

VLIR-UOS draft Theory of Change 2022 - 2026

Draft 0.6

Introduction

The VLIR-UOS Theory of Change (ToC) elaborates how and why VLIR-UOS and its portfolio can be expected to achieve its intended impact. This first, meta-version outlines the sequence of change and results at different levels (mainly outcome and impact level).

VLIR-UOS Theory of Change in relation to projects and programmes funded by VLIR-UOS

Having an organizational Theory of Change implies that the projects and programmes that are funded by VLIR-UOS need to have a match with the Theory of Change of VLIR-UOS (with at least one impact area and one outcome).

This draft ToC was developed based on earlier experience and learning. The consolidation of learning is extracted from Annual Progress Reports, and from evaluations organized by VLIR-UOS or government (impact evaluation organized by the Special Evaluation Unit). These evaluations and monitoring reports have provided critical knowledge and evidence for rethinking and adjustments of the key factors and pathways of change required to better achieve the objectives of VLIR-UOS. The Theory of Change also takes into

account recent policy evolutions (e.g. on gender, uptake, etc.). Building on this evidence basis, below the Theory of Change of VLIR-UOS is explained step by step.

In this document we refer to UOS or University Cooperation for Development as: Higher Education Partnerships for Sustainable Development (HEPSD).

Context

The new Theory of Change (ToC) translates the VLIR-UOS vision in clear objectives. It was developed in the context of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SD). Higher education (HE) plays a key role in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SD) and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aiming to end poverty, protect the planet, foster gender equality, defend and promote cultures and cultural understanding, and ensure prosperity for all. HE offers disciplinary and transdisciplinary teaching and research, generates and contributes to the development of new and innovative approaches to global, regional and local issues. The 2030 Agenda calls for strong national and international teaching and research cooperation in order to give rise to unformulated solutions to problems.

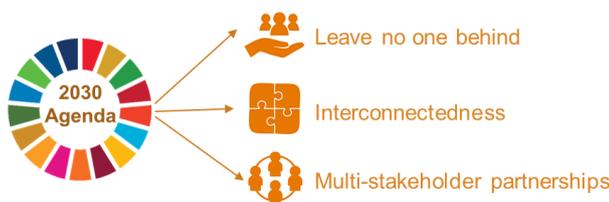
None of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be achieved without the contribution of higher education and research. Through research, HEIs play a unique role, as drivers of change, by producing new knowledge and innovation to address global challenges, by transferring knowledge through training, by providing evidence for informed (public) policy and implementation, and by knowledge mobilization. Higher education institutions worldwide must teach and train today's students – tomorrow's decision-makers – to think both critically and ethically, to learn to cope with ethical dilemmas and apply

systems-thinking approaches to serious and complex societal problems, and also provide lifelong learning to today’s decision-makers and professionals. Through teaching, universities develop generations of new leaders and skilled professionals who will drive sustainable development. Through community engagement, higher education institutes work with a rich variety of stakeholders – including governments, the private sector, and civil society – for local, national, regional and global impact. Higher education has a direct impact on the development of every country. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will not be achieved without partnerships that include higher education institutes.

In the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report of the United Nations - The future is now – Science for achieving sustainable development – the UN calls upon all stakeholders to facilitate multidirectional (North-South, South–North, North-South-South and South-South) collaboration in science and (transfer of) technology for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It considers academic and scientific capacity strengthening and partnerships as one of the 4 main levers for achieving the 2030 agenda. This also implies a strengthened link between higher education institutes, governments, civil society organisations and the private sector (the quadruple helix).

The overarching goal of VLIR-UOS is to contribute to the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. VLIR-UOS uses the 3 underlying Principles of Agenda 2030 to render the activities, results and change we aim at ‘SDG-proof’ (Policy Supporting Research Project (2019) The SDGs as a compass for the Belgian Development Cooperation):

- Leaving No One Behind (LNOB)
- Interconnectedness of the SDGs
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships

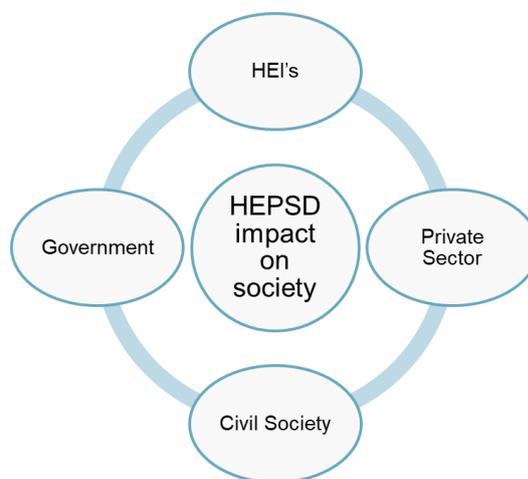


These principles are translated in the impact and outcomes envisioned and, in the way VLIR-UOS organizes Higher Education Partnerships for Sustainable Development (HEPSD).

VLIR-UOS Impact

We define impact as the positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by an intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended on the level of the final beneficiaries. The final beneficiaries are groups or persons outside the partner universities (“societal impact”, SEO, 2018):

Governments, the private sector, civil society and local communities and other HEIs. In this Theory of Change, we identify the main domains of positive and intended impact. These impacts are beyond the sphere of influence of an intervention and therefore an intervention “contributes” to this impact (cf. attribution gap). Put differently, the VLIR-UOS portfolio contributes to the 2030 agenda by realizing a societal impact, implying an impact on local communities/civil society, governments, private sector or other HEIs. In this chapter we identify the main impact areas of the VLIR-UOS portfolio and clarify their contribution to the 2030 Agenda.



VLIR-UOS Impact areas

VLIR-UOS has identified 3 main impact areas to which VLIR-UOS wants to contribute:

1. Strengthened human capital making an impact in relevant sectors
2. Applied sustainable solutions, practices and evidence-based policies
3. Enhanced equality and inclusion in society

Below, further details about these impact areas and the link with the underlying principles of the 2030 agenda is provided.

1. Strengthened human capital making an impact in relevant sectors

As stated in the UN Global Sustainability report 2019 through teaching HEIs develop generations of new leaders and skilled professionals who will drive social and economic development in relevant sectors. Realising this impact and creating networks between tomorrow's change agents and leaders is an essential role of HEIs and delivering this strengthened human capital (making an actual change in relevant sectors) is at the heart of HEPSPD.

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in impact areas
 Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By delivering skills and knowledge to disadvantaged or marginalised groups • By delivering development relevant skills and knowledge (i.e. making a difference for marginalised groups)
 Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By creating a space for strengthening a diversity of skills and knowledge
 Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By delivering skills and knowledge in collaboration with other relevant actors (e.g. labour market) • By enabling networks for lifelong learning

2. Applied sustainable solutions and practices and evidence-based policies

Through capacity building and research, HEPSPD can lead to new knowledge, insights, evidence. By engaging with society and by creating the conditions for uptake, this can lead to a broader application of this new knowledge by end-users. This can be related to policymakers applying evidence from research in their policies, local communities adapting new practices, private-companies adapting innovative new approaches, etc. This is possibly the most important impact area of VLIR-UOS and is at the core of our motto Sharing Minds, Changing Lives.

This impact area relates to the Agenda 2030 Agenda as follows:

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in impact areas
 Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By focusing on solutions, practices and policies with a high development relevance and/or relevance to marginalised groups

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By targeting uptake strategies, taking into account the needs of disadvantaged or marginalised groups
 Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By approaching wicked problems in a complexity-oriented way (reflected in context analyses, (transdisciplinary) strategies, etc.) • By taking into account possible negative side-effects • Through active engagement with other sectors and domains
 Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From science to application through uptake-oriented stakeholder engagement and multi-stakeholder partnerships

3. Enhanced equality and inclusion in society

HEPSD has the potential to contribute to enhanced equality and inclusion in society. Both by enhancing equality (e.g. gender equality) and inclusion (e.g. of disabled) in HEI, as through research and education for gender equality and inclusion in society. Identifying this as a main impact area underlines the ambition of VLIR-UOS to make a difference for marginalised groups and is also an integration of the LNOB principle.

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in impact areas
 Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By targeted interventions focusing on gender equality and inclusion • By conducting a dialogue with partners on gender and diversity issues
 Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By mainstreaming gender equality and inclusion throughout all disciplines, interventions and policies
 Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By promoting the engagement of a diverse range of stakeholders in interventions (local grassroots movements, women's associations, youth networks...) • By building networks consisting of a diverse range of professionals from different types of sectors (government, civil society, higher education, research...)

Linking impact areas with SDG targets

In this section we illustrate the linkages between the 3 impact areas and the 2030 Agenda (and underlying SDG's). It is important to go beyond the "contribute to sustainable development" and materialise the contributions of HEPSD. Every impact area is linked to SDG 4 and 17. Furthermore, other linkages with SDG's are also foreseen. The overview below serve as an illustration and is not exhaustive. Similar links can be made if VLIR-UOS chooses to work with SDG clusters instead of individual SDGs.

This impact area can link up with different individual SDG's/Clusters.



Training and working with researchers by awarding scholarships (e.g. as part of a research project) is considered as instrumental to create new knowledge on the one hand, and to create sustainable capacities leading to new knowledge and eventually applied sustainable solutions and practices and evidence-based policies (impact area 2). This is linked to the SDG target 4B: *By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries [...] for enrolment in higher education [...].*

Furthermore, striving to enhanced gender equality and inclusion in society (impact area 3) is linked to the SDG target 4.3 (*[...] : ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality [...] tertiary education, including university*) and target 4.5 (*[...] eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access [...] for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations*)

Finally, there is also a strong link with target 4.7: *ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of cultures contribution to sustainable development"*



HEPSD is also strongly linked to SDG 17, amongst others linked to target 17.6: *Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation [...]* Impact area 3 is obviously strongly linked to the SDG on gender equality.



When translating the impact areas to specific projects and programmes, HEPSD can potentially also be linked to any other SDG.

For example:

1. Strengthened human capital making an impact in relevant sectors: an intervention in this impact area which focuses on strengthening human capital in Occupational Therapy (e.g. through curricula development or training), with graduates making an effective change in the (mental) health sector will make a contribution to SDG 3 (targets 3.4 and 3.5)
2. Applied sustainable solutions and practices and evidence-based policies: An intervention in this impact area focusing on creating knowledge on agricultural practices and creating the conditions for the uptake of this knowledge can contribute – through application - to SDG 2 on zero hunger (cf. target 2.3)
3. Enhanced gender equality and inclusion in society: An intervention in this impact area focusing on improving road safety and public transport for those in vulnerable situations (women, persons with disabilities, etc.) is linked to SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities (target 11.2) (e.g. by generating evidence for policymakers to be translated in national policy (cf. impact area 1).



VLIR-UOS outcomes

In order for VLIR-UOS to effectively contribute to the 2030 agenda by realizing a societal impact, VLIR-UOS focuses on 2 strategic axes:

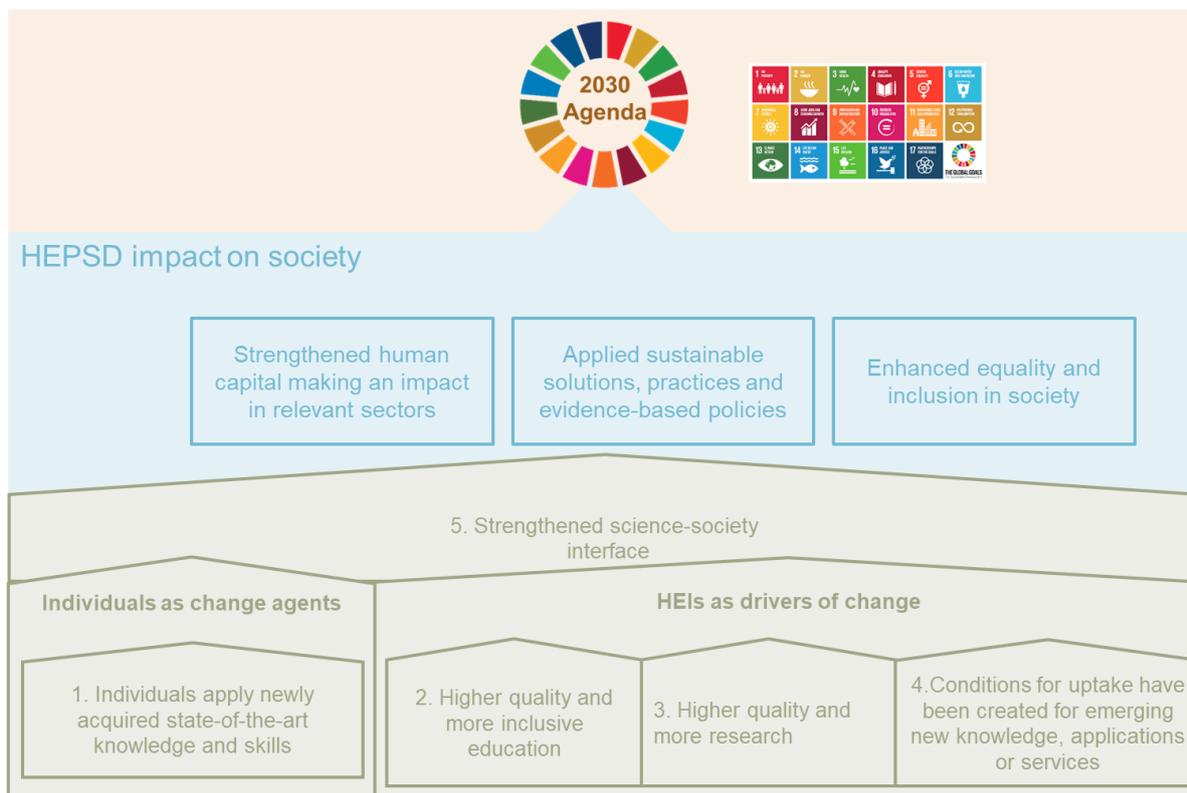
- Enabling HEI to strengthen their role as Drivers of Change
- Enabling individuals to become agents of change

Although scholarships can be part of the first strategic axe (Drivers of Change), we define individual scholarships as a separate strategic axe with potential societal impact. The added value of individual capacity building, through scholarships, meaning not as part of a project (scholarship instrumental for project outcomes) has been confirmed by evidence from a recent impact evaluation of Belgian University development cooperation (SEO, 2018) and from other evidence (e.g. Dassin et al., 2018)

VLIR-UOS main outcomes

For the strategic axes – (1) Enabling HEI to strengthen their role as Drivers of Change and (2) enabling individuals to become agents of change - VLIR-UOS identifies a number of outcomes. Outcomes are the medium-term effects of an intervention on the level of the direct (incl. staff and students at HEI, individual students and professionals) or in some cases indirect beneficiaries. These effects are beyond the sphere of control of an intervention but fall within the sphere of influence of the intervention. These outcomes contribute to the attainment of the main VLIR-UOS impact areas defined earlier. VLIR-UOS has identified 5 main outcomes:

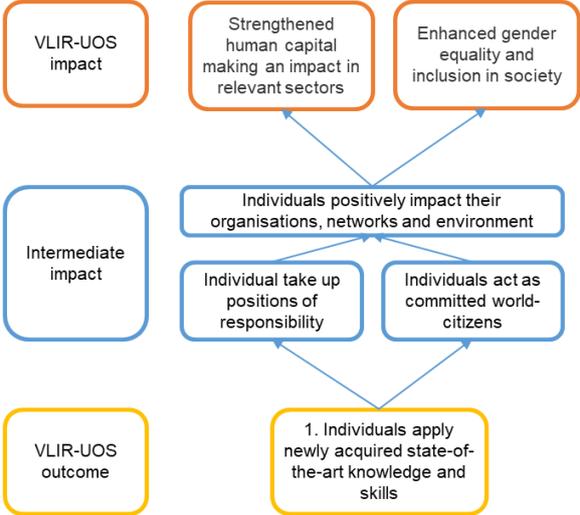
1. Individuals apply newly acquired state-of-the-art knowledge and skills
2. Higher quality and more inclusive education
3. Higher quality and more research
4. Conditions for uptake have been created for emerging new knowledge, applications or services
5. Strengthened science-society interface



These 5 outcomes are realized by the interventions supported by VLIR-UOS (projects, programmes, scholarships). Some outcomes will typically be found in combination with other outcomes (e.g. outcome on research capacities and outcome on knowledge creation and uptake). Below, further details about these outcomes, the link with the impact level and the link with the underlying principles of the 2030 agenda is provided. The link between outcome and impact level is clarified by identifying “intermediate outcomes”, the intermediate changes we expect that result from the realization of the outcomes, leading to impact.

1. Individuals apply newly acquired state-of-the-art knowledge and skills

In order to contribute to the impact area “strengthened human capital making an impact in relevant sectors”, VLIR-UOS focuses on transferring state-of-the-art knowledge and skills to individuals who then apply this knowledge and skills in their own organisation. Skills and knowledge need to be interpreted broadly as this also includes critical thinking, world-citizenship skills and attitudes, etc. This leads to individuals acting as agents of change by taking up positions of responsibility and by acting as committed world-citizens. This allows individuals, agents of change, to positively impact their organisations (affecting their organisation’s performance and sector at large), networks and broader environment. This thus leads to strengthened human capital making an impact in relevant sectors

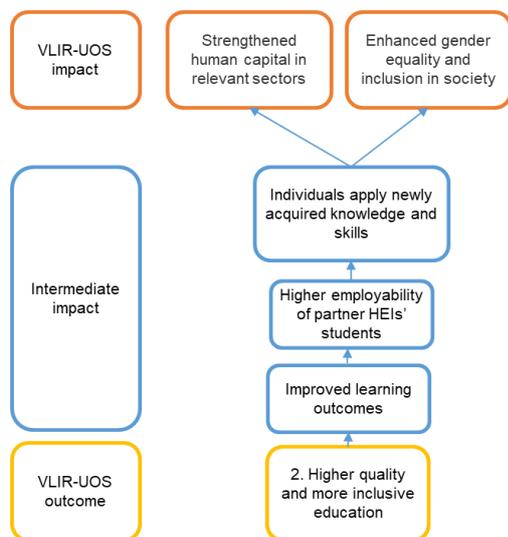


Simplified ToC (link Outcome 1 and impact areas)

This outcome relates to the SDG principles as follows:

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in outcomes
Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By delivering skills and knowledge to marginalised groups • By delivering development relevant skills and knowledge (i.e. making a difference for marginalised groups) • By taking other factors into account (e.g. diversity, gender) next to academic excellence in scholarship attribution
Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By strengthening a diversity of skills and knowledge
Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By linking up with other partners (e.g. other HEIs, labour market (e.g. through internships), etc.

2. Higher quality and more inclusive education



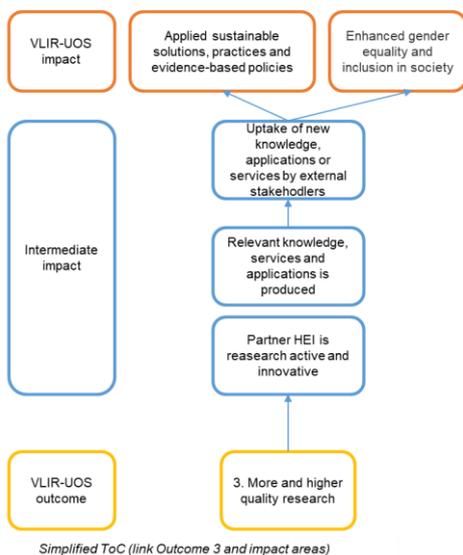
Simplified ToC (link Outcome 2 and impact areas)

In order to contribute the impact area strengthened human capital making an impact in relevant sectors, a second main outcome of VLIR-UOS' portfolio is to invest in educational capacities in order to allow for higher quality and more inclusive education. By improving the quality of education through **capacity strengthening**, learning outcomes are improved which will lead to a higher employability of students (assuming relevant educational approaches and content in line with labor market needs were developed). As graduates gain access to the job market (thanks to a widening access this also includes graduates from marginalized groups), they can apply their newly acquired knowledge and skills on the job. All this contributes to a strengthened human capital in relevant sectors having a real impact. By focusing on inclusive education, this also allows participation by marginalized groups and contributes to the impact area of enhanced gender equality and inclusion in society.

This outcome relates to the SDG principles as follows:

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in outcomes
 Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By delivering skills and knowledge to marginalised groups • By delivering development relevant skills and knowledge • By working with disadvantaged HEIs • By taking policy priorities into account (e.g. on gender) next to scientific quality during project selection
 Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •
 Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By linking up with other partners (e.g. other HEIs, labour market (e.g. through internships), etc.

3. Higher quality and more research



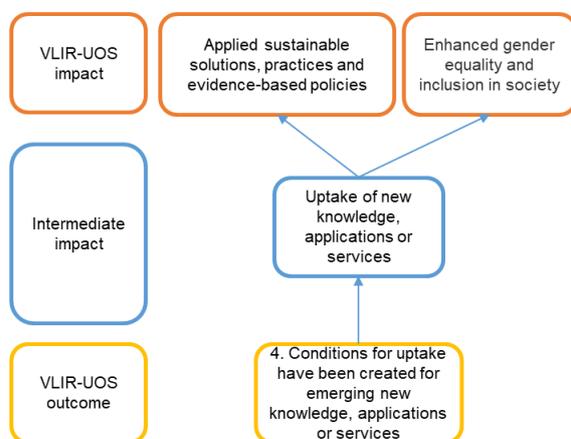
In order to contribute the impact area “Applied sustainable solutions and practices and evidence-based policies” VLIR-UOS has identified as a third outcome: higher quality and more research. This implies that VLIR-UOS strives to strengthen research capacities in order to enable them to produce more and higher quality research results. This **capacity strengthening** needs to lead to partner institutions to become (more) research active and innovative and being enabled to produce solutions to local and global challenges. This should lead to effectively producing new knowledge, applications or services and engaging, its uptake by external stakeholders/end-users and finally a broader application in solutions, practices or policies. More and higher quality research also refers to considering inclusion and

gender sensitivity as a resource for achieving excellence in research. Gender bias for example limits creativity, excellence and benefits of research for society.

This outcome relates to the SDG principles as follows:

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in outcomes
 Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By strengthening the research capacities of individuals from marginalized groups • By working with disadvantaged HEIs • By encouraging the use of gender analysis in research
 Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By approaching wicked problems in a complexity-oriented way (reflected in context analyses, (transdisciplinary) strategies, etc.) • By taking into account possible negative side-effects
 Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By linking up with other partners (e.g. government)

4. Conditions for uptake have been created for emerging new knowledge, applications or services



Simplified ToC (link Outcome 4 and impact areas)

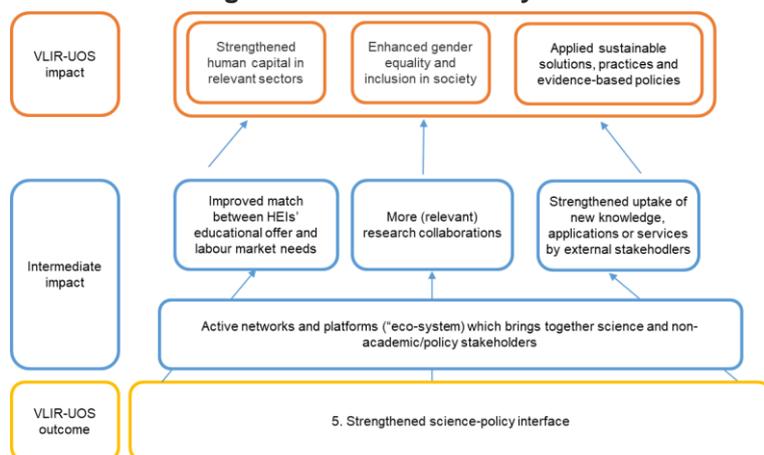
In order to contribute the impact area “Applied sustainable solutions and practices and evidence-based policies” VLIR-UOS has identified a fourth outcome: Conditions for uptake have been created for emerging new knowledge, applications or services. This outcome has a more direct link with the impact area (compared to Outcome 3) as it refers to new knowledge, applications or services emerging from mainly research activities (here the objective is not capacity strengthening but the production of new knowledge, applications or services). This outcome includes the traditional production of new knowledge, applications or ser-

vices by doing research together, but also creates the conditions for uptake by external stakeholders to emerge. This may involve a strategic, uptake-oriented stakeholder engagement, targeted dissemination, and capacity strengthening of end-users (or intermediaries). By creating the conditions for uptake, one can expect this outcome to lead to an effective uptake, and a broader application of new knowledge, applications or services by relevant stakeholders (e.g. in new evidence-based policies being implemented by government, new practices being implemented by communities, new solutions being replicated by the private sector, etc.). As new knowledge, applications and services integrate attention for marginalized groups (both as subject matter, as in terms of uptake strategy) this outcome is also strongly linked to the impact area related to gender equality and inclusion in society.

This outcome relates to the SDG principles as follows:

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in outcomes
 Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By focusing on solutions, practices and policies with a high development relevance and/or relevance to marginalised groups By targeting uptake strategies, taking into account the needs of marginalised groups
 Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By approaching wicked problems in a complexity-oriented way (reflected in context analyses, (transdisciplinary) strategies, etc.) By taking into account possible negative side-effects Through active engagement with other sectors and domains
 Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From science to application through uptake-oriented stakeholder engagement and multi-stakeholder partnerships

5. Strengthened science-society interface



Simplified ToC (link Outcome 5 and impact areas)

The fifth outcome of VLIR-UOS has a critical contribution to the 3 impact areas of VLIR-UOS and approaches the third mission of universities from a meta-perspective (while in outcome 4 this is mainly limited to knowledge transfer). A weak science-society interface has been identified both in VLIR-UOS evaluations, and awareness about the importance of this interface has been growing in the international academic community (hence the third

mission). Strengthening this interface can allow HEI to fully take up their role as effective driver of change and allows to unleash the full potential of science as a crucial lever to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

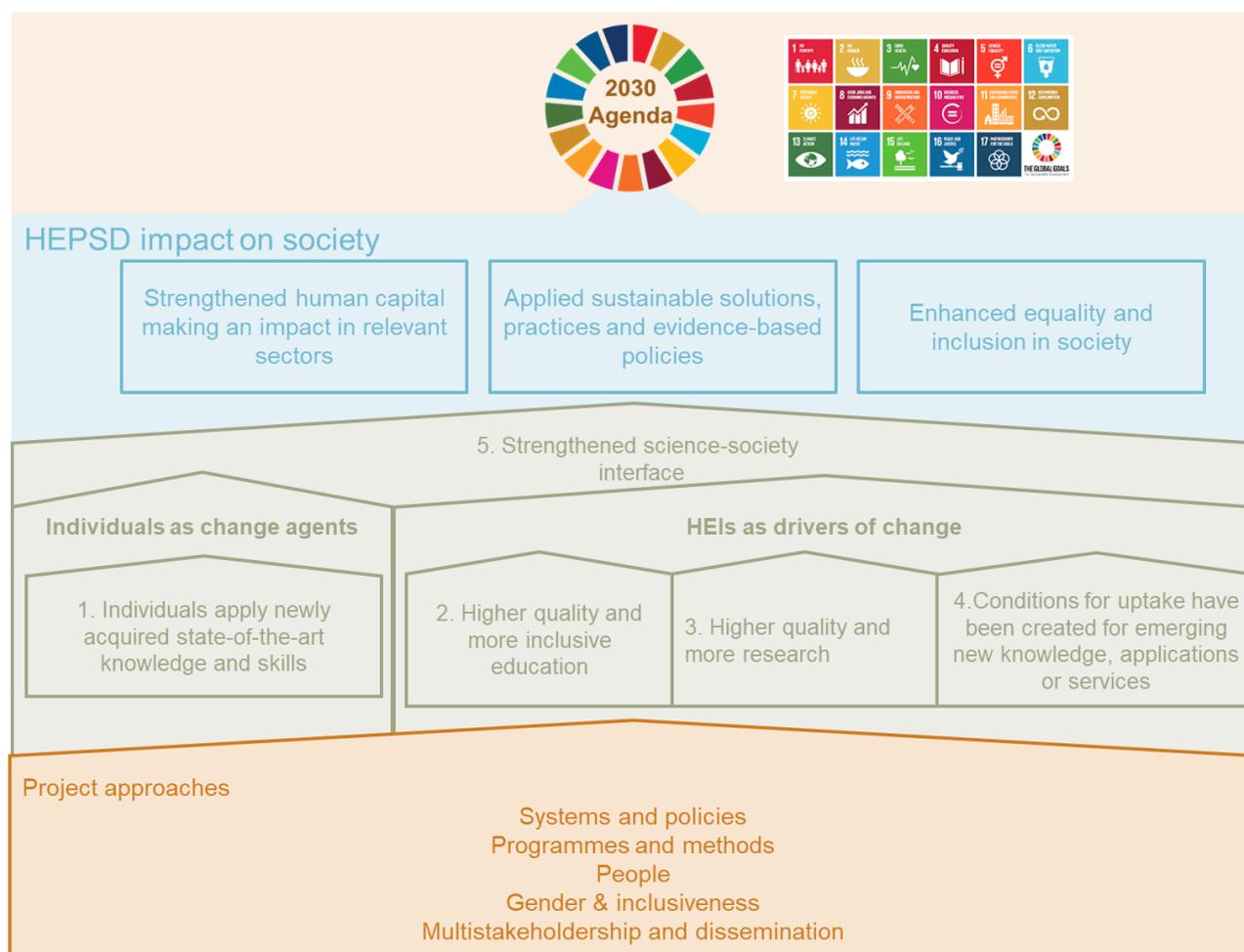
In order to contribute to the 3 impact areas of VLIR-UOS, active networks or platforms (an eco-system) where HEI staff from Flanders and partner countries, students, and non-academic stakeholders (policy-makers, NGAs, donor organisations, private sector, embassies, etc.) need to exist in order to improve the match between HEI's education offers and match with the labour market needs, to enable more and needs-oriented research collaborations, to facilitate stakeholder engagement with a diversity of actors, and to allow for a stronger uptake potential of knowledge, applications or services created by science (through network-building).

2030 Agenda principle	How VLIR-UOS integrates principles in outcomes
 Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By allowing for more needs-oriented and development relevant research, education, etc. potentially implying more attention for marginalized groups
 Interconnectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By bringing together stakeholders from different sectors and disciplines, "science" embrace complexity and the interconnectedness of the international community.
 Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By stimulating platforms/networks to stimulate multi-stakeholder partnership and effective multi-stakeholder partnerships

Annex: How do interventions link to outcomes?

VLIR-UOS interventions approach these outcomes and impact areas through a variety of strategies and project outcomes. This could be summarized as follows:

Systems & policies	Strengthened policies and systems (a.o. for research and education) + implementation
Programmes and methods	Strengthened quality and relevance of education and research programmes and methods
Knowledge creation	New knowledge, applications or services have been developed
People	Increased capacity and competence of staff, students and/or stakeholders)
Gender and inclusion	Improved gender equality and inclusion of marginalised groups in education, research and/or the HEI
Uptake	Increased engagement with relevant stakeholders, and dissemination of knowledge



The table below shows what typical project outcomes can be related to the VLIR-UOS outcome areas. This table is not exhaustive and project outcomes are **not** ordered based on added value or importance.

VLIR-UOS Outcomes	What projects outcomes are related?
<p>1. Individuals apply newly acquired state-of-the-art knowledge and skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People Graduated scholarship holders apply acquired knowledge and skills to make a positive professional impact that generates positive social change. • Gender and inclusion: Improved gender equality and inclusion of marginalized groups in educational programmes, by broadening access to international education via scholarships
<p>2. Higher quality and more inclusive education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems and policies: Support systems such as management systems, quality assurance, accounting, etc. are implemented and used • Systems and policies: Processes and structures of the partner institutions are supported by ICT (Big data, E-learning) • Systems and policies: Improved educational processes and structures as well as improved human capacities • Programmes and methods: Improved didactical, pedagogical and teaching methodologies (based on research) introduced, adapted and implemented • Programmes and methods: Relevant, high quality and research-based trainings, courses or Master programmes are developed and implemented • Gender and inclusion: Improved gender equality and inclusion of marginalized groups in education • Gender and inclusion: Improved integration of the concepts gender, intersectionality, inclusion, (implicit) bias ... into curricula • Uptake: Increased engagement with relevant stakeholders (linked to labour market, local communities, etc.)
<p>3. Higher quality and more research</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems and policies: Quality management systems and project management capacities are enhanced • Systems and policies: Support systems such as management systems, quality assurance, accounting, etc. are implemented and used • Systems and policies: Processes and structures of the partner institutions are supported by ICT (Big data, E-learning) • Systems and policies: Libraries and laboratories use state-of-the-art technology • Systems and policies: Technology transfer, Knowledge Mobilisation or innovation policies implemented • Systems and policies: Partner institutions possess improved research processes and structures • Programmes and methods: Increased research capacity and performance (in terms of research production (publications, training manuals, etc.) • People Improved quantity and quality of research staff • Gender and inclusion: Improved capacities of staff for conducting gender analysis in research

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender and inclusion: Improved insight on gender equality and inclusion of marginalized groups through research • Uptake: Improved capacity to attract external funding
4. Conditions for uptake have been created for emerging new knowledge, applications or services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge creation: New knowledge, applications or services have been developed • Uptake: New knowledge, applications or services produced and the conditions for its uptake outside the HEI created (with specific attention for marginalized groups) • Uptake: Depending on the maturity of the partnership and the knowledge, applications or services produced, may also include early adaptation, spin-offs, upscaling, etc.
5. Strengthened policy-science interface	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uptake: Self-reinforcing network of all actors involved and their stakeholders: researchers, (former) scholarship holders, embassies, Belgian policymakers, governments, private sector, civil society, higher education institutes, donors, ... leading to an ecosystem of different organizations. • Uptake: Networks formed by scholarship holders and alumni with the potential to catalyze positive social change through collective action (see also outcome 6);