Further explanation on the Impact Plan approach and Impact Outlook approach in the NWA-ORC call 2020/21

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Knowledge utilisation is an essential part of any NWA-ORC project. Productive interactions with societal and other stakeholders will promote possible contributions from research to questions raised by society. The aspect of knowledge utilisation is further explained below.

To meet the various expectations in terms of societal impact across the NWA agenda, NWO will apply two approaches to (steps in order to realise) societal impact: the Impact Plan approach and the Impact Outlook approach. There is no a priori preference for projects following either approach, provided the approach suits the proposal. NWO expects the Impact Plan approach to suit most of the routes and cluster questions.

For NWA-ORC projects that focus on societal breakthroughs in addressing one or more cluster questions, the Impact Plan approach will apply. For NWA-ORC projects that do not focus directly on societal breakthroughs in addressing one or more cluster questions, the Impact Outlook approach will apply.

Part of the application is a substantiation of the chosen approach that explains why the chosen approach suits the proposal best.

The components of both approaches are explained below. Please note that these approaches should only be fully developed in the full proposal. For the pre-proposal, it is only required to indicate which approach is chosen and to substantiate this choice.

Impact Plan approach

An Impact Plan includes an approach to knowledge exploitation that is integrated into the research design and increases the impact potential of the proposed research. The Impact Plan approach consists of the following elements that are explained below:

1. Productive interactions;
2. Theory of Change and Impact Pathway;
3. Strategic Activity Planning;
4. Risk assessment.

1. A productive interaction is an exchange between researchers and with other stakeholders that generate and value knowledge that is both scientifically robust and societally relevant. A stakeholder is any person or group that can influence or is influenced by the achieving of goals.

2. A Theory of Change (Figure 1) describes how the research process can contribute to societal impact, taking into account underlying assumptions, the context and parties involved. Developing a Theory of Change with consortium partners and stakeholders makes it explicit which (and whose) problem is addressed and how the contribution of the research activities to the desired change is presented. Underlying this is a variety of assumptions: by naming and discussing these, implicit assumptions regarding the proposed route towards impact are made explicit. By monitoring the assumptions during the project, the approach developed can be gradually adjusted if the efforts of the parties involved prove ineffective. A Theory of Change is not fixed but facilitates a reflective approach and is continually adjusted during the research. For this reason, it is also used as part of the monitoring, evaluation and learning strategy described in Annex 3.6.5 in the call for proposals.
Part of the Theory of Change is the *Impact Pathway*. This is the visualisation of the proposed change process resulting from the conducting of the research as described in the Theory of Change. It describes explicitly how the complex change process towards impact will unfold. It also explains how research activities resulting from productive interactions will lead to insights (output) and how exploiting output will contribute to changes in behaviour, relationships, actions and partnerships of consortium partners and stakeholders (outcome). These outcomes are essential to achieve the desired societal impact. Also when formulating the Impact Pathway assumptions are made explicit and monitored. The following *definitions* are used:

- **Output**: direct knowledge or insights from a project or programme (often laid down in publications and/or patents)
- **Outcome**: changes in behaviour, relationships, actions and activities of private and public stakeholders as a result of exploiting output.
- **Societal breakthrough or Impact**: cultural, economic, industrial, ecological and/or social changes resulting wholly or partly from knowledge and skills generated by research. These changes usually occur after the research has been conducted.

3. An overview of how productive interactions contribute to achieving outcomes is described in the *Strategic Activity Planning*. Outputs do not automatically lead to outcomes: strategies are needed to plan and monitor how the specific activities of the consortium will enhance the potential for achieving outcomes. The Strategic Activity Planning contains specific activities for at least the following:

- **Stakeholder involvement**: Who are the relevant societal organisations involved in the consortium, who are the cooperation partners, who are the stakeholders in social practice around the consortium who should be involved during the research? How, by whom and when will these interactions be made productive?
- **Communication strategy**: How will dialogues and exchanges of (required) knowledge be organised, and how will results be exchanged and put into practice, using which means of communication and under whose responsibility?
- **Monitoring and evaluation**: How will results of strategic and research activities be monitored and evaluated so that assumptions are tested and the approach adjusted if necessary, and who is responsible for this?
- **Capacity strengthening**: How will the necessary capacities of consortium partners and stakeholders to achieve outcomes be strengthened, how is this organised and who is responsible for this?

4. Finally, the full proposal should include a *Risk assessment* describing potential risks to successful implementation of the project (e.g. because assumptions are found to be false) and options to mitigate and control these risks.
Impact Outlook approach

This approach applies to projects that mainly pursue scientific breakthroughs, because the cluster questions they aim to answer focus on gaining knowledge rather than on achieving societal breakthroughs.

The proposal should show that there will be a proportional focus on societal impact during the research. Of key importance are both advancing prospects and the presence of factors, processes and plans for identifying unforeseen opportunities for societal impact during the project.

As far as possible, the proposal should describe the vision for the short-term and long-term societal impact of the project. It should also describe specifically how the project contributes to taking steps towards societal impact: not only steps in creating the necessary knowledge, but also steps in involving users.

In addition, the proposal should explain how the consortium will ensure a proportional focus on identifying and possibly exploring unforeseen opportunities during the project. The interpretation is up to the consortium. The consortium determines which (possibly existing) processes can give shape to this, which factors can contribute to this in a positive way, and which role it sees for itself.

Finally, the proposal should substantiate why an Impact Outlook approach suits the proposed research better than the Impact Plan approach.

The NWA-ORC has conditions concerning a minimum and maximum budget for knowledge utilisation activities; see Annex 6.3 in the call for proposals. The components described above can be funded from this budget. Only in the Impact Outlook Approach it is also possible to reserve up to 50% of the budget for knowledge utilisation without further specification for activities to identify and exploit unforeseen opportunities.