

# Working Group: Societal Impact

## High Level Forum, 2024

Joint report



# Summary

## Objective and Ambition

The Societal Impact Working Group aims to establish a **shared understanding** and **practical framework** for **assessing the societal impact of research and innovation**.

By 2027, the ambition is to **embed societal impact considerations into all stages of R&I projects**, helping organizations assess and communicate their societal contributions across economic, environmental, and social dimensions. This approach seeks to inform funding decisions and drive impactful, sustainable outcomes aligned with societal needs.

## Key Outcomes

- 1. Common Definition of Societal Impact:** The report defines societal impact as the full spectrum of intended and unintended effects on stakeholders, society, and the environment. It includes both positive and negative, short- and long-term impacts across areas like health, social inclusion, education, and the environment, emphasizing the need for a broad, adaptable understanding that captures evolving societal priorities.
- 2. Preliminary Benchmark and Case Studies:** The report maps initial field data on tools and their applications across organizations, including Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), Social Return on Investment (SROI), and the SDG Impact Assessment Tool. Two categories of tools have been already identified: to qualify potential impacts and track integration into project stages.

## Next Step

Moving forward, the group plans to build a toolbox, collect additional case studies to offer insights into best practices for assessing impact within diverse R&I environments.

## Call to Action

Stakeholders in R&I are invited to join the ongoing effort in 2025, contributing to a more comprehensive societal impact framework. By participating, organizations can support the development of adaptable standards and tools that ensure R&I aligns with and supports societal goals.

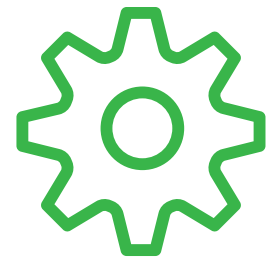
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# Objectives of the WG Societal Impact



Align on a **common definition of societal impact** of research / research project / research and innovation (R&I)



Propose a **reference framework to be widely used**

*Methods and tools for qualitative and/or quantitative measurement of societal impact (in the context where a "Societal Readiness Level" (SRL) scale exists but is not widely used).*

# Our ambition: Scope

In 2027, we want to be able to...

## Share a common understanding & approach

A shared understanding of societal impact (including its different dimensions) **within and across organizations, researchers and managers** in order to:

- set specific related **targets**
- **qualify** the impacts and define related **indicators**
- **evaluate** R&I projects

## Embed societal impact all along R&I projects

- to **reflect** on its societal impact at any stage of development
- to **structure** all new research projects with societal impact at its core
- to **evaluate ex ante** the potential for societal impact, i.e. helping organizations to **anticipate** the impact of future technologies on the society and planet, in a positive way rather than negative

## Assess and select R&I projects

The tool can help to merely **evaluate the potential** of impact of any project (ex ante), to **select** R&I projects, to **support**, and to **measure** (in itinere / a posteriori) its societal impact.

As a result, it indicates the **level of maturity of societal impacts in research project**

## Help organizations to manage societal impact

Organizations are able to **evaluate (projection of potential impact) manage**, and **communicate** social impact of R&I and of their technologies. It also contributes to evaluate the overall societal impact of the organization.

Thus organizations can develop and implement their own **'SRL' policies and strategy** based on the common framework.

# Our ambition: Capacities to deploy

## How to reach this ambition?

### Discussions & co-validation

**Discuss/ Challenge / Co-validate** the proposed actions with stakeholders out of this group, and decision makers/top management/labs at every level, to collect feedbacks and identify ambassadors.

Beyond a common definition, **stakeholders** need to align on and adopt common vocabulary / framework.

### Improve capacity-building

Develop and disseminate **training materials, principles and guidelines, work tool, surveys...** among organization teams.

Implement processes for capturing information (e.g. technology platform) to **capitalize on experiments.**

### Communication

Present the tool through presentations and webinars, and its benefits to **promote testing** among researchers.

Communication **between organizations** should involve issuing policies from the top down.

### Test & validation

Start with **use cases** to test the tool and validate the method and the indicators.

Build **a pool of testers** to use it on existing projects.

### Indicators & methods

Provide a list / a **shared database of indicators and methods** that could help organizations to evaluate the societal impact.

# Our ambition: Results

## For which results?

**Societal impact has become a tool that has transformed research into an agile process creating a continuum in the evolution of methodology and KPIs**

### Societal impact is a reflex

**100% of the projects & processes** are able to describe precisely their potential for negative / positive impact (at early stages) and their actual impact depending to the stage of development

As a result, 100% of the projects are **able to pivot or adapt** the project to deliver societal impact.

### A new way of embedding society in the R&I process

The tool enables a **wider cooperation between RPOs and society** to address societal challenges & SDGs, and to prevent more environmental and social destruction.

This wider cooperation translates into:

- a flexible and on-going update to reflect the latest information and society's needs
- a clear and comprehensive reporting to society
- the inclusion of society to decide topics of research and allocation of funding

### Inputs & Examples

A wide use of the tool will generate a lot of example / inputs, helping to **promote a better understanding** and illustration of what societal impacts really are.

### A tool to attract funding

The tool is **a reference** for investors and governments **to allocate fundings** for research and innovation projects, according to the potential of societal impact.

The tool can also help justify current and increased levels of research investments.

# Learnings from survey form\* to participants

## There is no recognized definition of societal impact within the participant's organization...

- The subject is still fresh and **emerging**.
- The concept of impact is still **economically oriented**.
- Definitions of societal impact already exists, **covering social and environmental** dimensions, as well as **negative and positive impacts**.
- This definition may or even must **evolve** as society needs and demands are evolving.

## ...but we need a consensus...

- It is an **emerging topic**, there is a lot of definitions, metrics, tools under development, nothing is set in stone and actual frameworks (like SDGs\*) are just a starting point
- It is a **growing requirement (regulatory & fundings)** and new standards will emerge
- It is an **ethical requirement** and a **driver** of stakeholder engagement
- Today it varies according to stakeholders, to their intentions & objectives and we need to have a consensus

## ...adopting a systemic and pragmatic approach for deployment.

- The **scope might evolve to other dimensions** beyond social and environmental
- The impact ought to include the **overall impact within society**, not just the impact of a project or of the organization itself
- We need to **clarify** what is the impact of R&I projet in short, medium and long term
- The definition must remain **flexible** and be **regularly updated** according to evolving issues and societal needs: it is not a fixed definition

### Potential barriers for implementation

It requires time to see benefits

Problem of data (access to/lack of) to evaluate ex ante the potential of impact

Economic impact prevails

Need for systemic change

Lack of knowledge and skills within organizations on the topic

Fear of an overly restrictive standard

Political barriers

Financial barriers

\* Find the form's questions in annex n°2 (p.28) and fill it in through this [link](#).





# Output #1

## Common definition of societal impact

# Output: Common definition of societal impact



**The societal impact of research & innovation is all the consequences and effects on its stakeholders and more generally on society and on the planet - negative as well as positive - in a systemic perspective, whether those consequences are intended or not.**

**It can include long or short term impacts on areas such as economic, environmental, social inclusion, health and education...**

# Output: Common definition of societal impact



The societal impact of research & innovation is ...



What do we mean by this term?

social



environmental



The WG aligned to include the **social** and **environmental** categories.

As long as “social” includes other dimensions such as : inclusiveness, health, mobility, accessibility, education, cultural impact.

**The broader, the better** is to describe societal impact.

*See our learnings on this topic on page 15.*



**CORYELL BOFFY**  
AXELYS

*“A similar debate occurred for social innovation. It took 10 years to come up with a definition that is still challenged today. We need to keep the definition broad to engage everyone.”*

# Output: Common definition of societal impact



The societal impact of research & innovation is ...

→ We explored several options before settling on this term.



## SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Scientific research might be too upstream and doesn't take innovation and existing technologies into account.

*"When it comes to societal impact, they take the organization as a whole (not just research activity, but all types of activities)"*



ANGELICA LOPEZ  
TECNALIA



## RESEARCH PROJECTS

Research projects might be too restrictive. What do we do with technologies and organisations that already exist?

*"The word Technologies has the advantage of being more precise and explicit, comparing to Innovation"*



HARVIN MOORE  
FRONTERA



## TECHNOLOGIES

There may be a risk of not questioning research activity and practices and of focusing on tech and tech solutions only.

*"R&I already encompasses tech, some organizations do not separate technology and research - if we are doing it, we will need to explain why"*



DONNA ENNIS  
GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF  
TECHNOLOGY



## RESEARCH & INNOVATION

We aligned it is the best way to cover the continuum of research practices, technologies and organizations.

*"R&I describes better the attitude that is to be adopted regarding societal impact, as technologies can promote a tech push vision"*



ALBERTO SANNA  
HSR RESEARCH

See WG participants' position before alignment on Annex 4.

# Learnings from discussions (debunking misconceptions)

## Societal impact of scientific research and innovation is not to be mistaken with...

### Scientific communication

is sharing scientific knowledge and results to educate the public, strengthen scientific knowledge within society. To achieve societal impact, it is not enough to simply communicate and share research findings to other stakeholders in society, assuming or hoping that they will adopt and use them on the field to transform society.

### Societal acceptability

is questioning users a posteriori to check whether they are ready to adopt new technologies. It is a techno push approach which is not co-constructed to take into account the societal impact and does not take into account the needs of society before development. It's an approach that rarely leads to the creation of societal impact, because the process is backwards. We ask society's stakeholders whether the solution suits them rather than co-creating it with them from the outset.

### Societal relevance

is for a technology or a research project to be aligned with society's concerns/challenges. As stakeholders inclusion, relevance is crucial to deliver societal impact but being relevant is not the same as being impactful.

### Including stakeholders

is necessary but not sufficient. To create positive impact, including stakeholders from society is one step, but the job is not finished. This collaborative process must lead to solutions that deliver societal benefits.

### Knowledge transfer

involves promoting scientific results and/or applying technologies mainly from an economic and technical point of view. It is a means and not an impact per se.

### Research outputs / outcomes

Societal impact is not measured in terms of results and performance, but in terms of changes within society.

### Social quality

defined as "the extent to which people are able to participate in soci(et)al relationships under conditions that enhance their well-being, capacity and individual potential". This concept is more about capacity for action and empowerment than impact

# Learnings from discussions (scope)

## What is the scope of societal impact?



### POSITIVE / NEGATIVE

Societal impact can cover positive or negative or both.  
At SoScience, we believe that there is no sense to exclude one or the other, the two must be considered together.



### SPECIFIC / GLOBAL

The impact of a technology or a research project on one specific issue (the one addressed by the project) is not enough. Societal impact is only meaningful at a global level.

For example, a technology may have a very positive impact on carbon emissions but a terrible negative impact on biodiversity.



### SHORT / MID / LONG TERM

Societal impact must be discussed as part of a timeline even if it depends on the problem addressed and the project. It is important to differentiate between **results** (what is produced during the implementation of the project), **outcomes** (immediate results of actions on their targets, favored by the dissemination/exploitation strategy) and **impacts** (effects broader and long-term impact on society). (including the environment) enabled by the results)



### SOCIAL / ENVIRONMENTAL / ...

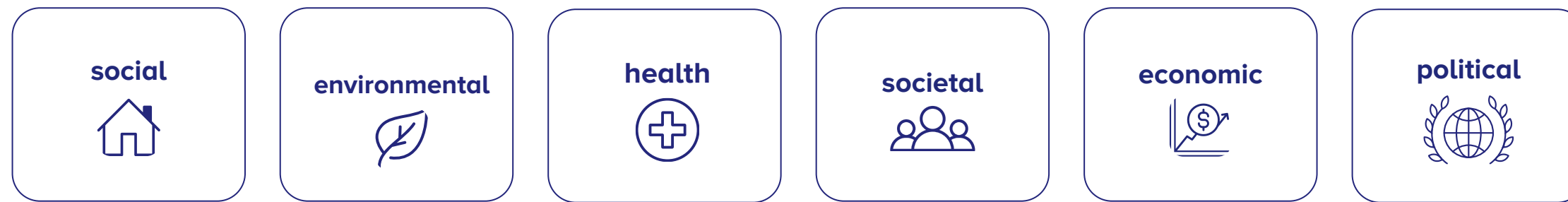
What does societal mean?  
Which categories should be taken into account?  
What do those words encompass?

There is no standard category at all for societal impact.

# Learnings from discussions (focus on categories of impact)

## SOCIAL / ENVIRONMENTAL / ...

There is no standard category at all for societal impact.  
Hereafter are the most frequent categories referred to:



The **health** dimension can be separated from the **social** dimension because healthcare is seen as different as social care, social care being focused on the needs of individuals in their daily activities. But sometimes, the social category covers the health dimension.

A difference can be made between **social and societal**, social impact being focused on individuals and their daily needs and societal impact is the major forces transforming society, our ways of producing, communicating, learning and consuming (...) at the collective level

Some organisations include **economic** impact, but this is also very often excluded from research and innovation, because it is already dealt with by institutions and teams, using existing frameworks, skills and indicators to evaluate the economic impact.

Sometimes, it also includes **political** impact, the impact of research and innovation on **public policies** leading to social, societal, environmental impacts.

**Today, the difficulty is that many organisations use the term societal impact, but it's never made explicit, we don't know what it means. It's not so much about "good" categories as it is about being clear about the elements that make them up.**

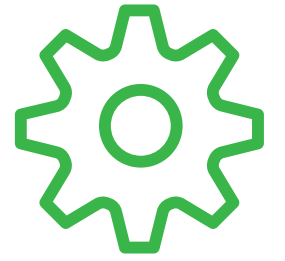


# Output #2

## Reference framework



# Output: Reference framework



## A TOOLBOX LIBRARY with 2 entries

### TOOLS

2 categories of tools:

- to qualify the (potential) societal impacts of the project
- to take a snapshot on the integration of societal impacts in the project

### CASE STUDIES

Case studies of organizations that have used these tools in specific contexts.

# Benchmark Tools\*

Name	Start	Country	Organisation
<b>Society Readiness Level (SRL)</b>	2014	Europe 🇪🇺	<b>EIT InnoEnergy</b> (ex KIC InnoEnergy)
<b>Societal Readiness Level (SRL)</b>	2019	Denmark 🇩🇰	<b>Innovation Fund Denmark</b> (IFD)
<b>Societal readiness Level (SRL)</b>	2021	France 🇫🇷	Laboratoire Commun <b>DESTINS</b> (CNRS-Université de Poitiers, Ellyx)
<b>Societal Embeddedness Levels Level (SELS)</b>	2019	Netherlands 🇳🇱	The NL Organisation for Applied Scientific Research ( <b>TNO</b> )
<b>Sustainable Readiness Level (SRL)</b>	2020	Sweden 🇸🇪	<b>Vinnova / KTH</b> - KTH Innovation Readiness Level™ tool
<b>Societal Readiness Level (SRL)</b>	2023	Norway 🇳🇴	<b>SIVA</b>
<b>Societal Readiness Assessment (SoRA) framework</b> for carbon free mobility solutions	2022	UK 🇬🇧	<b>DecarboN8</b>
<b>Societal Readiness Level (SRL)</b>	/	Finland 🇫🇮	<b>CLIC Innovation</b>
<b>Societal Readiness Level (SocRL)</b> for security technologies	2022	Europe 🇪🇺	<b>MultiRate</b> (european project)
<b>SDG Impact Assessment Tool</b> 		Sweden 🇸🇪	<b>Wexus</b> - West Sweden Nexus for Sustainable Development
<b>Environment Life Cycle Assessment (LCA)</b>			
<b>Life cycle sustainability assessment (LCSA)</b>			<b>Life Cycle Initiative</b> (hosted by UNEP)

# Benchmark Tools\*

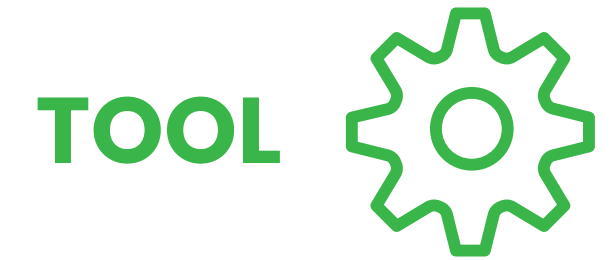
Name	Start	Country	Organisation
Key Impact Pathway	2021	Europe 	European Commission 
Return on Sustainability Investment (ROSI) model			
Impact Framework IRIS (IRIS+ system)			Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN)
Impact Pathway SoScience Tool	2024	France 	SoScience
Social Return on Investment (SROI)			

*\*Some of these tools will be shared and detailed on the **toolbox***

# Learnings from discussions

- Delivering a new / updated SRL is too soon (to be continued in 2025), we should start with presenting the benchmark.
- We should not advocate for just one tool or one category of tools.
- We should have a broad approach for the HLF and present a **toolbox**.
- We should provide a template to collect more case studies in order to create a toolbox/library of tools.
- The toolbox shall **focus on dimensions of societal impact that researchers are less familiar with (social, environmental impacts)** as political & economical impacts are already well covered and metrics well known.

# Output: Reference framework



**[Name of the Tool – Clear, descriptive title]**  
 [Type of impacts targeted]

Design to be done in 2025

<b>Purpose</b>	Brief statement of the tool's main objective - what's it for?
<b>Application</b>	What does it assess? When to use it? (ex ante, in itinere, ex post)
<b>Outputs</b>	What results or insights the tool provides?
<b>Methodology</b>	Concise explanation of how the tool works
<b>Data Requirements</b>	What information is needed to use the tool?
<b>Accessibility</b>	Open access / License / ...
<b>Cost</b>	How much does it cost to use this tool?
<b>Strengths</b>	Main advantages of the tool
<b>Limitations</b>	Potential drawbacks or constraints
<b>Time Requirements</b>	Estimated time effort needed
<b>Expertise Level</b>	Skills required to use the tool effectively / How difficult is it to use this tool?
<b>Autonomy Level</b>	1 (can be used alone) 2(...) 3(...) 4(...)
<b>Examples</b>	Brief real-world applications or case studies (redirect towards specific case studies from the library)
<b>Related Tools</b>	Other complementary methods
<b>Origin</b>	Year of creation, Organization, Context
<b>Resources</b>	Resources for further information (links + attached files)

# Case studies\* review



Life Cycle  
Sustainability  
Assessment

axelys

KTH Innovation  
Readiness Level

SDG Impact  
Assessment tool



工業技術研究院  
Industrial Technology  
Research Institute

Environment Life Cycle  
Assessment

Social Return on Investment  
(SROI)

Return of Sustainability  
Investment (ROSI) model

soScience  
DRIVING RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION

Key Impact Pathway

Impact pathway  
SoScience tool

*\*Some of these case studies will be shared and detailed in the **toolbox***

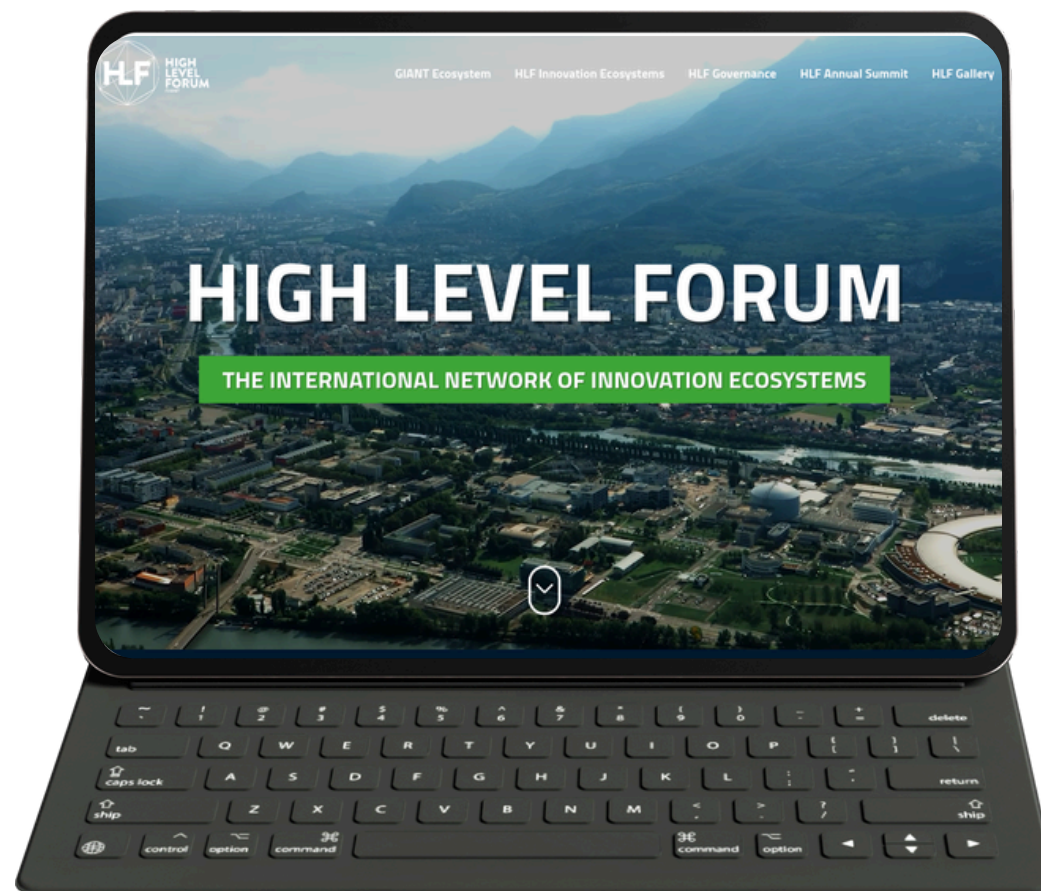
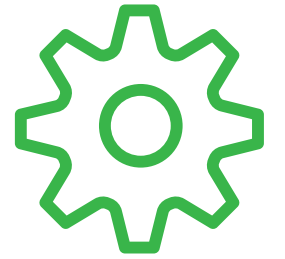
# Output: Reference framework

[Name of the Case study - Clear, descriptive title]  
[Type of impacts targeted]

Design to be done in 2025

Tool used	
Organization	
Country	
Year / Timeframe	
Objective	
Resources needed	
Benefits	
Limits	
Key learnings	
Recommendations	
Resources	
Contact	

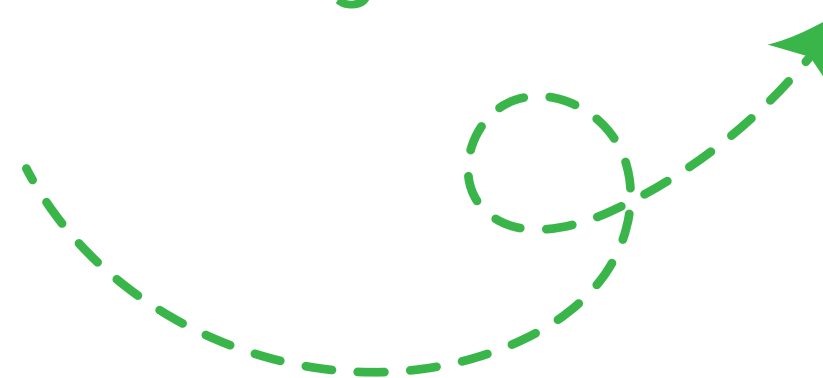
# Next step: Contribute to the toolbox



All tools & case studies soon available on the HLF website



Share your own through a form!



**HLF HIGH LEVEL FORUM**

### Key Impact Pathway

Associated case... SoScience case study

+ Add a property

+ Add a comment...

► Table of contents

**Purpose**  
Brief statement of the tool's main objective - what's it for?

**Application**  
What does it assess? When to use it? (ex: ante, in itinere, ex post)

**Outputs**  
What results or insights the tool provides?

**Methodology**  
Concise explanation of how the tool work

**Data requirements**  
What information is needed to use the tools?

**Cost**  
How much does cost to use this tool

**Strengths**  
Main advantages of the tool



## Call to action: Join the 2025 WG!

You are interested in the topic of societal impact of R&I?

And you want to **contribute** to co-**building a reference framework** for research institutes?



**JOIN THE 2025 WG**



**HIGH  
LEVEL  
FORUM**  
GIANT



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# Annex 1: WG Members

## PROJECT TEAM



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VINCENT-  
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AXELYS



**KIRSI-MARIA  
HYTTINEN**  
VTT

## PARTICIPANTS



**CYRIL  
LAURIÉ**  
CEA



**CLEMENTINE  
ARPIAINEN**  
DIMECC



**MAYA  
OKAMOTO**  
TSUKUBA



**TAKASHI  
INUTSUKA**  
TSUKUBA



**ALBERTO  
SANNA**  
HSR  
RESEARCH



**HARVIN  
MOORE**  
FRONTERA



**NORA  
INTARANONT**  
NSTDA



**ANABELLE  
LOPEZ**  
CEA

# Annex 2: Questions of the survey for organizations



## Definition

- What is your institution's official definition of societal impact of R&I project / spin off?
- In your opinion, could this definition evolve?
- If your understanding of the societal impact of R&I differs, what is it?

## Motivation

According to you, the question of the societal impact of technology is

- an essential ethical question
- a future obligation (regulatory, financial, industrial)
- other : please specify

## Obstacles

When this working group arrives at a common definition and shared tools, what would be the potential barriers to implementation within your organization and your country's institutions?

## Current assessment tools

Have you set up tools to assess societal impact of your research projects / spinoff (measurement and/or projection, planning from the outset)?

- [If yes] What tools do you use?

## Current usages

If yes to the previous question

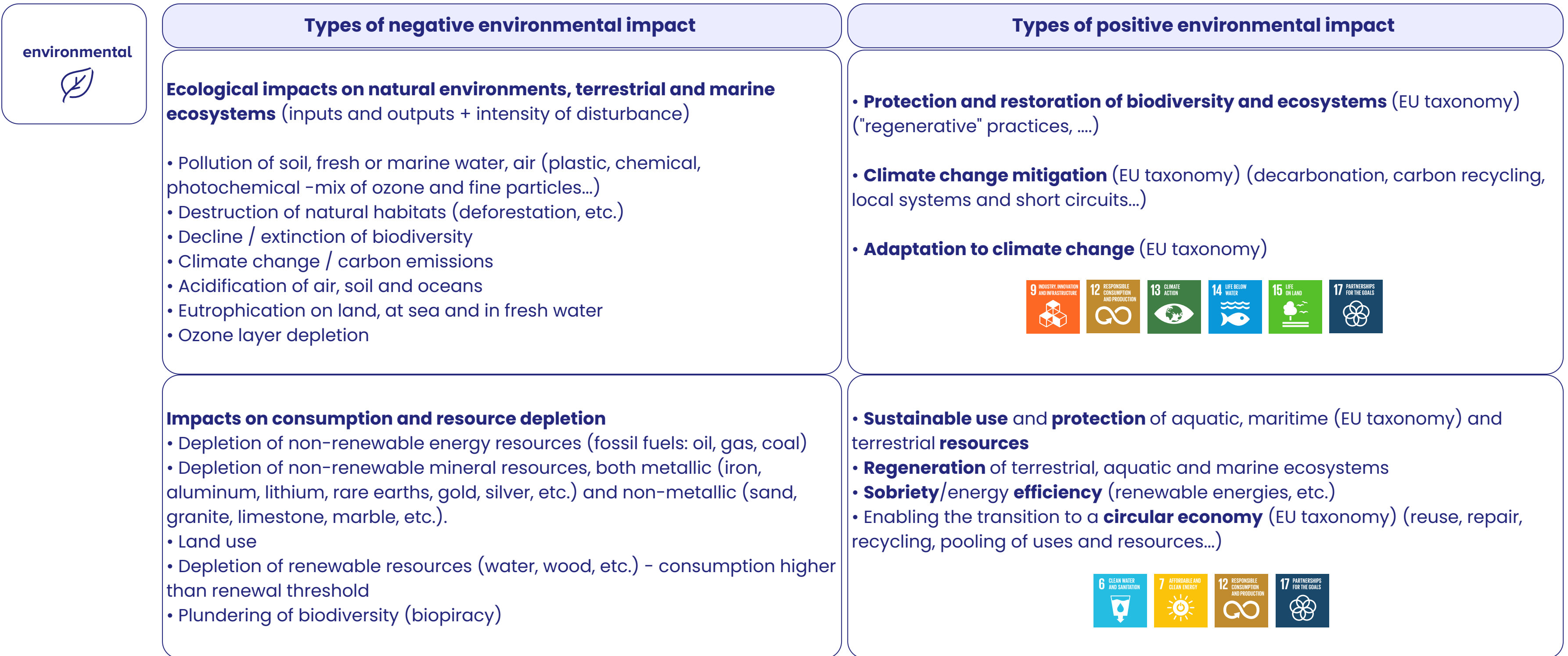
- Are these tools used widely within your organisation or for a restricted target? If the second option, by whom?
- Are these tools used systematically or on an ad hoc basis? If the second option, when and why?
- Do you have documented case studies available online?

## Additional comment

Do you have anything to add on this subject?

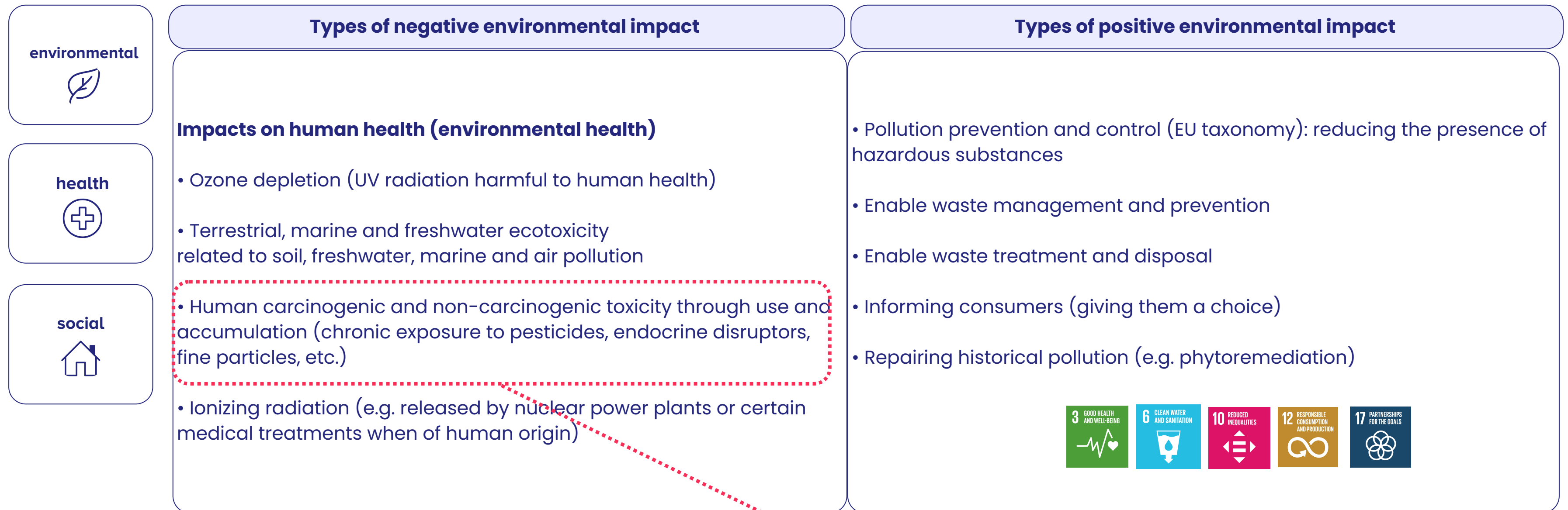
# Annex 3: SoScience's impact framework (1/2)

Here is an example on how SoScience consider **environmental impact**. We make sure to **be explicit**. We formalized what could be the negative and positive impacts using **existing frameworks** like SDGs, the planet boundaries and the European Union green taxonomy.



# Annex 3: SoScience's impact framework (2/2)

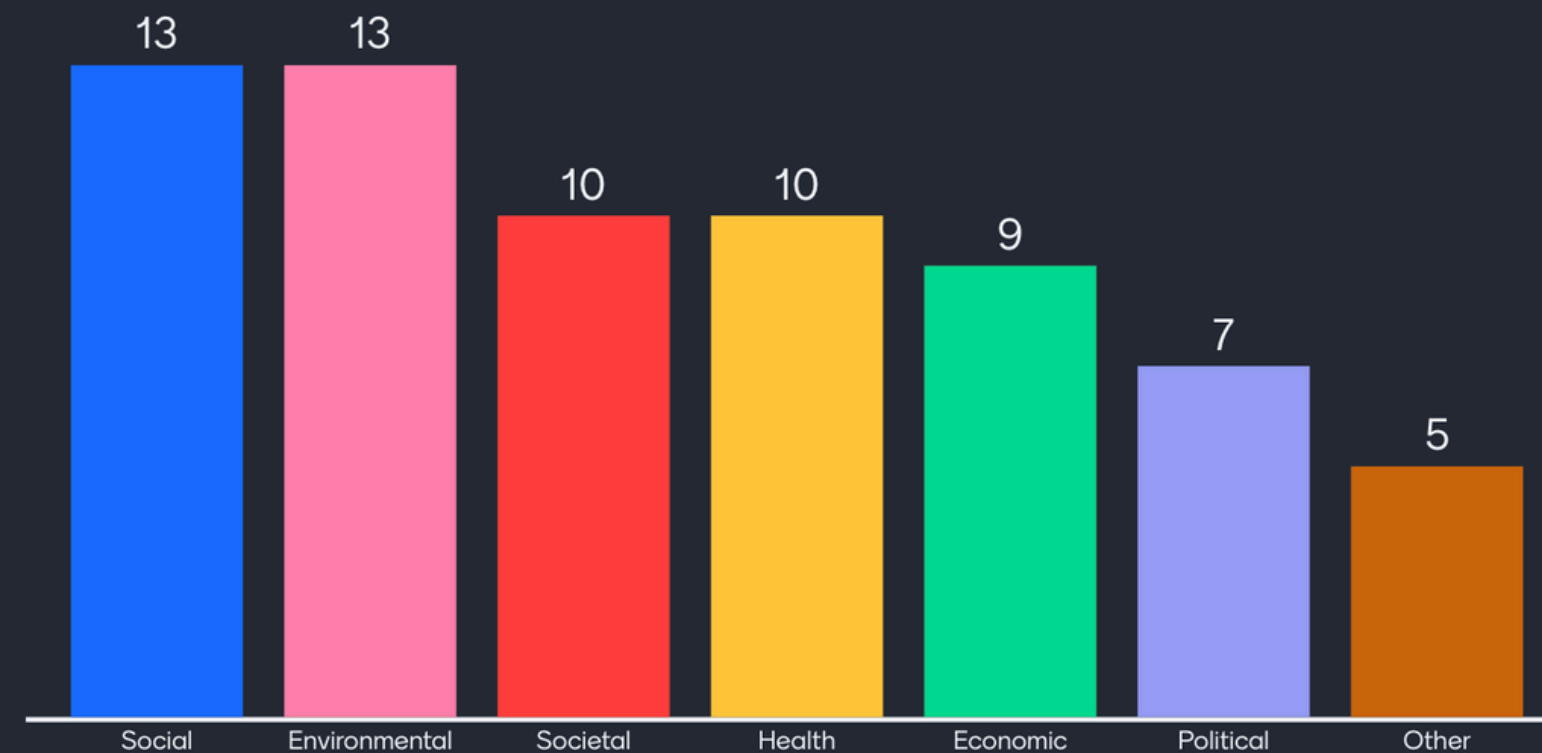
Here is an example on how SoScience consider **environmental impact**. We make sure to **be explicit**. We formalized what could be the negative and positive impacts using **existing frameworks** like SDGs, the planet boundaries and the European Union green taxonomy.



You can see here that the third category of **environmental impact overlaps with the social impact** (or health if you use this category) as **everything is interconnected**

# Annex 4: **WG participants' position before the discussion phase**

Societal impact must cover the following topics:



# Annex 4: **WG participants' position before the discussion phase**

