



ISDM

INDIAN SCHOOL OF
DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

प्रदान
Pradan

PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE
FOR DEVELOPMENT ACTION



Roots of Change:

A Handbook for Mapping Systemic Change
in Rural Development

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Glossary

Civic & Resource Governance: The community's ability to act collectively, manage shared resources, and engage with governance systems and institutions.

Community Actors: People and groups within the geography who are directly affected by the issue or intervention, such as farmers, women, labourers, or SHGs.

Co-Production Channels: The ways organisations help communities engage with governments, markets, and institutions to create change together.

Ecological & Economic Change: Changes related to livelihoods, agricultural productivity, diversification, irrigation, and natural resource management.

FGD (Focus Group Discussion): A guided group conversation used to understand people's experiences, perspectives, and behaviours.

Friction Interface: The space where organisational values, such as equity or inclusion, interact or conflict with existing social norms like caste or patriarchy.

Human & Agency Outcomes: Changes in confidence, aspirations, leadership, mobility, participation, and decision-making, especially among marginalised groups.

Institutional Density: The extent to which government bodies, civil society organisations, financial institutions, and other actors are present and active in a geography.

Macro Pressures & Legacies: Historical, structural, or environmental forces that shape the system, such as caste, patriarchy, migration, rainfall variability, or market access.

Mechanisms: The processes through which change happens when an intervention interacts with a specific context.

Non-Community Actors: Institutions and organisations operating in the geography but not part of the community itself, such as government departments, NGOs, banks, or markets.

Realist Evaluation: An approach to understanding impact that asks: What worked, for whom, under what conditions, and why?

Resilience Matrix: A framework used to organise long-term outcomes across ecological, economic, social, mobility, and governance dimensions.

Strategic Mobility: Mobility or migration undertaken by choice and opportunity rather than distress or compulsion.

Structural Field: The wider social, institutional, economic, and historical conditions within which an intervention takes place.

Systemic Change: Long-term changes in how a system functions, including shifts in relationships, institutions, behaviours, and power structures.

Systems Map: A visual representation showing how different actors, pressures, and institutions influence one another within a geography.

Acknowledgements and Credits

We gratefully acknowledge the support and collaboration received throughout the development of this handbook. The insights, feedback, and engagement of those involved were invaluable in shaping this work.

We also thank all community members, practitioners, and colleagues who contributed their time, experiences, and perspectives to this initiative.

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A New Way to Look at Impact

If you work in rural development, you already know this truth: social change is painstakingly long, slow, non-linear, and path-dependent. Shifts in norms, institutional capacity, agricultural practices, and collective agency develop incrementally through repeated engagement, rather than a single, isolated intervention.

Yet, the dominant evaluative lens in the social sector remains project-centric, short-term, and attribution-driven. We are often asked to treat complex social impact as a simple equation: Did this specific activity produce this exact outcome in this exact timeframe?

This approach turns measurement into a compliance exercise rather than a tool for learning. It forces us to focus on proving our success rather than on improving our pathways for the communities we serve. At its core, this handbook rests on a simple idea: programs don't produce outcomes directly. What they do is introduce material, institutional, and relational resources into a particular context. How those resources influence change depends on the conditions into which they are introduced.

These interactions trigger mechanisms such as shifts in how people think and behave, which ultimately shape the impact.

Why this handbook?

This interactive handbook comprises 8 exercises and was developed by the Indian School of Development Management (ISDM) based on a rural development impact framework created in collaboration with Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN)*. It is designed to help organisations identify and understand their impact at the systems level, particularly after long-standing interventions. It helps shift the question from:

“Did this intervention produce these outcomes?”



“How has the organisation's work contributed to change in this geography over time?”

Stakeholders to be engaged:

This should be a collaborative exercise, involving the key decision-makers, field team, MEL and Program teams.

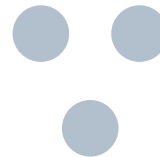
Once the exercise is completed, the output should ideally be validated by the community.

What will this Handbook help you do?

Map the Context of Your Geography: You will visualise the "structural field" you are working in using a systems map across 4 exercises. This means acknowledging the historical pressures, institutional density, and internal community power dynamics (like caste or gender inequalities) that existed long before your intervention began.

Trace How Change Actually Unfolds: You will track the impact in your geography by visualising how the system has evolved, identifying where you have intervened and how that affected the system as a whole, using qualitative and quantitative evidence through 3 exercises.

Document the Outcomes Ladder: You will consolidate the changes through 1 exercise that the geography has undergone across the key dimensions of ecology, economy, mobility, agency, civic life, and governance, helping you understand how impact can unfold across multiple layers.



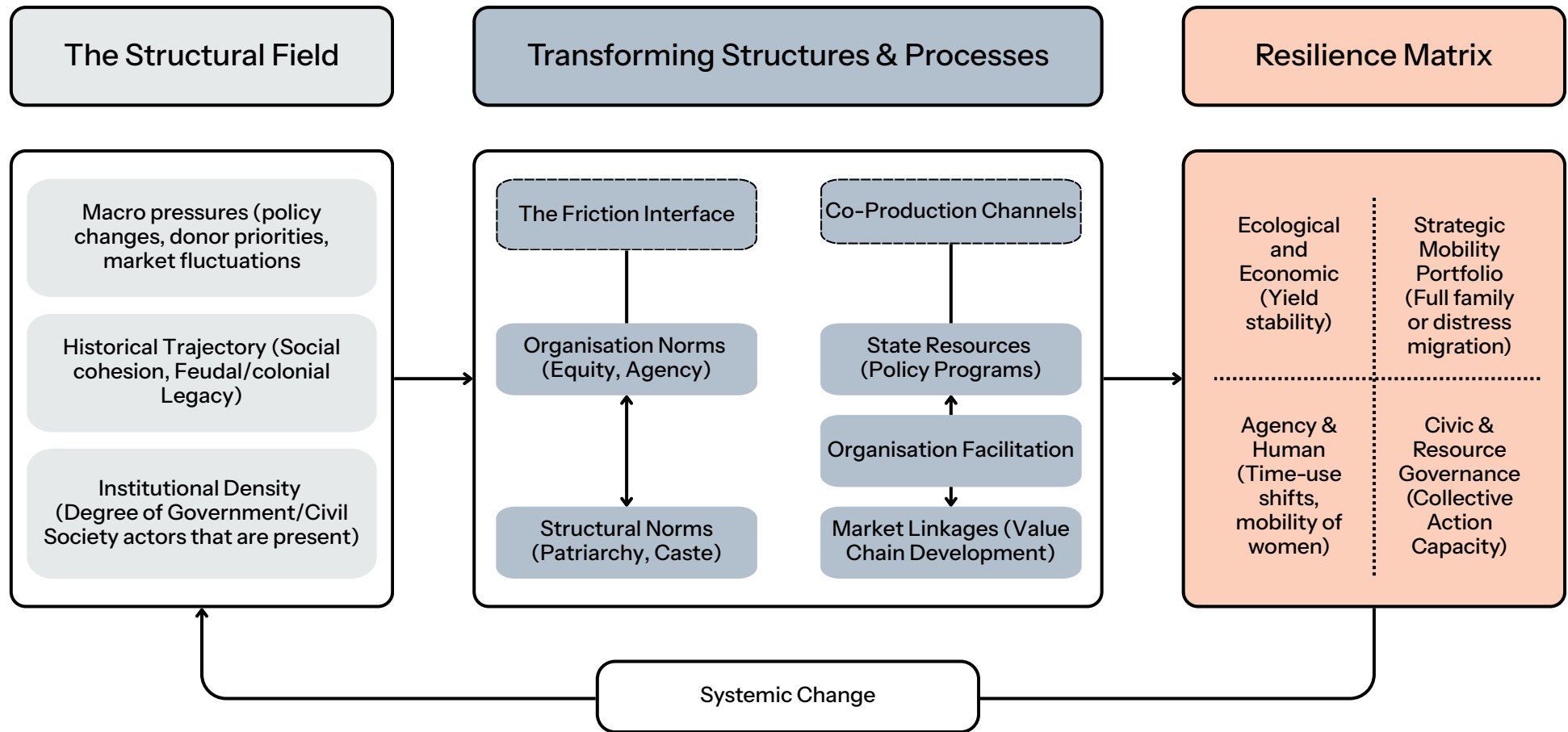
Learn Through PRADAN's Example:

All the working examples in this handbook are derived from an in-depth study and a rural development framework developed in collaboration with PRADAN. Hence, PRADAN's work and long-standing engagement in the Gumla region serve as the sole illustrative case throughout the handbook.

Materials that may be useful for this exercise:

Annual Reports, Impact Assessment Reports, MIS data (qualitative & quantitative), Newsletters, Strategy documents, Theory of Change, Case studies.

Rural Development Impact Framework





C for Context

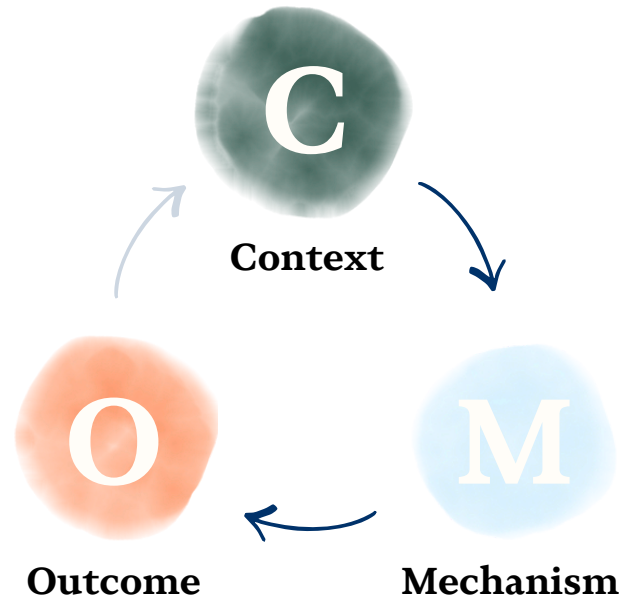


Let's start with establishing the context

This framework adopts the realist evaluation approach to conceptualise long-term impact.

Rather than asking merely whether an intervention worked, a realist evaluation focuses on *What worked? For whom? Under what conditions? Through which mechanisms, and why?*

This logic can be expressed as:



So, we begin this exercise by establishing the context — the structural field. We first identify the community and non-community actors in the context we're working in, and then we examine the macro and historical pressures and how they connect with each other.

The Structural Field

Macro Pressures (policy changes, donor priorities, market fluctuations)

Historical Trajectory (Social cohesion, Feudal/colonial Legacy)

Institutional Density
(Emerging vs Thick presence of Government/Civil Society actors)



List the 'Community Actors' present in the region that your project or organisation aimed to influence.

Please list all the important community actors your project/organisation engaged with directly or indirectly, using the template below.

Community Actors - People and groups who live and work within the geography and are directly affected by the conditions your organisation works to change.

Write down the 'Community Actor' in 1 or 2 words.

Describe the state they were in before your project entered the ecosystem, in less than 8 words.

Example

Women

Limited financial decision-making, weak SHG participation

Farmers

Seasonal migration, reliance on wage labour, scepticism toward SHGs

Moneylenders

Primary credit providers, Reinforcing household indebtedness with high-interest loans



Use this page to list down all the 'Community Actors'

Use as many boxes as needed to list down all the community groups in the system that are impacted by your project.

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List the 'Non-Community Actors' present in the region that your project or organisation worked in.

Specify all the non-community actors that have played or continue to play a role in the domain of your intervention. This would also help you understand whether the space has an institutional void or a thicket. Note them down using the template below.

Non-Community Actors - Institutions and organisations that operate in or around the geography but are not themselves part of the community, such as government bodies, NGOs, businesses, or banks.

Write down the 'Non-Community Actor' in 1 or 2 words.

Describe the state they were in before your project entered the ecosystem, in less than 8 words.

A dashed-line box containing a light grey top section with one horizontal line and a light orange bottom section with three horizontal lines.

Example

Government
Still building its institutional capacity and processes

A dashed-line box with a light grey top section containing the word 'Government' and a light orange bottom section containing the text 'Still building its institutional capacity and processes'.

Other NGOs
Limited presence, scattered thematic interventions, weak sustained engagement

A dashed-line box with a light grey top section containing the text 'Other NGOs' and a light orange bottom section containing the text 'Limited presence, scattered thematic interventions, weak sustained engagement'.



Use this page to list down all the ‘Non-Community Actors’

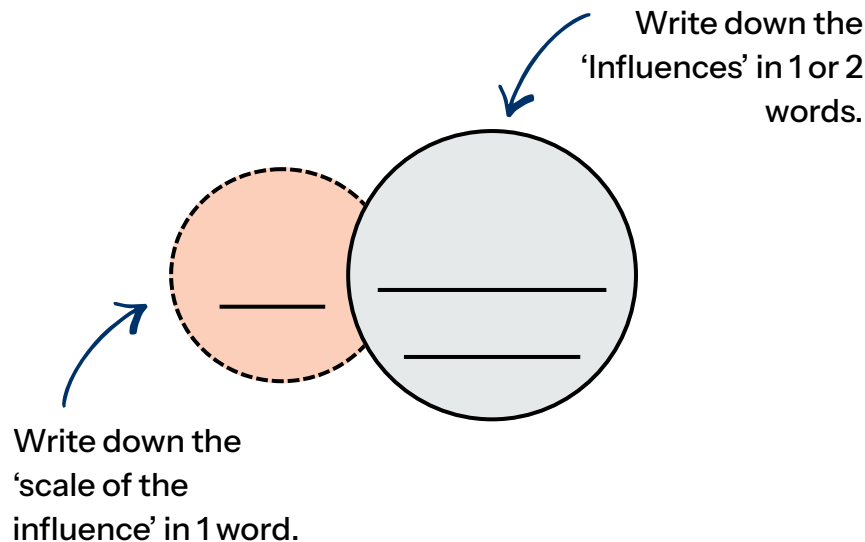
Use as many boxes as needed to list down all the Non-community actors in the system that are relevant to your project.



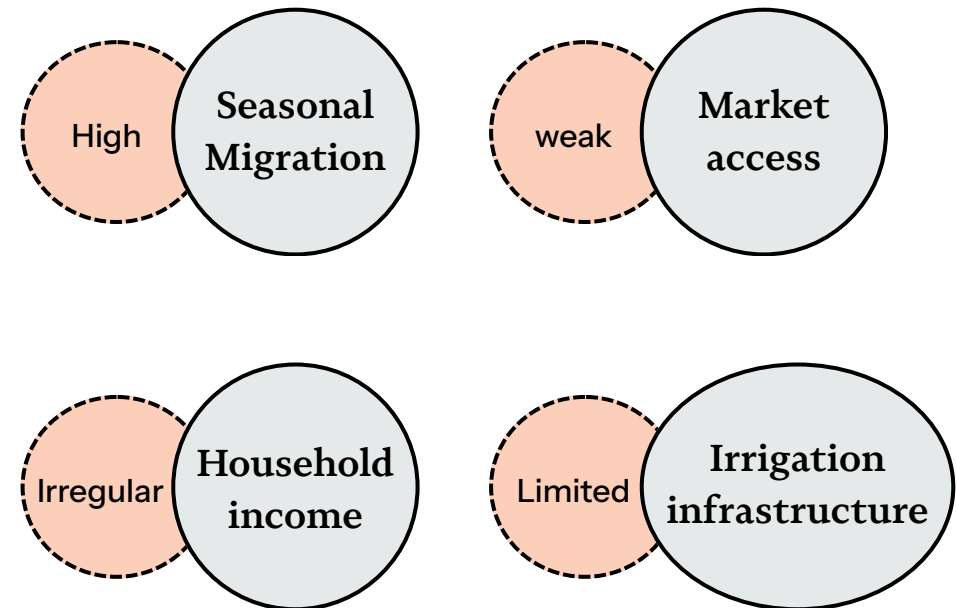
List the 'Macro pressures and legacies' present in the region that your project/ organisation worked in

There may be many non-human, cultural, and socio-economic forces significantly influencing actors in the region. They are identified as the 'macro pressures and legacies'. Examples include water scarcity, caste, patriarchy, and market forces. Note them down in the following template.

Macro Pressures and Legacies - Non-human, structural, or historical forces that shape conditions in a geography, such as caste, patriarchy, seasonal rainfall patterns, colonial land tenure, or market volatility. These are not actors; they are forces that act on actors.



Example





Use this page to list down all the ‘Macro pressures and legacies’

Use as many boxes as needed to list all the non-human, cultural, and socio-economic pressures that are impacting your actors in the system.

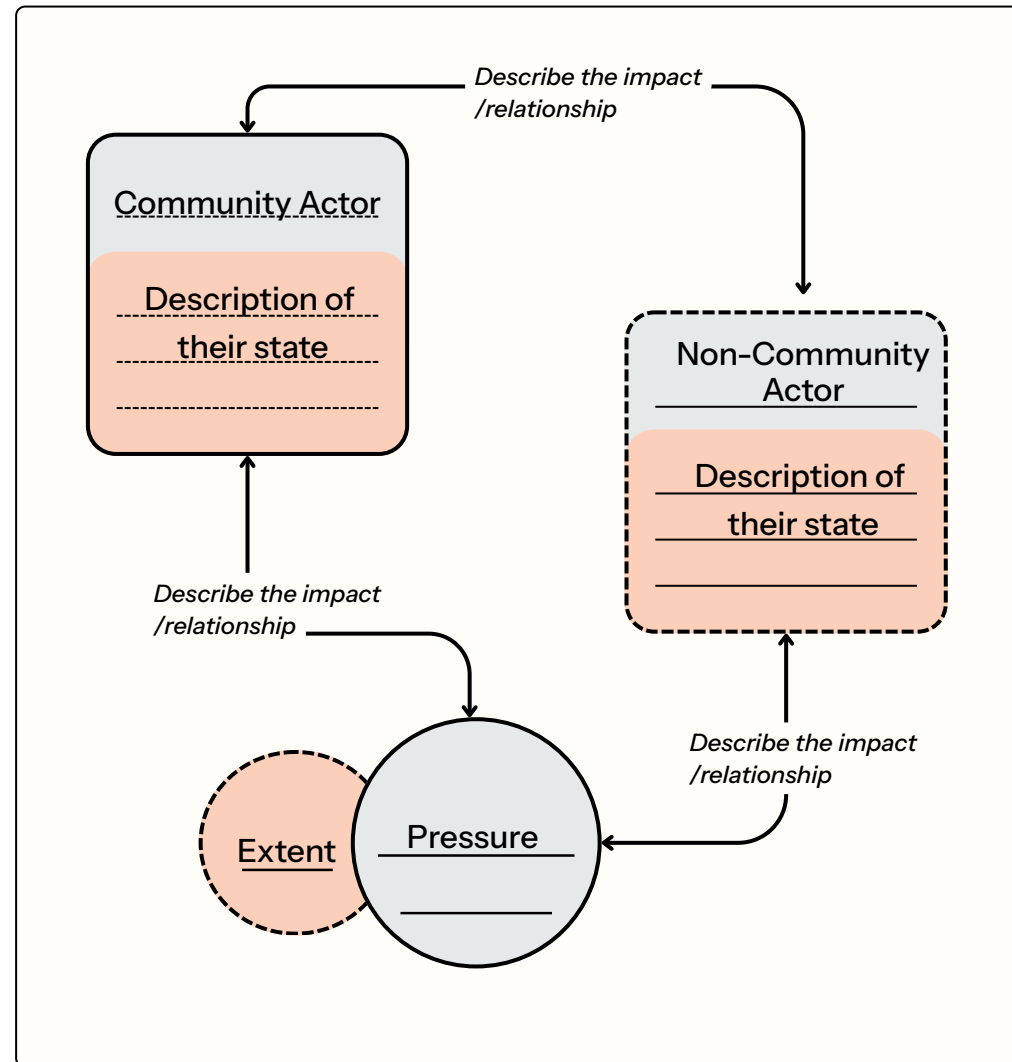


Now, connect the dots on how all the elements are impacting each other in the system

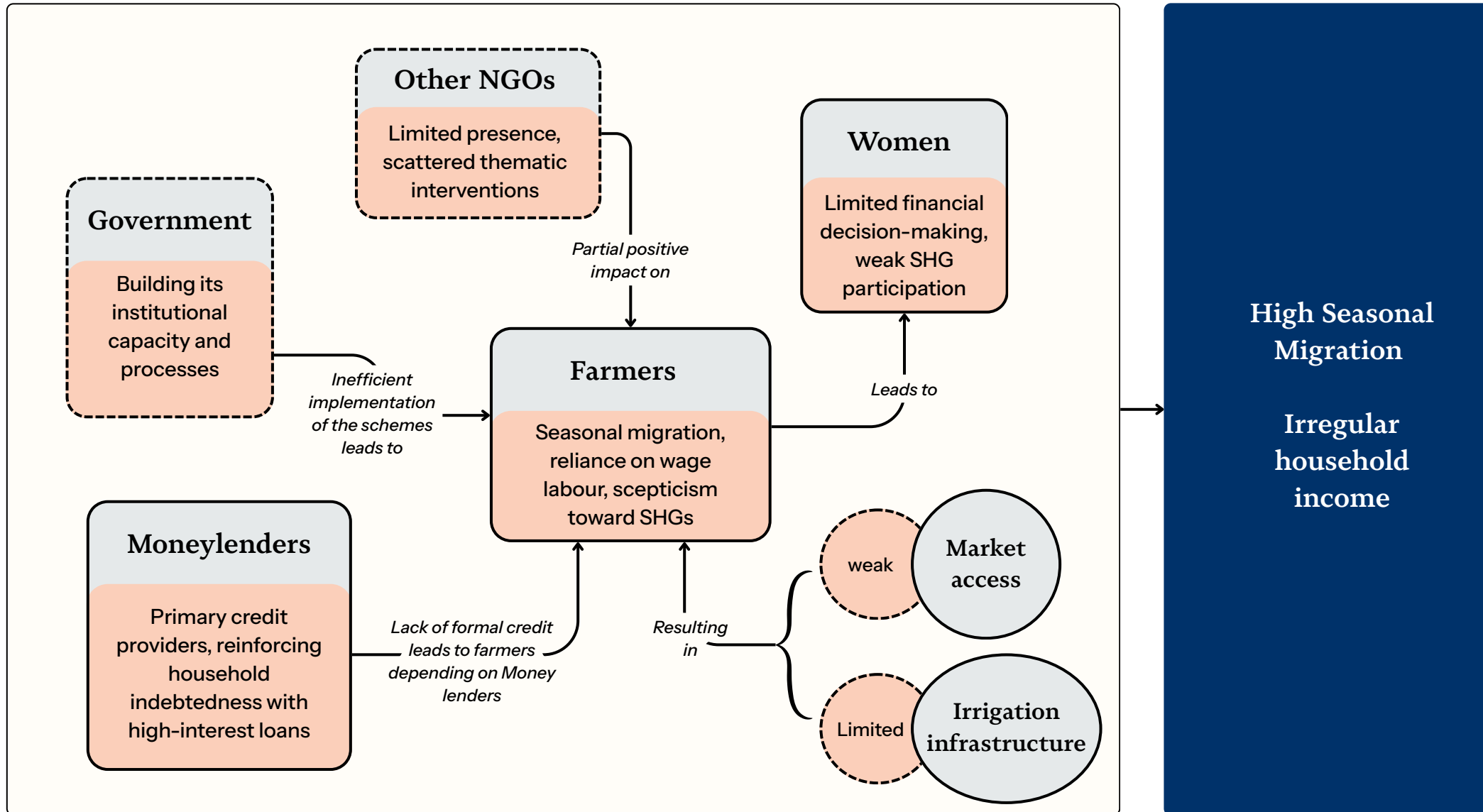
Bring all the actors and pressures you've noted in the previous pages together and connect them to show how they're influencing one another, describing the relationships as reinforcing, conflicting, causal etc.

This systems map should establish the context of the region before your project or organisation entered it. It illustrates all the key actors, how they influence each other, and how the interactions shaped the problem your project or organisation sought to address.

An example is given on the next page to illustrate how this can be applied to a context.

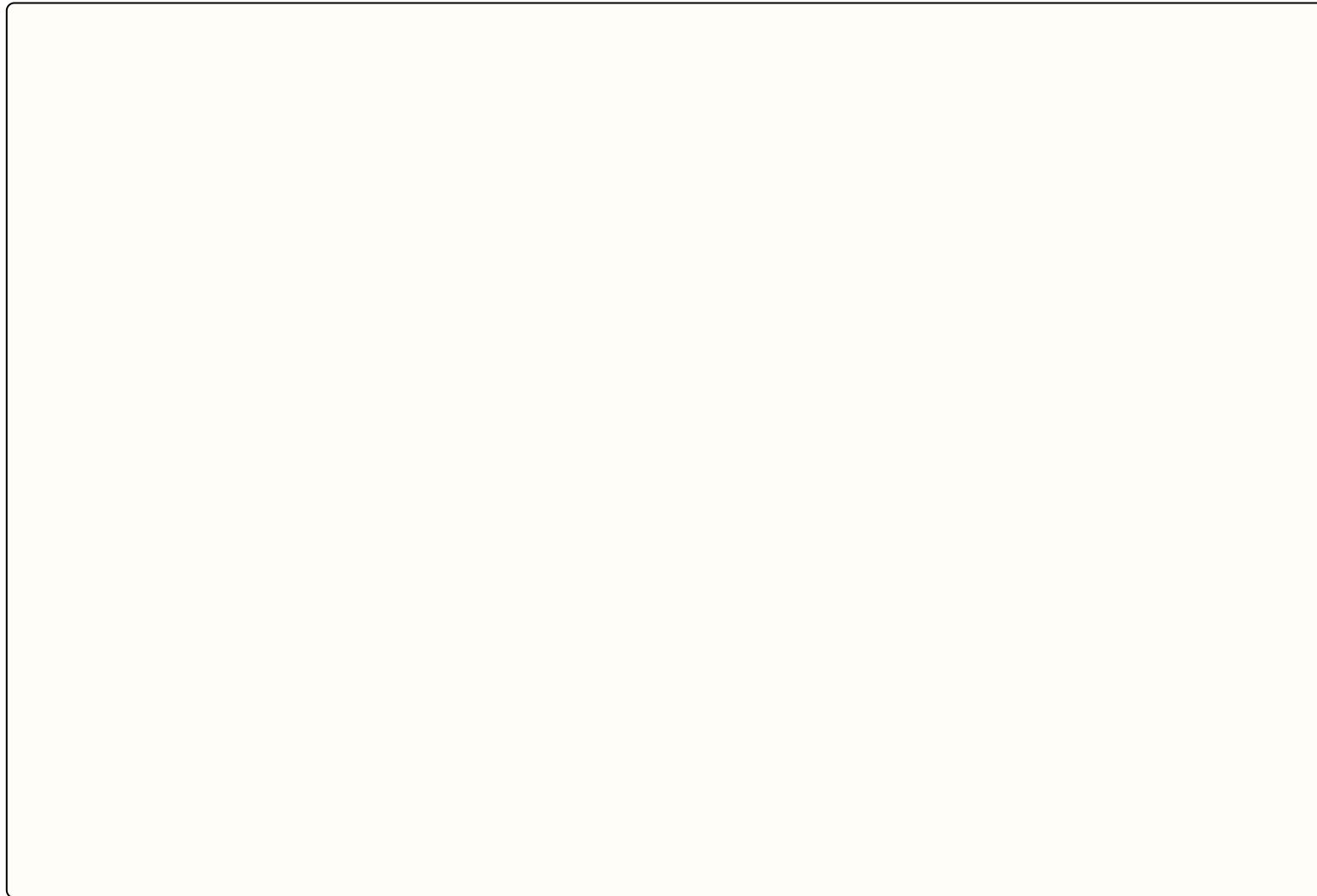


Systems map of Gumla before PRADAN entered the region





Use this page to build the systems map, establishing the context of your region before your intervention





M for Mechanisms



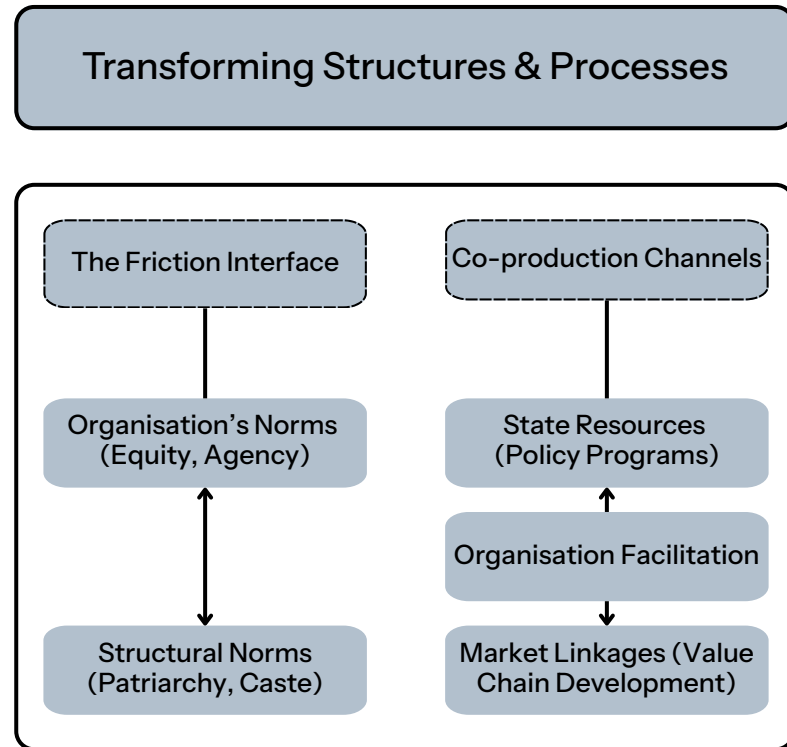
We now move to understanding how an intervention facilitates change by activating mechanisms

We established the context by recognising both community and non-community actors, the pressures in the region, and how they influence one another.

We now move to understanding how our project impacted the system. Here, instead of viewing projects as isolated processes, we see them as mechanisms activated in our context. This means we would examine how our project intervened at various points within the context. We will examine how our project affected the actors and their states, and how the system as a whole is evolving. Transforming structures and processes is where interventions interact with the structural field through two main mechanisms: the friction interface and co-production channels.

The friction interface: Here, the values (equity, agency) promoted by an organisation conflict with entrenched norms (patriarchy, caste), producing productive conflict. This friction gradually reshapes power relations through negotiation and resistance.

Co-production channels: Organisations broker relationships, helping communities access state resources and navigate market linkages.



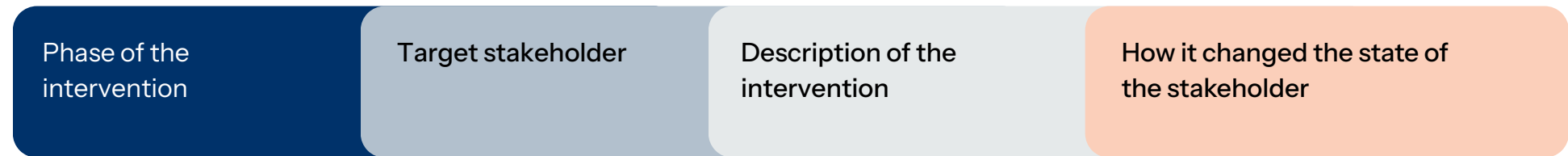
Through facilitation, development outcomes are co-produced by communities, the state, and markets.

This section will document how the system has evolved as a result of your project's intervention.



Reconstruct the Intervention Timeline

Trace the timeline of the intervention from its early phases to the present.



Example





Use this page to build the timeline of your intervention

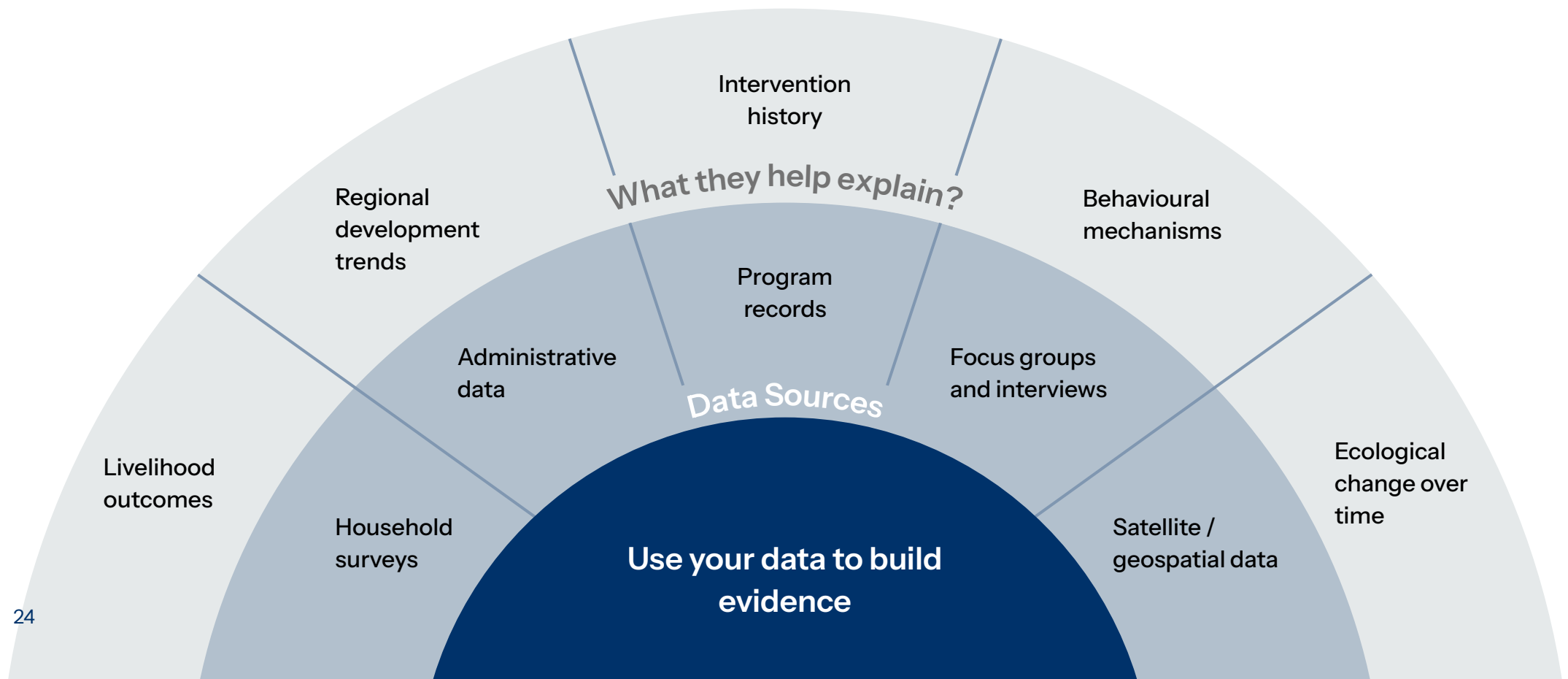
Phase of the intervention	Stakeholder	Intervention	How it changed the state of the stakeholder





Now, for everything you have listed under "How it changed the state of the stakeholder", add qualitative and quantitative evidence

Use both qualitative and quantitative data sources to gather and build evidence of the impact of the intervention, in collaboration with all actors in the system.





PRADAN's evidence

An example of Qualitative evidence



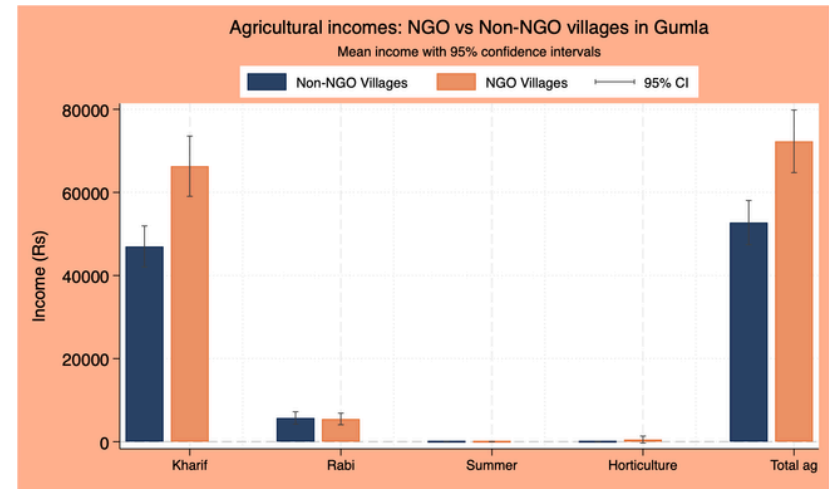
...Like, now we cultivate mustard, watermelon, peas, etc., but we were initially unaware of how to farm. People from outside came in to do this kind of cropping here, but they left, and we were unfamiliar with the techniques involved. This was taught to us by the PRADAN people; they provided us with training and manure, seeds, etc. We grow these crops on our farmland... they even provided us with training in making organic manure, and we make it too.
(FGD 1, Village Burhu, Gumla)



If you are getting a good paddy crop, you can switch to something else. Also, if you grow paddy, then you need more water. Instead, you can grow Daals or Til. And you can make Jaivik manure. You can make Jeevamrit, and you'll get training for it.
(FGD 36, Village Jhujrakasa, Dhamtari)



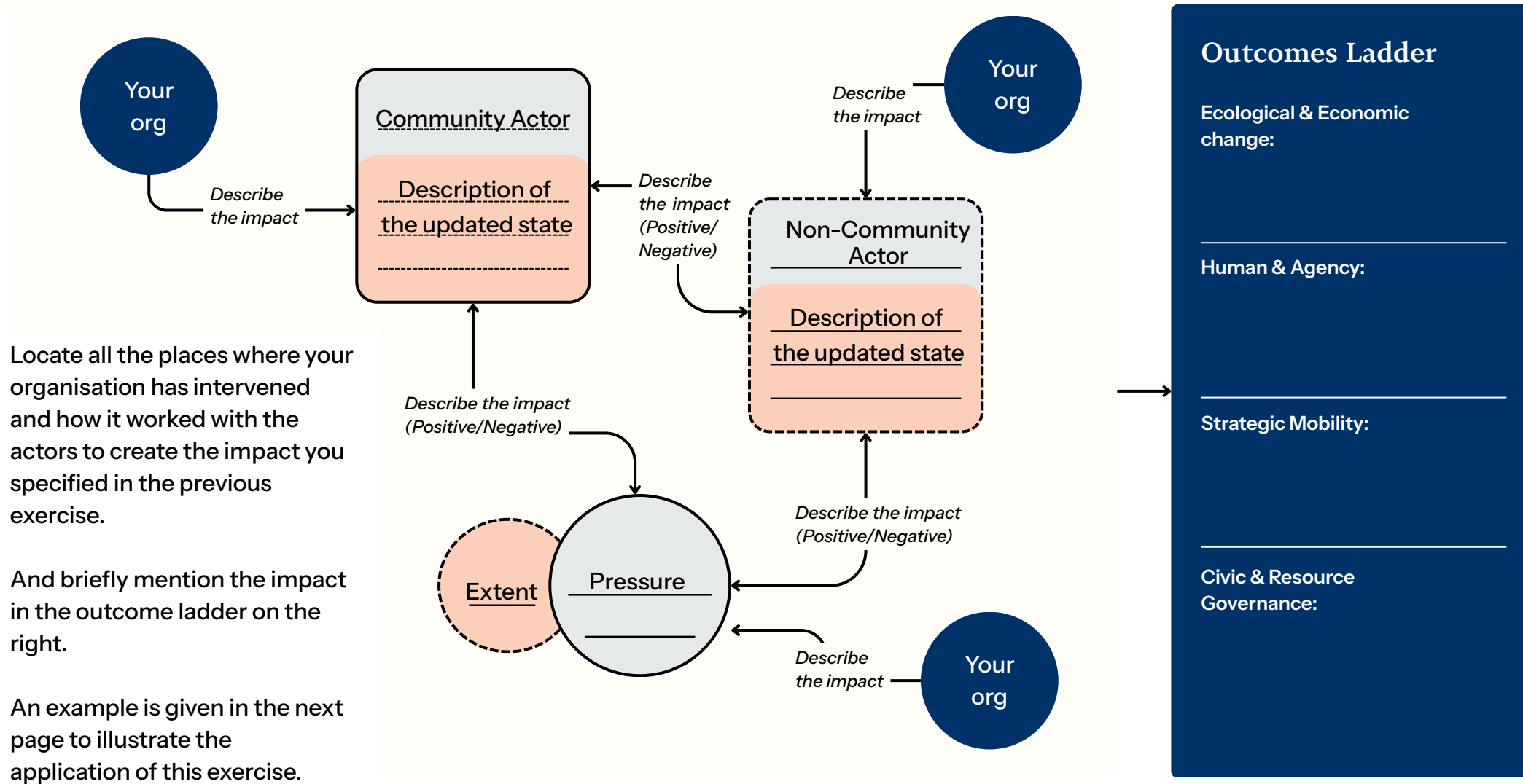
An example of Quantitative evidence



There is clear evidence of impact in Gumla. Villages with sustained PRADAN engagement show higher long-run agricultural productivity compared to non-PRADAN villages. The gains are especially visible in the rabi season and in areas where water constraints are binding.



Create an updated systems map that shows how the system evolved following the intervention



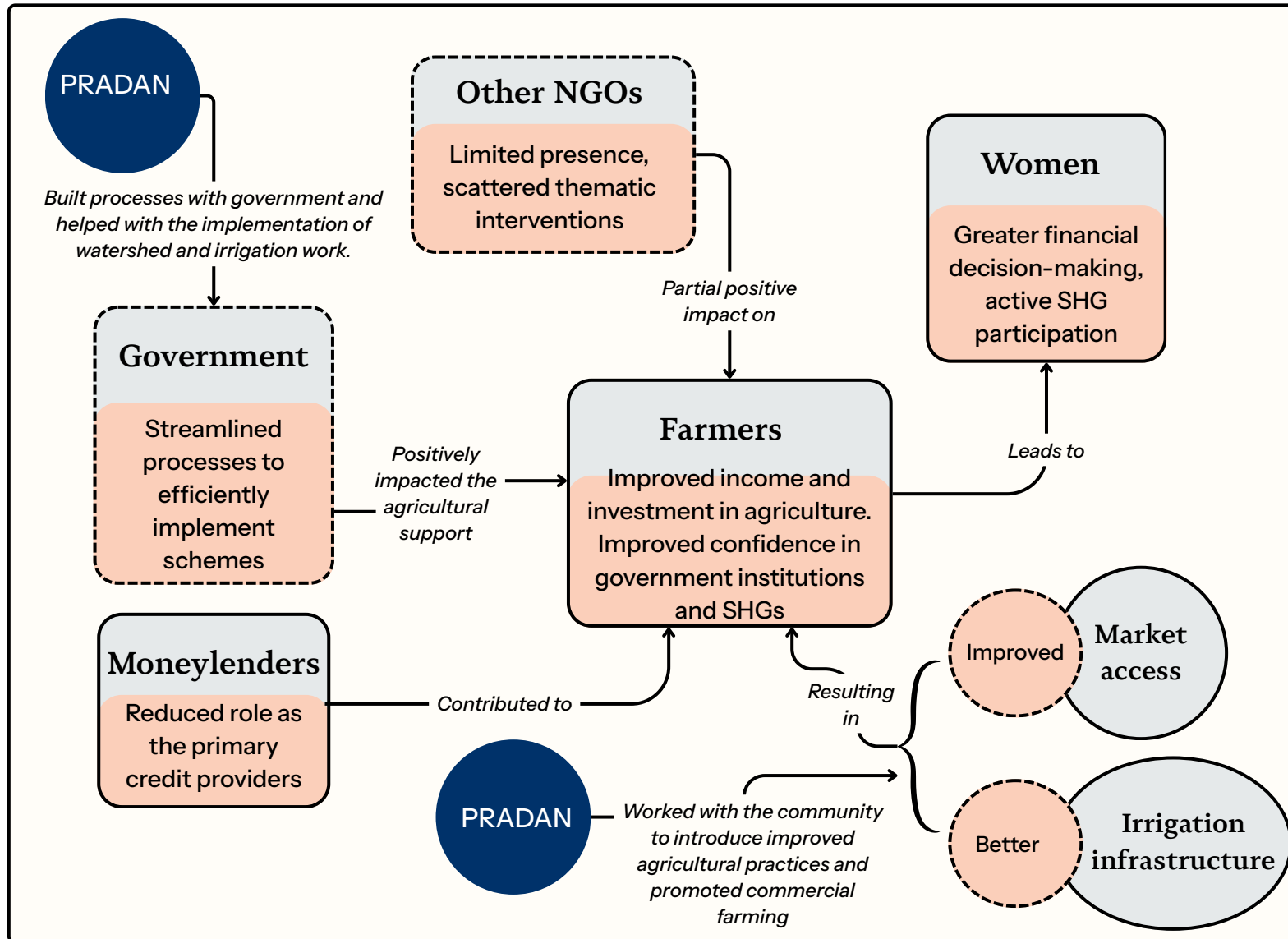
Locate all the places where your organisation has intervened and how it worked with the actors to create the impact you specified in the previous exercise.

And briefly mention the impact in the outcome ladder on the right.

An example is given in the next page to illustrate the application of this exercise.



Evolved Systems Map of Gumla after PRADAN Intervened



Outcomes Ladder

Ecological & Economic change:
Improved farm productivity and income. Easier access to loans.

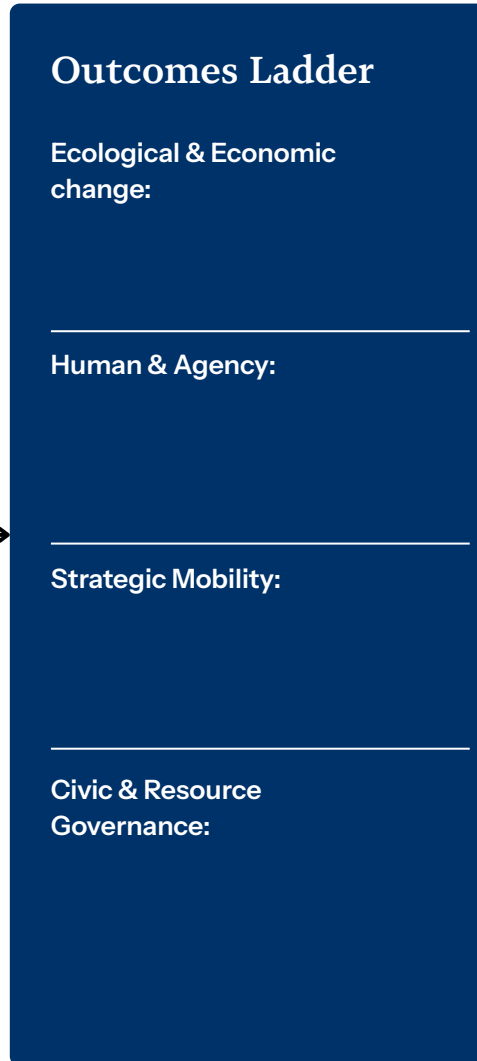
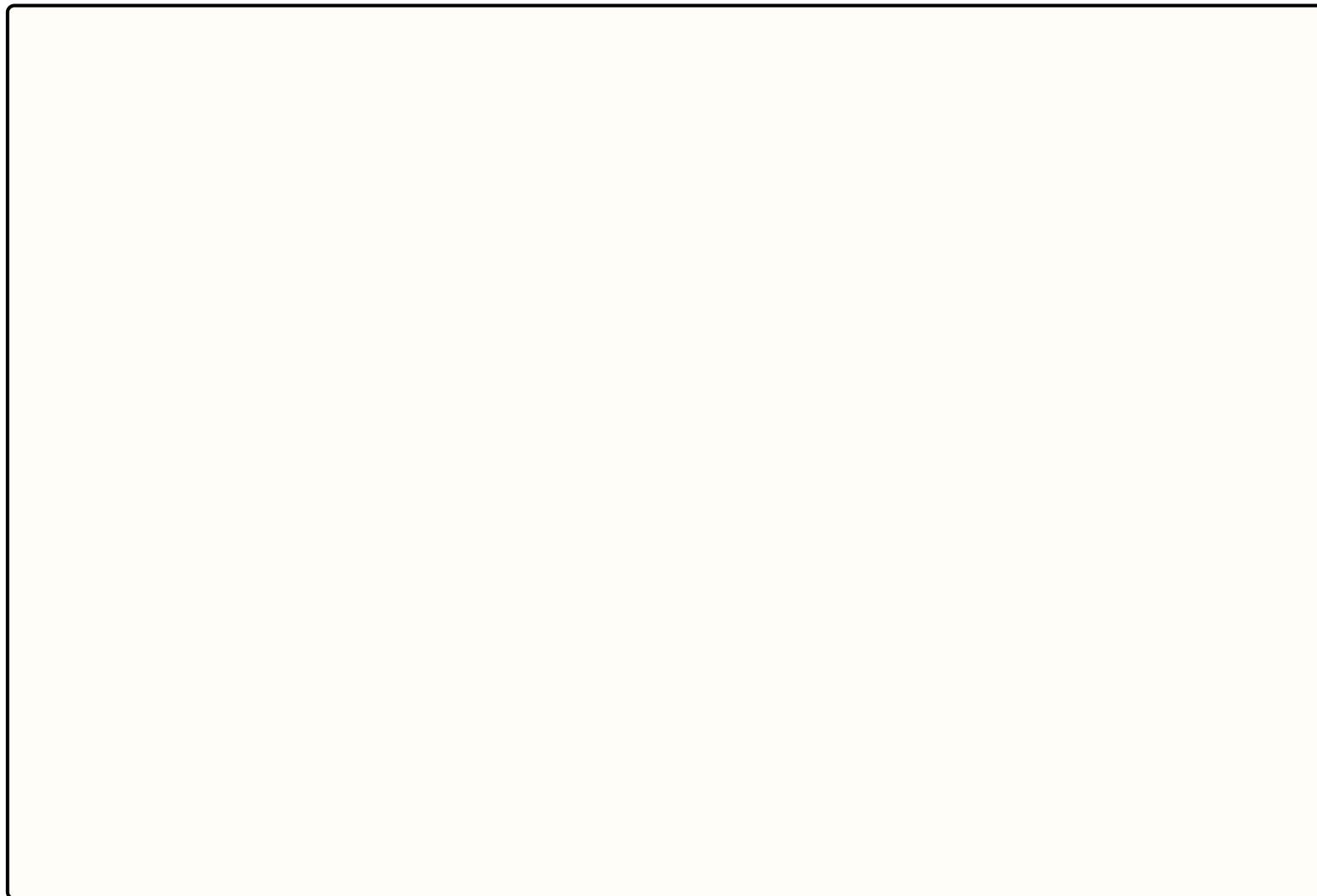
Human & Agency:
Women having time to participate in SHGs. Greater confidence in farming as livelihood.

Strategic Mobility:
Reduced seasonal migration. More family members staying to farm.

Civic & Resource Governance:
Improved agricultural resource use. Better soil and water management.



Use this page to build the systems map, to establish how the system evolved as your intervention impacted the system





O for Outcomes



We now move to understanding how long-term change appears across the system

So far, we have mapped the context and traced how interventions activated mechanisms within the system. We now move to understanding the outcomes that emerged over time.

Rather than viewing impact as a single end result, this framework organises outcomes across four interconnected domains of resilience. Together, they help us understand how change unfolds across livelihoods, agency, mobility, and collective governance.

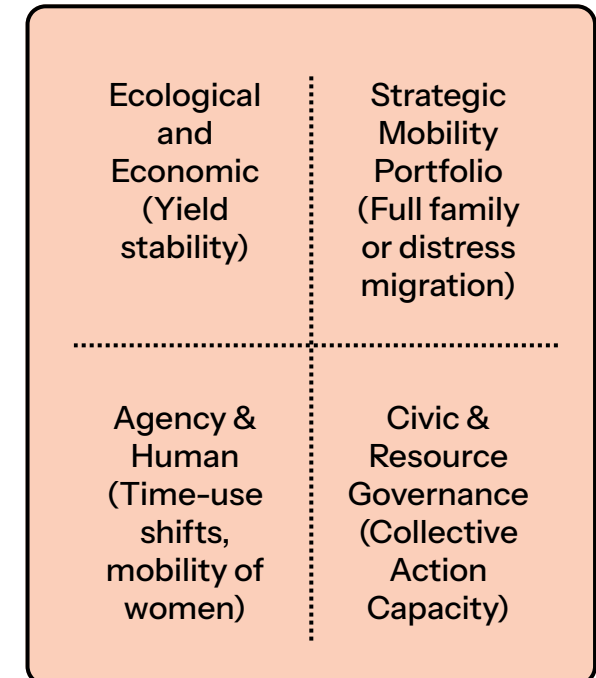
Ecological & Economic Change: This domain captures changes in agricultural productivity, livelihood stability, irrigation, diversification, and the use of natural resources. It reflects how communities become more resilient to environmental and economic shocks.

Strategic Mobility: This domain looks at how migration and mobility patterns evolve over time. A stronger system is one in which households have greater choice and migration becomes more strategic rather than distress-driven.

Human & Agency: This domain focuses on changes in confidence, decision-making, leadership, aspirations, and mobility, especially among women and marginalised groups.

Civic & Resource Governance: This domain captures the community's ability to act collectively, engage with institutions, manage shared resources, and negotiate with governance systems.

Resilience Matrix





Organise and elaborate observed outcomes across four domains

Ecological & Economic change:

Eg: Agricultural productivity, irrigation coverage, diversification

Strategic Mobility Portfolio:

Eg: Distress migration vs strategic migration

Agency & Human:

Eg: Women's mobility, decision-making power, leadership

Civic & Resource Governance:

Eg: Collective action, engagement with local government

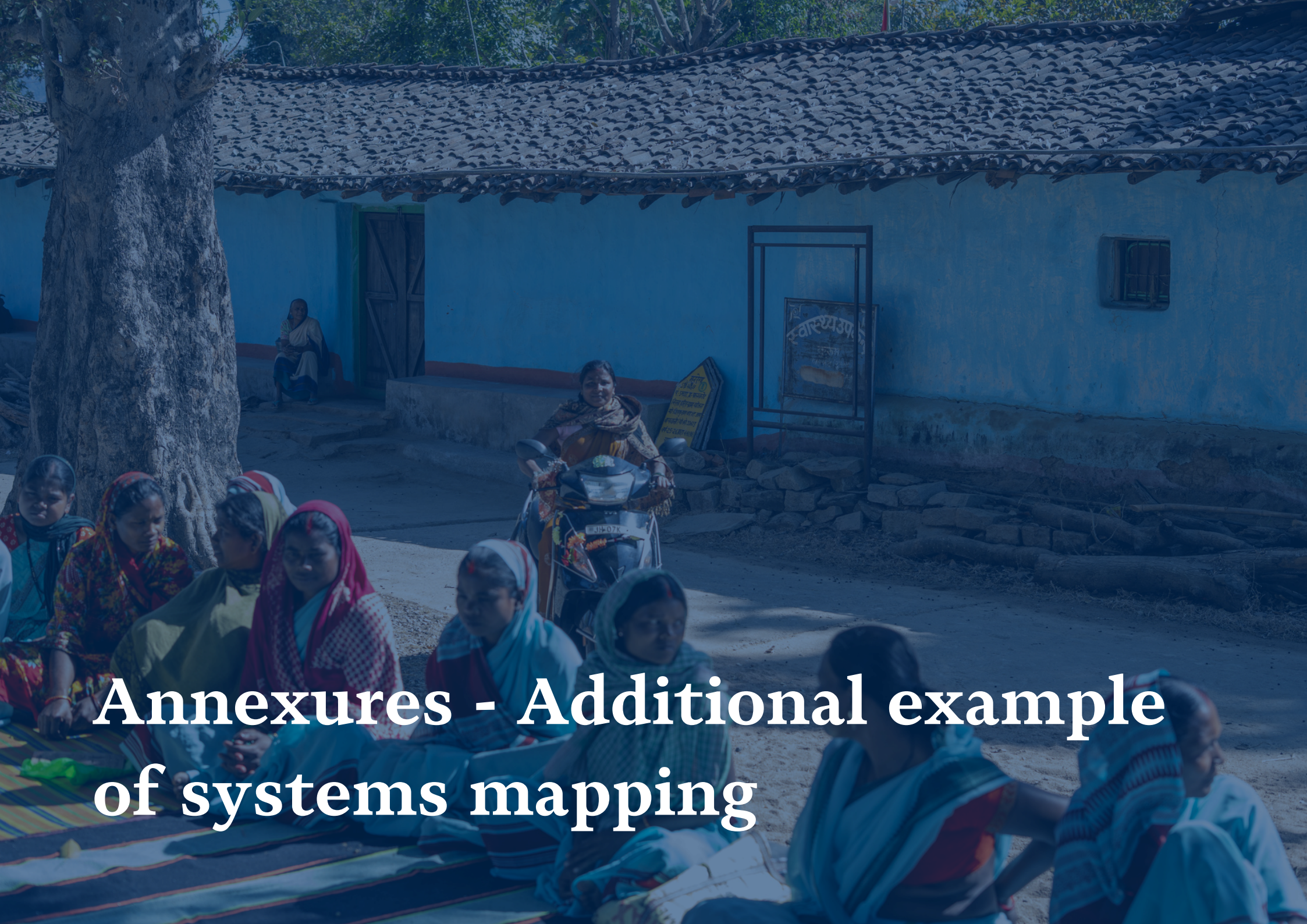
The Rural Development Impact Framework does not offer a universal formula for measuring impact. Instead, it provides a lens for understanding how sustained engagement drives long-term change in specific places.

Interventions introduce resources into ecological and institutional environments, triggering shifts in behaviour, capabilities and collective organisation. Over time, these shifts generate observable livelihood outcomes as well as less-visible institutional transformations in collective organisation, leadership, and engagement with governance systems. By linking structural conditions, mechanisms and resilience outcomes, the framework moves evaluation beyond isolated project outputs toward a more realistic understanding of cumulative transformation.

For the social sector, this represents a broader conceptual shift from evaluating projects to understanding systems, from attribution to contribution and from short-term outputs to long-term trajectories of change.

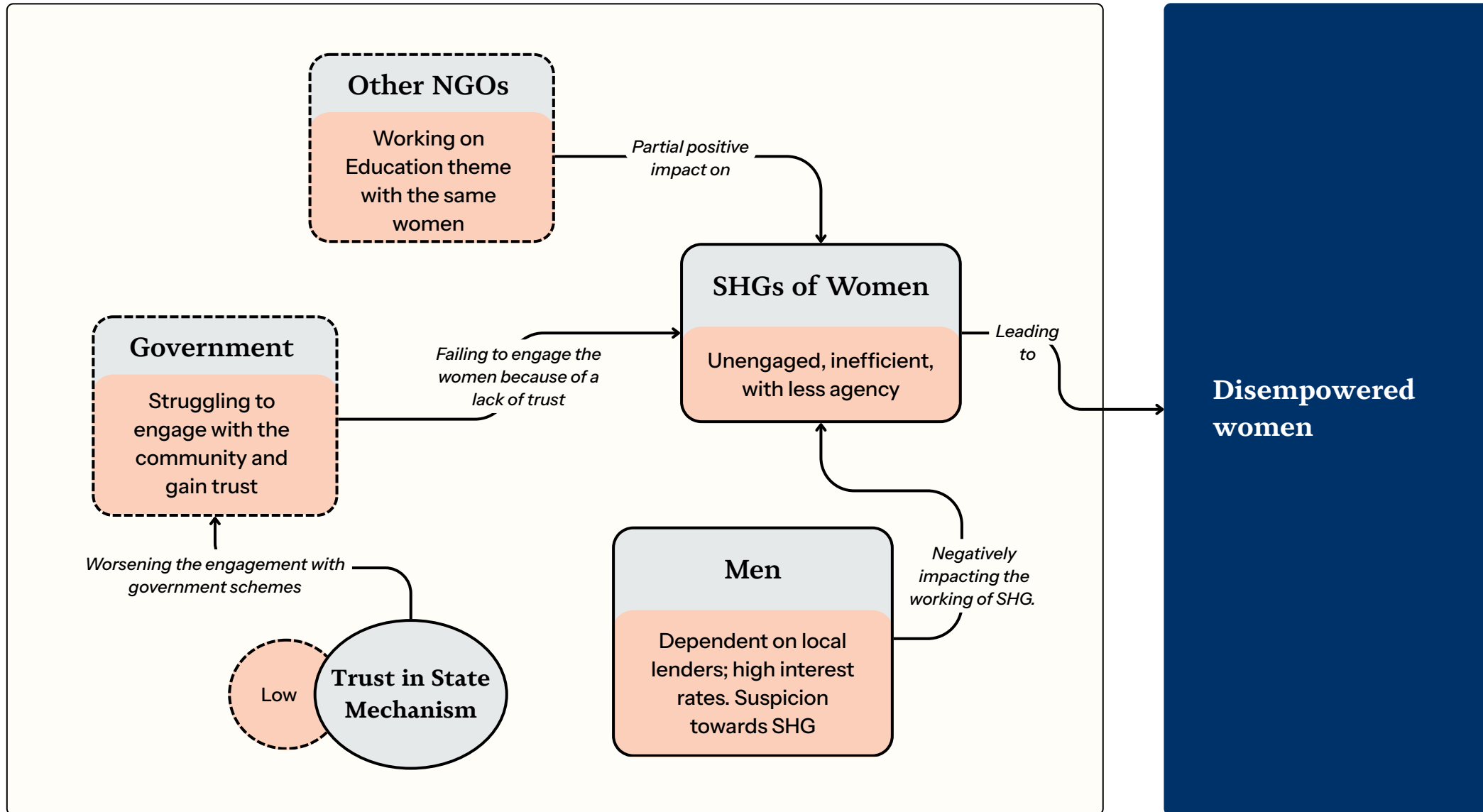
This handbook is not intended to fully capture an organisation's long-term impact, but to illustrate and critically engage with the realities of impact assessment on the ground.



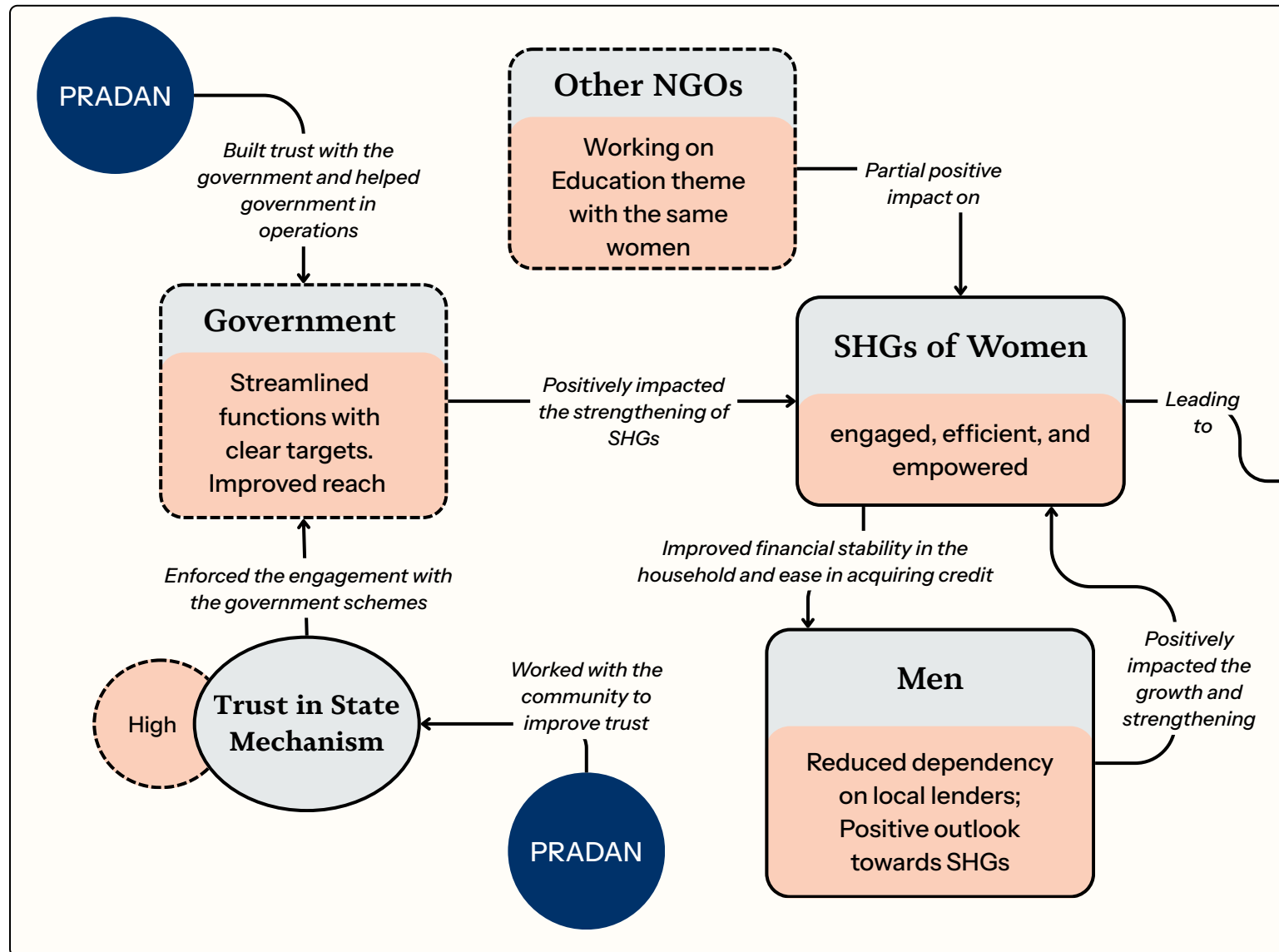


**Annexures - Additional example
of systems mapping**

Systems map of Dhamtari before PRADAN entered the region



Systems map of Dhamtari after PRADAN's interventions





Founded in 1983, PRADAN is working to reduce socio-economic inequalities in remote rural areas, especially among rural women, Dalits, and vulnerable tribal communities. We believe even the most underserved communities can drive the change they need. Working alongside these communities, PRADAN places young professionals directly in the field and partners with governments, donors, CSOs, and community institutions to unlock larger, systemic change in rural India. It has informed major state and central government programs and serves as a National Support Organisation to DAY-NRLM. Partnering with multiple stakeholders, PRADAN reaches 3.4 million households across 145 districts in 9 states (as of March 31, 2025), and aims to impact 50 million rural people by 2030.





About this Handbook

This handbook has been developed by ISDM based on the *Roots of Change: A Realist Framework for Long-Term Rural Development Impact* report (2026), produced in collaboration with PRADAN.

The report examines the long-term, systemic impact of sustained organisational engagement in rural geographies, drawing on over two decades of PRADAN's work across two districts — Gumla (Jharkhand) and Dhamtari (Chhattisgarh).

Using a mixed-methods approach combining household surveys across 2,010 households, village-level data from 201 villages, geospatial analysis, and qualitative fieldwork through focus group discussions and interviews, the study developed the Rural Development Impact Framework (RDIF), a realist evaluation lens for understanding how long-term development impact accumulates and unfolds within a geography over time.

This handbook translates that framework into a practical tool for development organisations seeking to map and understand their own long-term impact.

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