

NextFOOD

EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF PROFESSIONALS IN THE AGRI-FOOD SYSTEM

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This policy brief gives an overview of a framework for assessing interactive research and education developed in an EU-funded Horizon2020-project (NextFOOD), which may be of special interest to evaluators and other professionals working with the evaluation of quality research and education.

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The NextFOOD Sustainability Impact Assessment Framework - evaluating the quality of interactive research and education in the agri-food and forestry sectors

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Introduction

As existing frameworks for evaluating impact resulting from agri-food and forestry research provide little incentive for interactive innovation, there is a need for devising alternative ways of reviewing and measuring performance in this context. The approach of the NextFOOD Framework is intended to support the planning of the desired impact, the inclusion of relevant actors, and the fostering of interaction and mutual learning between actors. The purpose of the NextFOOD Framework is to inspire diverse actors to meet and collaborate in the research and evaluation process, and to jointly consider the implications (impacts, benefits, etc.) of their work.



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➤ Why does the inclusion of stakeholders matter in evaluation?

Impact assessment in the context of agricultural research is fundamentally a complex socio-political phenomenon. As a broader point, the literature review clearly shows a tendency towards constructivist approaches, which see impact evaluation as a socially-oriented and socially-embedded activity, where multiply situated and diverse actors “co-produce” impact. Indeed, not all impacts stem from the use and relevance of research results; the reviewed impact assessment models demonstrated methods of acknowledging research or educational activity itself as actually or potentially impactful. The reviewed models demonstrate how stakeholders tied to social networks constitute valuable opportunities for collective action towards sustainable impact. This implies seeing stakeholder communities as complicit in the impact evaluation process, further suggesting the importance of their inclusion in the evaluation process itself. In other words, accommodating what are traditionally seen as “external environments” in the evaluation process provides for a reflexive engagement with impact as a social phenomenon of common concern.

➤ Two types of impact and impacts on different levels

The structural components of the NextFOOD Framework are to be used as an organising tool for articulating “impact” in the process of evaluation. The structure allows for the evaluation of both process and product related impacts in relation to social, environmental, and economic sustainability, (see Table 1). The users are asked to reflect on four interrelated impact levels: an individual level, a project level, an intermediary level, and a systemic level.

	Process related impact category. Economic, environmental, social.	Product related impact category. Economic, environmental, social.
Individual level The personal and professional development of the individuals directly involved in the project.	Indicators of how the process creates value for the involved individuals, in economic, environmental or social terms.	Indicators of how the results/ products create value for the involved individuals, in economic, environmental or social terms.
Project level The group of individuals involved in the project working group, reference group and/or stakeholder group.	Indicators of how the process creates value on the project level, in economic, environmental or social terms.	Indicators of how the results/ products create value on the project level, in economic, environmental or social terms.
Organisational level The organisations that are represented by the individuals that are part of the project level.	Indicators of how the process creates value on the organisational level, in economic, environmental or social terms.	Indicators of how the results/ products create value on the organisational level, in economic, environmental or social terms.
Systemic This level refers to impacts related to the broader relevant agri-food or forestry system.	Indicators of how the process creates value on the systemic level, in economic, environmental or social terms.	Indicators of how the results/ products create value on the systemic level, in economic, environmental or social terms.

Table 1. The structural components of the NextFOOD Framework are based on four levels and two categories of impact: process and product. Each category can contain the sustainability dimensions of economic, environmental or social sustainability.

Organizing the evaluation process

The process of the NextFOOD Framework constitutes a way of organising stakeholder interaction around potential and actual impacts (see Figure 1). Five procedural components jointly constitute a way of operating the NextFOOD Framework in practice. These components are: Prepare, Assemble, Involve, Plan, Execute and Reflect. In this process, users are expected to identify the indicators that best describe the sustainability impacts stemming from their project work and results, both in terms of indicators specific to the focal project, and general indicators which are comparable between projects.

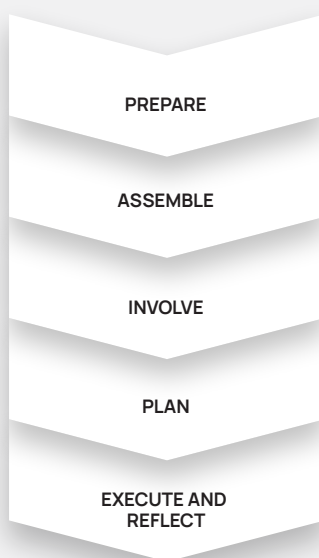


Figure 1. The five procedural components of the framework.

Some recommendations:

- Engage a stakeholder network in the preparation phase. Stakeholders can often be important contributors to a project in terms of resources such as networks and experiences, and not least in enabling the future impact of the project through, for instance, the utilisation of their own networks.
- Decide as a group which indicators to use. The NextFOOD Framework involves the use of indicators. These are divided into project specific indicators and general indicators. The project specific indicators serve to measure how the project accomplishes its goals. The general indicators allow for comparability between projects by assessing comparable parameters across several projects.
- Appoint a facilitator, group leader, or similar, who can introduce the concepts of impact assessment and how this may be translated into indicators of impact, and assist the group in delegating responsibilities and moving forward with the tasks of the impact assessment process.

Concluding remarks

The presented NextFOOD Framework is intended to be used as an organising tool for articulating and structuring impact, and a way of organising stakeholder interaction around potential and actual impacts. We recommend the use of a facilitator or similar to aid the impact assessment process.

Finally, while there is no “quick fix” for impact assessment through the simple application of a standard model, we suggest the use of general indicators to facilitate the development of an impact assessment model that would allow for comparability across several projects.

Factbox:

NextFOOD (grant agreement No 771738) was initiated in 2018 as a collaborative project bringing together 19 partners in an international network with the aim of designing a research-based learning strategy to enhance learners’ understanding of complex situations and develop the competences needed to drive the transition towards more sustainable agri-food and forestry systems. The results of NextFOOD were intended to help overcome some of the barriers faced by learners, teachers, and institutions who would like to engage in action-oriented and learner-centered education.

Project coordination: Martin Melin, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, martin.melin@slu.se
For the topic of impact assessment: Lisa Blix Germundsson, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, lisa.germundsson@slu.se
Project website: www.nextfood-project.eu
For more information:
► Lisa Blix Germundsson, Ivanche Dimitrievski, Elisavet Papadopoulou, Håkan Jönsson, Jan Lehejček, Jiří Lehejček, Martin Melin, Jan Moudrý jr. (2022) The NextFOOD Sustainability Impact Assessment Framework. Deliverable 5.5 of the NextFOOD project funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme GA No: 771738.



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