A CRITICAL RESOURCE FOR

UNDERSTANDING
IMPACT

for participatory international research

CONTENTS

NAVIGATING THIS RESOURCE

Research impact has become an important concept in the Academy. Without careful and critical attention, this term can be applied in ways that risk imposing meaning upon a wide range of geographical, cultural, and disciplinary contexts. Layers of lived experience and learning can be overlooked and as such undervalued or misunderstood. Equally, assertions of impact can be imbued with assumptions that may not hold relevance outside of the dominant discourses in which they were developed.

We have built this resource from the learning gained through an international research project, Participatory Futures. In this project, teams from five distinct international research initiatives collaborated in conceptual and ethnographic research to develop insights into the practices of partnership, impact, and sustainability within our sector. We have discovered that impact is often delineated in a very narrow and functional way within projects that are achieving complex levels of significance and change across contexts.

The provocations, explorations, and propositions that we present here are designed to support the development of more equitable, inclusive and sustainable approaches to research impact, particularly in international and interdisciplinary contexts.

As you encounter these ideas, we invite you to read across the various texts and contexts of your own work.

The visual design may prompt new ways of conceptualising ideas that are important to your activities.

WHAT
IS IMPACT ?

We can understand impact as the **difference** that our research makes in the world. It includes any **change** that our research causes, for example benefits to society, health, economy, public policy, culture or environment. This effect can occur on different scales and in different contexts - from individuals to communities to the wider environment - impacts are typically considered positive, but can also be unintended and undesired.

WHY
IS IT IMPORTANT ?

Positive impact is a way of measuring and communicating the success of our research to partners, participants, stakeholders and policymakers. Impact is also an element in funding decisions and assessments of excellence at both institutional and individual levels. As we strive to embed **awareness**, **understanding** and **best practice** into our research culture and activity across all disciplines, we need to think about our approach to impact.

WHO
IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ?

All of us! We all want our research to make a difference, and so do the people who give their time and energy working with us.

WITHIN THESE DEFINITIONS, A GREAT DEAL OF IMPACT REMAINS UNCAPTURED AND INVISIBLE.
THROUGHOUT THIS RESOURCE WE SUGGEST THAT WE CAN APPROACH OUR COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF IMPACT IN MEANINGFUL WAYS TO CONCEPTUALISE AND RE-DEFINE 'MAKING A DIFFERENCE'.

IMPACT CAN BE CONSIDERED IN MANY CONTEXTS, BOTH FORMAL & INFORMAL

LISTENING

IMPACT 'CASE STUDIES' FOR PUBLICATIONS

SUPPORTING

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

FRIENDSHIP

DIRECT

SOCIETY

LEARNING NEW SKILLS

ENGAGING

PROXIMATE

VALUE FOR MONEY
MONETISATION

RESEARCH

REPUTATION

ACKNOWLEDGING ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF BEING AND DOING

KNOWLEDGE

MOBILISING

HERITAGE AND CULTURE

BUSINESS

SPACE OF INCLUSION

ECONOMY
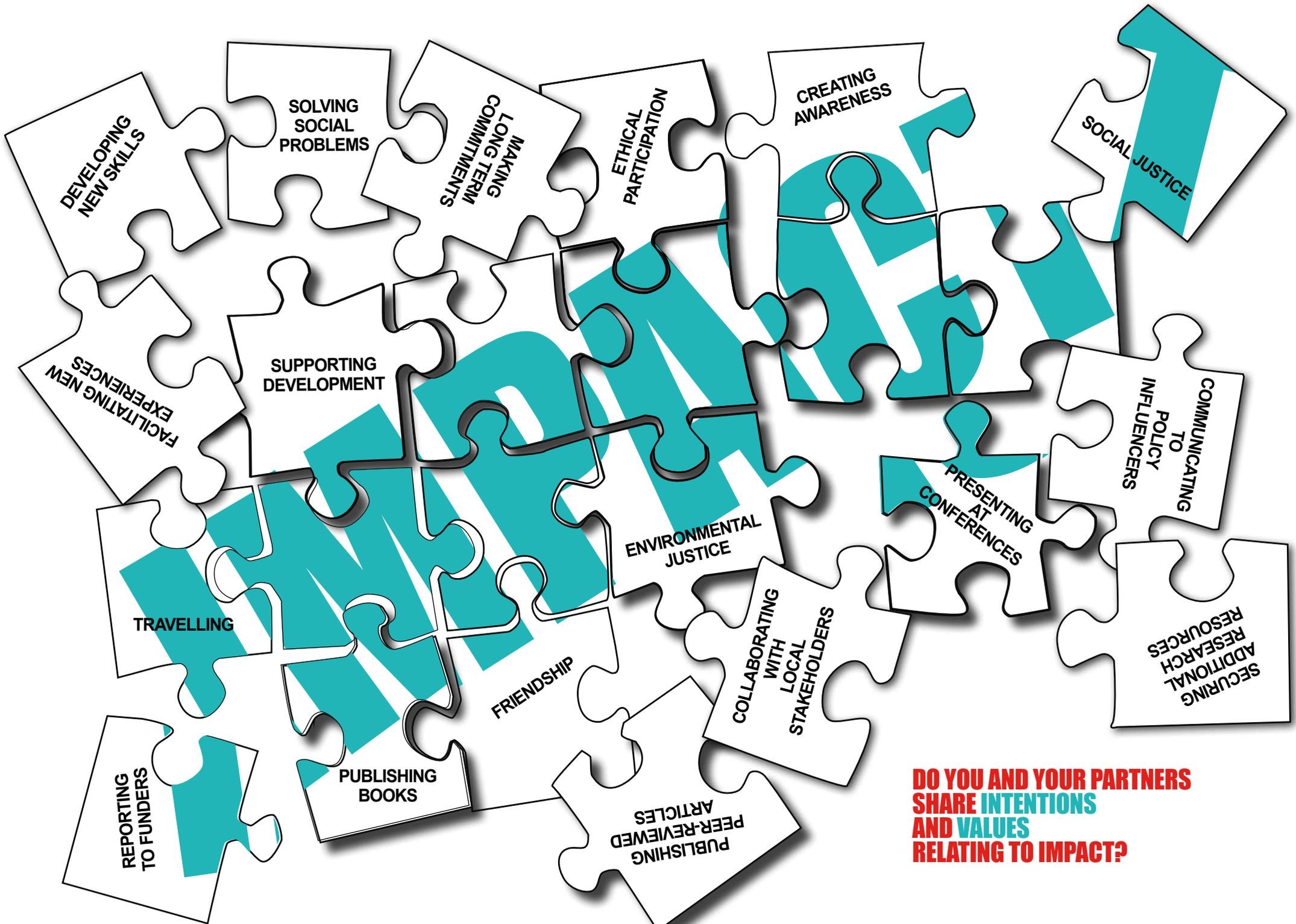
ACADEMY

AWARENESS

INFLUENCE

REPRESENTING

*MEASURABLE society / economy / business / innovation / physical health / academy / industry

*IMMEASURABLE local practices / friendship / partnerships / communications / collaboration / imaginaries

DEVELOPING NEW SKILLS

SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

MAKING LONG TERM COMMITMENTS

ETHICAL PARTICIPATION

CREATING AWARENESS

SOCIAL JUSTICE

FACILITATING NEW EXPERIENCES

SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNICATING TO POLICY INFLUENCERS

TRAVELLING

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

PRESENTING AT CONFERENCES

SECURING ADDITIONAL RESEARCH RESOURCES

FRIENDSHIP

COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

REPORTING TO FUNDERS

PUBLISHING BOOKS

PUBLISHING PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES

IMPACT

DO YOU AND YOUR PARTNERS SHARE INTENTIONS AND VALUES RELATING TO IMPACT?

RECOGNISING IMPACT
WHAT ARE MEANINGFUL MEASUREMENTS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF IMPACT?

As researchers, we demonstrate what impact our work has. In doing so, we interpret certain circumstances in relation to their changed state, and we propose certain changes or impacts as valid, or as valuable. This practice of representing impact plays a significant role in research and the relationship between research, knowledge, and society.

What changes count in your research?
Are they measurable?

Consider these statements:

"Diabetes rates drop by 30%"

"78% of participants report a change in attitude to plastic pollution"

"3 new research grants amounting to £3million have been awarded"

"8.900 views have been recorded on the information video created"

"Dr Keene feels more confident in engaging with international colleagues"

" A local primary school has converted a playground into a vegetable garden"

"25% more of the community have access to clean running water in their home"

"The community leader has increased awareness of the energy consumption required for clean running water"

What do these metrics tell us about **change**, **difference**, or our **contribution to society**?

What knowledge and experience is prioritised in these measurements of impact?

What does it take to extract, determine and represent these indicators, and what does that mean for your partners and values?

AVOIDING
EXTRACTING IMPACT

Academic research projects have often been criticised for extracting information from participants and communities for the purposes of demonstrating findings or impact, providing little or no benefit or return to those participants.

Globally, this dynamic has contributed to distrust and the persistent divide between the academic sector and other sectors and communities that we aim to serve.
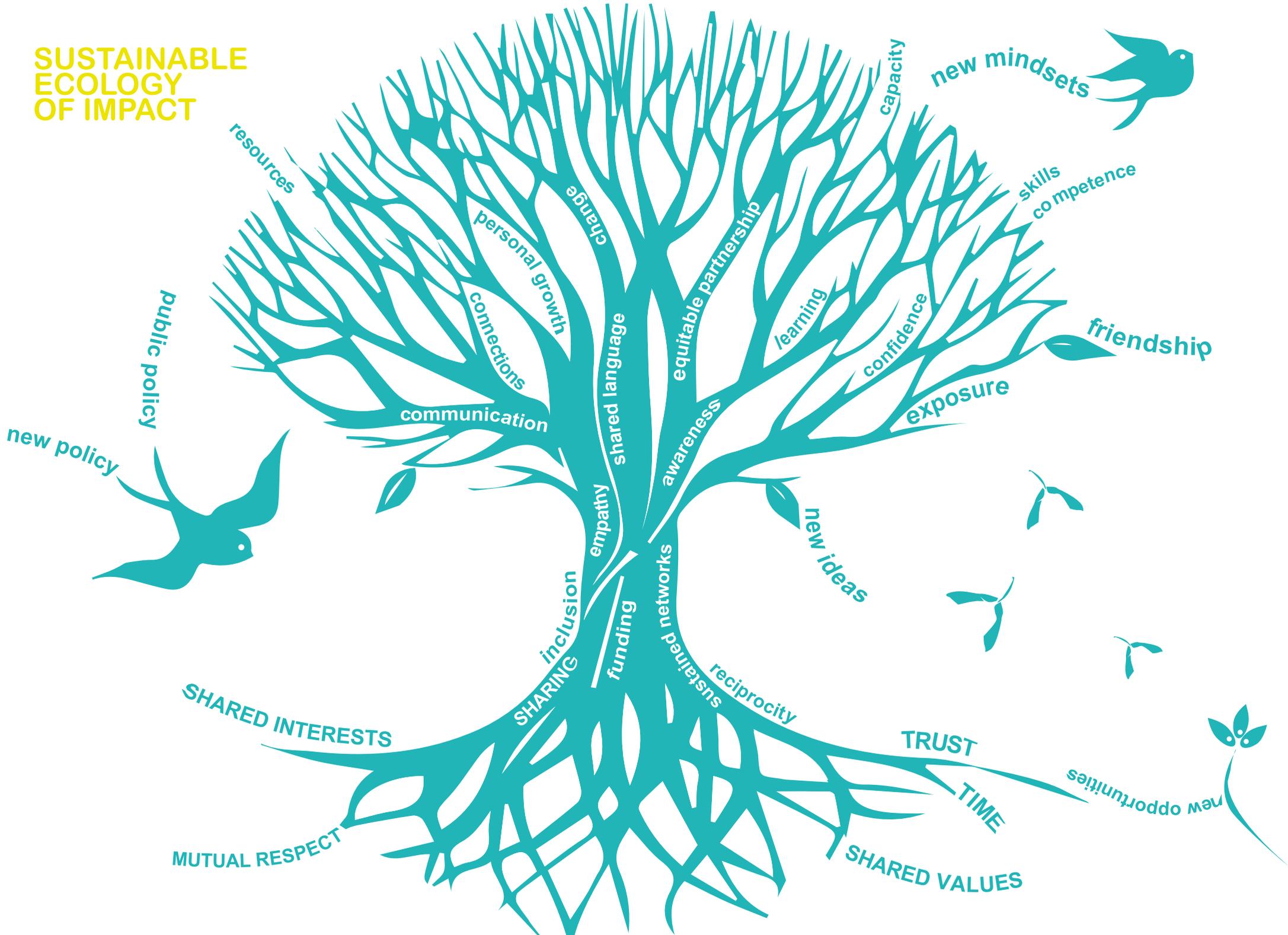
How do we change this?

We can consider engaging with research impact through ethical participation.

We can ask how partnerships might co-construct the indicators and evaluation of impact.

How might these practices contribute directly to participants whilst satisfying project requirements?

BE READY TO ACKNOWLEDGE NEGATIVE OR UNDESIRED IMPACTS

SUSTAINABLE ECOLOGY OF IMPACT

new mindsets

capacity

resources

skills

competence

change

personal growth

equitable partnership

friendship

connections

learning

confidence

public policy

communication

shared language

awareness

exposure

new policy

empathy

new ideas

inclusion

funding

sustained networks

SHARING

reciprocity

SHARED INTERESTS

TRUST

new opportunities

MUTUAL RESPECT

TIME

SHARED VALUES

Our research has shown that the dominant understanding of **RESEARCH IMPACT** is of something measurable or demostrable. Because of this, often researchers and participants struggle to identify or understand the multi-dimensional impacts of the research or the impacts of their work at all. As the word "impact" is translated across contexts and languages, the meaning shifts as well.

പരിവർത്തനം ചെയ്തു

Araştırmanın sosyal etkisi

Change

Impact

Zotsatila zakafukufu

Significance

Benefit

फाइदा

Positive change

Empreinte de la recherche

Fondest memories

Ebirugire mukuseruliza

Lasting influences

Matokeo ya utafiti

Effectiveness

Success

গবেষণার প্রভাব

Achievement

Bibyaano bye khuetselesa

Omugasho gw'okucondooza

Community benefits

تحقیق کے اثرات

IMPACT ACROSS LANGUAGES

IMPACT in other *words*

When we use alternative language, responses and understandings change.

When impact is considered in terms of **success**: "it's actually friendships... the emotional or personal level success that's created with lots of effort… we have little resource, but still people are really really putting in a lot of effort in terms of organizational or institutional success"

When impact is considered in terms of **achievement**: "one of our biggest achievements for us is that our research has come about in a more democratic way, we look at the issues, we brainstorm together, we develop issues collectively, and I see that as a very big achievement... it is a big achievement in the network"

When impact is considered in terms of **significance**: "it is a space and sense of inclusion… the project helped me to rediscover myself, gave me space and opportunity to become something that I was, before being a mom. It gave the space to recreate myself a little bit as an employee"

Changing the term can result in more nuanced discussion and more detailed mapping of impact.

We invite you to ask yourself:

HOW CAN DIFFERENT WAYS OF ASKING ABOUT THE IMPACT OF YOUR RESEARCH SUPPORT THE INCLUSION OF MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES - FROM MEASURABLE TO IMMEASURABLE, FROM VISIBLE TO INVISIBLE?

Identifying
Impact

There are standardised processes and practices we adopt to measure visible forms of impact, but **what about aspects of impact that remain uncaptured** and more difficult to discern?

From our research we suggest a range of methods and practices we can adopt to look at the broader ecology of impact. These include practices that are non-extractive, situated, responsive to context and require reflexivity.

REFLEXIVE QUESTIONS

Reflexive practice can help expand our understanding of research impact. Reflexivity generally refers to the ways in which our own beliefs, values, judgments and practices may have influenced the research process and outcomes. It requires openness and an acceptance that the researcher is part of the research. Research impact is not just something to be discerned, measured or collected at the end of a project, but is intricately entwined with who we are as human beings from the outset and over the duration of research projects.

What can we ask ourselves about how our own beliefs, values and biases influence the production of impact?

Impact on whom, and for whom?
On whose terms?
What do you consider impact, and what do partners and participants value?
Do you feel you already know what the impact of your project will be?
How can you account for the unexpected?
Are you looking for impact in the wrong places?
What might be uncaptured?
Which impacts will have longevity?
Where is the individual?
Which 'small' impacts can become politically powerful?
How can you account for plurality?
What importance is valued or impeded by your funder and institutional structures?
Can you afford budget/time for a dedicated 'Impact Ambassador'?
How can you learn from missed opportunities/unmet goals?

INDICATIVE PROCESSES AND PRACTICES OF IDENTIFYING IMPACT

Shifting from a position of knowing to learning - remember research is about finding out what we don't know, rather than telling or imposing what we think we know already.

Focusing on co-creation impact is typically packaged in a way that is to be received and accepted by non-academics. Co-production emphasises a dynamic relationship which embraces a variety of perspectives, experiences and understandings of impact. This also ensures impact is more relevant, acceptable, appropriate, responsive and effective in generating change.

Recognising the influence of place and power is important for understanding how impact may differ across varying contexts.

Focusing on the nature of connections within our project, at all scales. Impact may be seen as externally-facing, but is critically dependent on quality of relationships within collaborations.

Unlearning our own biases and assumptions e.g. about how we view the world, what questions we ask, as well as what answers we look for.

Creating time and space for negotiation and reflection from all stakeholders on ever-changing goals and outcomes.

Tracking ripple effects of research through stakeholder engagement. Asking about unintended changes. Did any negative changes arise, as well as positive?

Framing research as a creative endeavour with human experience at its core - requiring imagination, exploration and reflection.

Looking for impact where we don't always expect to find it. It may be small, specific, local, descriptive, observational but these can be powerful in generating change.

Whose Job is it?

The job of identifying impact can be carried out by an individual or it can be a collective effort. The person or the team needs **to facilitate, promote, coordinate, design, curate and enable.**

What resources are needed?
To understand, capture, and document impact, dedicated **time and space** is needed.
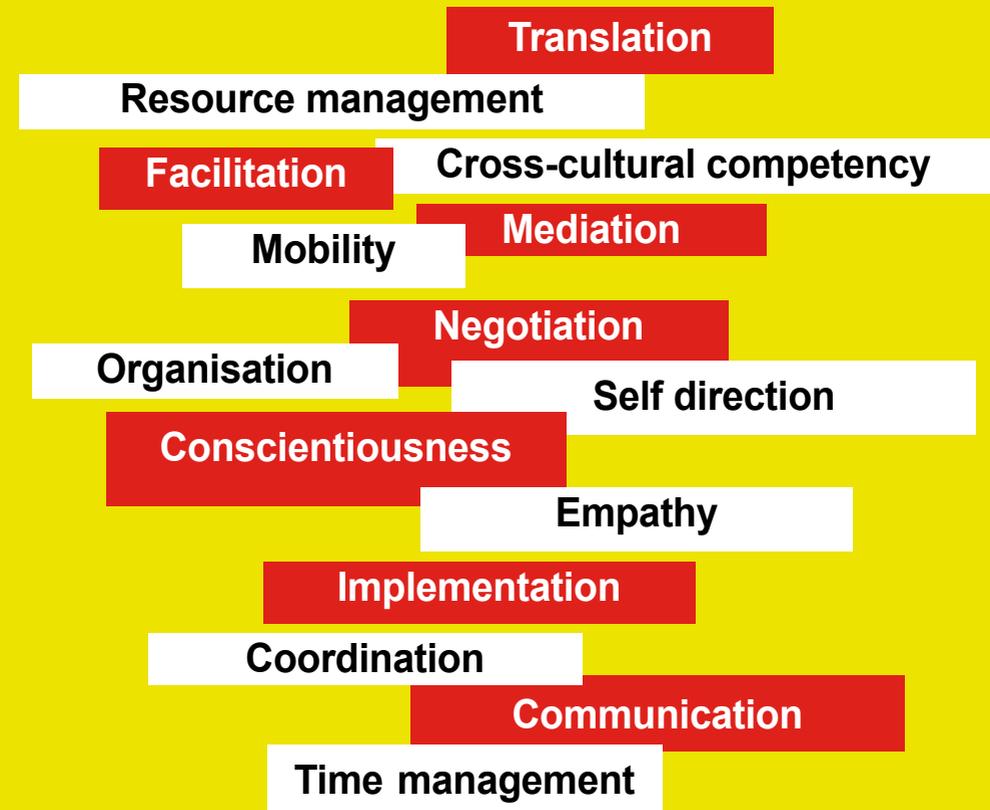
Where is this work carried out?
This work takes place across **multiple and varied locations**, it requires mobility.

When does this work happen?
Understanding and capturing impact is an **on-going process**.
It needs to start from the **beginning of a project,** happen **during the project duration** and continue **beyond the project lifetime**.

Translation

Resource management

Facilitation

Cross-cultural competency

Mobility

Mediation

Negotiation

Organisation

Self direction

Conscientiousness

Empathy

Implementation

Coordination

Communication

Time management

LEARNING & UNLEARNING ABOUT IMPACT

WHAT WE UNDERSTOOD IMPACT TO BE

DIRECT

CHANGE OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

PROXIMATE

MEASURABLE

IT IS ALWAYS SEEN AS POSITIVE

LINEAR

IT HAPPENS AT THE END

IT HAPPENS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT IT CAN BE

IT CAN BE NEGATIVE

PERSONAL

INDIRECT

EMPOWERING

SMALL, BUT POWERFUL

IMMEASURABLE

FRIENDSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL CONNECTION CAN LEAD TO IMPACT AND LONG TERM SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS

DIVERGENT

IT IS NOT ALWAYS MEASURABLE

EVERYWHERE: THE DIVISION BETWEEN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE ACADEMIA IS A FALSE DICHOTOMY

IMPACT CAN BE NEGATIVE OR UNDESIRED

DEDICATED TIME AND SKILL IS NEEDED FOR IT

EMERGES THROUGH INFORMAL NETWORKS

EXCITING

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

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