

# ESPA Impact Strategy 2016-2017



*Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) is an international research programme providing evidence of how ecosystems function and how the services that they provide support or undermine efforts to alleviate poverty and/or enhance well-being for poor people in developing countries. ESPA investments are highly interdisciplinary, linking the social, natural and political sciences to address a series of focussed research questions and evidence challenges using systems thinking, acknowledging the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems.*

Impact is at the heart of ESPA. Its research and engagement activities aim to improve the lives of poor people. As ESPA fills knowledge gaps with new insights and evidence, and as decision-makers and communities act differently as a result, ecosystems will be conserved and managed more sustainably – in ways that alleviate poverty and enhance wellbeing.

This improvement is not guaranteed however – success depends on various factors. This Impact Strategy has been created to refocus programmatic work globally, regionally, nationally and locally, within the ESPA Directorate, among research teams and their local partners, to amplify impact during the final phase of programme delivery.

In this way, the document progresses and supersedes ESPA's previous Impact, Research Into Use and Capacity Strengthening Strategies (all dated September 2013), as well as the Communication Strategy published in May 2014.

## **1. Introduction**

The ESPA programme aims to positively influence research users and decision makers through the generation of cutting edge evidence on ecosystem services, their full value and links to sustainable development. As a result, ecosystems are conserved and managed sustainably, contributing to poverty alleviation and enhanced well-being. In this context, the term 'impact' refers to the changes in the lives of poor people in developing countries – these are ESPA's 'ultimate beneficiaries'.

This Impact Strategy will communicate how the ESPA approach is designed to achieve this end. By documenting, communicating and sharing this 'pathway to impact', the aim is to build a shared understanding that strengthens existing programme practice, as well as inspires a range of ESPA stakeholders to deliver research in new or different ways to enhance impact.

As such, the launch of this revised Impact Strategy marks the beginning of a new phase of a broader package of Directorate activity to build the capacity of stakeholders across the ESPA programme on impact: what it is and how the ESPA community can achieve more of it through collaboration.

## **2. Background**

The 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) found that 60% of ecosystem services studied were severely degraded or being used unsustainably, and that the harmful effects of this degradation were being borne disproportionately by the poor. In this context, the ESPA programme was created to generate knowledge and information on the linkages between ecosystem services and human well-being because the lack thereof was found to be a key barrier constraining the sustainable management of ecosystems.

In the intervening decade, the priorities highlighted in the MA have become part of the mainstream development narrative so that, now more than ever, there is a generation of decision-makers looking around for answers to very difficult, critical questions. Moreover, having endorsed the establishment of the 'Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services' (IPBES) platform, introduced the Sustainable Development Goals and adopted the UN's 2015 Paris Agreement, the international community has recognised and resourced the ongoing need for urgent action.

This institutional and political backdrop provides ESPA with a range of opportunities to provide relevant and accessible knowledge to facilitate dialogue and enable the problem-solving process in order to bring about improvement in the lives of poor people.

### 3. ESPA's Theory of Change

Research achieves impact, benefitting ultimate beneficiaries, through non-linear and iterative pathways. Though this is true (to some extent) for any development intervention, the pathway for research investments is typically longer-term and tends to occur in more complex contexts. As such, in most instances, it is expected that ESPA research will be *contributing* to observed outcomes alongside a range of other interventions / factors, rather than wholly and directly *causing* observed outcomes.

These challenges are unavoidable but use of the 'Theory of Change' approach<sup>1</sup> helps to overcome them by illustrating plausible links from activities and outputs in the short-term, through outcomes in the medium-term to longer-term impact.

An indicative 'Theory of Change' for the ESPA programme is presented in Figure 1 below. It shows how ESPA funding - provided jointly by DFID, NERC and ESRC<sup>2</sup> - is used to commission high-quality interdisciplinary research of varying forms that combine to form a body of evidence. This body of evidence is used to generate a range of knowledge products including highly technical journal articles for an academic audience through to policy briefs written for non-specialist audiences. Knowledge products are shared with targeted groups of potential research users via Knowledge Exchange activities - for example, community engagement events to share findings or workshops to train policy makers on use of a particular tool. Occurring within and between sectors and disciplines, as well as at different geographical scales, these Knowledge Exchange activities are designed to:

- Improve awareness of the importance of ecosystem services in alleviating poverty, and the value of research and evidence to inform decision-making.
- Improve knowledge of how to best use and manage ecosystems and maximise ecosystem services in ways that support sustainable development.

Sometimes researchers are able to directly target their ultimate beneficiaries as research users, but more commonly, researchers will need to target intermediary users of their research. These are the policy-makers, company owners, development agency managers and others who the ESPA community needs to influence and enable to design and implement policy solutions more effectively and/or make better investment decisions. This is to ensure ecosystems are conserved and managed sustainably, which in turn supports (rather than undermines) poverty alleviation and/or the enhancement of well-being for poor people in developing countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Theory of Change is an approach used to guide project planning, describing the way in which overall objectives will be achieved by mapping inputs, activities and outcomes. For more detail, see: <http://www.espa.ac.uk/files/espa/ESPA-Theory-of-Change-Manual-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

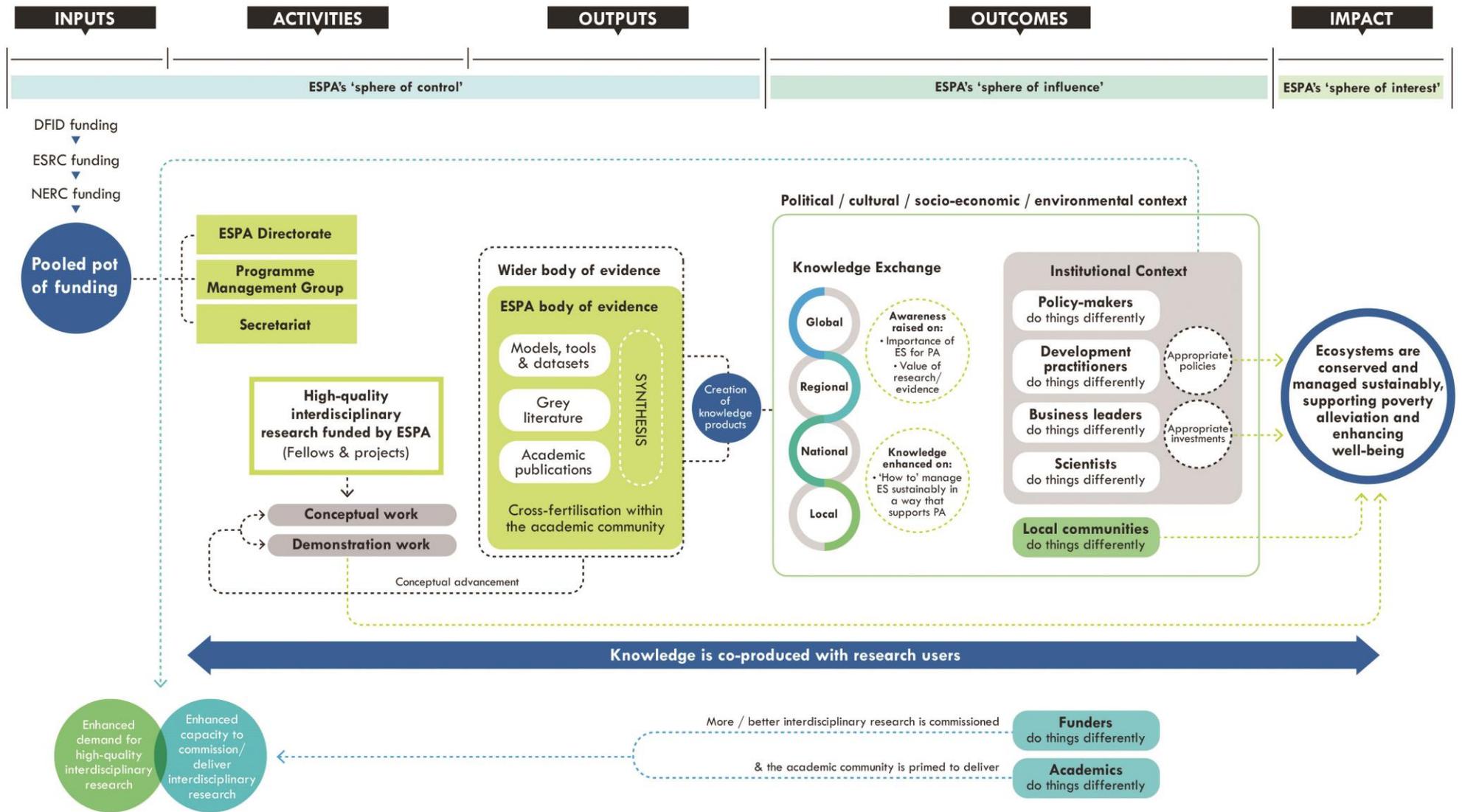


Figure 1. Theory of Change for the ESPA programme

## 4. Enablers of Impact

The ESPA programme is designed to achieve impact through its focus on:

### Research excellence

[ESPA's projects](#) are selected on the basis of being likely to deliver world-class interdisciplinary research on ecosystem services, their dynamics and contribution to human-wellbeing, as specified within ESPA's [Knowledge Strategy](#). Research is published in high-impact, peer-reviewed international journals in order to maximise influence and catalyse further conceptual advancement within the academic community.

It is expected that the experience of delivering interdisciplinary, impact-oriented research within the ESPA programme will enhance the capacity of researchers to work in new, innovative ways on future research projects. In addition, ESPA's focus on research that is undertaken via North – South collaboration and exchange is designed to further enhance the professional practice of all researchers involved. To this end, ESPA has also funded a global network of [Fellows](#) to support the professional development of promising early stage researchers, particularly those in low-income countries.

### Co-production

In order to leverage the benefits of local knowledge and connections, ESPA supports projects within which the potential research users and/or ultimate beneficiaries play a significant role in research design and delivery as 'local impact partners'.

Local stakeholders should be involved in all stages of the research process. Ideally they are engaged at an early stage of the research process, not as passive recipients of knowledge but as partners, with a sense of involvement and ownership of the research process. By listening and responding to local expertise, research is delivered in a way that maximises relevance and utility such that

- Potential research users become research 'champions' – able to speak with credibility, navigate complex social, political and institutional landscapes and influence others through their personal and professional networks; and,
- Ultimate beneficiaries will be more willing to modify the way(s) in which they interact with the ecosystem around them because the research answers questions that they consider to be important and is presented in ways that they find convincing.

Through co-production, researchers can also develop a more nuanced understanding of any other barriers inhibiting change at the individual or institutional level and develop strategies for overcoming these.

### Accessibility

The peer-reviewed research articles produced by ESPA are published in an Open Access format wherever possible. In addition, all of the new datasets, tools and models produced as a result of ESPA-funded research become new, freely available global public goods.

The ESPA community recognises that academic research papers are unlikely to provide intermediary research users with knowledge in a form that they can use in practice. In order to maximise research uptake, ESPA needs to effectively translate complex research findings into a language, formats and contexts that non-experts can understand, synthesising evidence across projects, geographies and thematic areas of expertise to convincingly answer the high-level questions ESPA was created to address. The ESPA community is therefore producing a broad range of knowledge products to enhance accessibility for targeted audience groups, including book chapters, policy briefs, blog articles and media pieces, as well as oral presentations given at conferences / workshops etc. (see 'Communication' on page 6).

## 5. ESPA Impact – Scale and Scope

ESPA's Theory of Change describes a number of different potential pathways to impact. These are not mutually exclusive and may intersect and combine in different ways.

**At the grassroots level**, as well as generating evidence and knowledge that forms part of ESPA's body of evidence, a number of ESPA investments are directly producing small-scale, localised benefits for ultimate beneficiaries. These benefits may start to accrue very quickly but behaviour change may take longer to become embedded.

- Demonstration activities: Some ESPA projects directly deliver demonstration activities in targeted communities in order to test and evidence a particular approach e.g. a trial initiative successfully restores a degraded ecosystem while generating income for a marginalised group, with an evaluation built into the project to understand and evidence impact.
- Working with local communities: Other ESPA projects are working with local communities generating evidence that is designed to influence and modify the behaviour of ultimate beneficiaries directly e.g. armed with new knowledge, ultimate beneficiaries choose to interact with the local ecosystem in ways that are less damaging.

**More widely**, indirect influence may happen at the local, national, regional and/or global levels, using project-specific evidence and/or programme-level synthesis, and led by any combination of actors. The ESPA community is producing evidence that has the potential to influence a wide variety of intermediary research users, motivating and enabling decision-makers within the public, private and charitable sectors to do things differently:

- Policies: decision-makers design and implement appropriate policy solutions that guide the sustainable use and management of ecosystems so that their contributions to human well-being are maximised and poverty is alleviated.
- Investments: decision-makers make informed and appropriate investment decisions that encourage sustainable use and management of ecosystems while enhancing human well-being and alleviating poverty.

Benefits accruing indirectly through intermediary research users will typically be larger scale but will likely accrue over longer time scales because it involves a more complex network of people and institutions. Institutional context is key at this level where individuals wanting or trying to do things differently may be constrained or enabled by wider organisational norms, rules or processes.

For the same reason, there is considerable uncertainty and attrition in the accrual of impact of this type. The ESPA community should anticipate and plan for influence where there is clear potential to work effectively with the relevant organisations and individuals to catalyse change, but will inevitably also need to be adaptable, responding flexibly to opportunities as they emerge.

### **Sustainability**

By working closely with potential research users and/or ultimate beneficiaries to co-produce research, ESPA project teams are engaging in dialogue that contributes to the delivery of effective and sustainable outcomes that are maintained and owned by stakeholders post-intervention.

More widely, the ESPA programme aims to stimulate repeated decision-maker demand for high-quality research and evidence, build the capacity of academics to work in new interdisciplinary, impact-oriented ways and provide its three donors with evidence to inform new investments and approaches to programming. Succeeding will mean the production of ESPA-like benefits for larger numbers of ultimate beneficiaries going beyond the life and scope of the programme.

## 6. Critical Functions

In this context, three functions critically underpin success for the ESPA programme:

<p><b>Research Into Use</b></p>	<p>Specific actions will often be required to make the link between academic results and development impact. The ESPA programme approach includes a facilitated process of knowledge translation whereby research teams are supported to move their research from the academic journal or conference into the hands of people and organisations who can put it to practical use.</p>
<p><b>Communication</b></p>	<p>The pathway to impact for a programme like ESPA depends on effective research communication – which includes ‘pushing’ information out to target audiences and ‘pulling’ target audiences into the ESPA community to engage them, involve them and build relationships with them in a more proactive way.<sup>3</sup></p> <p>A range of coordinated activities may be utilised across the Theory of Change in order to achieve four interrelated objectives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Influencing policy change:</b> engaging key audiences in dialogue that is relevant, context-specific and backed up by robust evidence.</li> <li>2. <b>Engaging communities:</b> providing platforms for debate – both within the academic community (particularly across disciplines) and beyond with potential research user groups.</li> <li>3. <b>Sharing information:</b> ensuring a strong flow of clearly presented, robust information in an accessible and engaging way – with messages and formats tailored for targeted stakeholder audiences.</li> <li>4. <b>Raising ESPA’s profile:</b> ensuring that knowledge generated by ESPA is visible to relevant stakeholder audiences and is considered credible because ESPA is seen to be a trusted ‘brand’.</li> </ol> <p>Wherever possible, ESPA needs to proactively anticipate and drive demand. This relies on intelligently scoping the external environment to identify key moments of leverage in which ESPA can work effectively with the relevant organisations and individuals to catalyse change. Often this will require the delivery of a set of coordinated, complementary interventions at the global, regional, national and/or local levels.</p>
<p><b>Capacity-building</b></p>	<p>ESPA’s approach – both in terms of research projects commissioned and the Fellows scheme – emphasises the need to support researchers around the world to develop the skills and experience needed to deliver interdisciplinary, impact-oriented research (see ‘Research excellence’ on page 4).</p> <p>Through the process of co-production, the delivery of ESPA research should also ensure that local stakeholders are more motivated and able to participate in informed debates on the future of their communities (see ‘Co-production’ on page 4).</p> <p>These new ways of working are challenging. It is therefore critically important to share learning within the ESPA community (and beyond) to facilitate an ongoing process of reflection and improvement. Only in this way will the ESPA programme as a whole become greater than the sum of its constituent parts.</p>

<sup>3</sup> Liz Carlile (June 2011), IIED Briefing - Making communication count: a Strategic Communications Framework, <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/17096IIED.pdf>

## 7. Next steps

The ESPA Directorate will produce an Operational Plan for this strategy document, to guide programme delivery in support of the Theory of Change set out above. This Operational Plan will also specify how the Directorate intends to work with research teams to assess and evidence ESPA's impact.

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