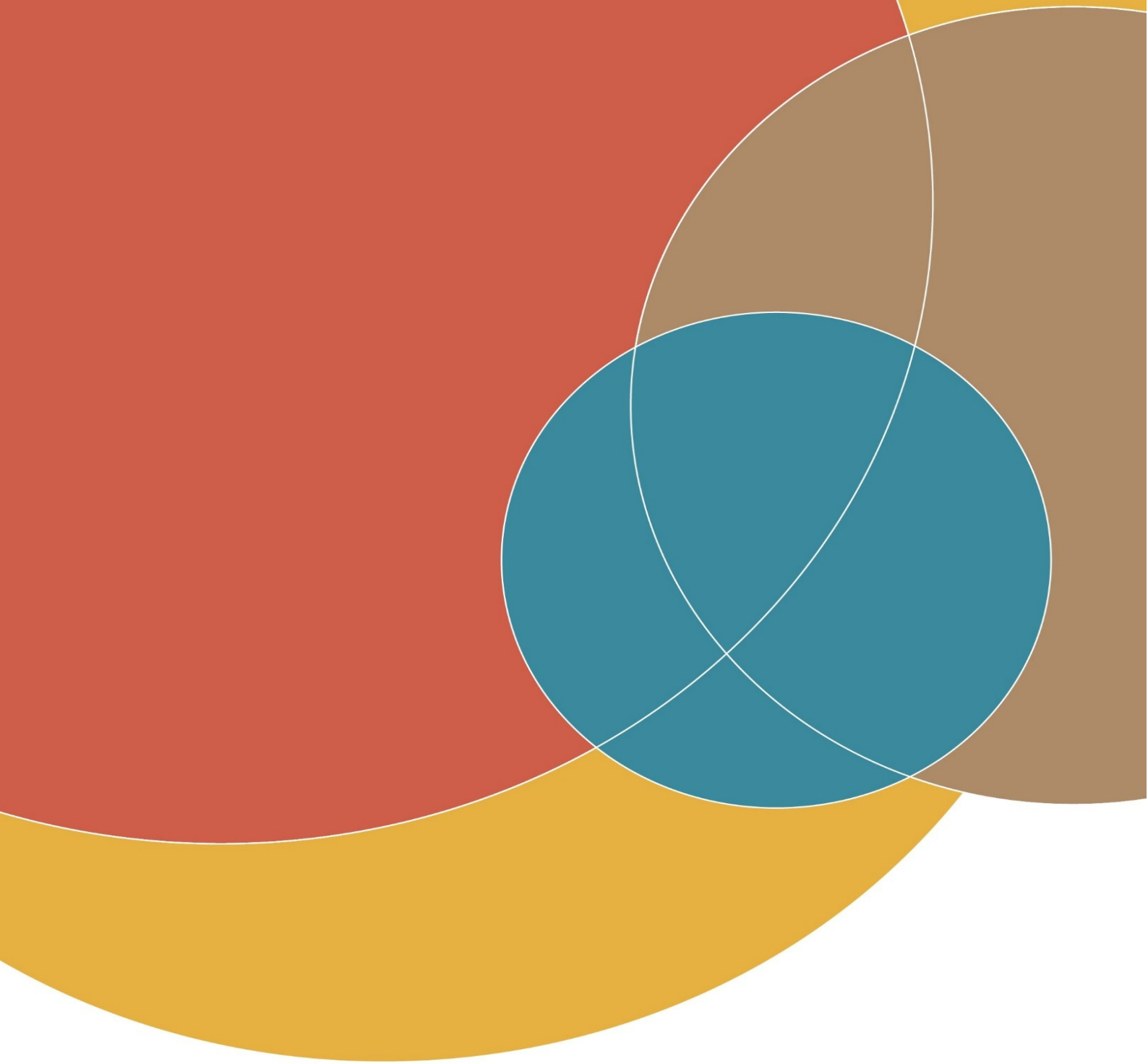


NWO-I Equity, Diversity and Inclusion plan 2025 – 2027

The Theory of Change for NWO-I

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1 Introduction

1.1 A bit of background

On behalf of the board of directors, an Implementation Plan for Diversity Policy was developed in 2018 for NWO, focusing on diversity and inclusion in relation to both research funding and internal personnel policy (NWO, 2018). The signing of the Diversity Charter in 2017 served as a foundation for this plan (NWO, 2017). Subsequently, in September 2020, the National Action Plan for more diversity and inclusion in scientific education was launched, in close collaboration with NWO and other partners (NWO, 2020). This plan outlines ambitions and actions to create an inclusive, diverse, and safe learning and working environment.

Two NWO-wide working groups were established to implement the Implementation Plan for Diversity Policy. One working group was led by the domain organisation of NWO (NWO-D) and focused on NWO's grant policy, while the other was led by the institute organisation of NWO (NWO-I) and concentrated on personnel policy. The main focus was on improving the gender balance, and i.e. the Women in Science Excel (WISE) programme was launched to attract more women researchers. A new Diversity and inclusion (D&I) implementation plan for 2022-2027 followed this.

NWO-D developed its own plan for personnel policy and the D&I plan 2022-2027 for NWO-I was aimed at all employees, including those in both the central organisation and the institutes. Unlike the previous plan, the D&I plan 2022-2027 focused solely on the personnel policy of NWO-I. There were differences in diversity, the challenges encountered, and the areas needing improvement among the NWO institutes and the central organisation. Consequently, the formulated action points did not apply equally to every component.

A D&I project leader was appointed at NWO-I on a part time basis starting from February 2023 to execute the D&I plan 2022-2027. The plan focused on a broader range than just gender and also addressed LGBTQIA+, cultural and/or religious background, and health/working capacity. For each theme, 44 actions were implemented. In addition to the D&I Project Leader, roles were assigned to HR, Communications, the collective bargaining negotiator, IT, the LGBTQIA+ advisory group, the management team, and Facilities. The plan also stated that starting in 2024, a full-time Diversity Officer would be appointed. As of June 1, 2024, the D&I Project Leader now serves in the role of Advisor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

1.2 Why a new plan 2025-2027 for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at NWO-I?

Establishing baseline data and conducting research are crucial for advancing Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), accurately tracking satisfaction, and effectively identifying and analyzing target groups (Nishida, 2019). The 2022-2027 D&I plan primarily focused on actions rather than outcomes. While the first comprehensive NWO-I employee satisfaction survey was conducted in 2023, specific experiences on underrepresented groups but also impact related to EDI have so far not been systematically tracked. To track progress, make data-driven decisions, and demonstrate the impact of our initiatives, the 2025-2027plan focuses on establishing measurable outcomes, and defining specific metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of our EDI strategies.

Ensuring the sustainability of EDI efforts is a key objective (Herring, 2009). Research indicates that genuine EDI progress is achieved only when actively supported by leadership (Morley, 2014). The 2022-2027 D&I plan assigned roles to various themes, but in practice, much of the responsibility fell to volunteers, often employees with temporary contracts, who formed D&I teams at the institutes. As a result, the 2025-2027plan aims to more deeply integrate EDI responsibilities to formal and informal leaders, ensuring a more sustainable and institutionalized approach.

The 2025-2027 plan explicitly incorporates equity, evolving into Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). We encourage all members of NWO-I to adopt and use these updated terms. The 2022-2027 plan also discussed equity but did not fully address it. Equity is vital because it recognizes and seeks to address systemic imbalances that impede fair opportunities and outcomes. Our ultimate goal is to cultivate a sense of belonging across NWO-I. This evolution and its significance will be explored further on.

1.3 What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change (ToC) emerged from programme evaluation methods for community-based initiatives in the mid-1990s. It is referred to as a "theory" because it provides a structured framework for understanding how change occurs and how it can be influenced. This theory is not fixed; it is tested and refined as it is implemented. The primary focus is always on identifying what is necessary to create meaningful change for real people. A ToC offers a comprehensive overview (often referred to as a "helicopter view") and is versatile enough to be applied over the long term for various purposes, such as fundraising or strategic planning. Unlike traditional approaches that start with desired outcomes, a ToC begins with the change that needs to happen and frames objectives within that context. This perspective shifts the focus from individual goals to a broader system of changes, recognizing that multiple actors play a role in achieving outcomes. The ToC outlines not only the output but also the outcome of the change process and provides a clearer understanding of the intermediate steps and interventions that are needed. This interconnectedness and its dynamics are explicitly considered in a Theory of Change. It is not a rigid framework; instead, it allows for flexibility and adaptation, enabling organisations to deviate from existing patterns or beliefs as needed. To facilitate this adaptability, a ToC outlines assumptions about how change occurs, which can be tested and used to refine the approach.

1.4 The process we followed

NWO-I engaged the organisation Flowz to develop and deliver a series of 4 workshops aimed at creating the foundational elements for a Theory of Change (ToC) document to support its Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) plan. Flowz designed and facilitated four in-person workshops, structured to promote in-depth discussions and collaborative work among members of the EDI NWO-I Steering Group. These sessions were focused on defining the building blocks for a comprehensive ToC for EDI.

Additionally, Flowz provided a draft outline and structure for the ToC, integrating feedback throughout the process to allow additional stakeholders from several NWO institutes working on EDI to review and refine the document.

MDF Nederland facilitated the last two workshops, during which the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were developed. Additionally, relevant stakeholders from previously unrepresented institutes were involved.This iterative approach ensured that the final Theory of Change was not only aligned with the EDI objectives of NWO-I but also captured diverse perspectives from all relevant stakeholders, resulting in a robust and well-supported document.

1.5 Steering group for Promoting Access, Knowledge, and Research on EDI

SPARK stands for Steering Group for Promoting Access, Knowledge, and Research on EDI. The Steering Group on EDI aims to provide strategic direction for EDI initiatives within NWO-I. SPARK has been in existence since the end of 2023, and all institutes and Bureau are represented. SPARK contains members with specific EDI tasks in their everyday work. Yet, they also often hold additional roles within their institutions. An additional document exists that describes the roles and responsibilities of SPARK.

1.6 Reading guide

This document is divided into four chapters. Chapter 2 sets the definition for equity, diversity and inclusion, identifies target groups, and outlines the barriers and challenges to be overcome, culminating in a vision for long-term change for EDI. Chapter 3 details the pathways to achieving the EDI goals, with actionable steps, and a Theory of Change diagram, while addressing key assumptions. Chapter 4 the interventions that are currently existing and still need to be developed. It also defines indicators for measuring progress. Lastly, chapter 5, focuses on the ongoing use of the Theory of Change for critical reflection and adaptation, outlining the process for evaluating and adjusting the EDI implementation plan to ensure its continued effectiveness.

2 How we believe change will happen

In this chapter, we outline the definitions for equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). We then identify the target groups for EDI, explaining the rationale behind their selection and how addressing their needs aligns with the programme's overall objectives. By analyzing the persistent challenges such as underrepresentation and systemic biases, we highlight why these issues continue to exist, and discusses the strategies to tackle these obstacles. Finally, we present our vision for long-term changes, describing the transformative impact we hope to achieve and how these changes will contribute to the broader goals of the organisation.

2.1 Definitions

In our pursuit of a just and inclusive society, it is essential to thoroughly understand the concepts of diversity, inclusion, and equity. These definitions do not stand alone; they are interconnected and together form the foundation for an environment where everyone feels valued and accepted. After extensive discussions, we define diversity, inclusion and equity as follows;

Diversity: The practice or quality of including a range of visible and/or invisible differences between people.
Inclusion: A safe environment that fosters acceptance, appreciation, initiative and self-expression.
Equity: Continuously identifying and eliminating obstacles to achieve fair treatment and opportunities for all.

Diversity emphasizes the importance of embracing a range of visible and invisible differences among people, while inclusion ensures that these differences are appreciated in a safe environment. Visible differences include characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, and physical abilities, while invisible differences encompass aspects like sexual orientation, religion, neurodiversity, mental health, and socioeconomic background. Equity focuses on identifying and eliminating obstacles to guarantee fair treatment and opportunities for all.

Together, diversity, inclusion, and equity create a powerful framework that helps us cultivate a culture where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. Recognizing the value of different perspectives and promoting an inclusive environment is crucial for achieving equitable opportunities. Ultimately, the desired outcome of these efforts is a profound sense of belonging, where individuals feel they are an integral part of the community and can fully engage without barriers. These definitions can be used by NWO institutes themselves.

2.2 The target groups and rationale

The Theory of Change (ToC) targets individuals in both formal and informal leadership roles at NWO-I. We focus on leaders—both formal and informal—because they possess the authority, influence, and resources necessary to champion and implement effective EDI initiatives across the organisation. Research indicates that engaging leaders at all levels is crucial for fostering an inclusive culture and achieving sustainable change that impacts every facet of the organisation (Baker, 2021; Noble & Irwin, 2018). Leaders often hold financial, moral, and ethical leverage, which can significantly propel and sustain the momentum for change.

By explicitly recognizing informal leaders, we acknowledge their vital role in shaping organisational culture and driving change from within. Informal leaders often possess unique insights and relationships that enable them to influence their peers and foster a sense of community. This approach ensures that change is not solely imposed from the top down; instead, it encourages grassroots support and engagement, which are essential for lasting impact. By combining the authority of formal leaders with the authentic connections and credibility of informal leaders, this two-pronged strategy enhances the likelihood of sustainable success.

However, this does not mean that the involvement of all individuals within the organisation is not important. In fact, widespread engagement is crucial for cultivating a truly inclusive culture. "Leading by example" is vital, as it sets the tone for others to follow. It ensures that the changes resonate throughout the organisation and are embraced by all, fostering an environment where everyone feels empowered to contribute to the ongoing journey of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Formal Leaders:

- **Managers and Project Leaders**: Individuals who oversee teams and are responsible for day-to-day operations and decision-making.
- **Directors**: Senior leaders who guide strategic direction and have a significant impact on institute/Bureau priorities.
- **Works Council (OR) Members**: formal decision making body with representatives involved in organisational governance and employee representation.

Informal Leaders:

- **Connectors**: Individuals who facilitate communication and collaboration across different groups and networks within the organisation usually as a personal characteristic.
- **Senior Staff**: Experienced professionals who, through their expertise and influence, can drive change and support EDI efforts.
- **EDI Professionals**: Employees with an interest in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion who advocate for and implement EDI strategies and practices, such as the EDI teams, SPARK and the Employee Resource Groups. An organisation chart for the EDI structure is added under attachments.

There may be overlap between these groups, but they are described separately because each plays a crucial role in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts. Engaging these leaders is essential to ensure that EDI initiatives are effectively prioritized and executed throughout NWO-I.

2.3 Barriers and challenges

Implementing effective EDI initiatives is often hindered by a range of internal and external barriers. The below-mentioned barriers and challenges are mapped out by SPARK. It is important to recognize that the presence of these barriers is a natural part of the change process and does not negate the existence of good intentions within the organisation. Many individuals and leaders are genuinely committed to fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion, and their intentions are often aligned with the organisation's goals. Understanding this context is crucial as we work to identify and address the challenges that impede progress.

Internal barriers and challenges

Internally, organisations frequently encounter the challenge of focusing on short-term goals to achieve success, which can overshadow the need for long-term, transformative changes in EDI. This short-term orientation leads to prioritizing immediate results over addressing deeper, systemic issues, resulting in superficial solutions rather than meaningful progress. Additionally, a technical mindset, which treats EDI issues as operational problems, often fails to address the complex, human-centered aspects of creating an inclusive environment. This approach can limit the depth of the response to EDI challenges, preventing substantial change.

Another significant internal barrier is the feeling of threat among individuals who perceive EDI initiatives as a challenge to their authority or status. When individuals believe that EDI efforts undermine their roles or diminish their influence, they may actively oppose these initiatives or disengage from the process. This resistance can stem from historically deeply rooted power dynamics and social hierarchies, and can impede collaboration and dialogue necessary for fostering a culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion, ultimately stalling progress within the organisation.

Unconscious bias further complicates EDI efforts, as it affects decisions and interactions without individuals being aware of it, perpetuating existing inequalities. Unconscious bias refers to automatic, unintentional attitudes or stereotypes that affect our perceptions and decisions about others, often leading to discrimination and inequality without our awareness. A lack of awareness about EDI principles and their importance can also stymie progress, as stakeholders who do not understand the issues may not fully engage with the necessary

changes. Excuses such as “our primary focus is research” or “we simply cannot find qualified women for the position” have been cited.

Moreover, some individuals may be convinced that their current efforts are sufficient, leading to complacency and a lack of further action or investment in more comprehensive EDI strategies. Ignorance about the extent and impact of EDI issues can similarly be a barrier, as stakeholders who are unaware of the challenges faced by underrepresented groups are less likely to support effective solutions. Resistance to change is another common challenge, driven by fear of the unknown or skepticism about the benefits of EDI initiatives, which can impede the achievement of desired outcomes. Downplaying the significance of EDI issues also poses a problem, as minimizing these challenges can result in inadequate responses and a lack of prioritization. Finally, the vagueness of EDI as a concept can lead to unclear goals and strategies, making it difficult to implement effective plans and measure success.

External barriers and challenges

Externally, organisations face additional barriers such as competing priorities, which can divert attention and resources away from EDI efforts. When EDI is not seen as a top priority, it may suffer from insufficient focus and commitment, hindering its effectiveness. General work pressure also plays a role, as high workloads and competing demands can limit the time and resources available for EDI initiatives. A lack of support from leadership and key stakeholders is another significant external challenge, as strong endorsement and allocation of resources are essential for the success of EDI efforts. Similarly, a lack of commitment from all levels of the organisation, including senior leadership, can undermine EDI initiatives, resulting in inconsistent practices and limited impact.

Therefore, those leading EDI efforts may sometimes lack the authority needed to drive change effectively. Without the necessary influence or decision-making power, their efforts can be stymied by competing interests or a lack of buy-in from key decision-makers. Finally, a lack of resources, including funding and personnel, can severely limit the scope and effectiveness of EDI initiatives, making it challenging to achieve meaningful outcomes. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach, including increasing awareness, securing commitment, and aligning EDI efforts with broader organisational goals to foster a supportive environment for change.

2.4 Our vision for long-term change

In our vision, we aim to cultivate an organisation where every individual experiences a profound sense of belonging and is valued for their unique qualities. We envision a dynamic environment characterized by a diverse range of backgrounds, perspectives, and abilities within our workforce. We hold that genuine strength emerges from these differences and are committed to fostering a setting where each unique voice is not only acknowledged but celebrated.

The long term vision is:

An inclusive and diverse workplace, where everyone feels a sense of belonging, fostering opportunities for all to thrive in an equitable environment.

Central to our vision is the pursuit of equity for all. We foresee a workplace where fairness—treating everyone equitable and without bias—and justice—addressing and correcting systemic inequalities—are not merely aspirational concepts but practical realities. Regardless of one's background or circumstances, every member of our team should have equitable access to opportunities for growth, advancement, and success. We are dedicated to dismantling barriers and addressing systemic inequalities to ensure that every individual can thrive and realize their fullest potential.

At the core of our vision is a firm belief in the power of inclusion and equity to drive meaningful positive change. By cultivating a culture of respect, empathy, and understanding, we aim to create an environment where everyone can contribute their distinctive talents and perspectives toward a common goal. Together, we aspire to build a more equitable future where diversity is not only embraced but recognized as our greatest strength. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to create a strong sense of belonging, where individuals feel valued as essential members of the community and are empowered to participate fully without any obstacles.

3. Pathways to change

In this chapter we translate our overarching vision into shorter-term goals that can drive meaningful progress in our equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. We outline three distinct pathways, which are structured approaches that detail the specific actions and processes necessary to achieve our objectives. These pathways are designed to interconnect and reinforce one another, creating a synergistic effect that enhances our overall impact. The pathways have the potential for long-term sustainability, while enabling adjustments to short-term goals and interventions as needed. To visually represent this framework, we include a Theory of Change (ToC) diagram that illustrates the connections between our activities, outcomes, and impact. Flyers of this strategy will also be developed. Additionally, we identify the key assumptions underlying these pathways and analyze potential weak spots that may require further research or adjustments. We anticipate that these pathways will remain relevant over the long term, allowing us to adapt our shorter-term goals and interventions as needed to ensure sustained success in our EDI efforts.

3.1 Short term goal(s) and the pathways of change

The short-term goal for the years 2025-2027 is:

By the end of 2027, because of our work we have a significantly* more diverse work force at all levels of the organisation, and a measurable increase in safety, employee satisfaction, and accessibility* through increased active contribution of all formal and informal leaders.

*adjusted to the context of the NWO-Institutes.

The above-mentioned short-term goal can be divided into three pathways of change:

- Pathway 1: a more diverse workforce at all levels of the organisation
- Pathway 2: a measurable increase in employee satisfaction and safety
- Pathway 3: a measurable increase in physical and digital accessibility

Pathway 1: a more diverse workforce at all levels of the organisation

The first step towards building a diverse workforce is recognizing the intrinsic value that diversity brings to an organisation. Research has consistently shown that diverse teams foster increased creativity and innovation, as individuals from varied backgrounds contribute unique perspectives and ideas (McKinsey & Company, 2020). This diversity of thought enhances problem-solving capabilities, enabling teams to approach challenges from multiple angles and ultimately leading to more effective decision-making. According to a study by McKinsey, organisations in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity are 21% and 33% more likely, respectively, to outperform their peers in profitability (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Understanding these advantages lays a solid foundation for why diversity matters, not only for organisational success but also for promoting a more equitable society.

Building a diverse workforce involves more than merely hiring individuals from varied backgrounds; it necessitates the creation of an inclusive environment that actively supports and values all employees. Research indicates that organisations that prioritize diversity without first establishing an inclusive culture risk alienating diverse talent, leading to high turnover rates and missed opportunities for innovation (Deloitte, 2017). A study from Deloitte found that inclusive companies are more likely to attract and retain top talent, as employees feel respected and valued (Deloitte, 2017).

Inclusive Hiring

Leaders might enhance their effectiveness by strengthening their confidence in executing inclusive hiring practices. This involves gaining knowledge about diverse talent pools, understanding the barriers that different groups might face, and exploring strategies to overcome these challenges. Seeking training or consulting with

experts can help leaders build their skills and self-efficacy in this area. A positive attitude towards diversity and optimism about the potential for change play important roles in promoting inclusive hiring. By cultivating a mindset that views diversity as an opportunity rather than a challenge, leaders can inspire a collective effort towards more inclusive hiring practices throughout the organisation.

With this foundational mindset in place, leaders can begin to explore specific inclusive hiring practices. This may include creating job descriptions that appeal to a broad range of candidates, utilizing diverse recruitment channels, and ensuring that the selection process is as free from biases as possible. Leaders might also consider setting diversity targets and regularly reviewing recruitment data to track progress.

For meaningful organisational change, engaging and inspiring teams and peers to embrace inclusive hiring practices is key. Regular communication, training sessions, and sharing success stories of diverse hires who have made positive contributions to the organisation can be effective strategies. Additionally, recognizing and rewarding the efforts made by teams to enhance diversity can further encourage these initiatives.

Inclusive Retention

Hiring and retention go hand in hand; it's important to continue diversifying recruitment efforts while also emphasizing the importance of talent retention. From a business perspective, effective retention strategies can help reduce turnover costs, which can be significant in terms of recruitment, training, and lost productivity (McKinsey & Company, 2018). Leaders can serve as role models by demonstrating inclusive behaviors in their daily interactions. This means being open, approachable, and respectful toward all employees, regardless of their background. By modeling inclusive behavior, leaders can set a standard that encourages others to follow.

Each institute may consider developing and implementing its own strategies to foster inclusion and working on inclusion on a central level in collaboration with SPARK. This could involve forming and further developing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) teams, informing employees during onboarding about the Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), hosting regular discussions on inclusion, and creating mentorship programmes to support underrepresented groups. Ensuring that all employees feel welcome, comfortable, and safe is key to retaining diverse talent.

Inclusive retention also involves providing fair and equitable career advancement opportunities. Management and promotion committees can strive to operate inclusive, ensuring that decisions are made based on merit and free from biases related to ethnicity, gender, or background. This can be supported through unconscious bias training and the implementation of standardized promotion criteria. Leaders may want to define and implement employee benefits and conditions that are inclusive and equitable. This includes offering flexible working arrangements, parental leave for all genders, and support for employees with disabilities. By providing benefits that cater to a diverse workforce, organisations can help all employees feel valued and supported.

To enhance the effectiveness of retention efforts, leaders can continuously monitor the impact of their strategies. This involves regularly collecting feedback from employees, conducting surveys, and reviewing diversity and inclusion metrics. Based on this data, leaders can be prepared to make necessary adjustments to better meet the needs of a diverse workforce.

Ultimately, achieving and maintaining a diverse workforce involves a commitment to continuous improvement. Leaders may find it beneficial to regularly review and update both hiring and retention policies to reflect the evolving needs of their workforce. This ongoing process helps ensure that the organisation remains dedicated to diversity and inclusion, fostering a workplace where everyone feels safe, valued, and empowered to contribute their best.

Pathway 2: a measurable increase in employee satisfaction and social safety

Creating a positive work environment that prioritizes **social safety** and **employee satisfaction** is essential for fostering a productive and engaged workforce. Achieving a measurable increase in these areas involves several

thoughtful steps that can help organisations cultivate a culture of respect, support, and continuous improvement.

Social Safety

Social safety refers to the assurance that employees can express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns without fear of retaliation, judgment, or negative consequences. It encompasses the ability to engage in open and honest communication, fostering a climate of trust and mutual respect. When employees feel socially safe, they are more likely to share ideas, raise concerns, and provide feedback, which are crucial for a thriving workplace.

One of the first steps is for leaders to recognize the potential for social safety issues within their organisation and appreciate the importance of minimizing these occurrences. This initial awareness lays the groundwork for a safe and supportive workplace environment. Leaders may consider pursuing training on enhancing social safety, which can equip them with the skills necessary to address these issues effectively. Such training offers insights into social safety requirements and highlights the broader benefits of a secure work environment, including improved employee morale and productivity.

Demonstrating vulnerability and enforcing social safety policies are also important. Leaders can create a culture of openness by being willing to listen to their employees, acknowledge their concerns, and adapt policies as needed to foster ongoing safety and trust. This commitment encourages employees to speak up without fear of retaliation or judgment, promoting a sense of belonging. When employees know they can voice their opinions and experiences without repercussions, it fosters a greater sense of engagement and commitment to the organisation.

To maintain this environment, leaders can continuously monitor the effectiveness of social safety measures and make adjustments as necessary to meet the evolving needs of the workforce.

Employee Satisfaction

In addition to social safety, recognizing the significance of employee satisfaction is vital. Leaders can actively monitor satisfaction levels and identify key issues affecting their workforce, also the needs of underrepresented groups. These groups may feel particularly vulnerable and may not always feel comfortable expressing their needs or concerns. By actively seeking input from these individuals and groups, we can ensure that their unique perspectives and interests are considered. This inclusion not only enhances social safety but also contributes significantly to overall employee satisfaction. Employees are more likely to feel satisfied when they believe their voices matter and their specific interests are being addressed.

While the majority perspective may highlight common themes, it does not necessarily capture the experiences and challenges faced by underrepresented or less vocal employees. Prioritizing these voices is essential because ignoring them can perpetuate feelings of exclusion and hinder overall organisational progress. Commitment to these procedures can create a supportive workplace where employees feel valued and heard.

To sustain a high level of employee satisfaction and social safety, establishing a culture of continuous improvement can be beneficial. This involves regularly reviewing and updating policies and procedures to reflect changing needs and standards. By embedding these principles into the organisation’s practices, leaders can ensure a sustained commitment to employee well-being, creating a workplace where everyone feels safe, satisfied, and empowered to contribute their best.

Pathway 3: a measurable increase in physical and digital accessibility

Accessibility is a fundamental aspect of fostering an inclusive environment for all staff and users. It encompasses both digital accessibility**,** which refers to the design of online content and tools that can be accessed and used by people with diverse abilities, and physical accessibility, which involves creating spaces that are navigable and usable for individuals with disabilities. By assessing current accessibility statuses and

implementing targeted strategies, we can create a more welcoming atmosphere that supports diverse needs and promotes overall success.

A thorough assessment of the current accessibility status is essential to identify the specific needs of (future) staff and users. This involves understanding the barriers to accessibility and gathering input from diverse stakeholders, including people with disabilities. Based on this assessment, leaders can benefit from a comprehensive action plan that outlines specific steps, timelines, and responsibilities for improving accessibility.

Leaders can then become aware of the importance of accessibility, both **digital and physical**, recognizing its impact on inclusion and organisational success. They could deepen their understanding of accessibility requirements, including the legal frameworks and broader benefits, such as increased user engagement and compliance with regulations. By fostering a positive attitude towards accessibility, leaders can commit to making it a priority within the organisation.

Implementing targeted training programmes for staff is crucial to build the necessary skills and knowledge to support accessibility initiatives. Training should cover digital accessibility standards, tools, and best practices. With this foundation in place, organisations can identify and implement solutions that address the accessibility needs identified in the assessment, which may include adopting new technologies, redesigning processes, or modifying existing resources.

To ensure these measures are effective, it is important to continuously monitor their impact and make adjustments as needed. This ongoing evaluation helps ensure that accessibility efforts are meeting their intended goals and are responsive to new challenges or changes in needs. Finally, creating a culture of continuous accessibility improvement is key. By embedding accessibility into the organisation's policies and practices, and regularly reviewing and updating strategies to reflect evolving standards and needs, we can maintain and enhance their commitment to accessibility over time.

3.2 The Theory of Change diagram

To be inserted once developed by the designer

3.3 Key assumptions

In developing pathways to change, we are aware that there are several key assumptions underpin the model. These assumptions guide the strategy but also highlight potential "weak spots" that require further research and learning. We would like to identify these key assumptions. We have identified and describe five key assumptions. In the next chapter we will offer some solutions.

The first assumption is that there is a shared understanding among leaders and employees about what diversity, equity, and inclusion (EDI) entail and their importance to the organisation. In reality, definitions and perceptions of EDI can vary significantly across NWO-I institutes, which can hinder cohesive implementation of EDI initiatives.

Secondly, the model presumes that leaders at all levels are committed to EDI efforts and are prepared to act as role models, demonstrating vulnerability, listening to employee concerns, and adapting policies as needed. However, leaders might lack the necessary skills, motivation, or willingness to drive these changes, especially in the face of other pressing organisational priorities or resistance from staff.

Thirdly, the model assumes that once leaders pursue training, they will acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively address these issues. This assumes that training programmes are well-designed, accessible, and directly relevant to the specific challenges faced by the organisation. In reality, this link might not be that straightforward, suggesting a belief in the effectiveness of tailored policies and the assumption that these will lead to a sense of belonging and engagement among employees.

Our fourth assumption is that there are sufficient resources and budget for EDI initiatives, but in practice, most EDI efforts are driven by volunteers who may lack time or adequate funding to implement changes effectively. Leaders often prioritize scientific output over EDI efforts, leading to insufficient focus on creating an inclusive environment**.** At this point there is no strategic budget yet for EDI initiatives. The effectiveness of these initiatives can therefore vary based on specific organisational contexts, including existing culture, workforce demographics, and available resources.

Lastly, it is assumed that a culture of continuous improvement can be established and maintained, leading to regularly updated policies and practices that reflect changing needs and standards. However, achieving this requires ongoing commitment from (new) leaders and an adaptable organisational structure, which may not always be present. Cultural differences among the NWO institutes, including variations in size, workforce demographics, and scientific focus areas, along with challenges like leadership turnover, strategic shifts, or political changes, can disrupt the continuity of EDI initiatives.

In addressing these key assumptions, it becomes clear that while our model provides a foundational framework for EDI implementation, it also reveals several areas that need targeted attention and refinement. Recognizing the diverse interpretations of EDI, the varying levels of leadership commitment, the challenges in aligning EDI with scientific goals, and the constraints related to resources and continuous improvement highlights the complexity of effectively driving EDI initiatives. As we move forward, our focus will shift towards actionable solutions designed to address these "weak spots."

In the next chapter, we will propose strategies and interventions to bridge these gaps, ensuring that our EDI efforts are both impactful and sustainable. By tackling these challenges head-on, we aim to foster a more cohesive, inclusive, and dynamic organisational environment.

5. Ongoing critical reflection and adaptation

In this final chapter, we discuss how we will use the Theory of Change to facilitate ongoing reflection and adaptation of our EDI plans. This section emphasizes the importance of continuous evaluation and outlines the process for reviewing the ToC on an annual basis, making necessary adjustments, and planning the next steps. Our goal is to ensure that the EDI programme remains responsive to emerging needs and continues to drive meaningful change over time.

5.1 Reflection and next steps

Further research is needed to understand the differences in common understandings of EDI. We will launch comprehensive awareness programme to establish a unified understanding across all organisational levels, developing clear and adaptable EDI definitions tailored to each institute's needs. We will provide leadership programme with a focus on inclusive leadership and link EDI goals to performance evaluations, to ensure leaders are motivated and equipped to model EDI commitment. EDI goals will be aligned with scientific objectives. Dedicated budgets and resources need to be secured, with partnerships or grants explored to support EDI projects and volunteer efforts. Contextual assessments will guide tailored EDI strategies, and best practices will be shared to foster collaboration. We will fit the EDI work into people's tasks instead of overloading them with more work. Regular reviews and feedback will be used to continuously improve EDI policies, nurturing a culture of ongoing learning and adaptation.

To address the potential weak spots identified in these assumptions, further research and learning are needed in several areas:

Developing a common language and understanding is essential for establishing a foundation of shared values within the organisation. This process involves conducting workshops, surveys, and focus groups to gain insight into how Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) are perceived. The aim is to create a unified language and set of definitions that everyone can align with, promoting clarity and cohesion in all discussions and initiatives related to these values.

Leadership engagement plays a pivotal role in the success of EDI strategies. To enhance this engagement, it's important to research effective methods for increasing leadership commitment, which could include training programmes, incentives, and clear accountability measures. Equally crucial is exploring the barriers that prevent leaders from fully embracing these principles, so that targeted interventions can be developed to address such challenges.

Another critical area is addressing employee resistance and building buy-in for EDI initiatives. Understanding the root causes of resistance is the first step in developing strategies to overcome it. Tactics such as storytelling, involving employees in decision-making processes, and clearly demonstrating the personal and organisational benefits of EDI can help foster greater acceptance and commitment to these efforts.

Retention is a complex issue that extends beyond EDI. It's important to study the various factors influencing employee retention and explore how they intersect to develop a comprehensive approach. Effective retention strategies should address the full spectrum of employee needs, ensuring that diverse talent not only joins the organisation but is also encouraged to stay and thrive.

Inclusive practices should be contextualized to fit different institutes. Researching the effectiveness of inclusive hiring and retention strategies across various contexts can help identify best practices. These insights can then be adapted to suit the unique needs of the organisation, ensuring that EDI is implemented in a way that resonates with the specific cultural and operational landscape.

Building organisational resilience is also essential, especially during times of change and uncertainty. Sustaining EDI efforts under such circumstances requires deliberate strategies, such as embedding these values into the

organisation’s core identity, planning for leadership succession, and cultivating strong internal advocacy networks to champion the cause.

Finally, measuring the impact of EDI on organisational performance is necessary for long-term success. Developing nuanced metrics and evaluation frameworks, along with conducting longitudinal studies, can provide a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of these initiatives. This data-driven approach ensures that EDI efforts are not only sustained but also continually optimized for maximum impact.

Closing words

Our Theory of Change is a living document that will evolve over the time we use it. We use the Theory of Change to plan and track our work. The results of our work will be used to adjust the Theory of Change based on our experiences. We aim to review elements of this Theory of Change once per year in a workshop, such as the vision, target group, pathways, and interventions. As indicated in the introduction, this narrative includes the broad strategic framework from which we will operate in the coming years. We then use this umbrella to provide advice to EDI plans at institute level.

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