

# Theory of Change

A Tool for Designing Programs



# Why do we need a Theory of Change?

- Builds a common understanding around the process needed to achieve a desired change.
- Makes explicit how activities and outputs will interact with the context.
- Highlights gaps and intellectual leaps in assumptions.
- Helps identify critical junctures in the change process
- Uses evidence to support the underlying assumptions and the links between actions and outcomes.
- Identifies critical areas addressed by external actors and how the program will link to them.
- Provides a detailed map showing pathways of change.
  - how multiple activities will lead to achievement of short and longer term goals.

# Definition

## What is a “theory of change”?

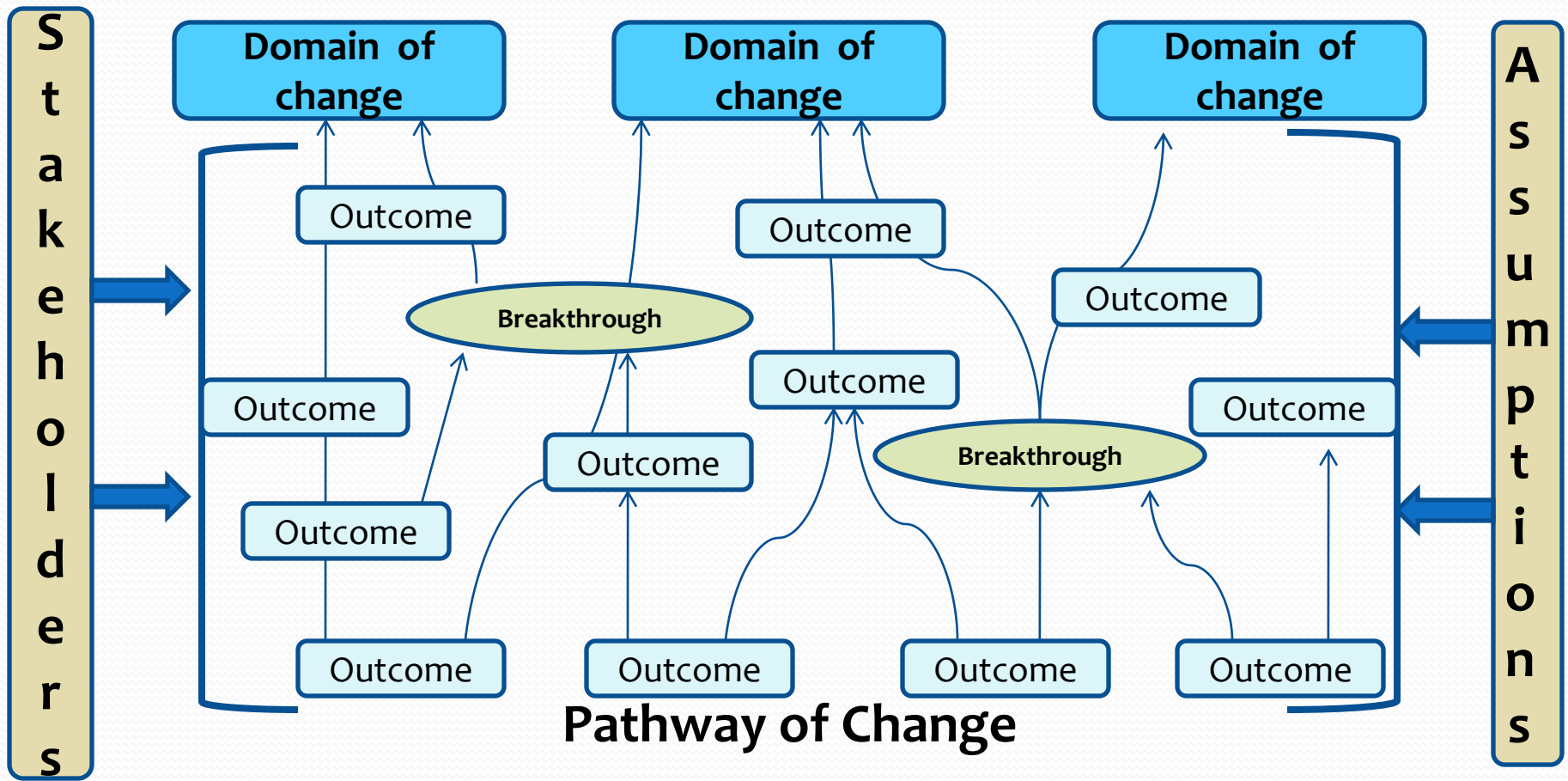
- Many approaches; process and a product
- A theory of change describes a process of desired change by making explicit the way we *think* about a current situation or problem, its underlying causes, the long-term change we seek, and what needs to happen in order for that change to come about.
- Contains a set of hypotheses, critical assumptions and indicators that make up causal pathways of change needed to bring about a desired long-term goal.

# Common Elements of a Theory of Change

- A problem statement
- A desired long-term goal
- Domains of change (key leverage points)
- Pathways of change, which include breakthroughs and incremental outcomes
- Assumptions and Risks
- Stakeholders
- Diagram and narrative summary

# Theory of Change Conceptual Model

Desired Long-Term Goal



Problem statement

# Constructing a ToC

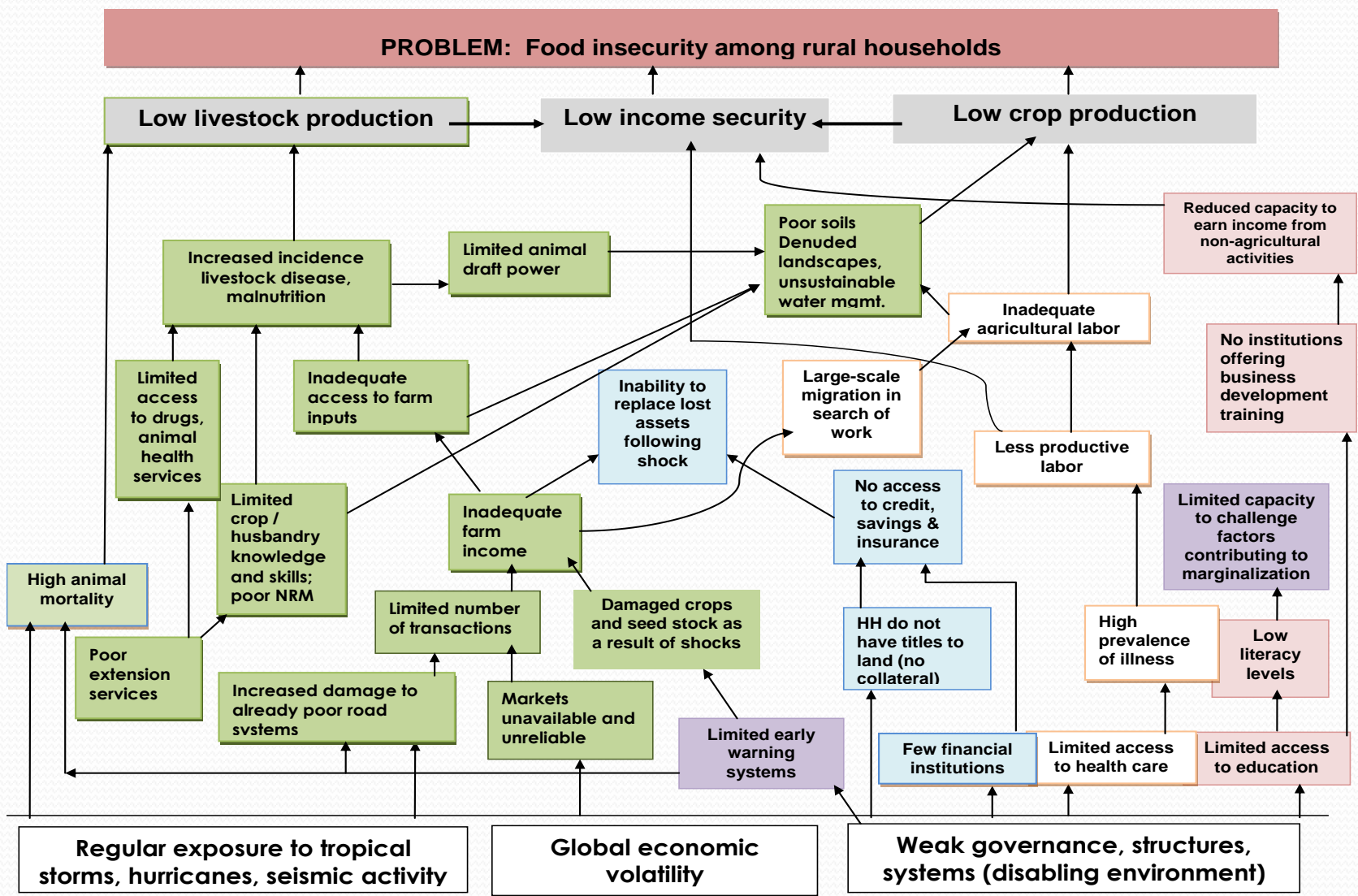
- **Make a problem statement**
  - issues the program will address - who, what, and where.
- **Convert problem statements to desired goals**
- **Identify key underlying causes** at the household, community, or external level
  - direct causes (specific conditions contributing directly to the problem);
  - secondary causes (behavior that contributes to the specific conditions);
  - tertiary causes (knowledge levels, beliefs, practices that influence behavior).

Determine key underlying causes that significantly contribute to the problem and which have high synergy with other underlying causes.

- Look for areas that are linked to various casual streams.

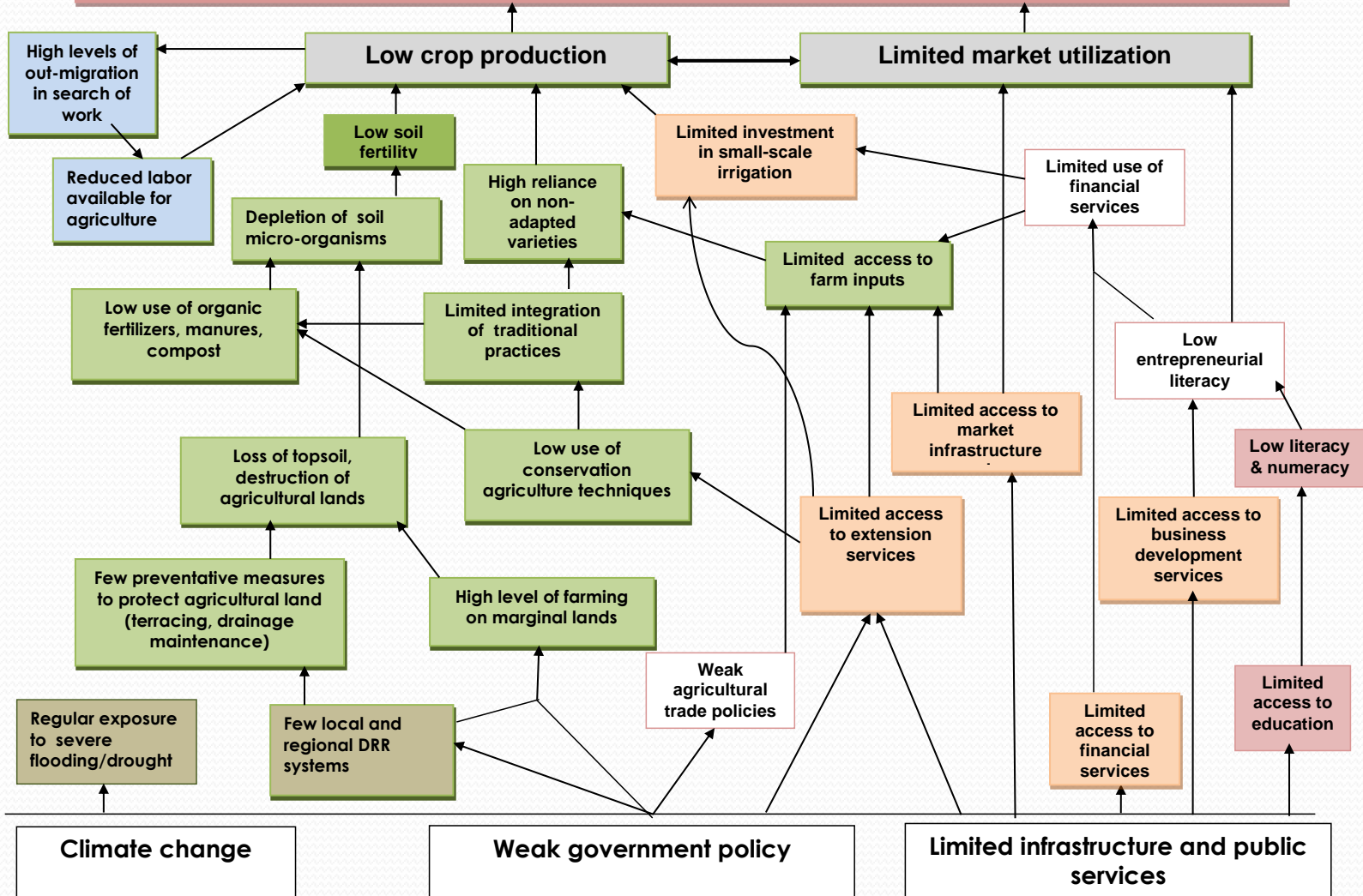
# Developing a Problem Tree

Mapping causal streams enables development of a *problem tree* in which the domains of change and pathway of change can be identified.



# Examining Causal Pathways

**Problem: Food and income insecurity for crop-based livelihoods in rural districts of Nueva Rivas**

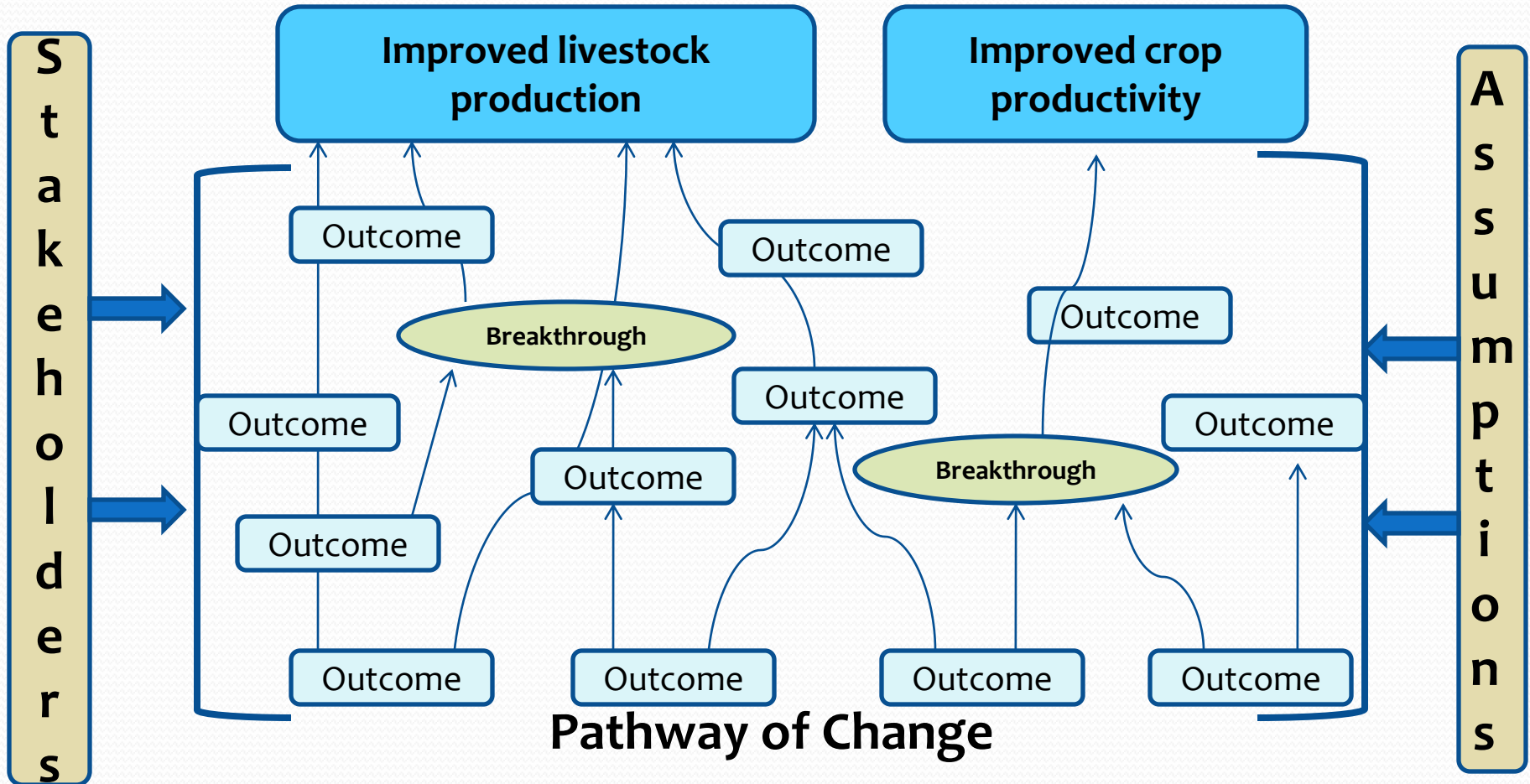




# Map a Pathway of Change

- Identify Domains of Change (key leverage points)
  - Main areas in which change must occur in order to be able to reach the desired long-term goal.
- Map a *pathway of change*
  - series of major breakthroughs and related incremental changes that are needed within each domain of change in order to reach the desired long-term goal.
- This set of connected building blocks is interchangeably referred to as *outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions*.
- A *breakthrough* is a change that represents a leap forward or an advance on the pathway of change that is not easily reversed.

# Goal: Improved food security for rural households

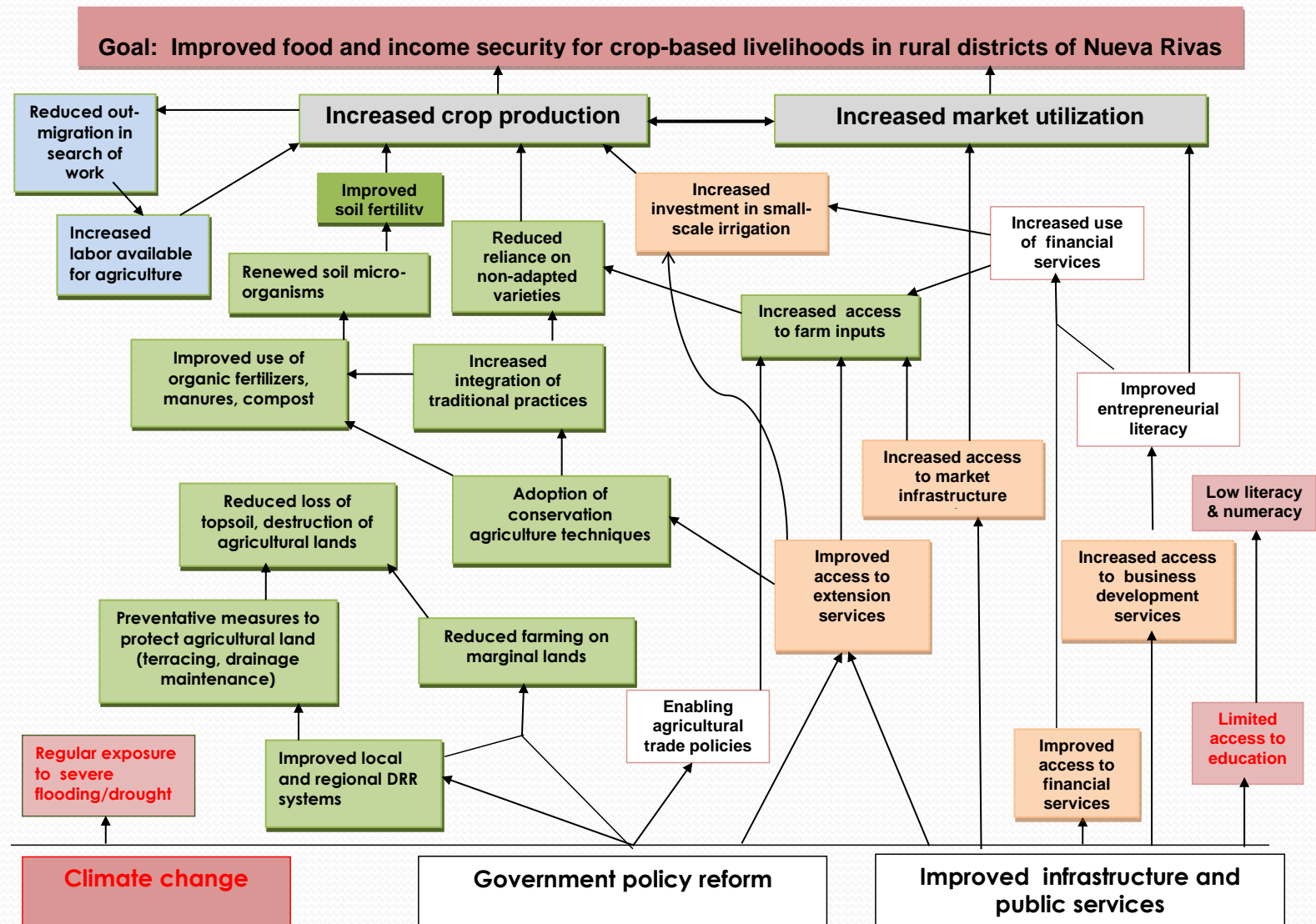


Problem: Food insecurity among poor rural households

# Map a Pathway of Change

- The change pathways show the outcome that must be realized before the next higher outcome in the chain can be achieved.
- Numerous outcomes contribute to the long-term goal.
- Multiple pathways lead towards the long-term goal.
- All outcomes on a pathway of change should be required to reach the long-term goal and should correspond to the domains of change that the program is addressing.
- This logic helps us to:
  - a) prioritize the outcomes and actions linked to each outcome
  - b) eliminate outcomes that may be desired but are unnecessary to achieve the goal.

# Map a Pathway of Change



# Choosing appropriate responses

- The ToC helps identify the most critical or strategic activities.
  - Based on assessments, best practices, lessons learned, evaluation reports, community inputs, research, institutional experience.
- Three components of the ToC process will help select appropriate responses: a thorough review of **assumptions and risks**; the interest and influence relevant **stakeholders**; and the **indicators** you will use to determine if outcomes are met.

# Assumptions

- Pathways of change are hypothetical - based on assumptions.
- Assumptions are conditions that are important to the success of a project, but are beyond its control.
- Assumptions explain both the connections between incremental outcomes and the expectations about how and why key actions will bring them about.
  - use available evidence to support these assumptions
- Some assumptions may be less proven and will need to be tested and documented, or challenged.

# Main types of Assumptions

- Assumptions about the connections between the underlying causes and the problem that stakeholders are trying to address.
- Assumptions that explain why each outcome or breakthrough is necessary to achieve the long-term impact
- Assumptions about the context
- Assumptions about the connection between particular program activities and the incremental outcomes they are expected to generate

# Risks

- By identifying risks, you think about what might happen if your assumptions do not hold.
- Risks include external conditions that have a high probability of affecting the success of a program.
  - predictable seasonal flooding
  - expected market volatility in the near future.
- Statements can be framed as an assumption or a risk, depending on the probability of whether an issue will positively or negatively impact initiatives.

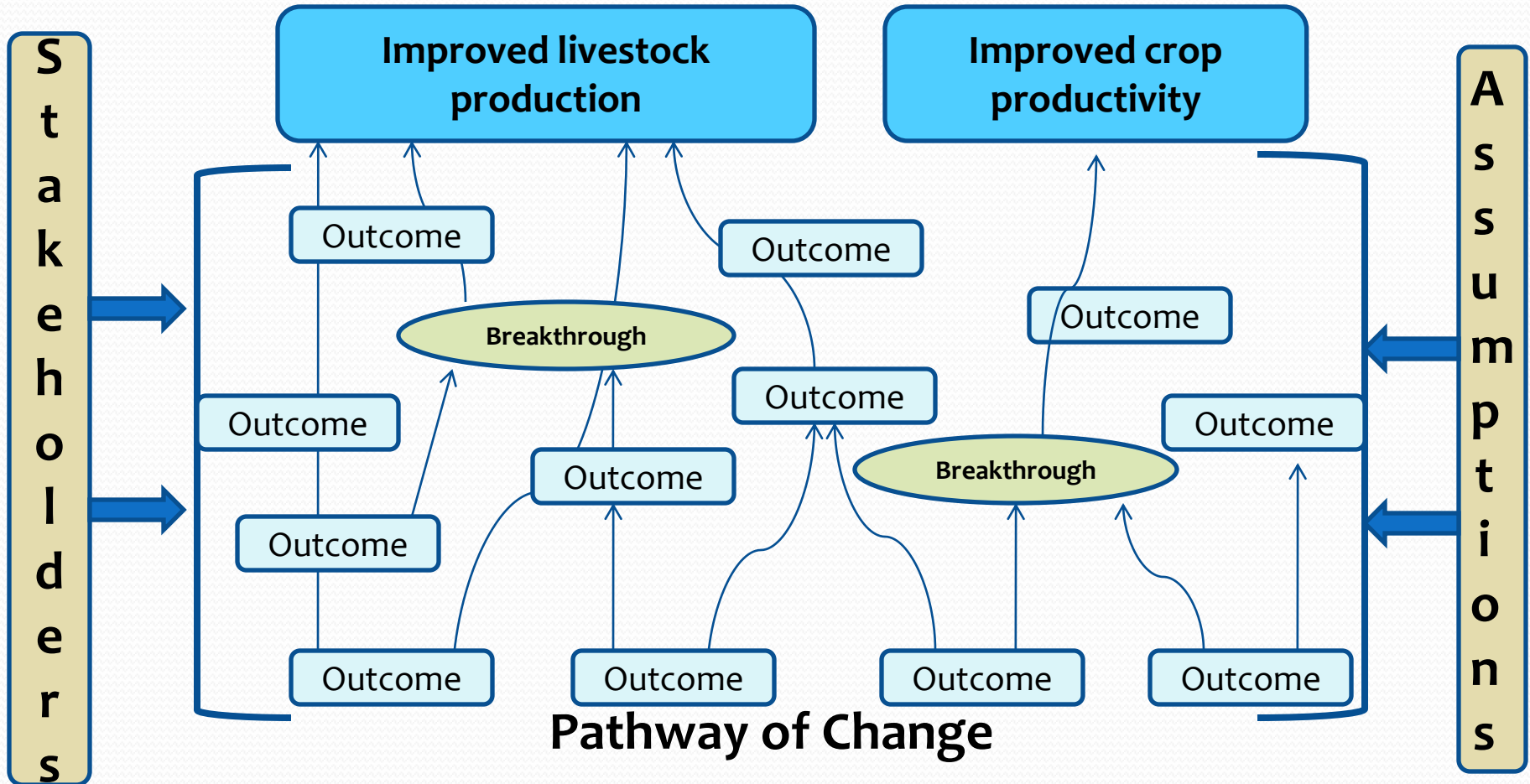


# Stakeholders in a ToC Model

Stakeholder analysis:

- Identify potential stakeholders and their level of interest
- Assess each stakeholder's power and influence and how this will impact program efforts
- Identify risks and assumptions related to stakeholder power and influence which will affect the success of program efforts
- Stakeholders can affect a project's outcome positively or negatively.

# Goal: Improved food security for rural households



Problem: Food insecurity among poor rural households

# Indicators

- Indicators tell us how success will be recognized at each step in the pathway of change (intermediate results).
- Indicators should be defined and operationalized for each prioritized breakthrough on the pathway of change
- *Outcome* and *Impact* indicators will also be defined for the domains of change and the long-term impact goal

# Summary

## **A complete ToC model provides:**

- A clear and testable hypothesis about how change will occur
- A visual representation of the expected change and how it will occur
- A blueprint for evaluation with measurable indicators of success identified
- An agreement among stakeholders about what defines success and what it takes to achieve it
- A communication tool to capture the complexity of your initiative

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