

A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide consisting of a cluster of hexagons in various shades of green, blue, and yellow, arranged in a somewhat irregular, honeycomb-like pattern.

Welcome!



**CAUSAL
PATHWAYS**

The Causal Pathways Initiative

Making visible the "black box" of philanthropic and systems change strategies, helping us collectively see how systems are (or are not) changing

An international network of evaluators, methodologists, philanthropic leaders, and more.

Focused on supporting philanthropy, other funders and their evaluation partners to open-up the black box of strategy and systems change by **building awareness, will, and skills to use evaluation approaches that can make sense of causal relationships** without depending on more traditional experimental and quasi-experimental approaches.



Introduction to Realist Evaluation

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Structure of this session

01 Introduction

- ▶ Introduction to realist evaluation and how it helps explore causal pathways

02 Exploring mechanisms

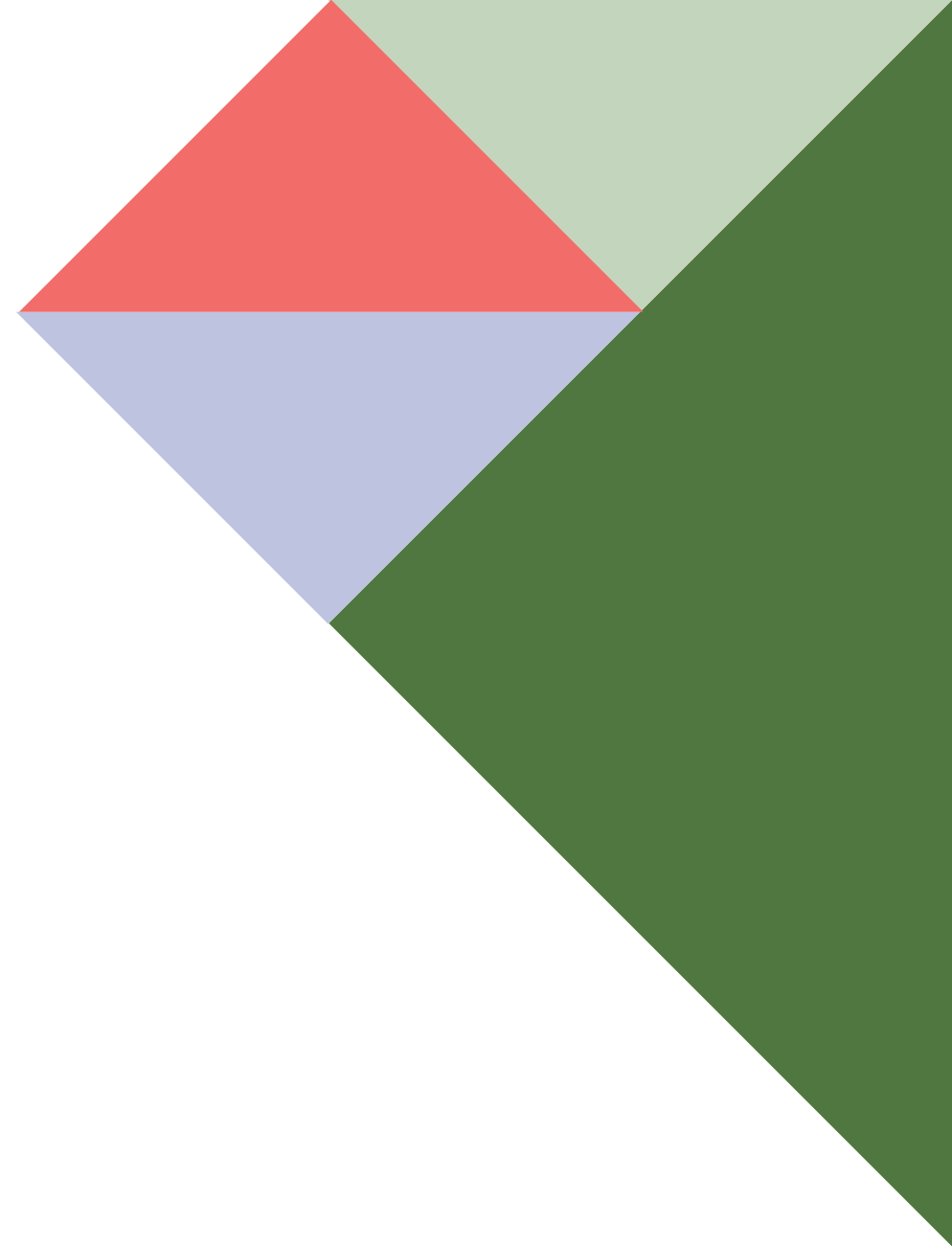
- ▶ What are mechanisms in realist evaluation?
- ▶ Practical exercise to explore mechanisms

03 Discussion

- ▶ What value can realist evaluation bring?
- ▶ Q&A and wrap up

01

Introduction



What is realist evaluation?



Theory based approach, developed by Pawson & Tilley (1997) as an alternative to RCTs



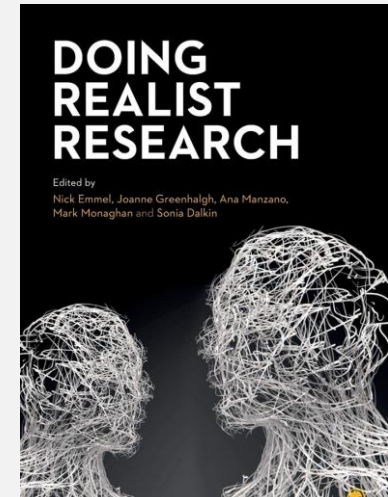
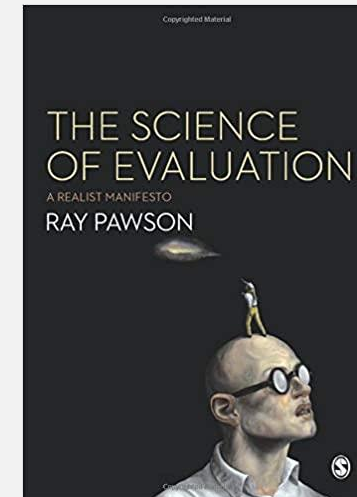
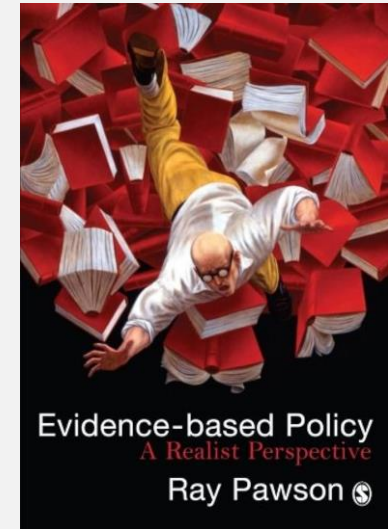
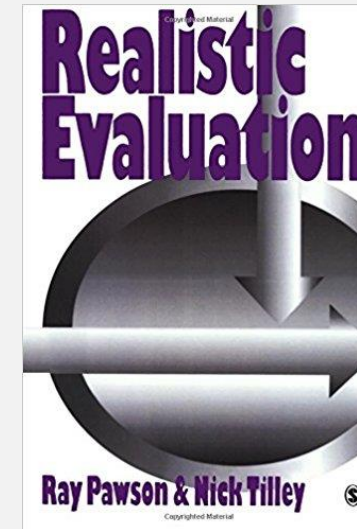
Doesn't ask 'what works?' but 'how and why does this programme work or not work, for whom, and in what circumstances?'



Starts from the assumption that no programme works everywhere, for everyone, all of the time



Growing application across a wide range of complex interventions and disciplines



Why is realist evaluation useful to explore causal pathways?

Helps explain
how and why
programmes
succeed and fail

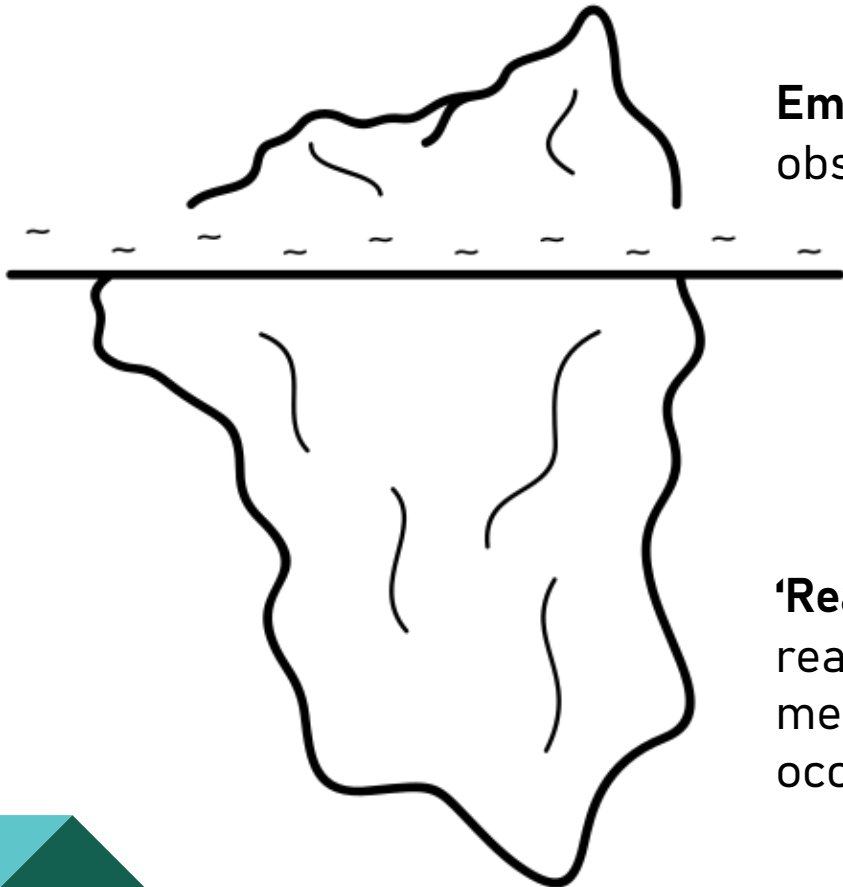
Generalisable
insights to guide
decisions about
scale up, roll
out, or applying
elsewhere

Structured
approach to
grappling with
context and
complexity

Nuanced
evidence that is
practical and
actionable for
different
stakeholders

The core assumption of realist evaluation:

Things we see and experience are caused by hidden (but real) processes...



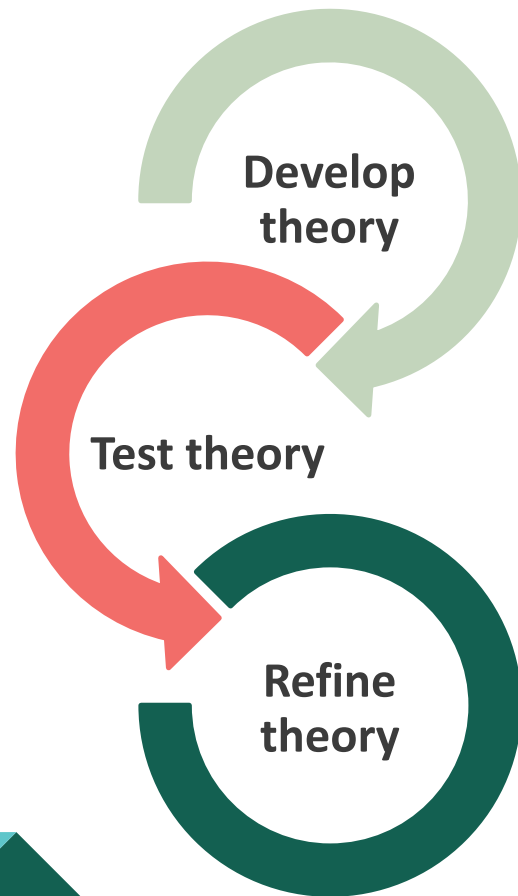
Empirical level: what we can observe

'Real' level: hidden (but still real), invisible causal mechanisms cause events to occur

Realist evaluation involves **digging 'underneath the surface'** of interventions, to understand how and why they work

How does it help explore causal pathways?

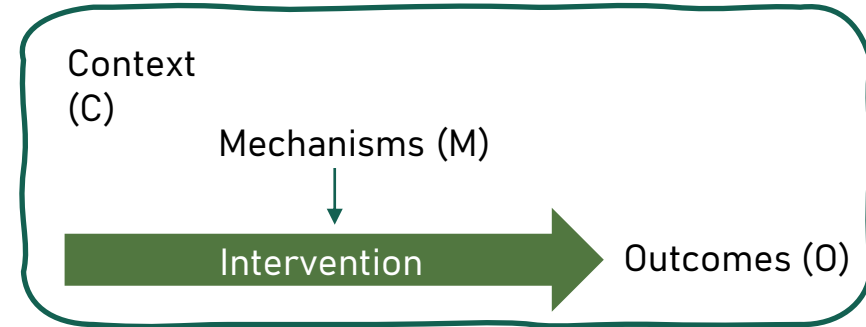
...Through developing, testing and refining theory



By the end of the evaluation, the aim is to have a rigorous, empirically tested theory explaining what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why

What does theory in realist evaluation look like?

Realist evaluation establishes a causal link between a programme and an outcome by developing and testing theories, in the form of **context-mechanism-outcome configurations** (CMOs)



CONTEXT

Where there is an opportunity to implement policy change to address climate change but obstacles exist, and where the UK provides constructive, collaborative support.

MECHANISM

ICF influences policy by equipping policy makers with the motivation, evidence and capacity to act, and systems to support action.

OUTCOME

Delivery and implementation of policy to address climate change.

Haplin et al (2020) Climate Change Compass Portfolio Evaluation 3 Technical Report [\[link\]](#)

What is a 'mechanism'?



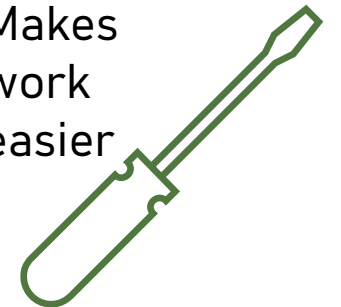
Aha moment



Supportive networks



Makes work easier



Recognition and rewards



What is a 'mechanism'?



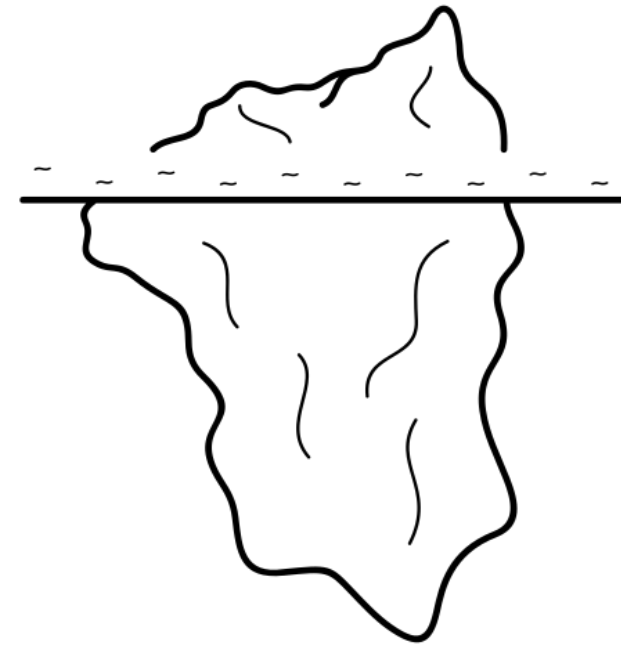
Usually hidden or invisible

Causal forces, powers, processes or interactions

Sensitive to variations in context – in some circumstances, they won't work



Aspects of the intervention (e.g. 'a training course')

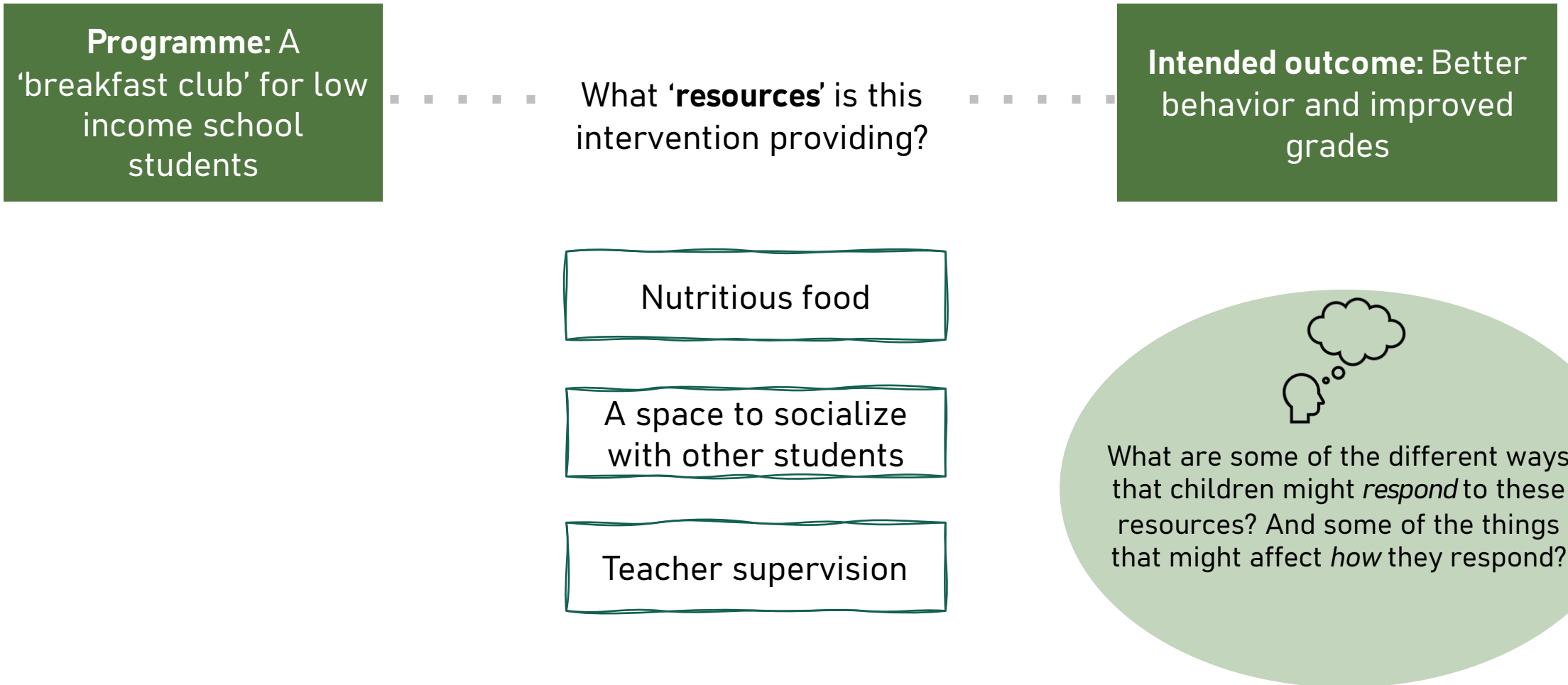


02

Exploring mechanisms



Mechanisms can often be identified by unpacking *responses to resources*



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Resources

Nutritious food

Responses



Kids who don't get enough to eat at home might have more energy and be able to concentrate more



If food is provided that some kids can't eat (e.g. for religious reasons) this might increase feelings of social isolation



Spotting context, mechanism and outcome

“Kids who don’t get enough to eat at home might have more energy and be able to concentrate more”

Context:

Kids who don’t get enough to eat

Mechanism:

Physical energy

Outcome:

Improved concentration

“Where children don’t get enough to eat at home (C), nutritious food provided at a breakfast club can improve their energy levels (M), leading to better concentration in lessons (O)”

Spotting context, mechanism and outcome

“If food is provided that some kids can’t eat (e.g. for religious reasons) this might increase feelings of social isolation”

Context:

Religious restrictions on certain foods

Mechanism:

Social exclusion

Outcome:

Feelings of social isolation

“If breakfast clubs provide food that some children cannot eat due to religious beliefs (C), they might inadvertently socially exclude these children (M), enhancing feelings of social isolation (O)”

03

Discussion



Why is it useful to explore causal pathways?

Helps explain
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succeed and fail

Generalisable
insights to guide
decisions about
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out, or applying
elsewhere

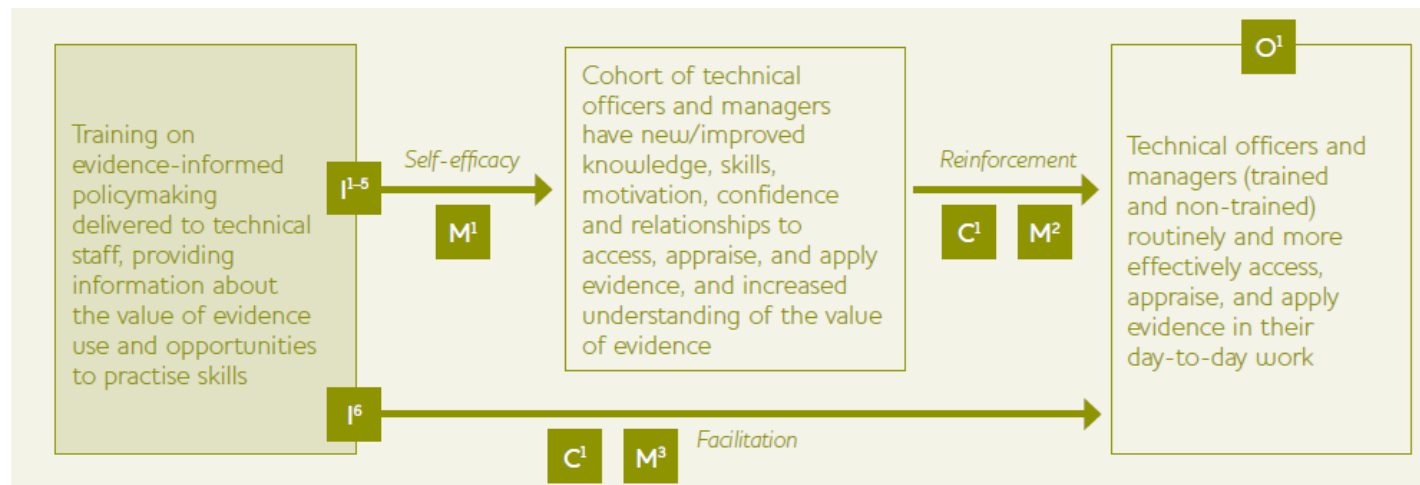
Structured
approach to
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Nuanced
evidence that is
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Nuanced insights into causal pathways

The CMO configuration forces precision and depth – going deeper than a standard ToC to explain the ‘arrows’ underneath the ‘boxes’

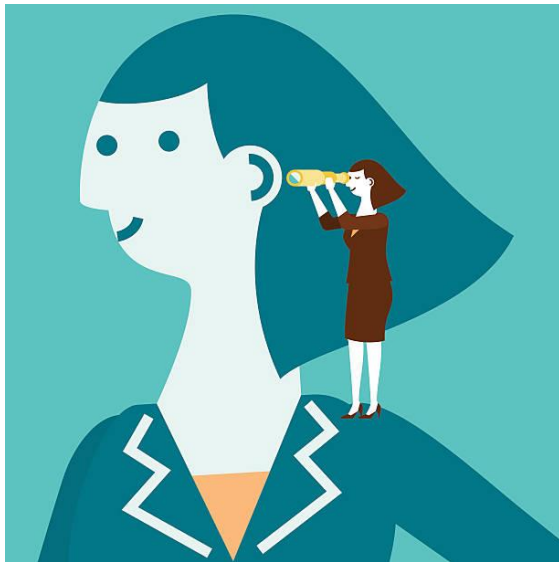
Mechanisms shine a light on how human agency and reasoning shapes outcomes



CIMO 1: Where information is provided about the importance of evidence-informed policymaking and how to access, appraise, and apply evidence, alongside opportunities to practise skills, this can generate **self-efficacy** among technical officers, building their confidence in their ability to do their jobs or achieve goals (M¹) leading to individual behaviour change around evidence use (O¹). Behaviour change is more likely to be sustained where there are clear incentives (rewards, encouragement, reminders, audits or mandatory requirements) that motivate participants to apply their learning and **reinforce** changes in practice (M²). This includes management support to encourage and provide space for participants to access, appraise, and apply evidence, which in turn depends on political incentives and a political environment that supports and promotes (non-symbolic) use of evidence as a means to improve policy (C¹). Behaviour change is also more likely where activities are closely targeted to individuals who can apply their learning because it is directly relevant to their day-to-day work (I¹), and where activities are practical and participatory (I²), incorporate a focus on soft skills as well as technical skills (I³), use knowledgeable, patient, and confident facilitators (I⁴), tap into incentives to encourage participation (I⁵), and provide practical tools, systems or processes (I⁶) that **facilitate** trainees to do their jobs more easily or efficiently (M³).

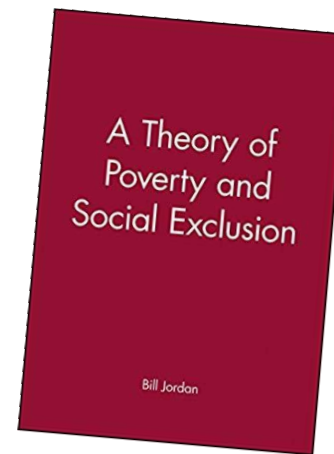
Theories build on existing knowledge

Evaluators are encouraged to draw on insights from wider theory and practice when developing CMOs



“If food is provided that some kids can't eat (e.g. for religious reasons) this might increase feelings of social isolation”

Mechanism: Social Exclusion



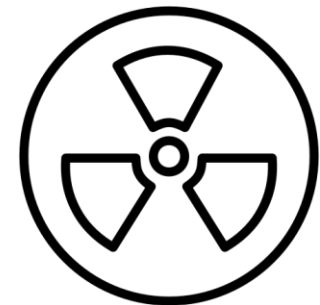
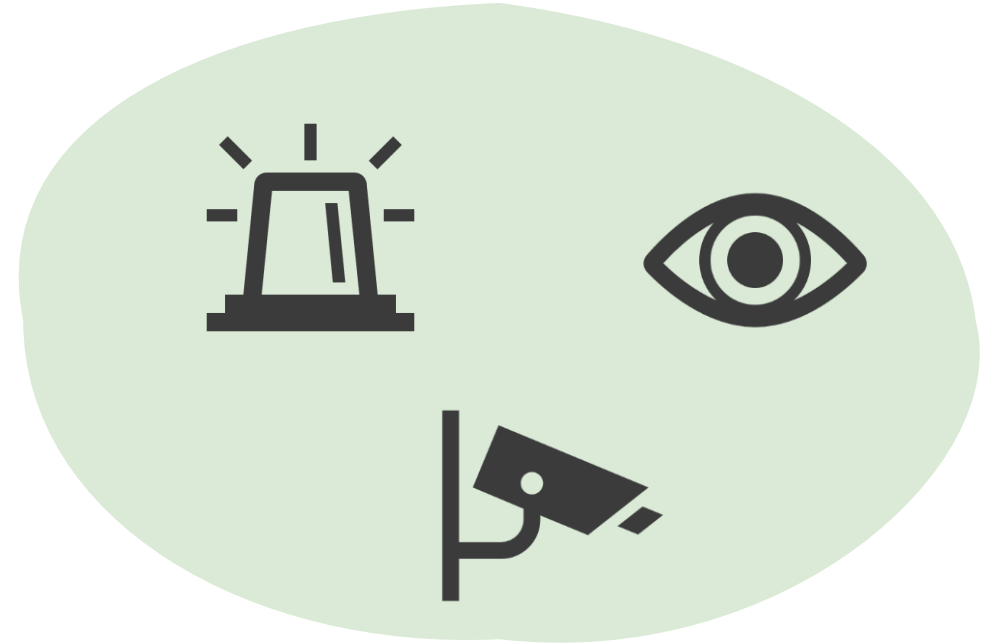
Generates generalisable insights

The same mechanisms are often present in very different situations

In realist evaluation, you generalise based on mechanisms

Realist findings are therefore **portable** to new settings

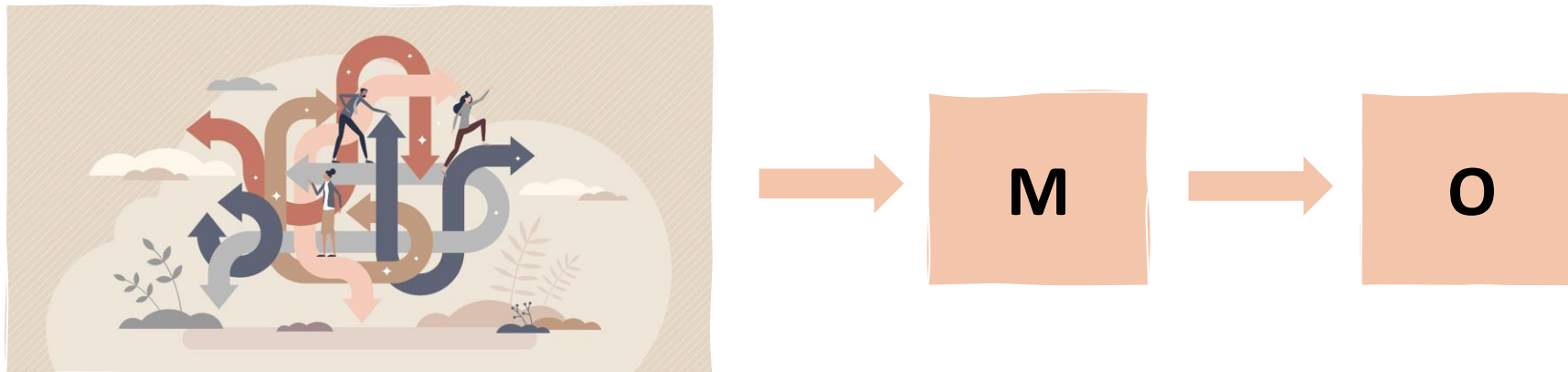
'Deterrence'



Helps to grapple with context and complexity

CMO configuration requires you to investigate specific aspects of context, and link context to explanations of how and why a programme works

This helps draw boundaries around and make sense of complex system dynamics



Practical and actionable evidence

Realist evaluation is able to generate nuanced evidence that is practical and actionable, supporting learning and adaptation

Commissioners: more abstract lessons about the types of interventions that work most effectively in different environments, to inform strategic decisions about what to fund in future



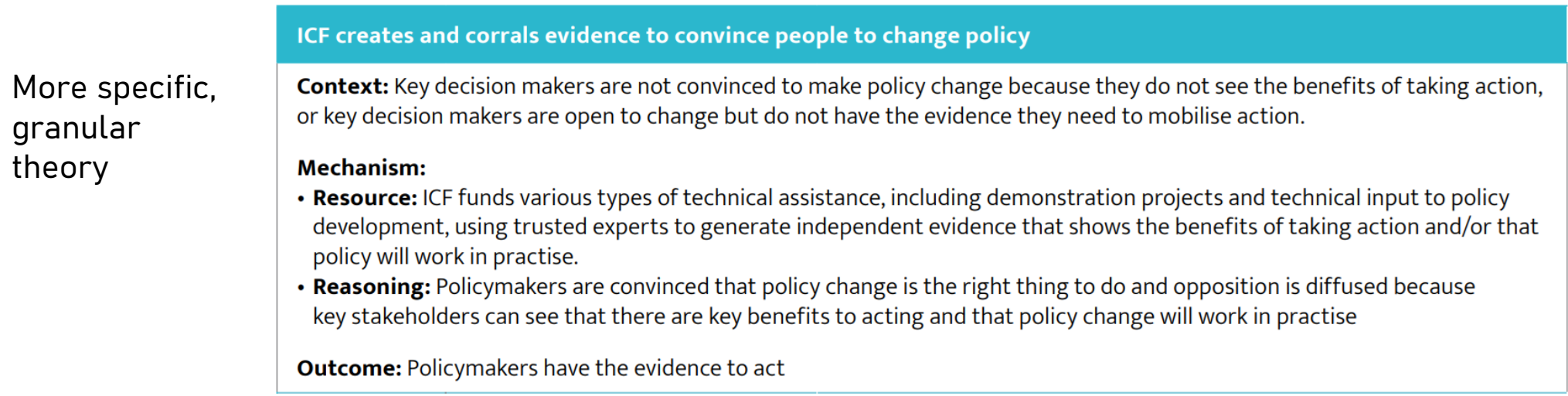
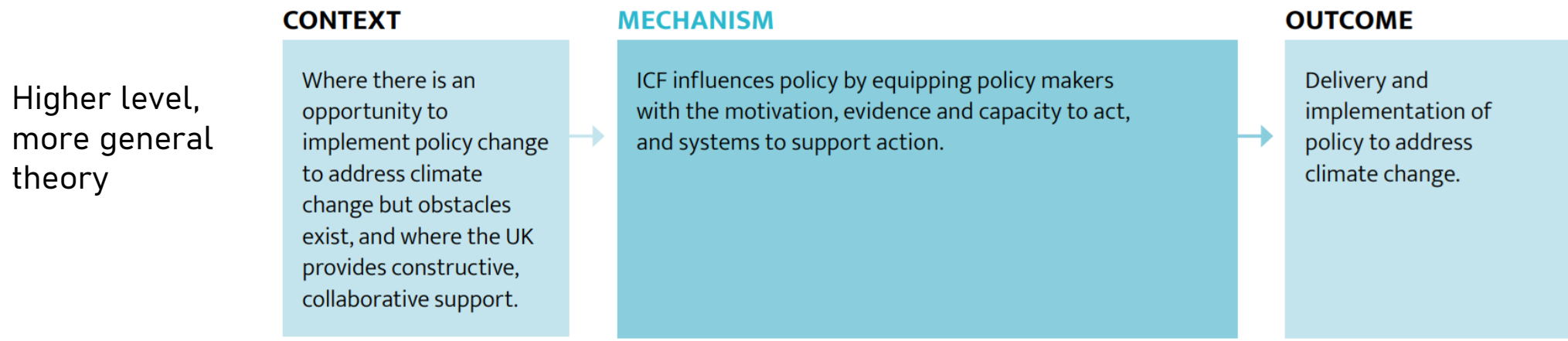
Implementers: granular insights about why a specific intervention worked in a particular place, in order to adjust and improve day to day programming



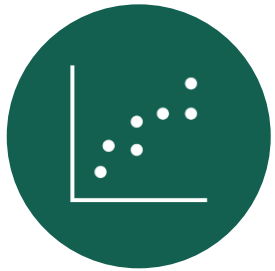
'The final independent evaluation report sets out very clear lessons and recommendations for DFID to take forward in future programmes that promote evidence-informed policymaking... We agree with all six recommendations, which have collectively fed into five key principles for our future... programming in DFID.' DFID (2018)

DFID management response to BCURE evaluation

Theories at different levels of specificity



Risks and limitations



Weak on estimating quantities or extent of impact – needs to be combined with other methods to answer these questions



Usually not feasible to investigate whole programme in depth using a realist approach – need to draw clear boundaries



Technically demanding – need an evaluation team who are willing and able to 'think like realists'



Requires active engagement and time from commissioners and implementers

Further resources

Useful short papers to get a flavor of the approach and why / when it is useful:

- Westhorp, G. (2014). Realist Impact Evaluation: An Introduction (ODI Methods Lab)
- Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (2004). Realist Evaluation
- Punton, M.; Vogel, I.; Leavy, J.; Michaelis, C. and Boydell, E. (2020) Reality Bites: Making Realist Evaluation Useful in the Real World, CDI Practice Paper 22, Brighton: IDS

The realist evaluation bible: Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. Sage

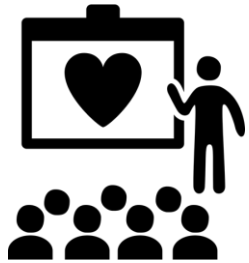
Example realist evaluations:

- Itad's evaluation of the UK's International Climate Fund
- Itad's evaluation of the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence programme

Realist evaluation mailing list: https://www.ramesesproject.org/Mailing_list.php



Resources from the Causal Pathways Initiative

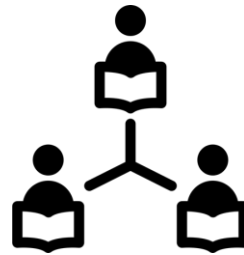


Presentations & trainings to build understanding and will

American Evaluation Association

Available to attend other events by request

Virtual 101 level training available on request



Resources to support understanding and action

Pending: BetterEvaluation.com updated resource hub on causal pathways

Case studies to provide overall stories and more detailed examples



Learning and acting together with support

Brain Trust to help funders work through tough questions with field experts

Pending: Peer learning spaces and early career support