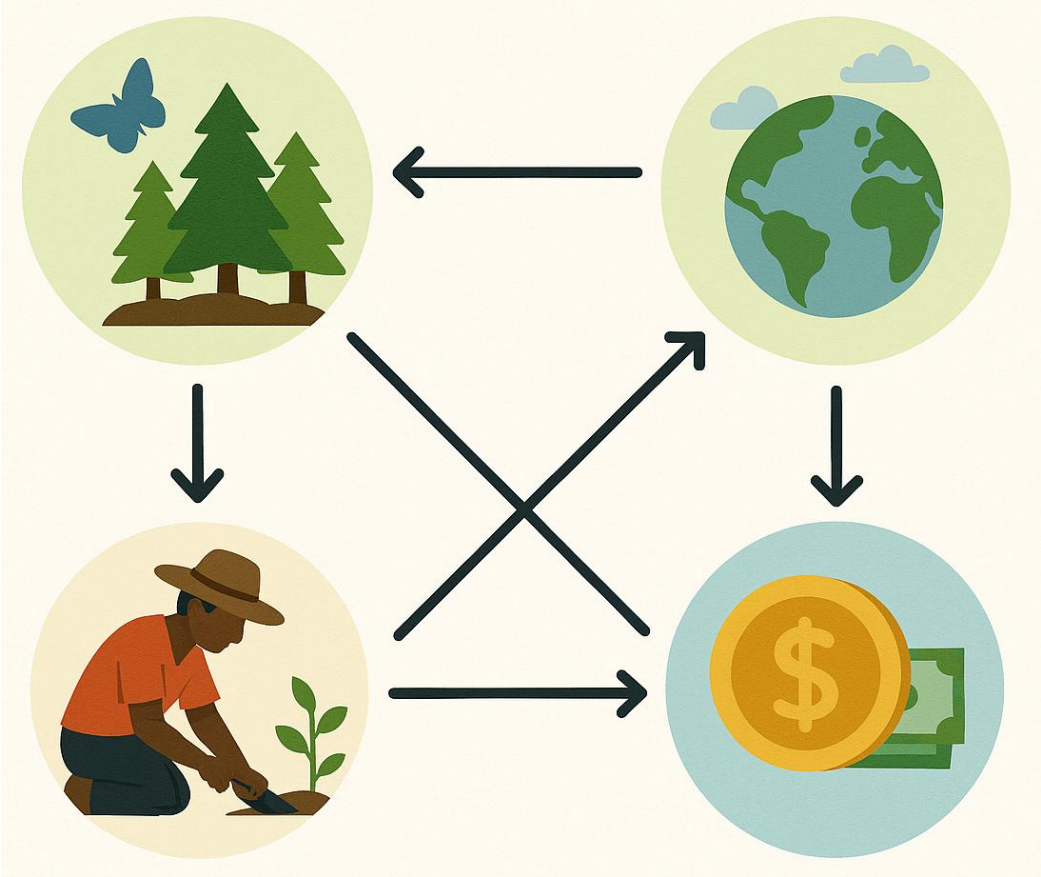
BIODIVERSITY CHALLENGE FUNDS

DARWIN INITIATIVE | ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE CHALLENGE FUND | DARWIN PLUS



Articulating Causal Pathways in Fund-level Theories of Change

Biodiversity Challenge Funds: Building and Applying Evidence

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)

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Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations

BCFs	Biodiversity Challenge Funds
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GIS	Geographic Information System(s)
ICF	International Climate Finance
IPLCs	Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
IWT	Illegal Wildlife Trade
Logframe	Logical Framework
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
NIRAS	NIRAS (Fund Administrator for the Biodiversity Challenge Funds)
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OTs	Overseas Territories
ToC	Theory of Change
UKOTs	United Kingdom Overseas Territories

Authorship and acknowledgements

This report was authored by Alex Harnett. Inputs to the planning and execution of the study, and comments on drafts of the report were provided by Victoria Reilly-Pinion, Rachel Beattie, and Hannah Reid.

Disclaimer

NIRAS is the fund administrator for the Biodiversity Challenge Funds (BCFs) and commissioned this work on behalf of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) under Workstream 5 – Building and Applying Evidence of the BCFs.

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1. Introduction

The purpose and rationale of this assignment is to articulate causal pathways across fund-level Theories of Change (ToCs). This work forms part of Workstream 5 – Building and Applying Evidence, which aims to enhance the evidence base underpinning the Darwin Initiative, the Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus. The assignment addresses a core need identified during recent updates to the BCFs' logical frameworks (logframes) and ToCs: to provide a clearer and more robust articulation of how specific outputs lead to intended outcomes and impacts, alongside the assumptions and evidence gaps that influence the strength of these causal links.

This assignment directly supports Defra and wider UK Government stakeholders in their ongoing requirements for high quality, evidence-based reporting. Strengthening the coherence and transparency of the causal pathways within each fund-level ToC will ensure that monitoring and reporting structures accurately reflect how the funds aim to deliver benefits in biodiversity conservation, poverty reduction, improved livelihoods, and policy influence.

2. Background

The BCFs' Workstream 5 focuses on synthesising and applying learning from across the portfolio to improve project performance, strengthen evidence generation, and enhance strategic fund management. Projects funded under the Darwin Initiative, IWT Challenge Fund, and Darwin Plus collectively contribute to complex biodiversity and development outcomes, making well-articulated ToCs essential for demonstrating impact.

In 2024, all three funds underwent a review of their logframes and ToCs to ensure alignment with evolving fund priorities, the introduction of Standard Indicators, and increased requirements for International Climate Finance (ICF) reporting. Feedback from this review, alongside insights from Defra Annual Reviews and Business Case processes, highlighted a need for clearer articulation of the causal pathways embedded within the ToCs. This includes how activities and outputs – such as capacity building, evidence generation, or livelihood interventions – contribute to higher-level outcomes such as improved biodiversity status, strengthened governance, or reduced poverty.

A further key finding from the 2024 review was the need to assess the strength of the evidence base underpinning each causal link and to identify where evidence remains weak or absent. Addressing these gaps will support more informed decision-making by fund managers, expert groups, and UK Government stakeholders. This assignment responds directly to those needs by generating short, evidence-based narratives for each fund's ToC, supported by footnoted evidence summaries and identified assumptions, to be used across fund reporting and learning processes.

3. Methodology

The methodology for this assignment has been designed to ensure a clear, evidence-based and consistent approach to articulating causal pathways across the three Biodiversity Challenge Funds: the Darwin Initiative, the IWT Challenge Fund and Darwin Plus. The approach follows the requirements described in the Terms of Reference (ToR) and aligns with Workstream 5's overarching aims to strengthen evidence use, improve reporting coherence, and support Defra decision making.

The methodology adopts a structured, desk-based review process focused on three main stages: (1) consolidation of core programme documentation, (2) synthesis of existing evidence, and (3) generation of fund specific causal pathway narratives. This process ensures that each narrative is grounded in the most up to date fund level ToCs, integrates relevant evidence, and highlights assumptions and evidence gaps in a transparent and accessible way.

3.1. Review of Core BCFs Documentation

The assignment began with a targeted review of key BCFs documentation, including:

- Revised 2025 fund level logframes and ToCs.
- Standard Indicator Guidance and associated reporting materials.
- The latest versions of each fund's results framework.

This stage establishes the structural basis for the narratives and verifies consistency with the conceptual pathways underpinning each fund. Particular attention was given to areas where ToCs were amended following the 2024 review, including strengthened reporting for International Climate Finance (ICF) requirements and the integration of Standard Indicator data flows.

3.2. Evidence Synthesis

A light touch, rapid review of relevant evidence syntheses was undertaken for each fund, limited to approximately five key sources per ToC. These included:

- Evidence Gap Maps.
- Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses.
- Deep Dive studies, including those on IWT–poverty linkages, and markets and livelihoods.
- Relevant external conservation and development literature.

The purpose of this stage was to assess the strength of the evidence underpinning each causal link, identify where evidence is robust, mixed, or lacking, and note critical assumptions and risks. Findings from this review will inform the endnote references and evidence gaps within each causal pathway narrative.

3.3. Assumption analysis

Using the documentation review and evidence synthesis, an expanded Theory of Change diagram was developed to understand the assumptions that were being made in the process and identify specific evidence gaps.

3.4. Development of Causal Pathway Narratives

Following the development of expanded ToC, concise narratives were drafted for each fund. Each narrative:

- Describes the causal links between inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impacts as represented in the fund level ToC.
- Highlights assumptions that influence the effectiveness of pathways, including risks and contextual factors.
- Identifies any significant evidence gaps.

To meet Defra's needs for both succinctness and comprehensiveness, evidence gaps and assumptions will be included in endnotes, allowing the main narrative to remain concise while retaining transparency and rigour.

3.5. Note on attribution and contribution

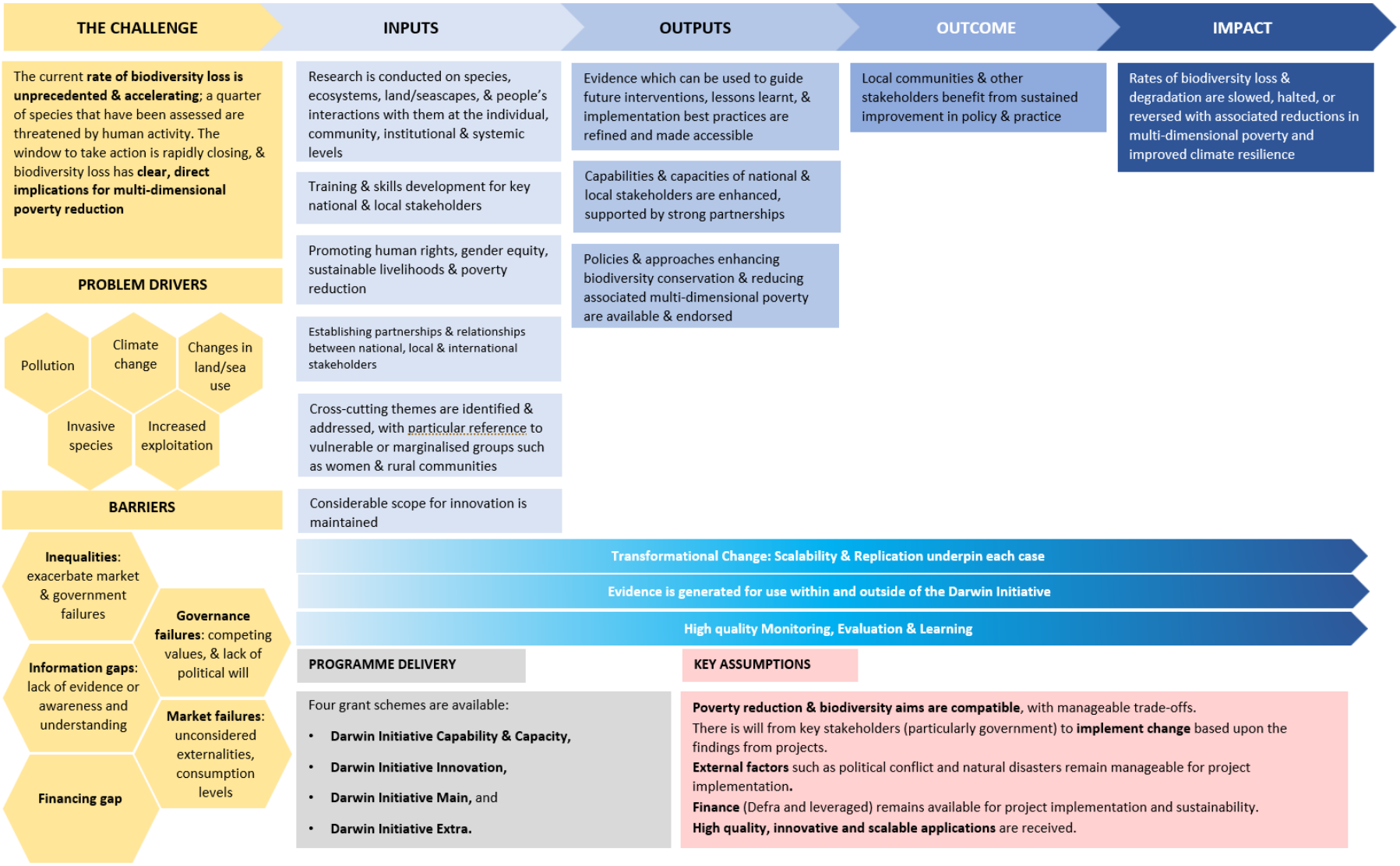
The Fund-level ToCs primarily frame impacts and outcomes in terms of contribution rather than attribution. This means that, at the outcome and impact levels, the language focuses on how projects "contribute to", "help advance", or "support sustained improvements (in)" broader goals, recognising that many external factors and actors influence these results. Attribution, where a direct causal link is claimed, is reserved for outputs that are clearly and solely produced by the project, such as the delivery of evidence products or training sessions.

This distinction is important for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) and reporting expectations. While projects are required to demonstrate and report on their direct outputs, their role in achieving higher-level outcomes and impacts is reported in terms of plausible contribution, acknowledging the complexity of change processes and the involvement of multiple stakeholders.

3.6. Note on future iterations

These narratives represent a faithful reflection of the ToC diagrams as they stand in March 2026. It is important to note that the ToCs will continue to evolve over time, adapting as the BCFs develop and respond to emerging priorities, evidence, and contextual shifts. Consequently, future iterations may incorporate revised pathways, assumptions, and evidence gaps to ensure ongoing relevance and rigour.

4. Theory of Change Darwin Initiative



The following is a narrative theory of change for the Darwin Initiative (as of March 2026). Assumptions and evidence notes are presented within the text using superscript numbers (for example, [1], [2], [3]), with full details provided at the end of each section. Footnotes used for additional information, references, or commentary are indicated using Roman numerals (for example, i, ii, iii). Evidence and Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) considerations are integrated into each section. A separate section focuses on Transformational Change.

4.1. The Challenge

Biodiversity loss is a critical challenge for sustainable development. The scale of loss and rates of extinction are the greatest they have been for several million years and are accelerating. Biodiversity loss is eroding economic livelihoods and impacting food and water security, health, protection from extreme weather events, climate change, and pollution. This loss escalates the likelihood that climate tipping points will be breached, bringing instability, abrupt changes, and wellbeing impacts at the community, national, and international levels. The greatest impact will be on low-income countries and the poor, who have a greater reliance on biodiversity and limited capability and capacity to adapt, undoing past development gains and risking future prospects.

4.1.1. Drivers of biodiversity loss

Human activity remains the primary cause of biodiversity loss and degradation via the following direct drivers:

- *Changes in land and sea use*, e.g. agricultural and urban expansion, water extraction.
- *Increased exploitation*, e.g. overexploitation via harvesting, logging, hunting, and fishing.
- *Climate change*, e.g. extreme weather events, changes in seasonality, ocean acidification.
- *Pollution*, e.g. marine plastic, waste, industry, agriculture, petrochemicals.
- *Invasion of alien species*, e.g. global trade spreading species that impact ecosystem functions.

Climate change is partly driving biodiversity loss, which in turn further reduces biodiversity's capability to mitigate, adapt to, and be resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Behind these direct drivers are indirect drivers (economic / political / social factors), including consumption habits, wealth generation, and the separation of production from consumption. Inequalities between and within stakeholders often impacts who benefits from the use of biodiversity, and who bears the cost.

Biodiversity loss and degradation tend to be less in areas managed by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), but these communities are facing escalating external pressures (such as resource extraction, agriculture, and infrastructure development) that impact biodiversity and the livelihoods and wellbeing of these communities.

4.1.2. Barriers to addressing the challenge[1]

The direct and indirect drivers of biodiversity degradation and loss need to be addressed to halt and reverse current trends. As the Dasgupta review[i] on the Economics of Biodiversity highlights, action is needed to ensure biodiversity is effectively embedded in decision-making. Barriers include:

- **Market failures:** biodiversity is an externality or public good that private actors will not necessarily account for in their private behaviour.
- **Government or governance failures:** limited ability of policymakers to take a sustainable approach to political and economic priorities and the management of biodiversity assets; capable institutions, and the requisite biodiversity knowledge to guide effective action, form the enabling conditions to change this.
- **Information gaps:** lack of awareness of biodiversity, an understanding of the impacts of activities, and options to managing biodiversity limit the effectiveness of policymakers, communities, and private agents.
- **Inequalities:** economic, political, and social inequalities exacerbate market and governance failures; more equitable representation of marginalised groups (e.g. by age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and IPLC status) in decision-making is needed.
- **Financing gaps:** The scale of the challenge is greater than funding available. Appropriate finance for biodiversity and poverty reducing interventions is often unavailable, inaccessible, insufficient, or too risky for other funders.

4.2. Programme Inputs

Not currently in the ToC diagram, the Darwin Initiative brings together a set of core resources, capabilities, and enabling conditions that underpin its support for biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction in eligible countries. These inputs include:

- **Financial resources**, funded through UK Official Development Assistance (ODA), alongside matched funding and in-kind contributions leveraged from partners to increase overall value for money[2].
- **Technical expertise** of project teams in biodiversity; poverty reduction; climate resilience; Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL); safeguarding; Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI); and project management.
- **Existing partnerships and relationships** from local, national, and international partnerships, to ensure contextual knowledge, engagement with local communities, and insight into political and institutional dynamics.
- **Evidence**, such as insights and best practices from past BCFs projects, fund-level research, and wider scientific data, is used to inform project design[3]. This approach enables the selection of context-appropriate interventions, ensuring that projects identify effective strategies, understand their mechanisms, and appropriately adapt them to specific settings. [4].
- **Fund management expertise** including guidance and support for effective project design and implementation including ethical and safeguarding compliance, and MEL[5].

[i] Dasgupta, P., 2021. *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta*. London: HM Treasury. Available here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review

- **The independent expert committee,** which plays a central role in shaping high quality proposals by offering informed, impartial reviews based on deep experience in conservation, poverty reduction, and climate change. This ensures that projects are selected, funded, and monitored to a consistent and robust standard[6].

4.3. Activities of projects (Inputs on the ToC Diagram)

With these inputs projects are able to use the grants to design projects aligned with UK Biodiversity and ODA strategy[7] that:

- Conduct biodiversity-related research, including on species, landscapes, and seascapes, and people's interactions with them at individual, community, institutional, and systemic levels.
- Build the capacity of key national and local stakeholders through training and skills development.
- Establish and build partnerships and relationships between local and international stakeholders.
- Address cross-cutting themes, in particular the meaningful inclusion of vulnerable or marginalised groups such as women and rural communities.
- Test out and adapt ideas and approaches to meet the specific needs and challenges of the diverse contexts that the projects work in, ensuring information is captured to evidence whether an idea or approach is effective[8]. This includes three broad areas of innovation:
    - **Novel to the area** - the diffusion, replication, or application of proven conservation approaches in another geography or to a different issue or stakeholder group.
    - **Novel to the sector** - an approach proven in a different sector is adapted to deliver results and impact in the biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction sector.
    - **Novel to the world** – an innovation unproven in any sector, is applied to the biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction sector.

Projects carry out robust MEL while implementing their activities, ensuring that progress is systematically tracked against clear objectives and indicators. By employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, projects are able to assess both the effectiveness and impact of their interventions, identify areas for improvement, and adapt approaches in response to emerging insights. Continuous learning is fostered through regular reflection and knowledge sharing, allowing teams and stakeholders to refine best practices and maximise outcomes for biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction[9].

4.4. Outputs[10] [11]

From activities of projects, the following outputs will be achieved:

4.4.1. Refined, accessible evidence, lessons, and best practices

Projects generate a suite of evidence-related outputs that contribute to improved decision making across sectors. These include ecological datasets (e.g. species population assessments, habitat assessments), Geographic Information System (GIS) Layers, case studies, monitoring results, lessons learnt and refined best practices. Projects will develop evidence that is accessible,

comprehensible, usable, and assessable, enabling stakeholders to trust and apply it effectively[12]. Evidence will incorporate local knowledge and perspectives, including those of IPLCs, and be shared openly for national and global benefit.

4.4.2. Enhanced capability and capacity among national and local stakeholders supported by strong partnerships

Projects strengthen the capability and capacity of national and local partners, ensuring long-term sustainability beyond the life of the project. Outputs in this domain include structured training, fellowships, mentoring, organisational development, strengthened governance procedures, improved technical skills, enhanced monitoring and evaluation capacity, and strengthened capacity for safeguarding, GESI, and risk management. Strong capability and capacity outputs improve efficiency and effectiveness of biodiversity and poverty reduction interventions and produce a legacy of more confident, skilled, and resilient institutions[13].

Capability and capacity building activities should be co-developed with in-country partners and engage stakeholders meaningfully from the earliest stages[14]. This will allow for building functioning governance arrangements, improved coordination mechanisms, and strengthened relationships between government agencies, civil society, research bodies, IPLCs, and private sector actors. This collaborative foundation supports future scaling, adoption, and sustainability of successful approaches.

4.4.3. Evidence informed policy and approaches for biodiversity and poverty reduction

Projects are also expected to produce outputs that contribute to policy development, reform, or implementation. This includes drafting or refining policy instruments, contributing to national biodiversity strategies and action plans, supporting resource management plans, generating policy relevant evidence, and creating approaches that integrate biodiversity considerations into wider development and economic policy. These outputs provide government and non-governmental decision makers with practical, tested options for addressing both biodiversity conservation and multidimensional poverty reduction.

4.5. Outcome: Sustained improvements in policy and practice

When the outputs described above are delivered, the expected outcome is that local communities and other stakeholders will benefit from sustained improvements in policy and practice. Evidence rich outputs help policymakers and practitioners make more informed choices, allowing them to integrate biodiversity considerations into decisions that also support poverty reduction[15] [16]. Enhanced capability and capacity ensure that national and local institutions are able to deliver conservation and development interventions more effectively, while strengthened partnerships anchor these practices within local governance structures.

As a result, policies and approaches at local, regional, and national levels become better aligned with biodiversity conservation needs and community priorities. Improved practice on the ground leads to more sustainable resource management, better protection of ecosystem functions, and fairer, more equitable participation of marginalised groups, particularly women, IPLCs, and other socially excluded communities[17]. The overall outcome is sustained improvements in policy, from local to global levels, alongside lasting improvements in practice that continue beyond the end of project funding [18] [19].

4.6. Impact: Slowed, halted, or reversed biodiversity loss with reduced multidimensional poverty and improved climate resilience

The long-term transformative change envisaged by the Theory of Change is that rates of biodiversity loss and degradation are slowed, halted, or reversed, while multidimensional poverty is reduced, and climate resilience improved. When evidence and best practices are widely accessible, and when capability and capacity are strengthened, decision makers, institutions, and communities are empowered to adopt more sustainable and equitable approaches to managing biodiversity. These improved practices reduce pressures from direct and indirect drivers, contributing to healthier ecosystems and more resilient species and landscapes[20].

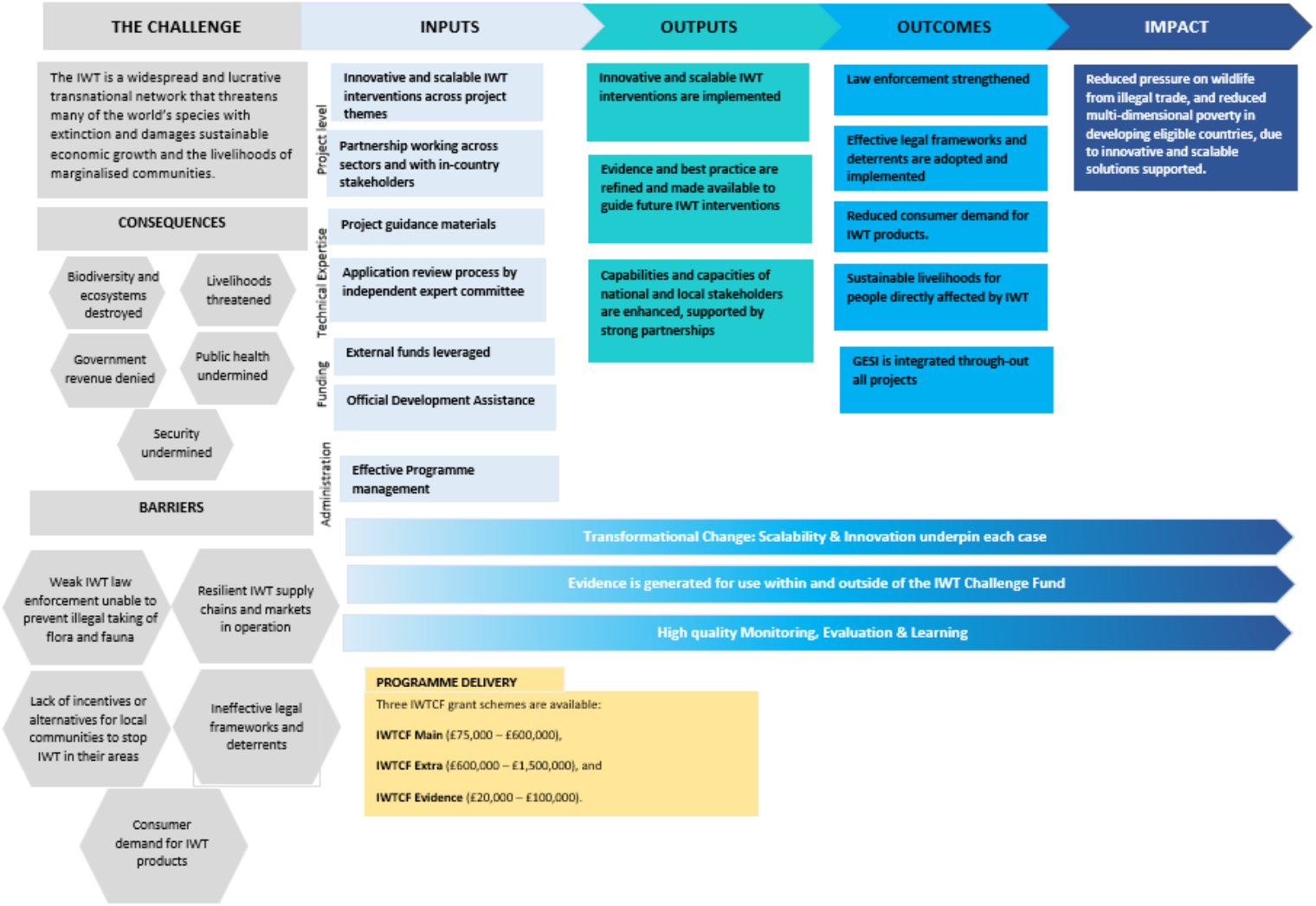
At the same time, improvements in sustainable livelihoods, enhanced voice and participation of marginalised groups, strengthened rights and access to resources, and better integration of biodiversity considerations into economic and social planning all contribute to reductions in multidimensional poverty[21]. Because biodiversity underpins food security, climate adaptation, water availability, and public health, improvements in ecosystem condition directly enhance community resilience to climate change and other environmental shocks. In combination, these effects generate a virtuous cycle in which healthier ecosystems support improved human wellbeing, and empowered communities maintain and protect biodiversity more effectively.

4.7. Transformation Change: Scalability and Replication underpin each case

Scalability and replication serve as the cornerstones of transformational change, ensuring that successful interventions can be adapted and extended across diverse contexts. By designing projects with the capacity to scale, lessons learned and effective approaches are not confined to a single locality but can be shared, adopted, and tailored by other regions or stakeholders. This facilitates the widespread uptake of proven methods, multiplying their impact and embedding lasting improvements in policy and practice[22]. Ultimately, transformational change is achieved when these scalable and replicable solutions catalyse broader shifts in governance, resource management, and community engagement, supporting the sustained reversal of biodiversity loss, poverty reduction, and enhanced climate resilience across multiple settings.

[1] Evidence gap: Challenges specific to different regions / themes and which challenges projects can realistically influence and those that sit largely outside project control.
[2] Assumption: Finance (Defra and leveraged) remains available for funding projects.
[3] Assumption: Evidence from project and fund MEL is of sufficient quality.
[4] Evidence gap: Whether existing support for adaptive management (e.g. CCNs) are sufficient to support this need.
[5] Assumption: Best practice and learning products are accessible, used, and understood by applicants and grantees.
[6] Evidence gap: How expert committee feedback changes project design quality, not just selection outcomes.
[7] Assumption: UK Biodiversity and ODA strategies and priorities are stable.
[8] Evidence gap: Success rates of different types of innovation supported by the fund.
[9] Evidence gap: How often Darwin projects genuinely adapt based on MEL findings, and with what effect.
[10] Assumption: High-quality, innovative and scalable applications are received.
[11] Assumption: Projects use funding effectively and as stated in their application.
[12] Assumption: Assumption that best practice has broader applicability than the very specific context in which the project is working
[13] Evidence gap: Does capacity building meaningfully shift behaviour where political or economic incentives run counter to conservation outcomes.
[14] Assumption: Stakeholders have sufficiently aligned incentives for biodiversity-friendly and poverty-reducing practices once evidence, capacity and partnerships are in place.
[15] Assumption: Scale, duration and intensity of projects are sufficient to influence systems that operate at much larger spatial, economic, and temporal scales.
[16] Assumption: There is will from key stakeholders (particularly government) to implement change based upon the findings from the projects.
[17] Evidence gap: Inclusion and GESI focused activities translate into durable changes in power, voice, or decision making.
[18] Assumption: Outcomes and impacts of the projects sustain after funding ends.
[19] Assumption: Barriers and drivers are sufficiently addressed for impact to sustain.
[20] Assumption: Short-term outcomes address barriers and drivers of biodiversity loss, poverty, and effects of climate change.
[21] Assumption: Poverty reduction and biodiversity aims are compatible, with manageable trade-offs.
[22] Evidence gap: Evidence distinguishing replication of activities from replication of outcomes

5. Theory of Change for IWT Challenge Fund



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5.1. The Challenge

The IWT is a widespread and lucrative transnational network that threatens many of the world's species with extinction and damages sustainable economic growth and the livelihoods of marginalised communities.

5.2. Consequences

The following are five key consequences of IWT:

- **Biodiversity and ecosystems destroyed**: IWT contributes directly to the depletion of species and the degradation of vital habitats. Rare and endangered animals and plants are targeted, often leading to local extinctions and a breakdown in ecological balance. As keystone species disappear, entire ecosystems may collapse, resulting in the loss of ecosystem services such as pollination, water purification, and soil fertility. The destruction of biodiversity also undermines nature's ability to recover from environmental shocks and adapt to climate change.
- **Livelihoods threatened:** IWT jeopardises the economic stability of communities, particularly in regions where people are heavily dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. The reduction in wildlife populations affects tourism, fishing, and agriculture, leading to fewer job opportunities and diminished income. Marginalised or rural communities are especially vulnerable, as they may lack alternative sources of employment or sustenance when wildlife resources are depleted.
- **Government revenue denied:** Illegal trade in wildlife bypasses legal channels, denying governments crucial revenue from permits, taxes, and sustainable resource management schemes. This loss of income can undermine funding for conservation programmes, public services, and infrastructure. Furthermore, the lack of financial returns from regulated trade may reduce the incentive for authorities to invest in environmental protection and sustainable development.
- **Public health undermined**: The trafficking and consumption of illegal wildlife products can introduce and transmit zoonotic diseases to human populations, posing significant public health risks. The handling and movement of animals outside regulated systems increases the likelihood of disease outbreaks, such as those caused by novel viruses or parasites. Additionally, ecosystem disruption caused by IWT can alter disease dynamics, making populations more susceptible to illness.
- **Security undermined**: IWT is frequently linked with organised crime, money laundering, and corruption, which threaten national and local security. The presence of criminal networks involved in wildlife trafficking can lead to increased violence, weaken governance, and erode trust in local institutions. The destabilising influence of IWT can disrupt peace and order, making communities more vulnerable to exploitation and further criminal activity.

5.3. Barriers

The following barriers effect the ability of organisation to address IWT[23]:

- **Weak IWT law enforcement unable to prevent illegal taking of flora and fauna**: Agencies may lack the necessary resources, training, and technology to detect and intercept illegal activities. This can result in poor surveillance, limited investigations, and low prosecution rates, allowing offenders to operate with relative impunity. Furthermore, gaps in cross-border cooperation and intelligence sharing often mean that criminal networks can exploit jurisdictional weaknesses, making it difficult to dismantle trafficking operations and protect vulnerable species.
- **Resilient IWT supply chains and markets in operation**: The existence of well-organised and adaptable supply chains enables traffickers to move wildlife products efficiently from source to consumer. These supply chains often involve multiple actors, including poachers, middlemen, transporters, and retailers, each playing a specialised role. The use of sophisticated methods, such as encrypted communications, hidden storage, and forged documentation, makes detection and disruption challenging. In addition, the emergence of online platforms and dark web marketplaces has further complicated efforts to trace and intercept illegal transactions, sustaining demand and facilitating global reach.
- **Lack of incentives or alternatives for local communities to stop IWT in their areas**: Many communities living near wildlife habitats may rely on IWT for income due to limited economic opportunities. Without viable alternatives, such as sustainable livelihoods or benefit-sharing schemes, local people may have little motivation to participate in conservation or resist involvement in illegal trade. In some cases, communities may also lack access to education or awareness programmes that highlight the long-term impacts of IWT on their environment and wellbeing. The absence of effective incentives undermines efforts to foster community stewardship and cooperation in combating wildlife crime.
- **Ineffective legal frameworks and deterrents**: Weak or outdated legislation can undermine the fight against IWT. Laws may not clearly define offences, impose sufficiently severe penalties, or cover emerging threats such as online wildlife trade. Inconsistent enforcement and judicial processes further reduce the deterrent effect, as offenders may escape punishment or face only minor consequences. The lack of harmonised regulations between countries can also create loopholes that traffickers exploit, highlighting the need for legal reform and stronger international cooperation.
- **Consumer demand for IWT products**: Persistent demand for wildlife products, whether for luxury goods, traditional medicine, pets, or trophies, drives the illegal trade. Consumer preferences are often shaped by cultural beliefs, social status, or misinformation about the efficacy or rarity of products. Efforts to reduce demand face challenges such as entrenched attitudes, lack of awareness about conservation impacts, and difficulty reaching target audiences through conventional campaigns. Without concerted behaviour change interventions and education, demand remains a powerful force sustaining IWT markets.

5.4. Inputs

The IWT Challenge Fund brings together a structured set of resources, governance mechanisms, and technical expertise designed to tackle the complex and persistent challenge of IWT while contributing to poverty reduction in eligible countries. These inputs begin with effective programme management, underpinned by and delivered through strong administrative systems, clear terms and conditions, rigorous safeguarding requirements, and a transparent assessment process overseen by an independent expert committee, the IWT Challenge Fund Advisory Group (IWTAG).

IWTAG plays a central role in shaping high quality proposals by offering informed, impartial review based on deep experience in conservation, law enforcement, behaviour change, sustainable livelihoods, poverty reduction, and IWT linked organised crime. This ensures that projects are selected, funded, and monitored to a consistent and robust standard[24].

A key input is funding from Defra provided through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and non-ODA[25], which ensures that all projects are explicitly aligned with poverty reduction and the economic development priorities of eligible countries[26]. In addition, projects are encouraged to secure leveraged external funds, including matched public or private financing and in-kind contributions, which help to broaden the financial base of interventions and increase their overall value for money.

Another essential input is the technical expertise fed into project design, assessment, and ongoing guidance[27]. Project teams themselves are expected to integrate specialised expertise, for example in MEL, GESI, market analysis, law enforcement systems, species conservation, or policy reform.

A further input is the requirement for projects to design innovative and scalable IWT interventions across the four thematic areas (see section 5.5 Outputs), responding to needs identified in existing evidence, gaps in current practice, and emerging frontiers such as online wildlife trade or the links between climate change and IWT.

Strong partnership working across sectors and with in-country stakeholders is also fundamental. Early and meaningful engagement with local partners, governments, communities, civil society, and private sector actors ensures that interventions are grounded in local priorities, operational realities, and cultural contexts. This also promotes genuine co-design and stronger uptake of project outputs.

5.5. Outputs

With inputs in place, IWT Challenge Fund projects implement a diverse range of interventions[28] [29] [30] aligned with the four programme themes:

- reducing consumer demand for illegal wildlife products[31],
- strengthening legal frameworks and deterrents,
- strengthening law enforcement[32], and
- developing sustainable livelihoods for people affected by IWT[33].

To illustrate how these thematic areas are operationalised in practice, an analysis of IWTCF-funded financial and technical monitoring (FTM) interventions identified several common activity types across projects:

- Capacity-building, such as multi-agency law enforcement agency trainings in FTM and/or on-the-job mentorship.
- Development of intelligence products, such as typologies or intelligence alerts featuring red flags or risk indicators for IWT-Illicit Financial Flows.
- Cross-sector community building, including advancing public-private or private-private partnerships. Intelligence sharing with national and international enforcement agencies, and/or the private sector.
- Supporting relevant prosecutions, e.g. with case conferences, brief watching, or private prosecution.

5.5.1. Implementation of innovative and scalable IWT interventions

Projects will implement interventions that are innovative, evidence driven, and designed to fill clear gaps in existing responses[34]. Outputs may include new regulatory tools, demand reduction campaigns using behavioural science, strengthened prosecution pathways, improved cross border intelligence sharing, alternative livelihood options that generate incentives for wildlife stewardship, and technological applications adapted from other sectors. The implementation of these interventions at pilot or scaling stages provides practical proof of concept, helping to demonstrate what is feasible, effective, and adaptable to different contexts[35].

5.5.2. Evidence and best practice are refined and made accessible

A core expectation of all IWT Challenge Fund grants is the generation, refinement, and open sharing of evidence. Projects produce monitoring data, case studies, evaluations, market analyses, enforcement insights, community studies, and best practice guidelines. These outputs help address the significant global knowledge gaps surrounding IWT, including the scale of trade, the motivations driving demand, the interaction of IWT with organised crime, and the effectiveness of different interventions. Project learning is strengthened through robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks that support attribution of impact using both counterfactual and theory-based approaches. Open access requirements ensure that datasets, findings and lessons learnt are made freely available to national governments, researchers, practitioners and international bodies, enabling future interventions to be designed on a stronger evidence base[36].

5.5.3. Enhanced capability and capacity of national and local stakeholders

IWT Challenge Fund projects are required to strengthen the capability and capacity of in-country partners and stakeholders as a central component of their work[37]. Outputs in this domain include training programmes, mentoring schemes, improved infrastructure and equipment, enhanced financial and governance systems, strengthened community knowledge, and increased institutional cooperation across government, civil society, and private sectors. These outputs help address systemic barriers such as limited technical skills, weak organisational structures, insufficient equipment, or poor coordination, all of which currently constrain efforts to tackle IWT effectively. Importantly, capability and capacity strengthening is designed to be sustainable, leaving a long-term legacy of improved skills, confidence, and leadership among local actors[38].

5.5.4. MEL

Projects carry out robust MEL while implementing their activities, ensuring that progress is systematically tracked against clear objectives and indicators. By employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, projects are able to assess both the effectiveness and impact of their interventions, identify areas for improvement, and adapt their approaches in response to emerging insights. Continuous learning is fostered through regular reflection and knowledge sharing, allowing teams and stakeholders to refine best practices and maximise outcomes for biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction[39].

5.6. Outcomes

Drawing on the outputs above, IWT Challenge Fund projects contribute to a suite of transformative outcomes[40] that respond directly to the fund's four thematic areas and broader poverty reduction mandate:

- **Law enforcement systems are strengthened**, as improved intelligence flows, inter agency collaboration, technological tools, and trained personnel enhance the ability of authorities to detect, investigate, and prosecute IWT crimes. This leads to more credible deterrents, reduced corruption risks, and better protection of species most vulnerable to illegal trade[41].
- **Effective legal frameworks and deterrents are adopted and implemented**, supported by policy guidance, legislative reforms, institutional strengthening, and improved compliance systems that help countries address IWT more comprehensively and consistently[42].
- **Reduced consumer demand for IWT products**, informed by evidence on market drivers, innovative behaviour change approaches, and early engagement with affected communities or consumer groups. Demand reduction outputs may also influence global markets, particularly when interventions target high value consumer regions through social marketing or alternative product provision.
- **Advanced sustainable livelihoods for people directly affected by IWT**, providing income alternatives, reducing the costs of living with wildlife, generating incentives for conservation stewardship, and addressing structural vulnerabilities that lead to community dependence on illegal trade.

Within all outcome areas, the **integration of GESI** strengthens project relevance and reach, ensuring that women, marginalised groups (e.g. by age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sex) and Indigenous peoples benefit equitably and that interventions do not exacerbate existing inequalities[43]. The embedding of GESI across project activities also supports improved agency, representation, and decision making for underrepresented groups affected by both IWT and poverty.

5.7. Impact

When the highlighted outcomes are achieved collectively and sustained over time[44], the IWT Challenge Fund contributes to its overarching impact: **reduced pressure on wildlife from illegal trade, and reduced poverty in developing eligible countries**[45]. Strengthened law enforcement and legal frameworks reduce the profitability and operational feasibility of illegal trade networks. Reduced demand lowers the incentives for the poaching, trafficking, and

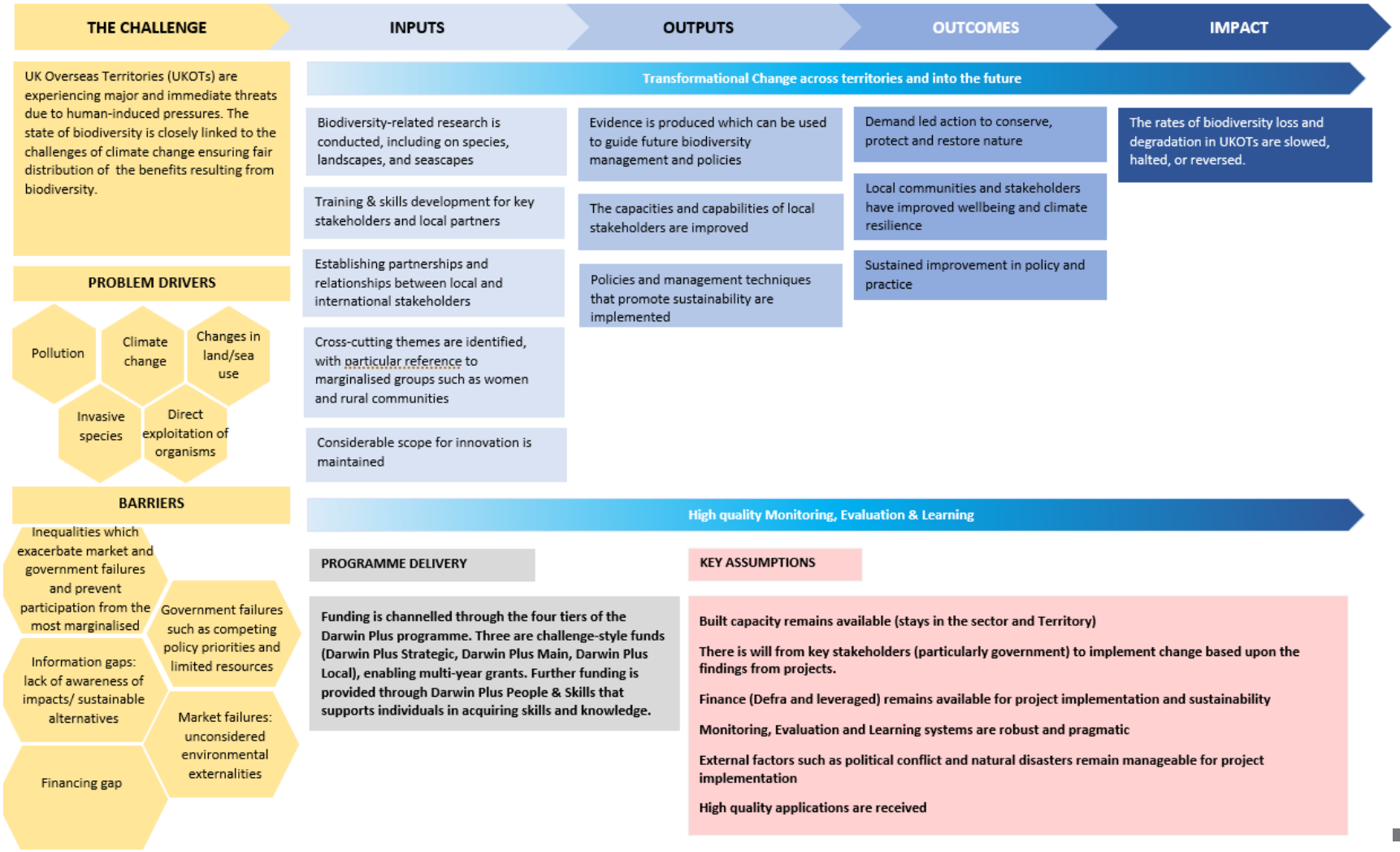
laundering of wildlife products. Enhanced sustainable livelihoods offer credible alternatives to IWT participation, reduce vulnerability, and improve overall wellbeing among communities most directly affected by IWT. Improved gender equality and social inclusion contribute to more resilient and just societies with stronger incentives for conservation[46]. Together, these result in ecosystems being better protected, species populations stabilising or recovering, and communities experiencing more secure and sustainable development pathways[47].

5.8. Transformation Change: Scalability and Replication underpin each case

Scalability and replication serve as the cornerstones of transformational change, ensuring that successful interventions can be adapted and extended across diverse contexts. By designing projects with the capacity to scale, lessons learned and effective approaches are not confined to a single locality, but can be shared, adopted, and tailored by other regions or stakeholders. This facilitates the widespread uptake of proven methods, multiplying their impact and embedding lasting improvements in policy and practice. Ultimately, transformational change is achieved when these scalable and replicable solutions catalyse broader shifts in governance, resource management, and community engagement, supporting the sustained reversal of biodiversity loss, poverty reduction, and enhanced climate resilience across multiple settings.

[23] Evidence gap: Challenges specific to different regions / themes and which challenges projects can realistically influence and those that sit largely outside project control.
[24] Evidence gap: How expert committee feedback changes project design quality, not just selection outcomes.
[25] Assumption: Finance (Defra and leveraged) remains available for project implementation.
[26] Assumption: UK Biodiversity and ODA strategies and priorities are stable.
[27] Assumption: Best practice and learning products are accessible, used and understood by grantees.
[28] Assumption: Projects use funding effectively and as stated in their application.
[29] Assumption: High quality, innovative and scalable applications are received.
[30] Assumption: External factors such as political conflict and natural disasters remain manageable for project implementation.
[31] Assumption: Reducing consumer demand for illegal wildlife products will decrease the incentives for poaching and trafficking, thereby reducing pressure on wildlife populations.
[32] Assumption: Effective law enforcement efforts will deter IWT and reduce the poaching and trafficking of endangered species.
[33] Assumption: Promoting sustainable livelihoods will provide communities with viable alternatives to engaging in illegal wildlife trade, leading to a reduction in poaching and trafficking activities.
[34] Assumption: High quality, innovative and scalable applications are received.
[35] Evidence gap: Success rates of different types of innovation supported by the fund.
[36] Assumption: Evidence from project and Fund MEL is of sufficient quality.
[37] Assumption: Building the capacity of local and regional stakeholders will enhance their ability to combat illegal wildlife trade effectively, leading to improved conservation outcomes.
[38] Evidence gap: Does capacity building meaningfully shift behaviour where political or economic incentives run counter to conservation outcomes.
[39] Evidence gap: How often IWT Challenge Fund projects genuinely adapt based on MEL findings, and with what effect.
[40] Evidence Gap: What works to tackle IWT.
[41] Assumption: There is will from key stakeholders (particularly government) to implement change based upon the findings from the projects.
[42] Assumption: There is will from key stakeholders (particularly government) to implement change based upon the findings from the projects.
[43] Assumption: GESI considerations are integrated into project design.
[44] Assumption: Outcomes and impacts of the projects sustain after funding ends.
[45] Assumption: Poverty reduction and biodiversity aims are compatible, with manageable trade-offs.
[46] Assumption: Improved gender equality and social inclusion incentivises conservation interventions
[47] Assumption: It is feasible to fund high quality projects that evenly address multiple objectives.

6. Theory of Change Darwin Plus



The following is a narrative theory of change for Darwin Plus (as of March 2026). Assumptions and evidence notes are presented within the text using superscript numbers (for example, [1], [2], [3]), with full details provided at the end of each section. Footnotes used for additional information, references, or commentary are indicated using Roman numerals (for example, i, ii, iii).

6.1. The Challenge

The UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) are facing significant and urgent threats to their biodiversity, primarily as a result of human activities such as habitat destruction, pollution, unsustainable resource use, and the introduction of invasive species. These pressures are having a detrimental impact on native species and ecosystems, many of which are globally important and uniquely vulnerable. Furthermore, the health of biodiversity in the UKOTs is intrinsically connected to broader challenges posed by climate change, which can exacerbate existing pressures and create new risks for ecosystems, wildlife, and local communities. Addressing these issues requires targeted conservation efforts, and ensuring that the benefits arising from biodiversity, including ecosystem services, livelihoods, and community resilience, are fairly distributed. This approach promotes social equity and helps safeguard both environmental and human wellbeing, recognising that sustainable biodiversity management is fundamental to achieving fair outcomes for all residents of the UKOTs, and the importance of safeguarding natural environments independent of people.

6.1.1. Drivers of biodiversity loss

Human activity remains the primary cause of biodiversity loss and degradation, via the direct drivers:

1. *Changes in land and sea use*, e.g. agricultural and urban expansion, water extraction.
2. *Increased exploitation*, e.g. overexploitation via harvesting, hunting, and fishing.
3. *Climate change*, e.g. extreme weather events, changes in seasonality, ocean acidification.
4. *Pollution*, e.g. marine plastic, waste, industry, agriculture, petrochemicals.
5. *Invasion of alien species*, e.g. global trade spreading species that impact ecosystem functions.

Climate change is partly driving biodiversity loss, which in turn further reduces biodiversity's capability to mitigate, adapt and be resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Behind these direct drivers are indirect drivers (economic / political / social factors), including consumption habits, wealth generation, and the separation of production from consumption. Inequalities between and within stakeholders often impacts who benefits from the use of biodiversity, and who bears the cost. OTs may be more susceptible to the impacts of climate change due to islands being low-lying and exposed to extreme weather events.

Biodiversity loss and degradation tend to be less in areas managed by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), but these areas are facing escalating external pressures (such as agriculture and infrastructure), impacting the biodiversity and the livelihoods and wellbeing of these communities.

6.1.2. Barriers to addressing the challenge

The direct and indirect drivers of biodiversity degradation and loss need to be addressed to halt and reverse current trends. As the Dasgupta review[ii] on the Economics of Biodiversity highlights and the UK Overseas Territories biodiversity strategy[iii], action is needed to ensure biodiversity is effectively embedded in decision-making. Barriers[48] include:

- **Market failures:** biodiversity is an externality or public good that private actors will not necessarily account for in their private behaviour.
- **Government or governance failures:** ability of policymakers to take a sustainable approach to political and economic priorities and the management of biodiversity assets; capable institutions and the requisite biodiversity knowledge to guide effective action form the enabling conditions to change this.
- **Information gaps:** lack of awareness of biodiversity, an understanding of the impacts of activities, and options to managing biodiversity limits the effectiveness of policymakers, communities, and private agents.
- **Inequalities:** economic, political, and social inequalities exacerbate market and governance failures; more equitable representation of marginalised groups (e.g. by age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and IPLC status in decision-making is needed.
- **Financing gaps:** The scale of the challenge is greater than funding available. Appropriate finance for biodiversity and poverty reducing interventions is often unavailable, inaccessible, insufficient, or too risky for other funders.

6.2. Inputs

Darwin Plus draws on a set of core resources and enabling conditions that support long-term environmental outcomes across the UK Overseas Territories. These inputs include:

- **Financial resources** made available by the UK Government for environmental projects in the UKOTs, recognising both the significance of their globally important biodiversity and the need to strengthen local capability to manage it.
- **Technical expertise** of project teams, in territory partners, UK institutions and regional networks, spanning biodiversity science, climate change adaptation, environmental management, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL), Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Sensitive design, and ethical and safeguarding practices[iv].
- **Existing partnerships and relationships** from local, national, and international partnerships, to ensure contextual knowledge, access to local communities, and insight into political and institutional dynamics.
- **Evidence**, such as insights and best practices from past BCFs projects, fund-level research, OT government priorities, and wider scientific data, is used to inform project design[49]. This approach enables the selection of context-appropriate interventions,

[ii] Dasgupta, P., 2021. *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta*. London: HM Treasury. Available here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review

[iii] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-overseas-territories-biodiversity-strategy/uk-overseas-territories-biodiversity-strategy

[iv] For more explanation of GESI Sensitive standard https://www.darwininitiative.org.uk/resources/gender-equality-and-social-inclusion/

ensuring that projects identify effective strategies, understand their mechanisms, and appropriately adapt them to specific settings[50].

- **Fund management expertise** including guidance and support for effective project design and implementation including ethical and safeguarding compliance, and monitoring and evaluation[51].
- The **independent expert committee** – Darwin Plus Advisory Group - plays a central role in shaping high quality proposals by offering informed, impartial review based on deep experience in conservation and climate change. This ensures that projects are selected, funded, and monitored to a consistent and robust standard[52].

6.3. Project Activities

With these inputs projects are able to use the grants to design projects aligned with the UK Overseas Territories Biodiversity Strategy and ODA strategy[53] [54] that:

- Conduct biodiversity-related research, including on species, landscapes, and seascapes, and people's interactions with them at individual, community, institutional, and systemic levels.
- Build the capacity of key national and local stakeholders through training and skills development.
- Establish and build partnerships and relationships between local and international stakeholders.
- Address cross-cutting themes, in particular the meaningful inclusion of vulnerable or marginalised groups such as women and rural communities.
- Test out and adapt ideas and approaches to meet the specific needs and challenges of the diverse contexts that the projects work in, ensuring information is captured to evidence whether an idea or approach is effective[55]. This includes three broad areas of innovation:
    - **Novel to the area -** the diffusion, replication, or application of proven conservation approaches in another geography or to a different issue or stakeholder group.
    - **Novel to the sector** - an approach proven in a different sector is adapted to deliver results and impact in the biodiversity conservation sector.
    - **Novel to the world** – an innovation unproven in any sector, is applied to the biodiversity conservation sector.

Projects carry out robust MEL while implementing their activities, ensuring that progress is systematically tracked against clear objectives and indicators[56]. By employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, projects are able to assess both the effectiveness and impact of their interventions, identify areas for improvement, and adapt approaches in response to emerging insights. Continuous learning is fostered through regular reflection and knowledge sharing, allowing teams and stakeholders to refine best practices and maximise outcomes for biodiversity conservation, wellbeing, and climate resilience[57].

6.4. Outputs

With inputs in place, Darwin Plus projects implement a diverse range of interventions aligned with the four programme themes[58]:

- **Biodiversity**: improving and conserving biodiversity, and slowing or reversing biodiversity loss and degradation;
- **Climate change**: responding to, mitigating, and adapting to climate change and its effects on the natural environment and local communities;
- **Environmental quality**: improving the condition and protection of the natural environment;
- **Capability and capacity building**: enhancing the capacity within UKOTs to support the environment in the short- and long-term.

6.4.1. Evidence that can guide future biodiversity management and policy

Under Darwin Plus, projects produce a wide suite of evidence-based outputs that support environmental governance across the UKOTs. These include ecological surveys, species assessments, habitat mapping, climate vulnerability assessments, environmental monitoring datasets, management guidelines, risk analyses, implementation lessons, and evaluations. Projects will develop evidence that is accessible, comprehensible, usable, and assessable, enabling stakeholders to trust and apply it effectively[59]. Because Darwin Plus prioritises practical, action orientated work, evidence outputs often demonstrate not only what interventions were implemented, but also how, why, and with what impact.

6.4.2. Improved capabilities and capacities of local stakeholders

Capability and capacity building is one of the four central themes of Darwin Plus. Outputs in this domain include targeted technical training, development of new skills for OT based practitioners, improved organisational systems, strengthened scientific and technical expertise, better environmental governance, and more resilient local institutions. These outputs are delivered through workshops, mentoring, territory to territory knowledge exchange, community-based training, improved monitoring systems, and enhanced environmental management practices. Building capability ensures that OT partners can sustain and expand environmental work beyond the life of a project, manage environmental risks more effectively, and participate more fully in decision making[60] [61].

6.4.3. Implementation and uptake of sustainable policies and management techniques

A further category of outputs includes policies, management plans, and practical techniques that promote sustainable use, conservation, restoration, or protection of biodiversity across the UKOTs. Examples include species recovery plans, invasive species strategies, habitat restoration protocols, protected area management frameworks, marine spatial plans, climate adaptation plans, and enforcement or regulatory tools. Where new research is conducted, it must be directly applicable to environmental outcomes and implemented through practical actions.

6.5. Outcomes

6.5.1. Demand-led action

When evidence is produced and shared, when capabilities and capacities of local stakeholders are strengthened, and when sustainable management approaches are implemented, the combined effect is to generate demand-led action to conserve, protect, and restore nature across the UKOTs. This means that OT governments, civil society, and community partners are better equipped, better informed, and more motivated to take proactive action, grounded in their own priorities and supported by high quality evidence. This means local ownership and

alignment with OT government objectives, ensuring that actions reflect territorial needs and contribute meaningfully to existing commitments.

6.5.2. Wellbeing and climate resilience

A second outcome is improved wellbeing across diverse local communities and stakeholders. Many UKOTs are small island territories where communities depend directly on natural capital for livelihoods, safety, food security, and resilience to climate change. When biodiversity is better protected and ecosystems are healthier, communities experience benefits such as reduced environmental risk, improved fisheries and ecosystem services, enhanced cultural and natural heritage, and strengthened resilience against environmental shocks. Ensuring that projects adopt a GESI Sensitive approach helps widen access to these benefits, prevents unintended exclusion or harm, and supports equitable participation in decision making[62].

6.5.3. Policy and Practice

The third outcome reflects a sustained improvement in policy and practice across the UKOTs. Evidence outputs and strengthened partnerships support OT governments to embed good environmental decision making into policies, processes, and long-term strategies[63]. As projects demonstrate impact and share accessible data, they reinforce the case for sustaining and scaling successful approaches. Enhanced capability means that OT based institutions are better able to regulate, plan, implement. and monitor environmental initiatives, supporting the long-term institutionalisation of effective conservation practice.

6.6. Impact

The long-term impact of the Darwin Plus programme is that rates of biodiversity loss and degradation in the UKOTs are slowed, halted, or reversed. By generating high quality evidence, strengthening local capability, supporting community engagement, and embedding sustainable management practices, the programme fosters systemic improvements in how biodiversity is protected, managed, and restored across the UKOTs. Healthier ecosystems support the resilience of communities and economies, reduce exposure to environmental risks, enhance climate adaptation, and maintain the globally significant natural heritage of the Overseas Territories.

This impact aligns with the core objectives of Darwin Plus to improve biodiversity, strengthen environmental quality, address climate change, and build capability and capacity for long-term environmental stewardship. As sustainable practices become embedded and local actors continue to apply knowledge and evidence, the OTs are better positioned to secure lasting environmental outcomes beyond the duration of the funded projects.

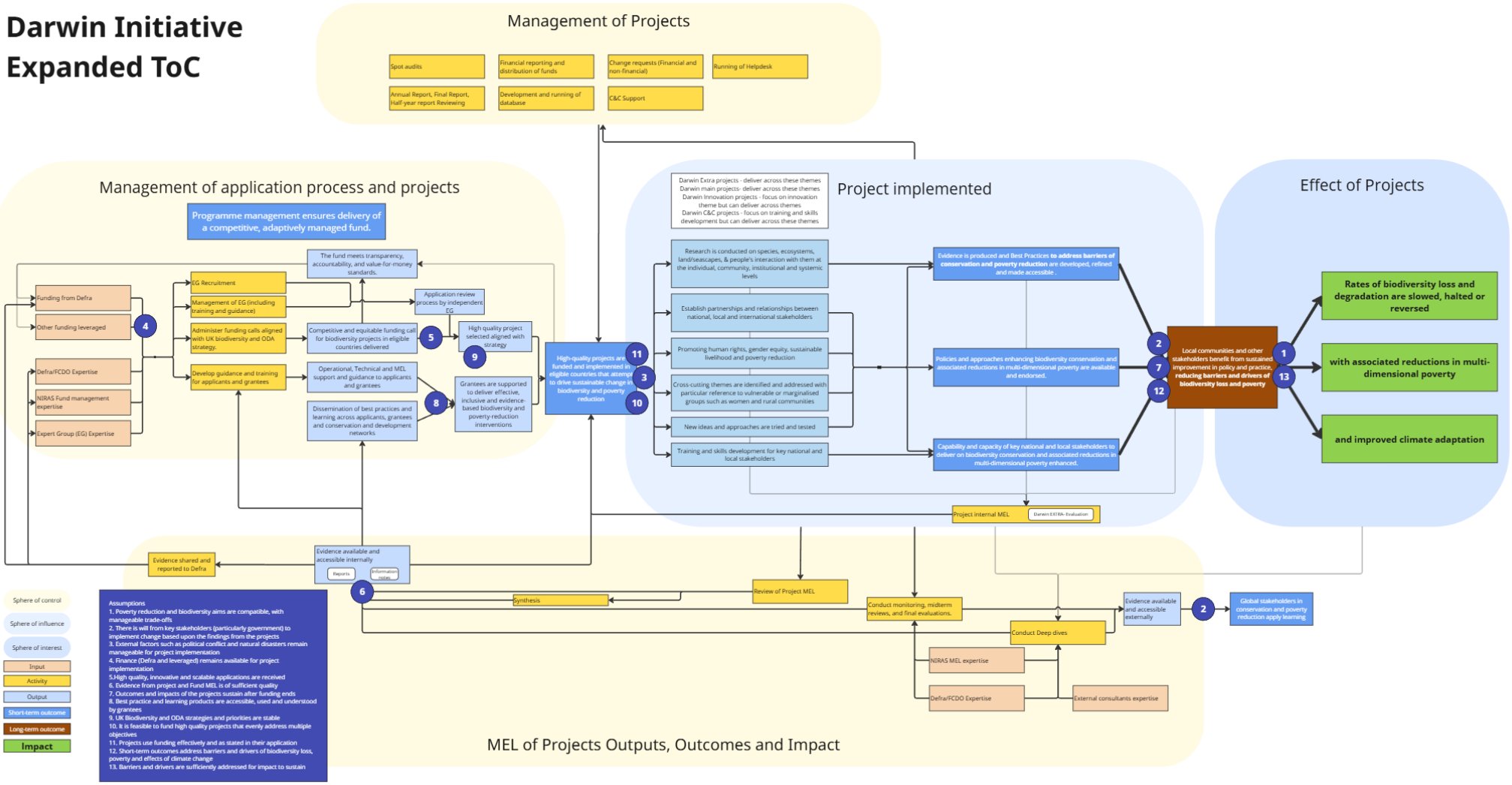
6.7. Transformation Change: Scalability and Replication underpin each case

Scalability and replication serve as the cornerstones of transformational change, ensuring that successful interventions can be adapted and extended across diverse contexts. By designing projects with the capacity to scale, lessons learned and effective approaches are not confined to a single locality but can be shared, adopted, and tailored by other regions or stakeholders. This facilitates the widespread uptake of proven methods, multiplying their impact and embedding lasting improvements in policy and practice[64]. Ultimately, transformational change is achieved when these scalable and replicable solutions catalyse broader shifts in governance, resource management, and community engagement, supporting the sustained reversal of biodiversity loss, poverty reduction, and enhanced climate resilience across multiple settings.

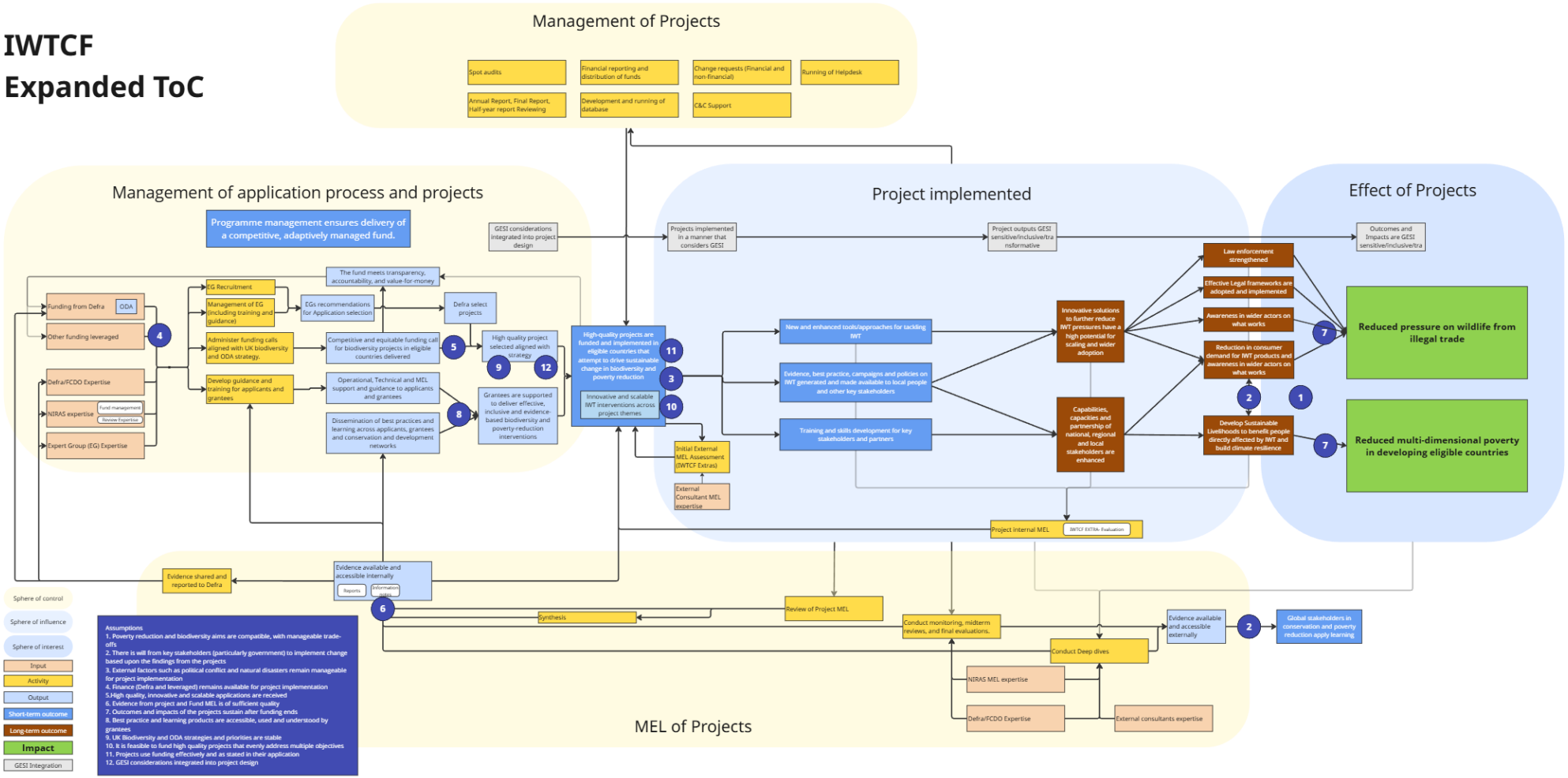
[48] Evidence gap: Challenges specific to different regions / themes and which challenges projects can realistically influence and those that sit largely outside project control.
[49] Assumption: Evidence from project and fund MEL is of sufficient quality.
[50] Evidence gap: Whether existing support for adaptive management (e.g. CCNs) are sufficient to support this need.
[51] Assumption: Best practice and learning products are accessible, used, and understood by applicants and grantees.
[52] Evidence gap: How expert committee feedback changes project design quality, not just selection outcomes.
[53] Assumption: UKOT Biodiversity Strategy and ODA strategies and priorities are stable.
[54] Assumption: High quality applications are received.
[55] Evidence gap: Success rates of different types of innovation supported by the fund.
[56] Assumption: MEL systems are robust and pragmatic.
[57] Assumption: Biodiversity, wellbeing and climate resilience aims are compatible, with manageable trade-offs.
[58] Assumption: External factors such as political conflict and natural disasters remain manageable for project implementation.
[59] Assumption: Evidence has broader applicability than the very specific context in which the project is working
[60] Assumption: Built capacity remains available (stays in the sector and Territory).
[61] Evidence gap: Does capacity building meaningfully shift behaviour where political or economic incentives run counter to conservation outcomes.
[62] Evidence gap: Inclusion and GESI focused activities translate into durable changes in power, voice, or decision making.
[63] Assumption: There is will from key stakeholders (particularly government) to implement change based upon findings from projects.
[64] Evidence gap: Evidence distinguishing replication of activities from replication of outcomes.

Annex: Expanded ToCs used for Assumption analysis

Darwin Initiative Expanded ToC



IWTCF
Expanded ToC



Darwin Plus Expanded ToC