



LEAP-Agri's approach to facilitate impact

Theory of Change, Research Impact Pathway and indicators with a Research Uptake strategy

1. Introduction

Planning, and monitoring & evaluation are important instruments for project management and for facilitating research impact. The focus of this document is on Theory of Change with a related Research Impact Pathway and indicators as well as Research Uptake to support this process of change. Note that there is much variation in the use of these tools and LEAP-Agri has developed its own approach based on earlier experiences. This handout aims to provide some insight into the LEAP-Agri approach as the 'way to go' in proposal development and execution.

The Theory of Change and Impact Pathway will be an important element of the reporting for LEAP-Agri, for which the proposal will be used as a reference.¹ Reporting will provide input for several goals: accountability, learning, adjustment and communication. Especially the Theory of Change and Impact Pathway are important tools for learning and research adjustment.

2. Theory of Change and Research Impact Pathway

Definition

A Theory of Change describes how the research process contributes to impact, taking into account the context, actors involved and describing the sequence of logically-linked cause-effect relations. It is both a process (reflection) and a product (tool) for formulating activities and strategies. A Theory of Change is never elaborated in isolation, but the result of collaborative process and joint reflection of the project team and stakeholders. Taking into account the different perceptions on the change process and involving people with local knowledge is a key to the approach, as well as making explicit underlying assumptions about how change happens.

For LEAP-Agri the Theory of Change includes the overview from problem analysis to the set of desired intermediate and final changes. The Research Impact Pathway is the visualization of the change process and accompanying assumptions from problem definition to the identification of knowledge gaps through research design and execution to the realization of expected output and outcomes and the desired contribution to impact (Figure 1). The Research Impact Pathway forms the basis for defining indicators, at output and outcome levels. Thus, the Theory of Change leads to the Research Impact Pathway and then into the indicators for monitoring progress and adjusting the research, if necessary. This is especially the case where the assumptions proved insufficient or incorrect.

¹ Obviously these are not the only elements for reporting, as several EC requirements exist. Further information on reporting will become available at a later stage.

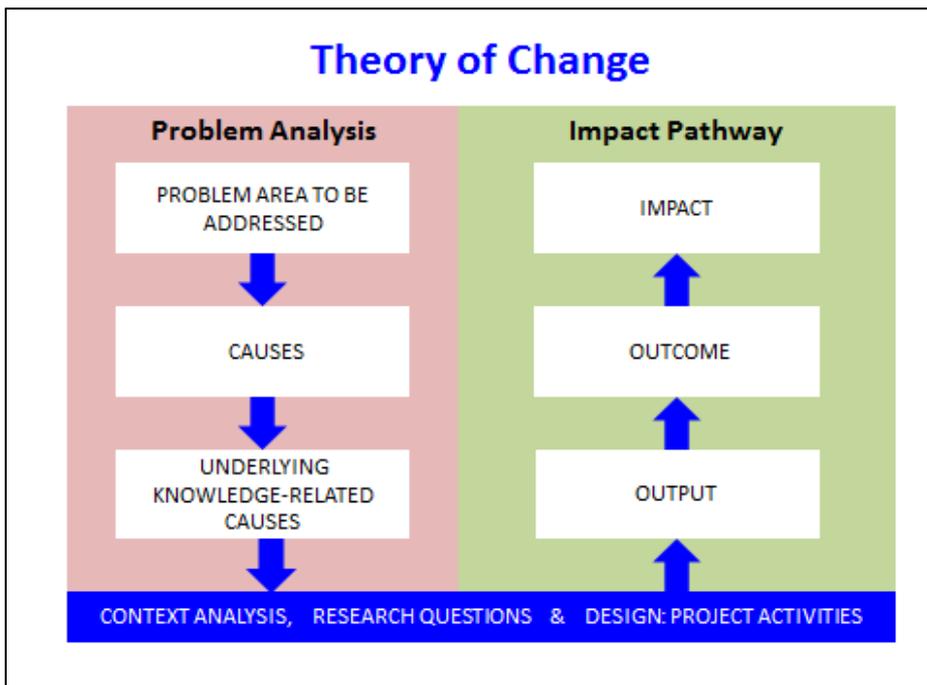


Figure 1: Theory of Change and the Impact Pathway

Defining of research outputs, outcomes and impact for society

Research outputs relate to the direct and immediate results obtained by a research project or programme.

Research outcomes relate to the changes in behaviour, relationships, actions and activities of stakeholders as a result of the sharing and uptake of research.

Research impact is defined as changes in whichever economic, environmental or social conditions a research project or programme aims to affect.

Change, and thus achieving impact, is a complex process that depends on many different actors and factors, of which research is only one. Where outputs fall under a research project or programme's direct sphere of control, outcomes & impact belong respectively to the sphere of influence and interest.

Elements of explanation

- The Theory of Change serves four main purposes:
 - To understand the problems and root causes of a certain problem
 - To clarify the assumptions
 - To achieve a common understanding among project participants about the project objectives
 - To describe the expected process of change and explain it to others.
- The Research Impact Pathway especially defines building blocks required to bring about a process of change. The set of connected building blocks is a roadmap or pathway of change, a representation of the change process.
- As part of the Research Impact Pathway, it may be useful to indicate as well what activities and outputs are expected from other parties.

Criteria for a good Theory of Change and Research Impact Pathway

- Is based on a thorough problem analysis, including analysis of the underlying causes (especially the knowledge related ones)
- Clarifies the main objectives of the project
- Includes both research and development results and shows the interrelations
- Captures the dynamics of a process of change with contributions by the project
- Is easy to understand and communicate
- Motivates readers, raises commitment

How to do it:

Step 1: Problem analysis

There are several tools for doing a good problem or root cause analysis. The following are some basic elements:

- Start out by defining the problem (to be solved). Make sure everyone agrees why it is a problem.
- Identify the causes of the problem, and the actors responsible for each cause.
- To develop a 'problem tree', keep asking yourself: what is the underlying cause of this cause?

Define the knowledge-related underlying causes. There may be multiple layers of causes:

- Make sure to make a clear distinction between causes (e.g. poor information) and underlying causes (e.g. not functioning extension service).
- Note that a 'problem tree' is usually a simplification. In most cases there are interrelations and loops: e.g. poverty may be both a cause and an effect.

Doing a problem analysis is essentially also a participatory process. The degree by which it is useful to involve stakeholders will vary, and depend upon a.o. to what extent earlier studies are available.

Step 2: Problem solution, project focus

By reformulating the causes, especially knowledge-related underlying causes, into results and objectives, one can come to a set of actions that together form a project plan.

The following needs to be taken into account:

- Which are the priority causes, which can generate leverage towards a sustainable solution?
- What are others already doing, or what will others do, so what is the greatest added value of your own contribution? And how can you collaborate?
- What is your own expertise (comparative value), so where can you have greatest impact?

Step 3: Theory of Change with the Research Impact Pathway description

Most guidelines about Theory of Change emphasise the participatory approach, because (1) it will capture useful insights from different stakeholders, and (2) it will stimulate exchange between participants, and (3) it will generate commitment among participants about the way to go.

For developing the Impact Pathway, start out from the desirable end situation (impacts and main outcomes) and then back-track to the changes that one wants to realize in order to achieve the goal. In doing so one makes use of the problem analysis, capturing the different elements that were identified. This may include elements addressed (or to be addressed) by others.

There are different ways of documenting a Theory of Change. The question is whether one also wants to include feed-back loops etc.

It is important to come back to the Theory of Change once every year or so, to check whether what has been written is still valid and adjust if needed (if everyone agrees). Any changes made must be justified and documented.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) indicator matrix

In the preliminary proposal stage, applicants are requested to fill in the expected output and outcome with indicators and impact. For the full proposal phase a more elaborated Theory of Change and Impact Pathway will be asked, for which information becomes available in the call for full proposals. At the full proposal stage also indicators for impact are requested.

The research pathway structure (Figure 2) shows how one can move from activities to impacts:

- If we realize these activities, then these outputs will be realized
- If we realize these outputs, then these outcomes may be realized, one can distinguish between direct and indirect outcomes, immediate users, final users, behavioral changes and policy changes.
- If we realize these outcomes, then the project goal and impacts will be realized

You need to define indicators at each of these levels.

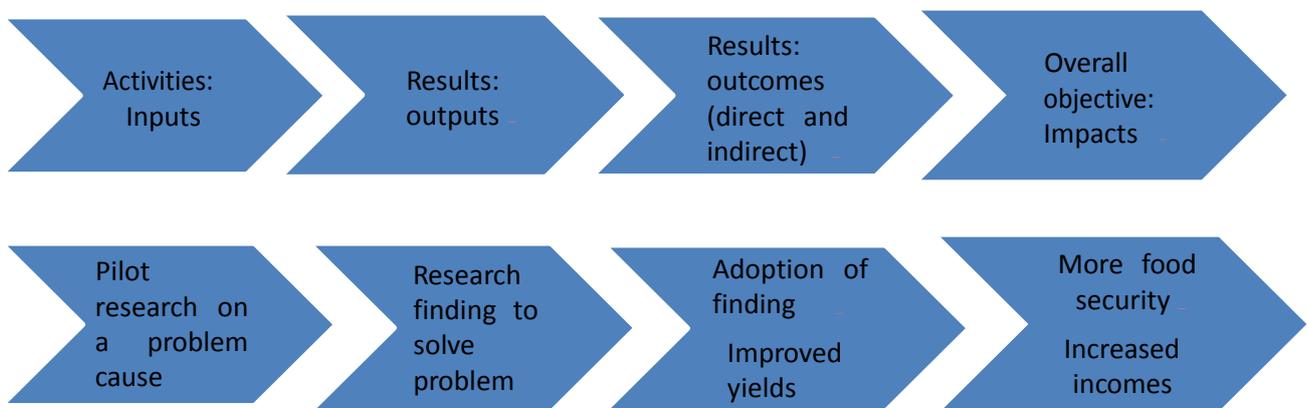


Figure 2: Research pathway structure

4. Knowledge sharing and Research Uptake

Developing a Theory of Change also helps to think through what kinds of communication and stakeholder engagement activities are needed in order to maximise the chances of the research process and research outputs contribute to expected and desired changes. We call these kind of supporting activities research uptake or knowledge brokering.

Knowledge brokering can take place at different levels: within the direct environment of a project by direct interaction of project team members with stakeholders, or via intermediaries (e.g. professional brokers (individual experts, organisations or knowledge management projects), linking-up to platforms or think tanks, and with different intentions and directions, e.g. outscaling or up-scaling (figure 3).

LEAP-Agri would like to see already in early stages of project execution the implementation of a **Research Uptake (RU) strategy** including a distribution of tasks within the team, external expertise, budgeting and timelines referring to specific activities on:

- **Stakeholder engagement:** early engagement and investing in building relationships with relevant stakeholders before, during and after the lifetime of the project. Engagement includes seeking (further) alignment to stakeholder demands, mutually agreement on engagement strategies and jointly (re)defining desired social change processes.

- **Knowledge sharing and communication:** Knowledge sharing and communication enhance the availability, relevance and accessibility of research. Communication is a two-sided process. It asks to understand your audience, prioritise and target messages and use appropriate means.
- **Assessing and strengthening RU capacities** which concern both internal capacities (consortium/team) as well as the capacities of stakeholders.

M&E of the RU strategy has to be included in the general M&E frame, ensuring that feedback is incorporated, leading to the adaptations in the Theory of Change, research design and to refining uptake strategies.

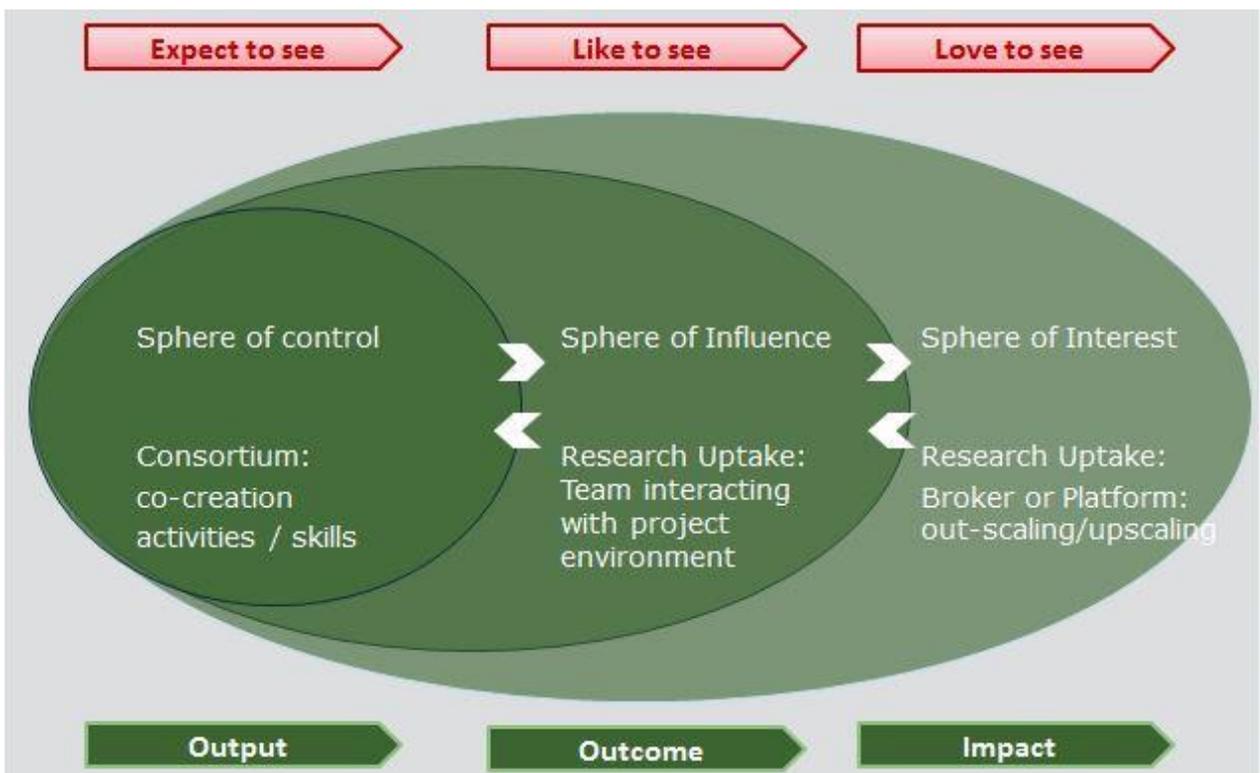


Figure 3: schematic structure of Research Uptake

Examples of research impact pathway with result levels in agricultural research: see Figures 4 (generic framework) and figure 5 (specific project framework)

- The formulation of good indicators requires some attention. Formulation should be as much as possible SMART:
 - **Specific:** accurately related to the defined output or outcome, well defined
 - **Measurable:** unit of quantity and scale defined; however, should all indicators be measurable?
 - **Achievable:** the change anticipated should be achievable by the project. Is the quality well defined?
 - **Realistic:** targets should be ambitious yet realistic
 - **Time-bound:** need to define quantity and time.

Baseline

Measuring a baseline is an essential activity for any project in its first phase. Baselines are essential for both outcome and output level. At output level the baseline is often easier.

Additional tips for defining indicators

- Keep the number of indicators limited, focus at key elements of the research impact chain
- Better to have 10 well defined indicators than 25 poorly defined ones
- Apply joint monitoring techniques for joint learning
- Use a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators
- Make use of existing data source

Generally perceived problems in using planning frameworks and indicators

- Insufficient time taken to involve stakeholders in planning process
- Focus at linear cause and effect relationships; may not be true for many development projects
- Focus on results and not on processes and relationships
- Most plans are an abstraction of reality, risk of fragmentation
- Focuses on measurable indicators, what about qualitative ones
- How to deal with uncertainties, unexpected changes and opportunities?
- How to maintain room for adjustments and learning
- Need to establish the baseline in time but other things are priority
- Setting targets on the indicators is difficult: ambition and sense of reality

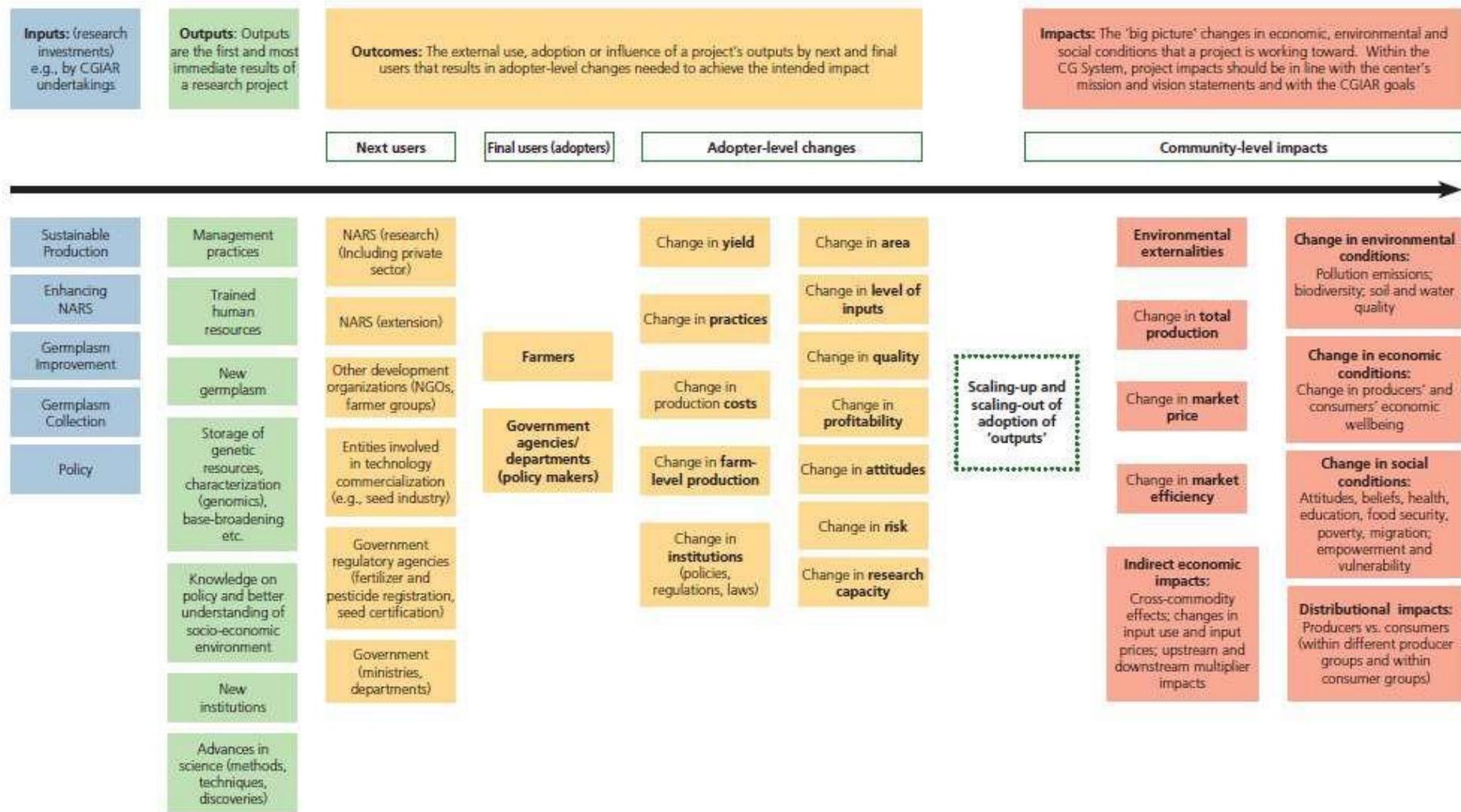


Figure 4: Generalised research impact pathway for agricultural research

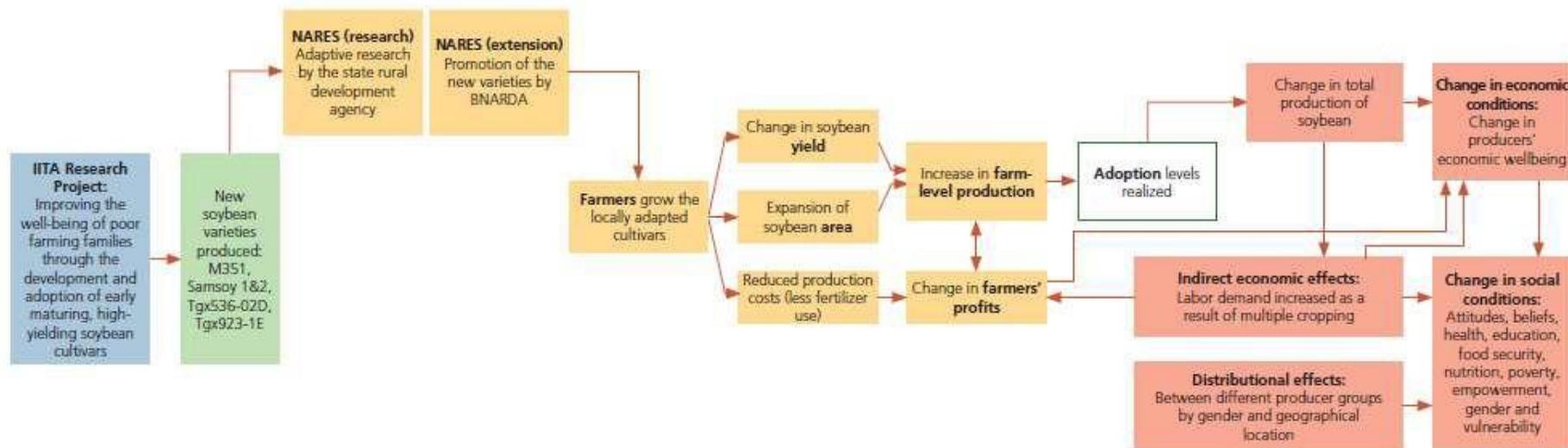
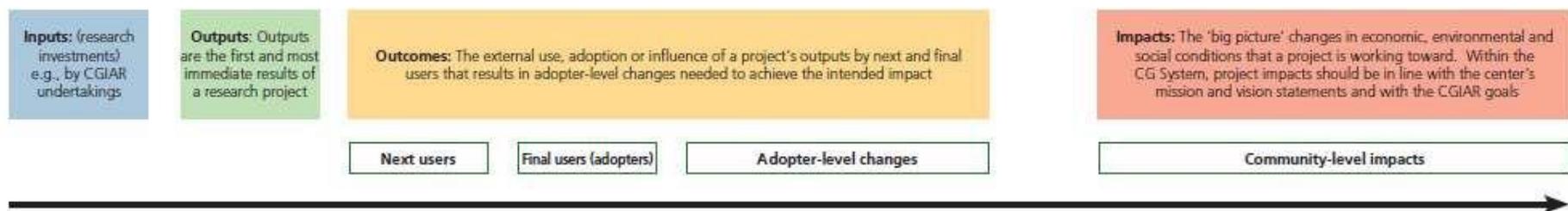


Figure 5: Specific example research impact pathway for agricultural research project