LEARNING BRIEF

1

DeSIRA LIFT

Authors: *B. Douthwaite, S. Mathe and A. Toillier*

Actionable learning from a review of **DeSIRA projects' contributions to policy change**

Table of contents

Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CC-SNIA	Cellule de Coordination du Système National d'Innovation Agricole (Coordination Cell of the National Agricultural Innovation System)
COP30	30th Conference of the Parties (UN Climate Change Conference)
DeSIRA	Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture
DeSIRA-LIFT	Leveraging the DeSIRA Initiative for Agri-food Systems Transformation
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
PIToC	Policy Influence Theory of Change
R&I	Research and Innovation
SC	Strategy Component
ToC	Theory of Change
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Executive Summary

This learning brief presents findings from a review of 21 DeSIRA research and innovation (R&I) projects that have made significant contributions to policy change, to understand how such projects can effectively contribute to policy change in agriculture and natural resource management. This is an important endeavour because influencing policy change is a crucial pathway by which research can contribute to impact.

The review found that successful policy influence emerges from long-term "outcome trajectories" - ongoing interactions between diverse actors, knowledge, and institutions in pursuit of a common mission. Projects play important roles in advancing these trajectories.

The review finds that the dynamic driving policy outcome trajectories can be modelled by using adapted Policy Window theory, namely that trajectory actors engage in one or more of four streams:

1) Conducting research to demonstrate policy needs and solutions
2) Building capacity to advocate and implement policy solutions
3) Building enabling environments for the policy solutions, while,
4) Leveraging windows of opportunity.

The review also finds that the successful cases used an average of four out of seven empirically identified strategy components when working one or more of the streams, namely:

1) Building on previous projects, relationships, and evidence base
2) Aligning with and responding to government priorities and policy windows
3) Facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement and coalitions
4) Generating and communicating policy-relevant evidence
5) Developing local capacity and ownership for policy implementation
6) Providing technical assistance and piloting solutions
7) Adapting to changing contexts and learning iteratively

The review found that projects contributed to five types of policy changes:

1) Creating and strengthening institutions,
2) Changing laws and regulations
3) Shifting government investment priorities,
4) Modifying operations of public agencies
5) Engaging with global treaties.

Nearly half the projects contributed to institutional strengthening, which often precedes more substantive policy changes.

Based on these findings, the learning review developed a Policy Influence Theory of Change (PIToC) to guide research and innovation (R&I) projects seeking to inform policy. The PIToC guides actions for both project staff and donors to enhance policy influence. For project staff, it informs initiative design through stakeholder mapping and policy window alignment, guides monitoring with specific indicators, supports capacity building, and structures reporting. For donors, the PIToC provides criteria for proposal evaluation, helps shape flexible funding mechanisms and guides the choice of evaluation approaches.

Background

DeSIRA-LIFT developed a Learning Review approach to understand what, why and how changes were generated by the DeSIRA Initiative.

The overall logic of intervention of the DeSIRA initiative is based on the promotion of international Research and Innovation (R&I) through project-based approaches within an Agricultural Innovation System (AIS) perspective as a major lever to transform agrifood systems towards more resilience and more sustainability and thus addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These DeSIRA R&I project partnerships are expected to deliver and scale innovations but also to contribute to deeper changes in the innovation capacities of their development partners and national agricultural innovation systems (AIS) of the countries. DeSIRA promotes new ways of innovating, more inclusive, open and responsible, to better place research and community-driven innovation at the heart of the response to sustainability challenges.

TARASA23 Policy Dialogue on Agroecology and Regenerative Agriculture Tranisition in Southeast Asia Photo: Vearyda Oeu

However, R&I projects work differently in different contexts and through different change mechanisms. Therefore, R&I projects cannot be simply replicated from one context to another and are expected to achieve the same outcomes automatically. Theory-based understanding about 'what works for whom, in what context, and how' is, however, transferable. In this perspective, the Learning Reviews conducted by DeSIRA-LIFT aim at reviewing with DeSIRA project teams 'What worked for whom, in what circumstances and how?' in six areas that we considered as key mechanisms of change:

- Projects' contributions to the formation of innovation portfolios for sustainability transitions
- Projects' contributions to the development of innovation scaling strategies
- Projects' contributions to multistakeholder innovation mechanisms
- Projects' contribution to policy changes
- Projects' contributions to systemic changes in the context of agroecological transitions
- Projects' contributions to transformative international R&I partnerships

The Learning Review consists of a process of exploring with DeSIRA project teams what they achieved and why, using guiding learning questions that interest them. The Learning Review process encourages the development of a range of learning 'products' that are tailored to the needs of those involved: learning briefs including guiding tools such as reference Theory of Change, how-to-briefs providing practical guidance for DeSIRA managers and queryable datasets to improve decision-making. The benefit of the Learning Review work is that it provides practical knowledge to project designers and managers, as well as donors.

Approach to Learning about DeSIRA R&I Projects' Contribution to Policy Change

This learning review addressed three main learning questions:

Learning Question 1: How and to what extent have selected DeSIRA projects contributed to policy outcomes?

Learning Question 2: What have been the factors and mechanisms that have helped or hindered selected projects' contributions?

Learning Question 3: What can be learned by cross-case comparisons to make recommendations to project funders?
The learning review employed the following approach to answer the questions based on two key elements considered in turn: the analytical framework and the learning review process.

Box 1: Policy Window theory

According to Policy Window theory to influence policy, relevant actors need to be continually working on the first three streams shown in Figure 1. While doing so the actors need to be on constant lookout for windows of opportunity for progress to happen. Windows of opportunity can be created by natural events such as pandemics, droughts or earthquakes. For example, an earthquake is a window of opportunity to change building regulations, if better regulations are available and known about. Policy windows can be the result of man-made events such as spikes in air pollution that lead to changes in clean air regulations. They can also be changes in government, budget cycles or landmark meetings and summits held as part of ongoing national, regional, and global processes. For example, the ASSET project leveraged Laos' ASEAN chairmanship to accelerate the development and adoption of agroecology guidelines. Policy windows are often short and may or may not be predictable. Whether policy champions[1] can take advantage of windows of opportunity (stream 4) depends on alignment between and progress made along the other 3 streams.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework consists of five main components:

1. **Back-casting:** This approach involves identifying an achieved policy outcome and then looking backwards in time to describe and validate how a particular project contributed to it. Back-casting allows for a focused, in-depth analysis of a specific outcome of interest within limited resources. Back-casting borrows from the Outcome Harvesting approach (Wilson-Grau, 2018).

2. **Positive deviance:** The review focuses on success cases, or "positive deviants," from which there is more to learn due to their significant progress. These cases may also include failures that were overcome, as people are more likely to discuss and learn from failures in the context of overall success (Marsh et al., 2002).

3. **Outcome trajectory concept:** The review assumes that significant policy-related outcomes emerge from patterned, evolving, and ongoing interactions between actors, knowledge, technology, and institutions over time. Projects contribute to policy outcomes by playing a part in the policy outcome trajectory (Douthwaite et al., 2023).

4. **Use of existing theory:** We assume that the dynamic that drives outcome trajectories forward is described by Policy Window theory (Kingdon & Stano, 1984) as adapted by Stachowiak (2018)), see Box 1.

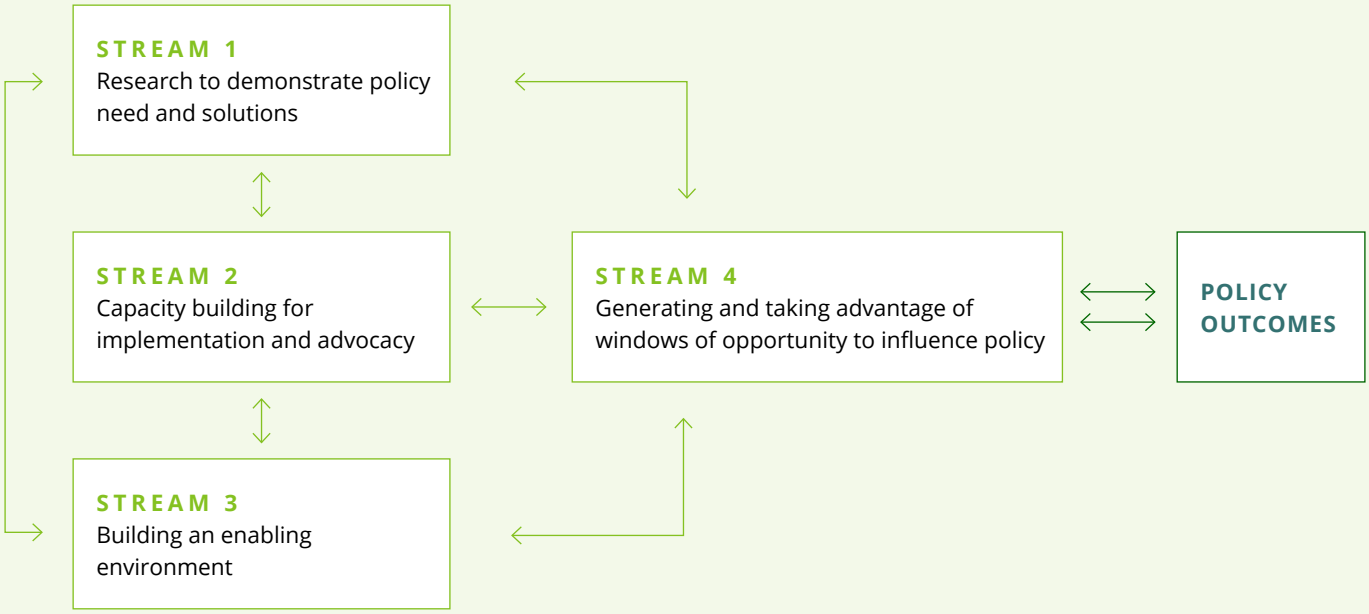
5. **The types of policy change considered:** The review considers five types of policy-related outcomes which are (after Renkow, 2018):

   A. The creation or strengthening of institutions[2]
   B. Changes to laws and regulations governing economic incentives
   C. Changes to government sector investment priorities and budget allocations
   D. Changes to operations and management of public agencies/programs
   E. Creation, strengthening or engagement in global treaties/agreements

1] Individuals in positions of authority or influence who can effectively navigate institutional structures and build the necessary support for policy implementation (Kingdon and Stano, 1984)

2] According to Renkow (2018), 'institutions' refers to new formal organizations, frameworks, or collaborative arrangements that facilitate agricultural and natural resource management.

Figure 1: A graphic depiction of the dynamic at the heart of policy outcome trajectories, based on policy window theory, with examples



Examples

STREAM 1: Research	ACCESS assessed the status of the agricultural innovation system in Burkina Faso through participatory and demand-driven data collection and analysis. This has helped identify policy issues and solutions	CASSECS is generating rigorous scientific methods and evidence to inform and influence the process of updating the NDCs of Sahelian countries
STREAM 2: Capacity development	CDI Rwanda carried out capacity development activities focused on strengthening the role of "innovation facilitators" and "innovation partnerships" within Rwanda's agricultural extension and advisory system	WE4F facilitated the development of capacity development action plans for Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia to promote productive use of renewable energy in agriculture.
STREAM 3: Building an enabling environment	ACCESS facilitated multi-stakeholder engagement to gain buy-in and overcome resistance to a new coordination structure (CC-SNIA)	IDEAS facilitated roundtables bringing together actors across different scales to improve coordination
STREAM 4: Taking advantage of policy windows	ASSET leveraged Lao's ASEAN chairmanship to accelerate the timeline for finalizing regional agroecology guidelines	SUSTENTA & INOVA is using the upcoming COP30 in Brazil as a major policy window to promote bioeconomy policies

The Learning Review Process[3]

The learning review process consists of six main steps:

1. **Project selection:** 25 out of 70 DeSIRA Pillar 1 projects were selected, largely based on their known contribution to policy change. Thirty projects were initially identified, and 25 agreed to participate in interviews.

2. **Interviews, transcription, and sense-making:** The review team conducted interviews with project leaders and key staff to establish the projects' most significant policy change contributions, progress, outputs, challenges, and successes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with help from Claude.AI to create case write-ups. Two projects were dropped because they had not achieved any significant contribution to policy change. Interview slots could not be found for two projects, leaving 21 cases.

3. **Sharing back cases for fact and inference checking:** The 21 case reports were sent back to the respective interviewees for fact and inference checking, with 13 projects sending back their corrected cases. Corrections were minimal.

4. **Carry out cross-case comparisons:** We constructed a spreadsheet summarizing the information from the 21 case study reports. This spreadsheet was uploaded into Claude.AI, which was then asked to answer pre-defined learning questions such as "How and to what extent have selected DeSIRA projects contributed to policy outcomes?" and "What have been the factors and mechanisms that have helped or hindered selected projects' contributions?" The full set of questions can be found in the policy outcome learning review report.

5. **Checking answers:** The answers were carefully checked by the review team for accuracy by going back to the case reports and the transcripts upon which they were based. The answers provided inputs for the findings reported in the same document.

6. **Produce and use findings:** Write and review the final learning review report and then share findings through presentations and by producing a learning brief (this document) and several recommendations to guide future interventions and investments in R&I for agrifood system transformation.

The learning review methodology has some limitations which were mitigated at least to some degree:

- **Self-reporting bias:** Much information came from project leaders' self-reports, potentially leading to positive bias. This was mitigated by clarifying it was a learning exercise, not an evaluation, and requesting documentary evidence where possible.

- **Interviewees' limited knowledge:** Interviewees might not have been aware of all policy changes their project influenced. To mitigate this, the review focused on identifying the most significant policy contributions through multiple sources.

- **Limited timeframe:** Many projects were ongoing and had not achieved final policy outcomes. The review analyzed case progress to date and future next steps, recognizing policy change as a long-term process.

- **Use of AI for analysis:** Large language models were used, which could introduce errors. To mitigate this, case study write-ups were sent back to interviewees for fact-checking.

Findings

Characterization of the 21 cases

The 21 projects contributed to all five types of policy change identified in the literature, see Table 1. Nearly half the projects have significantly contributed to the creation or strengthening of institutions (A), which is a precursor to more substantive policy changes such as changes to laws and regulations (B), government investment priorities and budget allocations (C), and operations and management of public agencies/programs (D). No projects had contributed to the latter, which happens at the end of a policy process. Three projects were engaging with global treaties, specifically relating to GHG emissions and COP 30 (E).

3] See the main learning review report for more details on the learning review process (https://tinyurl.com/h5jme4jp)

Table 1: The types of policy change to which the 21 projects contributed

Project	Policy outcomes attempted by the cases	Achieved?
A. The creation or strengthening of institutions		
ACCESS	The establishment of the "Cellule de Coordination du Système National d'Innovation Agricole (CC-SNIA)" as an inter-ministerial coordination body that will help strengthen the national agricultural innovation system in Burkina Faso	**Established**
AGRO-INNOVA	Provided technical support such as road maps to strengthen existing policy processes of countries in the Central America Dry Corridor	**Established**
CDI Rwanda	Agro-processing residues, market residues, rock phosphate, inorganic fertiliser, human excreta, slaughterhouse waste, plant residues/wild plant collection (tithonia)	**Ongoing**
IDEAS	Created and strengthened multi-level multi-stakeholder platforms to improve policy engagement in selected territories	**Established**
MARIGO	To contribute to policy decisions that support an ecological transition in vegetable farming in the Ivory Coast	**Ongoing**
ReDIAL	Establish multi-stakeholder partnerships to facilitate dialogue and find solutions to farmer-herder conflicts in Ghana, though policy impact delayed	**Established**
ReSINoC	Contribution is to policies relating to changing wildlife passages in Cameroon by another project	**Ongoing**
SyRIMAO	Transitioning of a national fruit fly research centre to take on a regional ECOWAS role at the centre of a newly established regional research network	**Ongoing**
WE4F	The development, endorsement and implementation of action plans and road maps on scaling up productive use of renewable energy in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia	**Ongoing**
B. Changes to laws and regulations governing economic incentives		
ABEE	Development and ratification of a regional charter to facilitate the exchange of seed varieties between research institutions in Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal	**Ongoing**
BIORISKS	The development and implementation of regulations around the exchange of vegetatively propagated crops like cassava cuttings between 10 African countries.	**Ongoing**
CLIMA LOCA	Contributing to national cacao development plans in Peru and Colombia	**Plans published**
LIPS-ZIM	Working to change seed certification regulations for smallholder forage seed producers in Zimbabwe	**Ongoing**
C. Changes to government sector investment priorities and budget allocations		
ASSET	Proposed guidelines for ASEAN countries on agroecological transitions that, when implemented, will have implications for national investment priorities and budget allocations	**Not yet**
FAIR-Sahel	Contributed to Burkina Faso's National Agroecology Strategy that, when implemented, has implications for future investment priorities and budget allocations	**Not yet**
ICSIAPL	County forage strategies incorporated into draft County Development Plans in Kenya that when implemented have implications for budget allocations	**Not yet**
D. Changes to operations and management of public agencies/programs		
All projects	Every successful policy outcome trajectory will eventually see changes in operations and management of public agencies/programs tasked with policy implementation. None of the 21 DeSIRA cases had got this far.	**Not yet**
E. Creation, strengthening or engagement in global treaties/agreements		
CASSECS	Creation of a network of UNFCCC livestock focal points from 14 African countries to support the drafting of livestock sections of their NDCs	**Ongoing, early stage**
SIRGE	Providing policy proposals to reduce GHG emissions from Uganda's beef industry to inform Uganda's NDC on climate change	**Policy proposals provided**
SUSTENTA & INOVA	The project is promoting the concept of a bioeconomy as an alternative economic model for the Amazon region. It is supporting government committees working to develop strategies to showcase at COP30, which could potentially contribute to shaping international agreements/commitments made at that major UN climate conference	**Early stage**

Relative success of the 21 cases

While all cases were chosen because they were at least partially successful, within this subset it is useful to categorize project contributions to their respective policy outcome trajectories as high, medium, low and indirect, as described in Table 2. The classification does not reflect overall project performance. The assessment was qualitative, based on the projects' contribution to their respective policy outcome trajectories. Table 2 shows that even the high-rated projects have not yet progressed beyond early policy implementation.

Table 2: Level and characterization of project contribution to their respective outcome trajectories

Rating	Rating criteria	Cases qualifying	Characterization of policy change and progress achieved
High	• Significant progress towards their intended policy outcome • The intended policy outcome will affect large numbers of people • The project has contributed to official policy documents	**ACCESS, ASSET, CLIMA LOCA, STREAM, SyRIMAO,** (5 cases)	• The policy change is of high-level nature, involving top government structures or national/regional policies • There has been some official recognition or approval • Potential for wide-ranging or transformative impact • Movement beyond planning stages to actual adoption or near-adoption of policies
Medium	In between high and low	**BIORISKS, CASSECS, FAIR-Sahel, ICSIAPL, IDEAS, MARIGO, ReDIAL, SIRGE, Sustenta & INOVA, WEAF** (10 cases)	• High-level policy dialogues and multi-stakeholder processes facilitated and carried out • Developing tools or methodologies to inform policy decisions • Securing endorsement of action plans or strategies without full endorsement yet • Facilitating multi-stakeholder processes that are influencing policy discussions
Low	• Initial steps towards policy influence • Little buy-in or policy adoption	**ABEE, Agroforestry Rwanda, CDI Rwanda, LIPS-ZIM** (4 cases)	• Policy documents drafted but not yet widely circulated or endorsed • Policy reviews conducted but have not yet led to concrete policy proposals • Policy needs or gaps identified but not yet developed into specific solutions • Establishment of partnerships or demonstrations aimed at policy influence without significant policy engagement yet
Indirect	Projects that support other initiatives' policy work rather than their own	**AGROINNOVA, ReSINoC** (2 cases)	• Technical support to inform broader policy process • Establishment of supportive structures or resources that other projects could use in their policy work • Contribution to the overall enabling environment for policy change without targeting specific policy outcomes themselves

Relevance of policy window theory

Analysis of the dataset shows that most projects engaged in all four of the policy streams shown in Figure 1. The research stream (1) and building an enabling environment stream (3) were the most commonly used. The figure gives examples of the different ways that the 21 case study projects contributed to each stream. Contribution to these streams across different contexts and policy changes suggests that Policy Window theory is a relevant framework for understanding and guiding policy influence efforts in these contexts.

Common strategic components used by the 21 cases

Another way of understanding how the projects are contributing to policy change is to look for common strategy components employed by projects that are not framed by existing theory. Accordingly, we asked Claude.AI whether the dataset suggested common strategy components used across the projects, independent of any framing construct or theory. A strategy component is a set of activities that projects combine in unique ways, depending on factors such as resources, time, capacity, feasibility and context resulting in a project strategy to contribute to policy change.

Claude.AI identified the following, which we double-checked and adjusted:

1. Building on previous projects, relationships, and evidence base – used by 14 projects
2. Aligning with and responding to government priorities and policy windows that occurred in the timeframe of project implementation – used by 13 projects
3. Facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement and coalitions – used by 18 projects
4. Generating and communicating policy-relevant evidence – used by 11 projects
5. Developing local capacity and ownership for policy implementation – used by 11 projects
6. Providing technical assistance and piloting solutions – used by 15 projects
7. Adapting to changing contexts and learning iteratively – used by 4 projects

Lessons Learned

Each strategy component represents a worthwhile lesson derived from what the 21 cases did in practice. The lessons are:

1. **Build on previous projects, relationships, and evidence base:** Many projects, such as ACCESS, ASSET, BIORISKS, CLIMA LOCA, ICSIAPL, and WE4F, did not start from scratch but rather built upon earlier initiatives, partnerships, or research findings. This allowed them to leverage pre-existing momentum, credibility, and knowledge to advance their policy influence goals.

2. **Align with and respond to government/regional/ global priorities and policy windows:** Projects like ACCESS, AGROFORESTRY-RWANDA, ASSET, and SUSTENTA & INOVA strategically aligned their efforts with existing government strategies, institutions, and emerging policy opportunities. By framing their work in terms of national priorities and timing their interventions to coincide with policy formulation or review processes, they increased the likelihood of policy uptake.

3. **Facilitate multi-stakeholder engagement and coalitions:** Many projects, including ACCESS, IDEAS, ReDIAL, and STREAM, created platforms and processes for bringing together diverse stakeholders to build shared understanding, find common ground, and develop joint policy proposals. By facilitating dialogue and collaboration across government, civil society, private sector, and research actors, they helped to build coalitions for change that can advocate for policy change and overcome resistance to it.

4. **Generate and communicate policy-relevant evidence:** Projects such as ACCESS, CASSECS, CLIMA LOCA, ICSIAPL, and SIRGE invested in research to generate new evidence specifically aimed at informing policy decisions. This included policy analysis to identify gaps and opportunities, as well as technical research to develop and test potential solutions. Importantly, they also put effort into packaging and communicating this evidence in accessible and persuasive ways to policy makers.

5. **Provide technical assistance and piloting solutions:** Some projects like AGROINNOVA, CLIMA LOCA and ICSIAPL provided hands-on technical support to help design and implement policy-related interventions. This included developing guidelines, tools, and protocols, as well as piloting and demonstrating practical solutions on the ground. By bridging the gap between policy and practice, they helped to build confidence and capacities for policy implementation.

6. **Develop local capacity and ownership for policy implementation:** Recognizing that policy change on paper does not automatically translate into change on the ground, projects like ACCESS, CDI Rwanda, IDEAS, MARIGO, and WE4F invested in capacity development for key local actors to understand, implement, and advocate for the new policies. This included training, mentoring, and institutional strengthening for government staff, civil society organizations, and private sector associations who would be responsible for operationalizing the policies.

7. **Adapt to changing contexts and learn iteratively:** Finally, many projects demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness in adjusting their policy influence strategies based on changing circumstances and lessons learned. For example, ACCESS, CDI Rwanda and SIRGE used interim policy achievements to build momentum for further change. This adaptability and iterative learning is critical for navigating complex and dynamic policy processes over time.

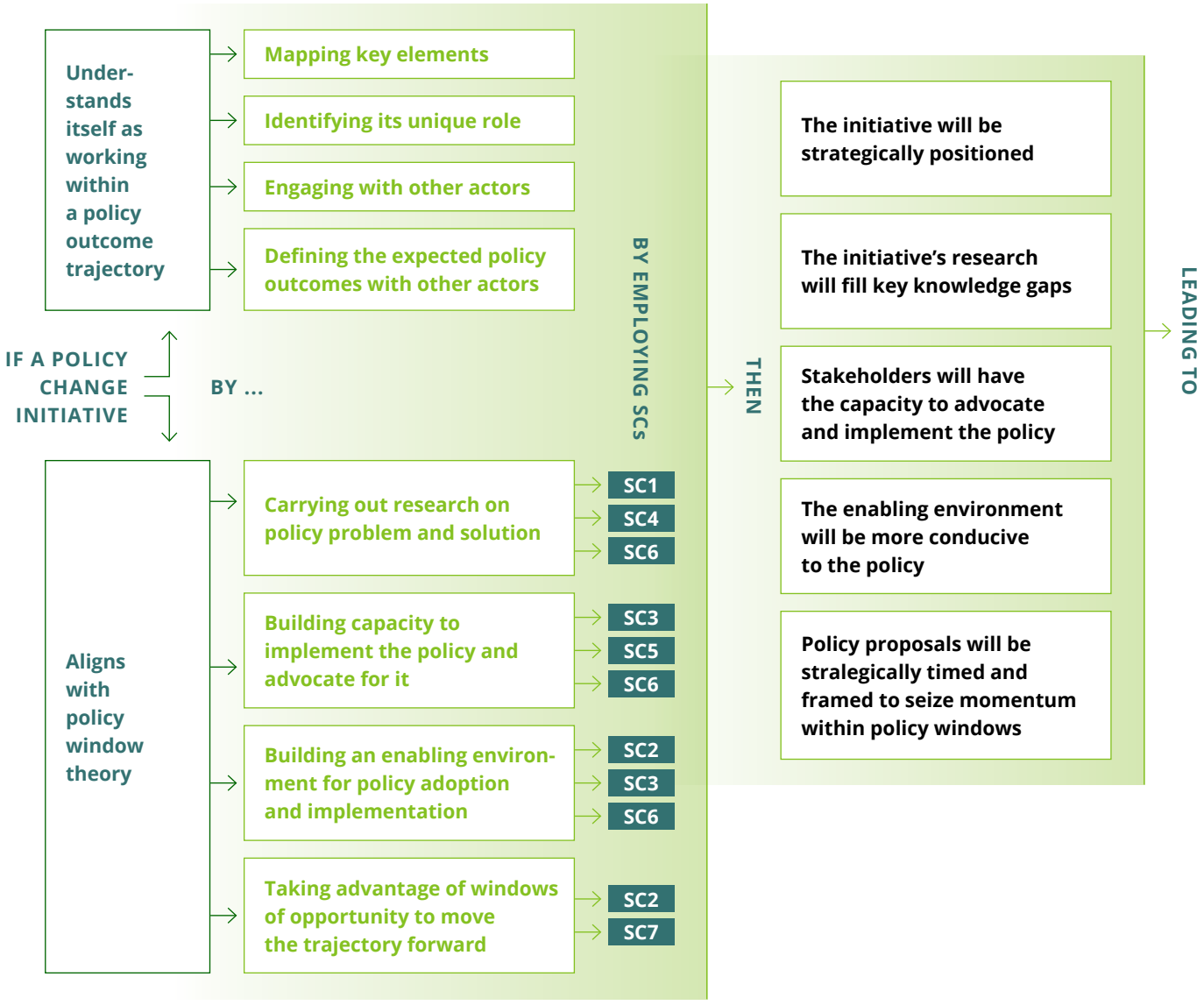
Table 3 shows how the seven inferred SCs map onto different stages in a typical project or programme cycle. These SCs are not strictly confined to these stages and often overlap and continue throughout the project. However, this mapping provides a general sense of where each strategy component is most concentrated within the project lifecycle.

Table 3: How the seven Strategy Components (SCs) map onto different stated in a typical project cycle

Stage in the project cycle	The 7 SCs
Design / initiation	**1, 2**
Early implementation	**2, 3, 4, 7**
Mid to late implementation	**3, 4, 5, 6, 7**
End of project / post project	**4, 5**

The seven SCs are a key part of a policy influence theory of change (PIToC) for R&I initiatives, including projects, developed in the next section. The PIToC shows the link between policy window theory and the strategy components (SCs). The SCs are how a policy change initiative contributes in practice to one or more of the four policy window streams.

A graphic depiction of a policy influence theory of change (PIToC), derived from the learning review findings and lessons learned.



Successful adoption and implementation of the policy

Strengthened stakeholder capabilities and networks

A more enabling institutional and normative environment for the policy

Acceleration and amplification of the overall outcome trajectory

Suggestions to incorporate lessons learnedinto future action

We derived a theory of change for R&I initiatives that seek to influence policy based on the findings and lessons learned from the 21 cases. R&I initiatives include R&I projects.

- The outcome trajectory can be adequately understood and mapped through available evidence and stakeholder inputs.
- The four components of policy window theory are indeed the key drivers of change within the outcome trajectory.
- Stakeholders are receptive to and able to utilize the initiative's research, capacity building, and advocacy efforts.
- Policy windows can be anticipated and effectively leveraged by the initiative and its partners.
- The initiative's contributions are significant and timely enough to influence the trajectory's direction and momentum.

PIToC Structure

The PIToC is structured in an "If-By-Then-Leading To" format

IF a policy change initiative, including an R&I project:

- Understands itself as working within a policy outcome trajectory:
  o This involves mapping key elements in the outcome trajectory, identifying the initiative's unique role, engaging with other actors, and defining expected policy outcomes with other actors.
- AND, aligns with Policy Window Theory:
  o This involves seeking to contribute to four streams: carrying out research, building capacity, building an enabling environment, and taking advantage of windows of opportunity.

BY employing Strategic Components (SCs):

- The graphic shows which SCs (numbered SC1 to SC7) are used to implement the four streams. The SCs are derived from the experience of the 21 cases that make up the learning review dataset. They are:

SC1: Building on previous projects, relationships, and evidence base projects
SC2: Aligning with and responding to government priorities and policy windows
SC3: Facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement and coalitions
SC4: Generating and communicating policy-relevant evidence
SC5: Developing local capacity and ownership for policy implementation
SC6: Providing technical assistance and piloting solutions
SC7: Adapting to changing contexts and learning iteratively

THEN the following outcomes are expected:

- The initiative will be strategically positioned
- The initiative's research will fill key knowledge gaps
- Stakeholders will have the capacity to advocate and implement the policy
- The enabling environment will be more conducive to the policy
- Policy proposals will be strategically timed and framed to seize momentum within policy windows

LEADING TO long-term impacts:

- Successful adoption and implementation of the policy
- Strengthened stakeholder capabilities and networks
- A more enabling institutional and normative environment for the policy
- Acceleration and amplification of the overall outcome trajectory

Future action guided by the Policy Influence Theory of Change (PIToC)

The Theory of Change developed by the policy learning review (PIToC) offers practical guidance for both project staff and donors in shaping future policy influence initiatives. Here are some concrete ways the ToC can guide future action:

For Project Staff:

1. **Initiative Design:**
   - Conduct a stakeholder mapping exercise to identify key actors in the policy outcome trajectory, including policy champions.
   - Use the PIToC as a checklist when designing new initiatives, ensuring all four streams of Policy Window Theory are addressed.
   - Select relevant strategic components (SCs) to contribute to the streams based on the initiative context and goals.

2. **Implementation:**
   - Develop a stakeholder engagement plan that outlines how to collaborate with other actors in the trajectory.
   - Create a timeline that aligns project activities with potential policy windows.
   - Set up regular team meetings to review progress against the PIToC and adjust strategies as needed.

3. **Monitoring and Evaluation:**
   - Carry out periodic after-action reviews to monitor initiative progress against PIToC expectations as well as to capture unexpected results and to assess the initiative's role in its outcome trajectory, i.e., its broader policy change process.
   - Develop indicators for each SC being employed, as well as for overall progress in contributing to the policy outcome trajectory.
   - Update and make the PIToC more specific to the initiative as it unfolds, in other words, use the PIToC as a framework for systematizing learning.

4. **Capacity Building:**
   - Organize training sessions for team members on the different SCs and how to implement them effectively.
   - Create a 'policy influence toolkit' based on the PIToC for staff to reference.

5. **Reporting:**
   - Structure project reports around the PIToC, highlighting progress and challenges for each component.
   - Use the PIToC to frame the narration of the initiative's contribution story to stakeholders and donors.

For Donors:

1. **Proposal Evaluation:**
- Develop a scoring rubric assess how comprehensively and plausibly funding proposals: 1) understand themselves working within a broader outcome trajectory; 2) align themselves with policy window theory; and, 3) employ SCs adjusted to proposal goals, resources and context.

2. **Project Inception**
- Allow sufficient time to formulate and agree an initiative that is coherent with the outcome trajectory

3. **Funding Mechanisms:**
- Design flexible funding mechanisms that allow for adaptive management as outlined in the PIToC.
- Consider offering longer-term grants or phased funding approaches that align with the long-term nature of policy change processes.

4. **Monitoring and Evaluation:**
- Require grantees to report on how their work aligns with and contributes to the different elements of the PIToC.
- Commission evaluations that use the PIToC as a framework for assessing policy influence efforts across multiple projects.

5. **Collaboration:**
- Use the PIToC as a framework for discussions with other donors, including bi-lateral policy dialogues, to coordinate efforts and avoid duplication within policy outcome trajectories.
- Facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogues using the PIToC as a common reference point.

By applying the PIToC in these practical ways, both project staff and donors can enhance the coherence, adaptability, and ultimate impact of their policy influence efforts. The PIToC provides a shared language and framework for understanding the complex process of policy change, enabling more effective collaboration and learning across the respective policy outcome trajectories.

Conclusions

This learning brief has shown that research and innovation (R&I) projects can contribute to different types of policy processes and outcomes, from strengthening institutions and changing regulations to shifting government investment priorities and modifying public agency operations. This contribution is crucial because it helps ensure that R&I efforts play a part in creating lasting systemic change.

The review of 21 DeSIRA projects shows that successful contribution to policy change requires a strategic approach combining multiple components: building on existing work, aligning with government priorities, facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement, generating policy-relevant evidence, developing local capacity including capacity to advocate for policy change, providing technical assistance, and adapting to changing contexts.

By understanding themselves as part of broader policy change processes and using the Theory of Change presented here, R&I projects can more effectively contribute to potentially transformative policy outcomes that support sustainable agricultural innovation and development.

References

Douthwaite, B., Proietti, C., Polar, V., & Thiele, G. (2023). Outcome Trajectory Evaluation (OTE): An approach to tackle research-for-development's long-causal-chain problem. *American Journal of Evaluation, 44*(3), 335-352.

Kingdon, J. W., & Stano, E. (1984). Agendas, alternatives, and public policies (Vol. 45). xxx: Little, Brown & Co.

Marsh, D. R., Schroeder, D. G., Dearden, K. A., Sternin, J., & Sternin, M. (2004). The power of positive deviance. *Bmj, 329*(7475), 1177-1179.

Renkow, M. (2018). A Reflection on Impact and Influence of CGIAR Policy-Oriented Research. Rome, Italy: Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA), CGIAR Independent Science and Partnership Council (ISPC)

Stachowiak, S. (2013). Pathways for change: 10 theories to inform advocacy and policy change efforts. Washington: Center for Evaluation Innovation, https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publication/ pathways-for-change-10-theories-to-inform-advocacy-and-policy-change-efforts/

Wilson-Grau, R. (2018). Outcome harvesting: Principles, steps, and evaluation applications. North Carolina, USA: IAP.

Acknowledgement

DeSIRA-LIFT (Leveraging the DeSIRA Initiative for agri-food systems transformation) is a service facility supporting the DeSIRA Initiative (Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture, in short DeSIRA) funded by the European Commission. DeSIRA (2019-2026) aims to bridge the gap between research and policy-making towards resilient, sustainable and equitable agri-food systems in low- and middle-income countries. DeSIRA-LIFT (2021-2025) includes three service areas aligned to the three DeSIRA pillars: *Service Area 1* supports country-based DeSIRA projects to prove and improve their impacts on climate-oriented innovation systems in line with more sustainable food system transitions. *Service Area 2* supports the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) ex-pillar IV organizations in their Agricultural Innovation Systems (AIS) related roles. *Service area 3* provides support to policymakers on themes related to agricultural research for development (AR4D) and innovation policies and programming.

This Learning Brief has been prepared as part of the DeSIRA-LIFT Community of Action and Reflection put in place by *Service Area 1*, under the leadership of Aurelie Toillier (Agrinatura/CIRAD) and Margarida Lima de Faria (Agrinatura/ISA, University of Lisbon), and managed by Renaud Guillonnet (Agrinatura). The purpose of the Community of Action and Reflection was to share and learn about challenges and practices in managing for impacts in R&I projects.

This Learning Brief forms part of a collection of knowledge products, building on combined activities of the DeSIRA-LIFT *Service Area 1* team that has been providing support to the 70 DeSIRA projects of DeSIRA pillar 1 in their various contexts. These knowledge products were developed in close interaction and with the inputs of the DeSIRA project teams.

Besides the names of authors and contributors, thanks are due to the many people from DeSIRA who openly shared their lessons learnt and reflections.

Citation

Douthwaite B., Mathe S., Toillier A., 2025. Actionable learning from a review of DeSIRA projects' contributions to policy changes. CIRAD, France, 15p.

ISBN: 9782876148642
EAN: 9782876148642

Proofreading:
Bianca Becks, Agrinatura/WUR

Design:
RCO.design

Publisher

CIRAD, The French agricultural research and international cooperation organization working for the sustainable development of tropical and Mediterranean regions.

42, rue Scheffer, 75116 Paris, France
www.cirad.fr

Address:
Wageningen Centre
for Development Innovation
P.O. Box 88
6700 AB Wageningen
The Netherlands

Website:
https://www.desiralift.org/
LinkedIn:
https://www.linkedin.com/company/desira-lift
Email:
info@desiralift.org

Funded by the European Union