy, better advice / support
Policymaker: health, industrial / innovation	Finding scope for innovation and better supply chains
International policy- makers/ NGOs	Synergy: between health and industrial innovation
Health service users; employees	Better working conditions; more inclusive health care

Considering what change is likely

A stakeholder map will broaden understanding of who might be involved and how they relate to your work. The next step is to refine ideas of how the project's work with them may lead to change as they initially engage with the project, subsequently take on board the key messages, and finally internalise the issues to such an extent that they can effectively act on the project's behalf to spread the message themselves. This means developing a theory of change⁵.

Box 3. What is a theory of change?

As set out in the DEGRP Impact and Communications Strategy, a theory of change helps researchers conceptualise what impacts they might have, and how they might be sequenced and achieved given the wider context within which the project operates. In Vogel (2012, *ibid*), Julian Barr from ITAD defines a theory of change as follows:

A theory of change is analogous to "...Google maps – this is the territory, this is how we see our bit of the territory, and this is the route that we think is best to take through it (though, like Google Maps, we recognise there may be a couple of different routes across the territory, but we have explicitly chosen one). Based on our understanding of how the territory along the road works, this is how we shall approach the journey, and these are some of the landmarks we expect to see along the way."

What we are trying to avoid are indicators of the impact of a research project that talk about impact on policy and practice but gloss over key issues such as poor relationships between implementing institutions, politics, decentralisation, lack of capacity for key tasks, budget shortfalls, and the ongoing challenges of making headway in complex and sometimes impenetrable bureaucracies. Developing a theory of change will ensure that our understanding of what constitutes impact recognises these very real constraints.

There are three steps in developing a theory of change:

1. Analyse the current context—what are the current ideas, interest groups and processes that influence policymaking?
2. For the key stakeholders outlined in the map (these could be grouped by quadrant or by stakeholder type), examine the changes in behaviour you would:
 - a) **Expect to see**, to indicate initial engagement with the project
 - b) **Like to see**, to indicate that the messages are being taken on board
 - c) **Love to see**, to indicate that the messages have been deeply internalised
3. Identify what the project will do, what others will do, and check assumptions about how these are related.

⁵ What is presented here is one version of what a theory of change may be: see [Vogel, I 2012. A review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development](#) for a comprehensive review of theories of change.

Theories of change are not static: it is worth revisiting them annually, or more frequently if things are changing rapidly to assess whether project plans need to be revised.

The same three steps would be followed, asking: has the context changed? Have the roles of key stakeholders changed and what does this mean for the changes you would expect, like and love to see? Does this affect what the project does, or what others will need to do to bring about change?

STEP 1: ANALYSING THE CURRENT CONTEXT

This first step is often overlooked, but helps develop a good baseline and thus a more accurate analysis of how change might happen and the impacts that might be possible. The depth of analysis done at this stage is project-specific; some may wish to do a full-blown political economy analysis⁶, but it may be more appropriate for DEGRP projects to limit the focus to understanding the relationship between knowledge and policy (see also two background notes from ODI; the [analytical framework](#), and [using it to improve programming](#))

The key issues to consider are:

- **Knowledge and information:** What knowledge is currently used in debates around the policy issue? For example, is it knowledge from formal research; from past experience perhaps published in evaluations, or else taken as ‘common knowledge’; is it widely shared opinions; or do ideas come largely from ideologies and beliefs? Which of these types of knowledge dominates?
- **Actors and stakeholders:** Whose voices are the strongest in debates? Who is currently seen as credible and why? What networks exist between different stakeholders? Are there stakeholders whose voices are marginalised? Who decides what knowledge counts, who arbitrates between contrary facts and opinions?
- **Knowledge intermediaries:** Are there actors who broker debates, bringing new ideas into the discussions, synthesising evolving understanding, and communicating with stakeholders? Are there other active disseminators, such as lobby groups, civil society organisations, press and media, who actively participate in debates around the issue?

For all of these three issues, consider:

- **Processes:** How does knowledge circulate? Is it written down, is it oral? Is it public, or do critical debates and decisions take place in private networks behind closed doors? Does the political context⁷ affect how knowledge of your issue flows around debates?

The point is to look for any major aspects of the current context that may affect how change happens, particularly the sorts of changes you might want to see as a result of your project.

⁶ See [DFID's how-to note](#)

⁷ This does not necessarily mean party-political issues (though could include them): it means issues where the balance of power between stakeholders is an important consideration in how they act and how they relate to each other.

STEP 2: DEVELOPING THEORIES OF CHANGE

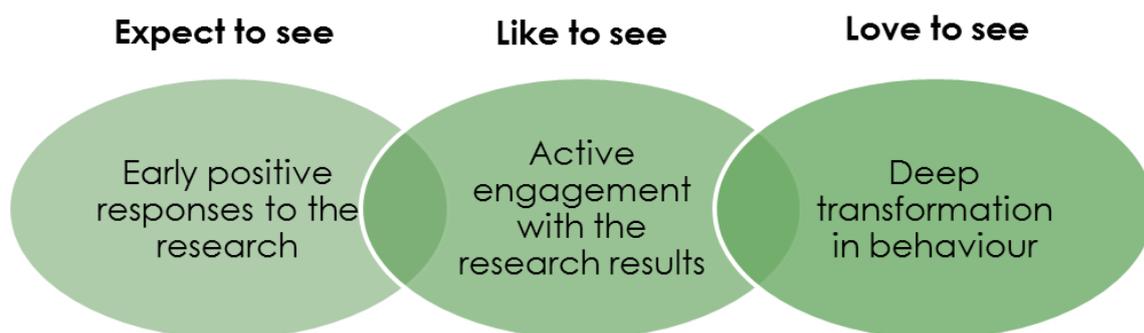
We are encouraging an approach to developing TOCs based on the principles of [outcome mapping](#). This looks at changes in people's actions and behaviours, not changes in the things that are produced. It distinguishes between three different levels of change:

- 1. Changes we would expect to see**
The early positive responses to your work (such as attending meetings convened by the project, giving feedback on a publication);
- 2. Changes we would like to see**
Active engagement with what you are doing (such as inviting you to attend one of their meetings, asking for information on project-related issues);
- 3. Changes we would love to see**
Deeper transformations in behaviour which indicate that your messages have been completely internalised (such as co-opting your project collaborator onto a standing committee, incorporating one or more messages from your project into a strategy document or taking a decision about resource allocation).

The lines between the different changes are blurred, and it is a matter of judgement as to which change falls into which category.

Fig 3: Using Outcome Mapping to develop a theory of change

Given our understanding of the current context, these are the behaviours we would:



As an example, one of the early DEGRP projects set out the changes they would expect, like and love to see for one of their key stakeholders, a private sector organisation:

Expect to see	We would expect to see that the main stakeholders identified have all committed to the project through their active participation in the conceptualization of the work and engagement during the project initiation workshop.
Like to see	We would like to have interested the private sector organisation in discussions and meetings to explore the scope of scaling up our micro-insurance product at the current site and future sites.
Love to see	We would love to see private sector firms take on more workplace based micro-insurance programs for their workers and to see the owners of the current project site invest their own resources as well in these types of interventions.

TOCs can be presented in table, as below. It is helpful to separate out your general statement of what the changes will look like ('Department X begins to actively seek out emerging research results') from more specific indicators ('Local collaborator is invited onto the standing committee for issue X'), which can be tracked.

Working into the specific indicators of change, and ensuring that their sequence is logical, can be a helpful way of checking the overarching logic of the TOC.

It is important not to assume that all 'like to see' behaviours (for example) have to happen at the same time across the different TOCs. Change in social processes is decidedly non-linear; people may block change for reasons that aren't immediately clear, or they may suddenly get the point as a result of several things happening simultaneously, most of which are outside your control.

Developing different TOCs for different stakeholders helps you unpick the assumptions about how change happens.

Table 1a: an initial theory of change

	General statement of change	Which stakeholders are involved?	Specific indicators
Current context:			
Expect to see: early positive response			
Like to see: active engagement			
Love to see: deep transformation in behaviour			

STEP 3: IDENTIFYING THE PROJECT'S ROLE AND CHECKING ASSUMPTIONS

The final step looks at the contributions to change made by the project and by others. This adds on two columns.

The first sets out what the project will contribute, the second looks at what we are assuming about how others will contribute:

Table 1b: a final theory of change

	General statement of change	Stakeholders involved	Indicators of change	What will the project contribute?	What will others contribute?
Current context					
Expect to see: early positive response					
Like to see: active engagement					
Love to see: deep transformation in behaviour					

Having gone through these three steps it should now be possible to revise the project's impact pathway; refining your understanding of the different types of impact your project can have, being clear about the limits to what your project can achieve and what needs to be achieved through others, and developing some concrete indicators of the impacts of your project and the longer-term impacts of your research.

Your position as a knowledge broker

This is the final step, setting the scene for the project's communications strategy.

It is important to consider whether you are always the best messenger for your research. Other organisations may be better placed to take part in debates, convene groups of people or lobby for a particular point of view. They should have all appeared on your stakeholder map, but in terms of developing a robust communications strategy it is helpful to consider your own comparative advantage and that of others.

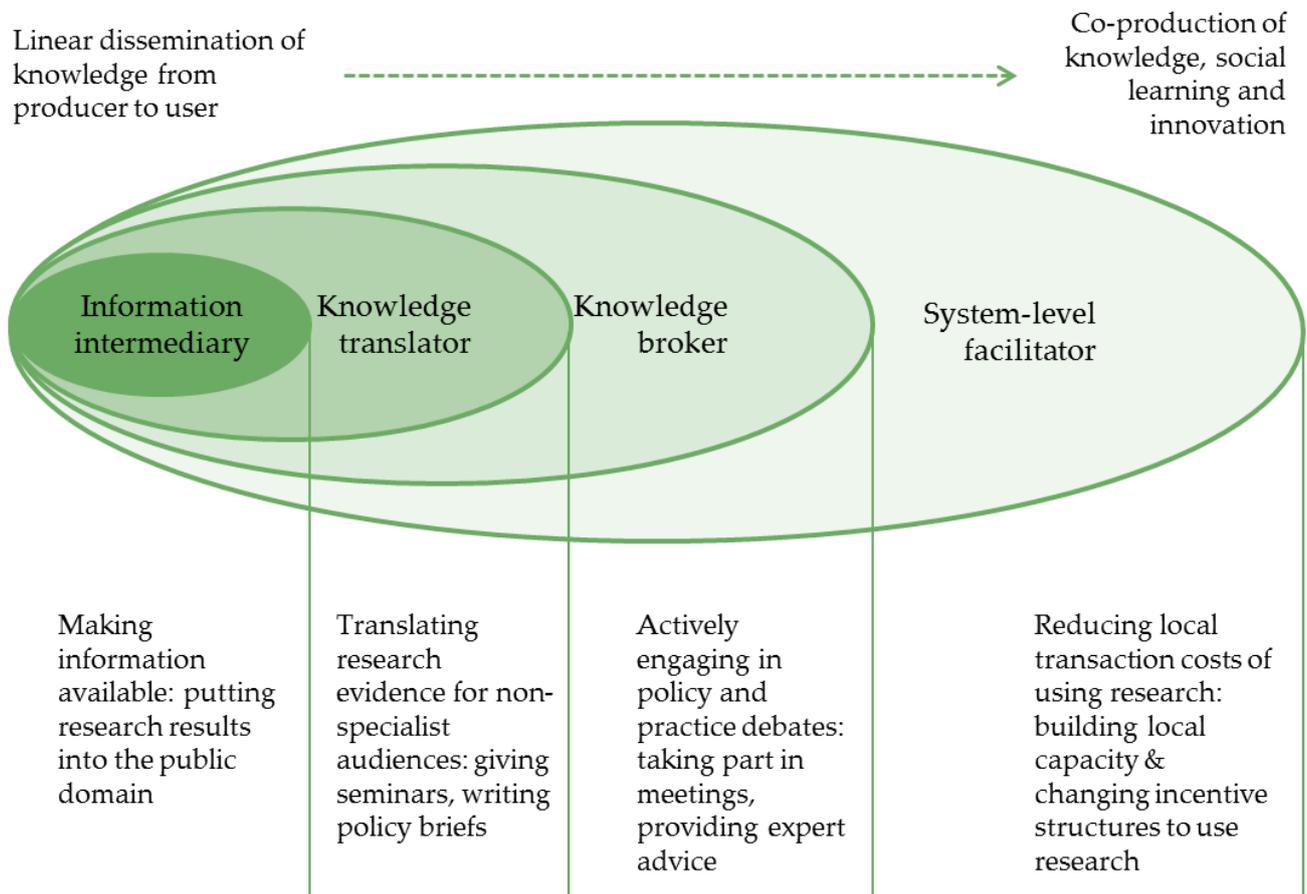
Figure 1 set out the four different functions which need to be addressed. In more detail, these are:

Table 2: Communications functions, in detail

Function	Typical project PI role	What others may do
Information intermediary: collating information and ensuring it is accessible	Preparing project reports, academic articles, briefing papers, web pages, presentations, etc.	[Not much: this is largely the PI's responsibility]
Knowledge translation: ensuring that information is translated into formats understandable by different groups of people	Preparing briefs for policy-makers, web pages for the general public, guides for technical staff, (simplified) reports or presentations to local stakeholders (e.g. village committees) and project participants.	Setting project results in context of other work, synthesising this work with other similar work, arranging events that showcase the results in tandem with other results.
Knowledge brokering: active involvement in decision-making to improve the use of evidence	Engaging in ongoing discussions with key decision-makers, participating in expert advisory groups for policymaking, co-producing knowledge on project-related issues.	Using project results to engage in wider debates about sets of changes, building coalitions of like-minded groups and people, spotting opportunities for others to use project results.
System-level facilitation: enabling system-level changes to improve the flow of knowledge and opportunities for innovation. This can happen at three levels: individual, organisational and system.	Improving the capacity of individuals and organisations to continue this sort of work. At system level, changing conceptual understandings of the issue.	Committing resources to project-related issues (e.g. further research funds, support to networks). Putting in place structures and organisations that facilitate new networks, partnerships or collaborations.

It is often difficult to distinguish exactly between the four functions, but they are systemically linked to each other—as in Fig 1 (repeated here). Note that the form of communication changes as you move across the spectrum: from linear dissemination to co-production of knowledge.

Fig 4: The spectrum of knowledge functions



The point is not that each project should attempt to undertake all four types of function at once. Instead, plotting where you and your other stakeholders are situated on the framework will help you decide what sort of brokering activities will be important at different stages in your project's lifecycle, and who will be best placed to do them. Once the role(s) are identified, defining communication objectives, messaging and activities becomes much clearer.

Using the guidance

DEGRP funds a wide variety of work on a range of issues. The impact guidance is designed to be flexible, to allow project teams to develop context-specific approaches to impact. We introduce it at the initial grant holder workshops that formally launch the projects, then leave projects to work on their own, only asking for revised narratives for the impact pathways after projects have been underway for a year. We provide support for these revised impact pathways over email. Louise Shaxson (impact lead), the two research theme leads (Dirk Willem te Velde and Steve Wiggins) and Natalie Brighty (communications officer) are available to review and comment on initial drafts of impact plans and communication strategies, holding one-on-one discussions as and when useful. The box below outlines how one DEGRP project put the impact guidance to good use.

Box 4. Putting the impact guidance to use: an iterative approach to developing policy briefs in Uganda

Researchers from Project ES/J00893, which explored [the effects of risk-taking and risk-sharing attitudes on agricultural investment decisions in Uganda](#), responded to the guidance note by developing an innovative, iterative approach to achieving impact.

As the findings from the research began to emerge, the project team began to think about **what** sort of impact they would like to have; **who** was best placed to hear the recommendations they developed from their findings; and **how** they could develop a policy brief that fully resonated with stakeholder needs.

An initial stakeholder mapping helped identify which local and national actors to target. The team then returned to local stakeholders they had spoken to early in the project (e.g. district agricultural officers, extensionists, local agricultural businesses and leaders and members of farmers' institutions) to share research feedback and draft a first, locally-informed policy brief.

This early draft formed the basis of consultation with selected policy officials, academics and civil society organisations in Kampala, resulting in a second, nationally-informed policy brief, which was sent to the EPG team for comment and review.

A large stakeholder engagement workshop in Kampala followed, where the team presented key findings, discussed policy implications, and gathered feedback on specific draft recommendations. This helped develop the fourth and final version of the policy brief, but was equally important as a way of developing relationships between the project team and key national-level stakeholders.

Although the DEGRP project has come to a close, the team continues to work on farmers' investment decisions in Uganda: they have hired dedicated 'policy brokers' to ensure the messages from their research continue to be heard deep inside government. The process of developing the policy brief is set out in a [stakeholder engagement report](#), featuring a step-by-step illustration of how consultations intersected with certain stages of research.

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