CAUSAL PATHWAYS

Causal Pathways Evaluation: Design and Implement

Causal Pathways Initiative Training

Today's trainers: Steve Powell, Alison Gold and Fiona Remnant

Content developed as a collaborative effort by initiative network members and staff including: Carlisle Levine, Jewlya Lynn, Marina Apgar, and Carolina De La Rosa Mateo with support and content from Tom Aston, Julia Coffman, Heather Britt, Yulianto Dewata, Abdoul Karim Coulibaly, Steve Powell, and Fiona Remnant.

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 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.

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Our Trainers

ALISON GOLD
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Who is in the room?

Poll

1. Your organization type
2. Your role
3. Your level of experience with causal pathways evaluations
4. Have you attended or watched the recording of any of the other Intro workshops in this series?

Causal pathways evaluations make visible the "black box" of philanthropic and systems change strategies, helping us collectively see how systems are (or are not) changing.

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Agenda

1. Welcome
2. Core concepts (brief review)
3. Case study
4. Planning Pt. 1:
    - Questions
    - Methods
5. Reflecting on Causal Questions & Methods in Your Own Work
6. Planning Pt. 2
    - Analysis
    - Assessing Strength of Evidence
7. Q&A

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Learning Objectives

Introductory understanding of:

- What it means to create and identify causal pathways evaluation questions.
- What you can gain from a causal pathways evaluation.
- Core concepts and an example of combining causal pathways methods, sometimes called “bricolage.”
- How causal coding and analysis look different from descriptively focused analysis.

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What we won't cover or cover deeply…

We're also not going to be covering:

- Comparing Causal Pathways evaluation with descriptive evaluation.
- Comparing Causal Pathways evaluation with "purely" quantitative approaches.

Content that was covered more deeply in the first two Intro Workshops:

- Understanding what Causal Pathways evaluation is, why do it, and how to get ready for it.
- Values, rigor, quality practices, participatory practices

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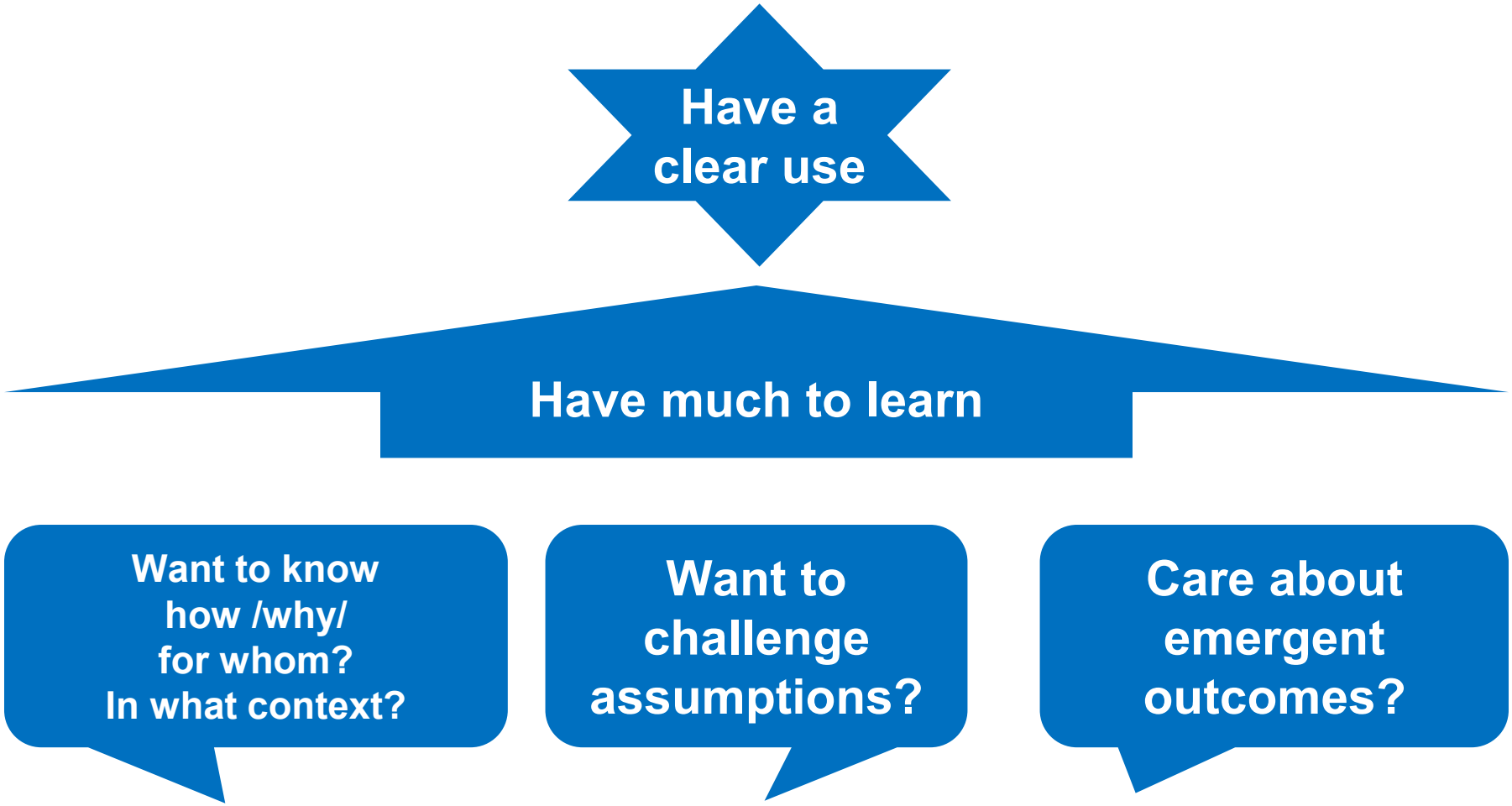
Regrounding in Core Concepts

We are ready to explore causal pathways when you …



Adapted from Lynn, J., & Apgar, M. (2024). Exploring causal pathways amid complexity. In *Research handbook on program evaluation* (pp. 304-325). Edward Elgar Publishing.

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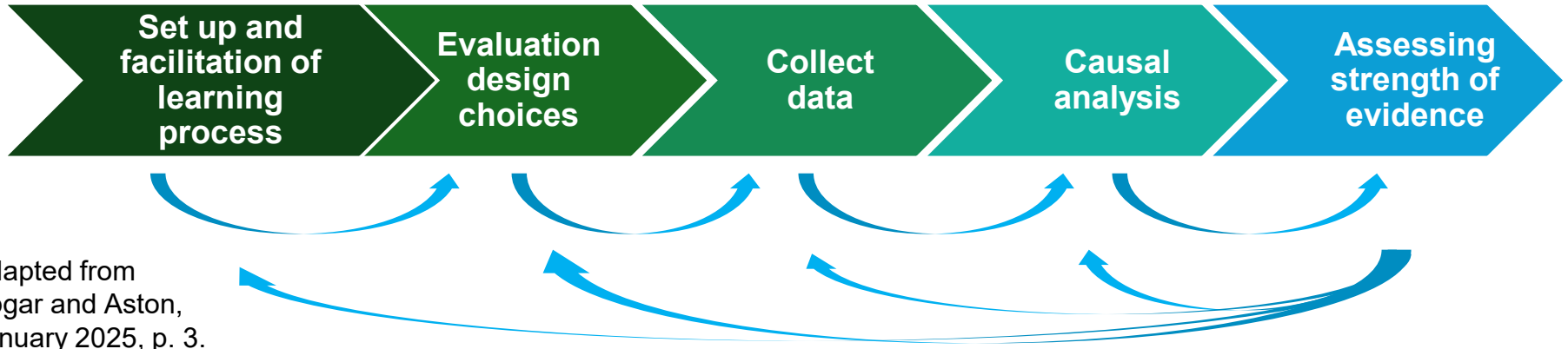
Planning a causal pathways evaluation grounded in our values

Seeking Equity
Seeking to use inclusive and empowering processes, from design through to the use of findings - that strive to respect, support, and prioritize the values and perspectives of people who are engaged in a funded program, and are actors in a system, ideally with particular attention to usually excluded interests.

Informing Strategy
Producing learning that helps explain how and why a strategy is influencing change, for whom and under what conditions. Producing learning that is actionable and meaningful to a wide range of stakeholders.

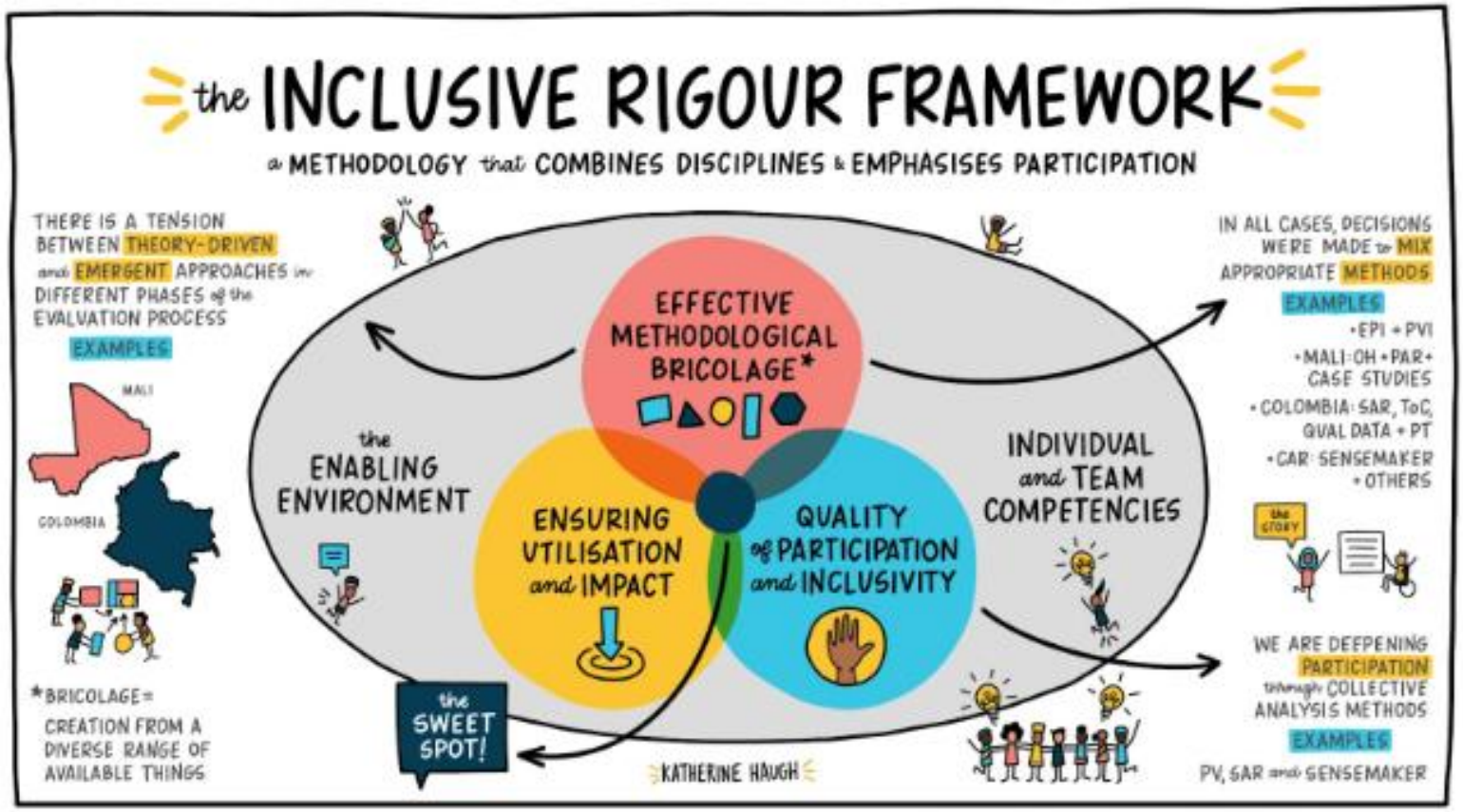
Embracing Complexity
Seeing causal pathways as non-linear, plural and contested. This requires paying attention to intended and unintended outcomes, both positive and negative, and understanding contextual conditions as part of causal mechanisms.

How do we operationalize these values in each step of our causal pathways evaluations?



Adapted from Apgar and Aston, January 2025, p. 3.

The Inclusive Rigor Framework



https://tinyurl.com/inclusiverigorcolab

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Bringing theory to life: case study

Introducing the case study

Save the Children

GiveDirectly

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
IFPRI

Government of Malawi

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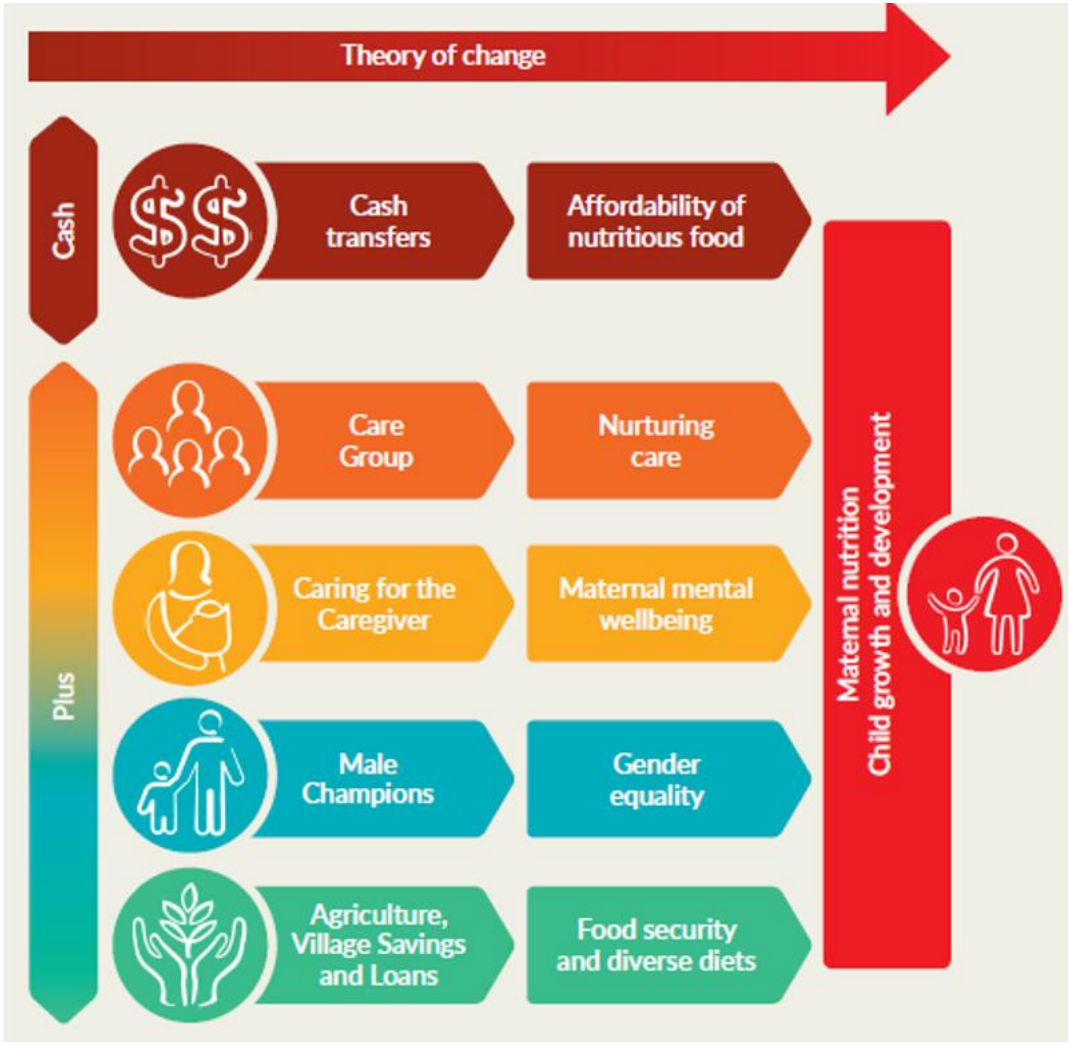
Introducing the case study



Midterm evaluation:
RCT, Process & **Qualitative (QuIP) evaluations**

Users: Govt of Malawi, Save the Children, Give Directly, IFPRI

Objective: Help inform Malawi's National Social Protection system and improvements to govt's multi-sector nutrition strategy

Is this relevant to my work?

Similar evaluations conducted in many thematic contexts, and with different types of actors involved in interventions - policymakers, CSOs, NGOs, intended beneficiaries...

- Rural livelihoods
- Microfinance and savings groups
- Social cash transfers and welfare interventions
- Education
- Health, nutrition, water and sanitation
- Gender relations and sexual & reproductive health rights
- Safety and rights at work
- Community mobilisation and voluntary initiatives
- Training and skills development

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Planning for a Causal Pathways Evaluation

Evaluation Design & Questions

Methods & Data

Causal Analysis

Assessing the Strength of Evidence

Four components of conducting a Causal Pathways evaluation

Evaluation Design & Questions

Methods & Data

Causal Analysis

Assessing the Strength of Evidence

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Evaluation Design and Questions

Be aware …

Are we making *causal inferences* and if so, how?

- collecting and weighing up claims made by trusted sources?
- making inferences along a causal chain?
- using special methods like Process Tracing?
- weighing up the amount / strength of evidence from *multiple* sources?
- and ultimately, evaluative judgement!

Causal beliefs are not causal facts

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Agreeing on causal evaluation questions

How, why, for whom, and under what conditions is an initiative contributing to intended or unintended (positive and negative) outcomes?

What important **outcomes** do people report - are they as expected?

What **processes** and **combinations** do they say led to the observed outcomes?

What **contextual conditions** enabled or inhibited causal effects?

Did any **unexpected causal pathways** develop?

How did causal effects **differ** across groups, e.g. men/women or treatment groups?

To what extent did the interventions **cause or contribute to the observed changes**? Remember to think about transitivity! If A → B and B → C, does A → C?

Case study: Evaluation questions

Use Theory of Change to outline what we are expecting to change, how we expect this change to happen and who would be able to tell us about these mechanisms:

RCT	Process evaluation	QuIP evaluation
What has changed, and **how much**, for intended beneficiaries in different groups?	**What** was delivered, **when**, **in what way** and by **whom** at different levels? Were there any problems, how were these overcome?	What did intended beneficiaries think changed, and how the change happened? **Causal mechanisms, context, combinations, processes and effects**

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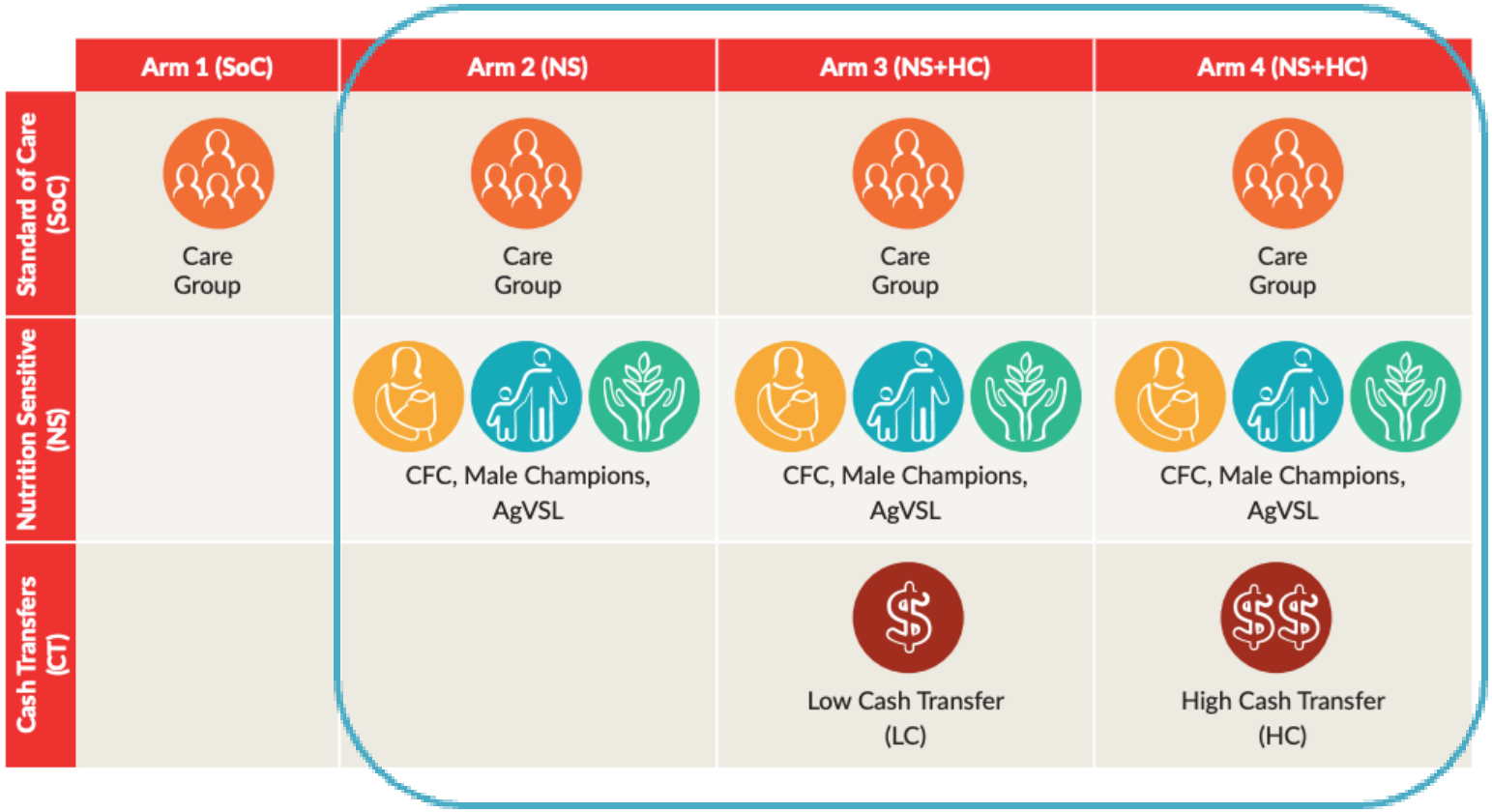
Evaluation Design & Questions

Criteria for deciding which (possibly multiple) causal pathways to explore

Utility	• What do we need to inform our strategy?
Pathways that matter	• Which pathways offer the most leverage? • Which matter the most in terms of the change we seek to influence?
Pathways that are less clear	• Which pathways do we know the least about or ask the most questions about?
Feasibility	• What is knowable? • Which pathways do we have the resources to explore meaningfully?
Timing	• Given our timing, which pathways are ripe for exploration? • Is it too early? Too late?
Do no harm	• Which pathways allow us to explore without doing harm (to people, to existing strategies, to the system)?

Evaluation design: QuIP

Save the Children



What are the **causal mechanisms** people think are important in each group?

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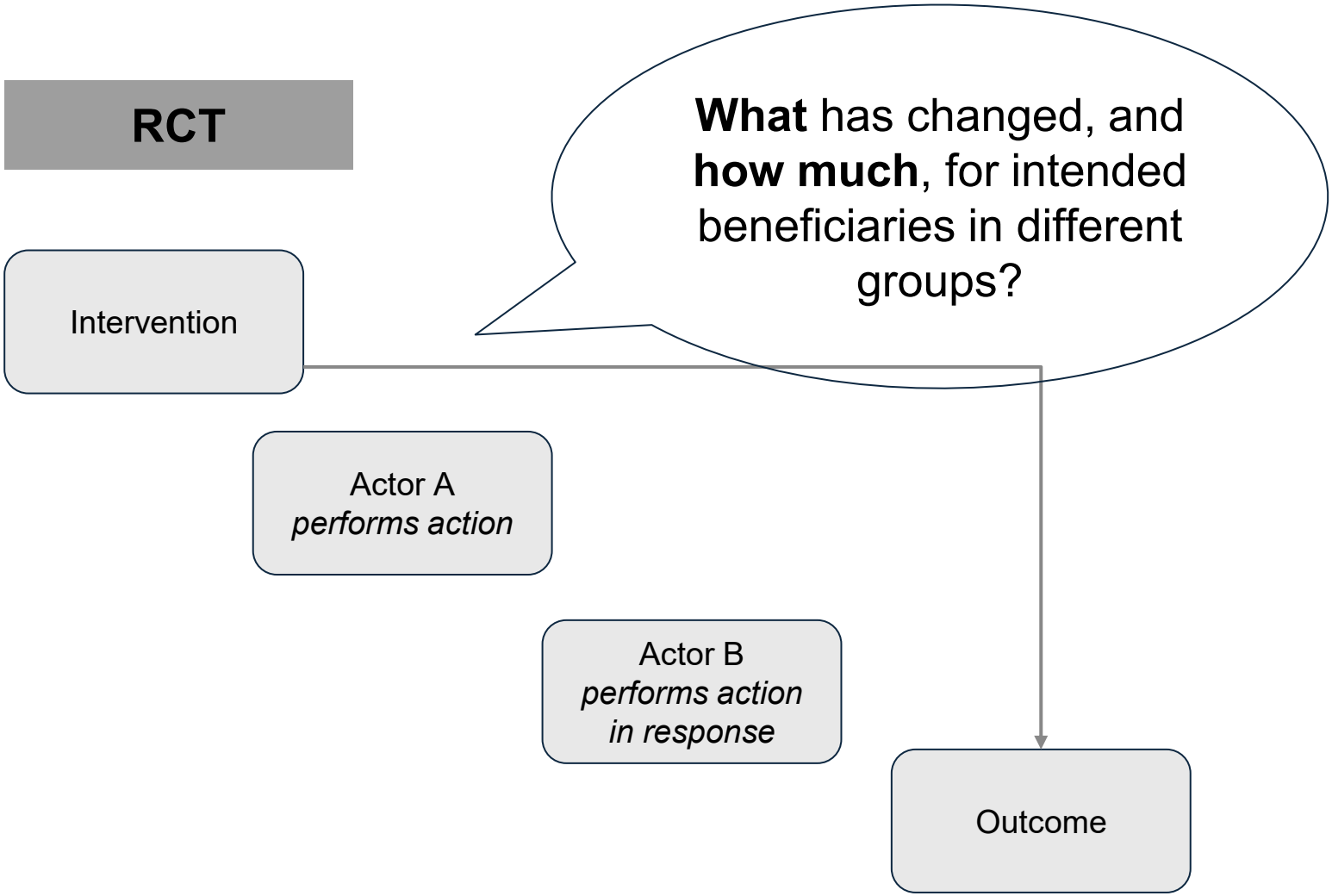
Case study: Evaluation design



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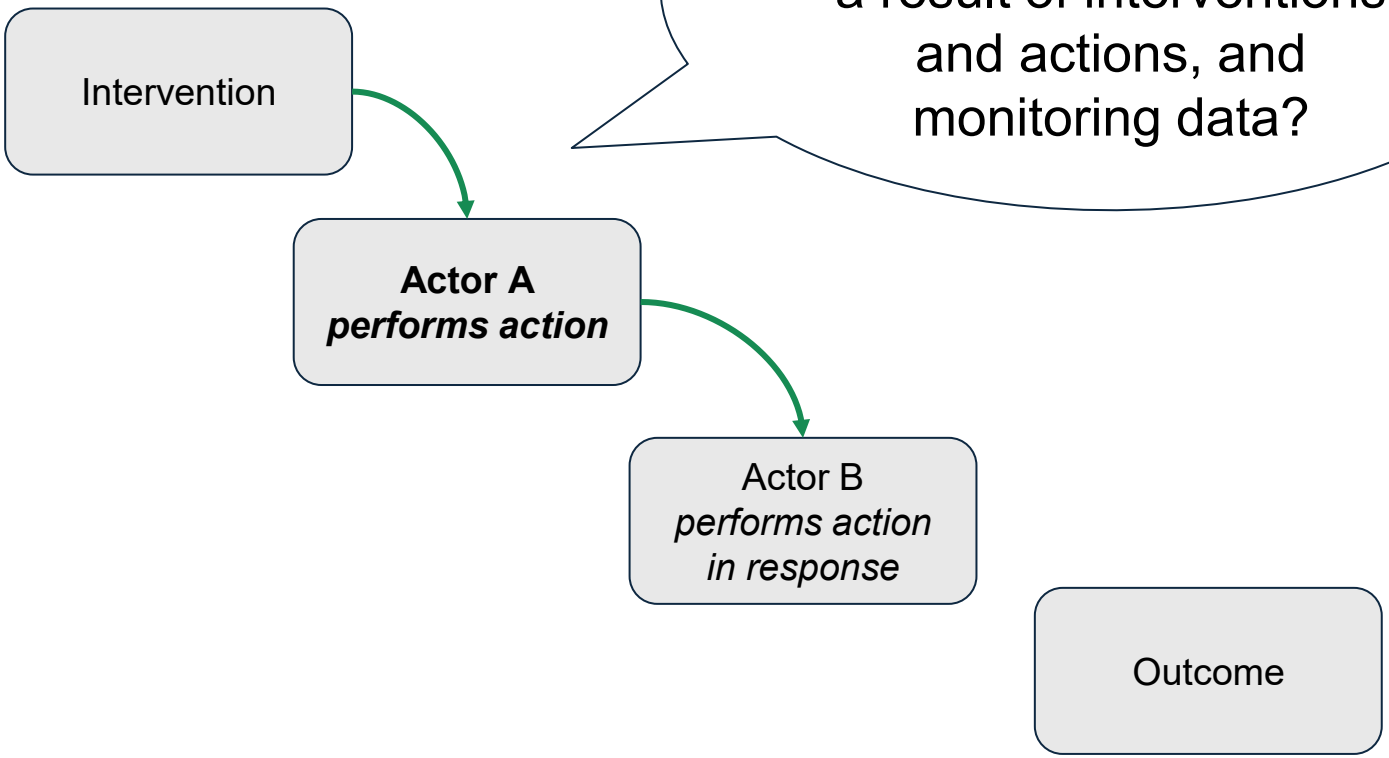
Case study: Evaluation design

Process evaluation

What actions does Actor A say were performed as a result of interventions and actions, and monitoring data?



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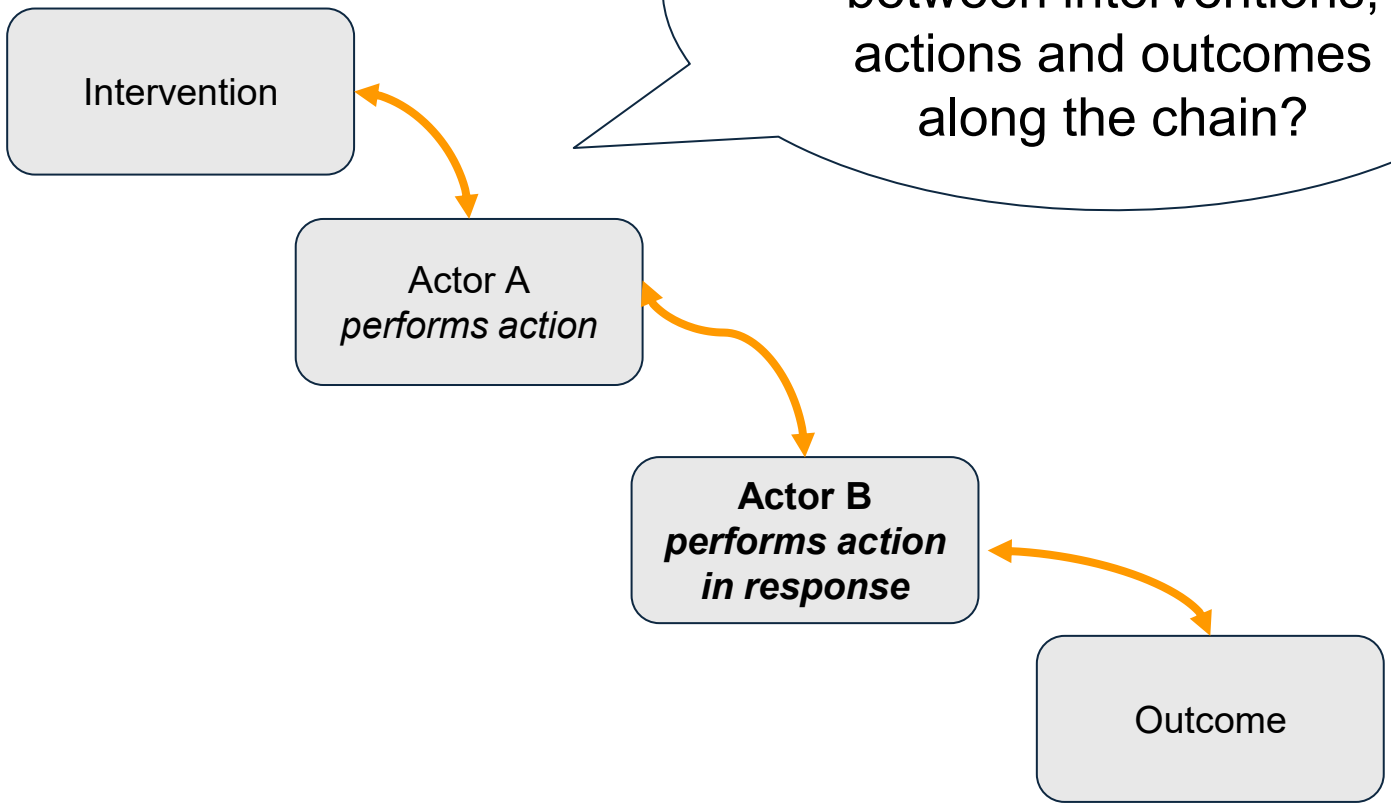
Case study: Evaluation design

QuIP evaluation

What perceptions does Actor B have about **links** between interventions, actions and outcomes along the chain?



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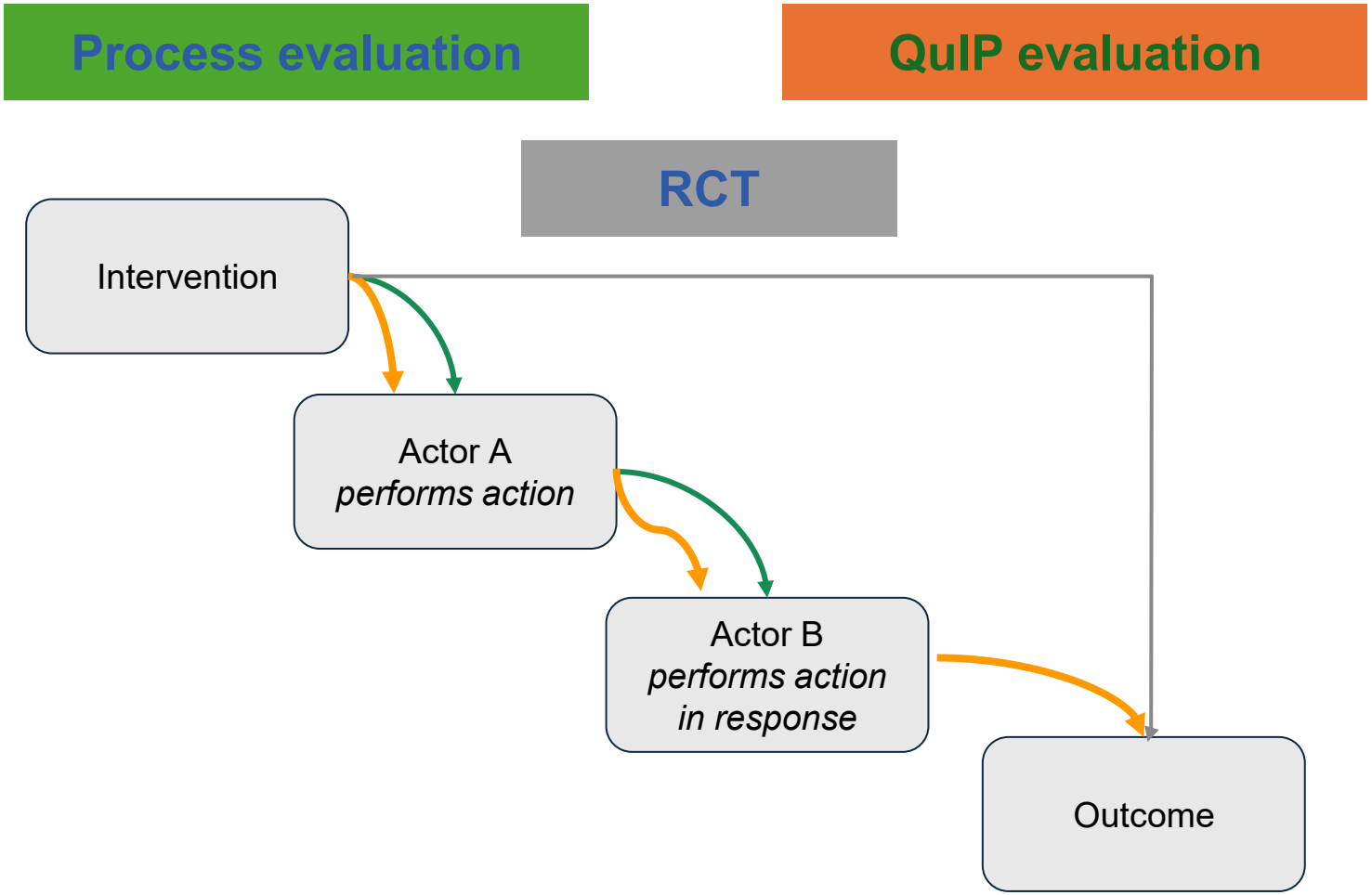
Case study: Evaluation design



Methods and Data Collection

Methods & Data

A quick glance at many methods

Process tracing	Rigorously compare our hypotheses about how and why a valuable outcome happened within a pathway to change.
Contribution analysis	Assess the extent to which an intervention has contributed to observed outcomes, along which pathways
Outcome harvesting	Identify expected and unexpected outcomes from an intervention and work back to determine the intervention's contribution
Qualitative impact protocol: QuIP	Participants identify important changes in areas linked to expected intervention outcomes and describe what they think caused change. Then uses causal mapping to assess the intervention's contribution.
Causal mapping	Visually represents and analyzes stakeholders' mental models of relationships between expected / unexpected drivers, outcomes..
Realist evaluation	Analyzes sequences of events and evidence to develop or test hypotheses about the **causal mechanisms** that explain an outcome.
Causal link monitoring	Identify and monitor the "result-producing actions / behaviors" connecting stages of a logic model, allowing for timely adjustments
… &&&	

Based on Apgar and Aston, January 2025, p. 16.

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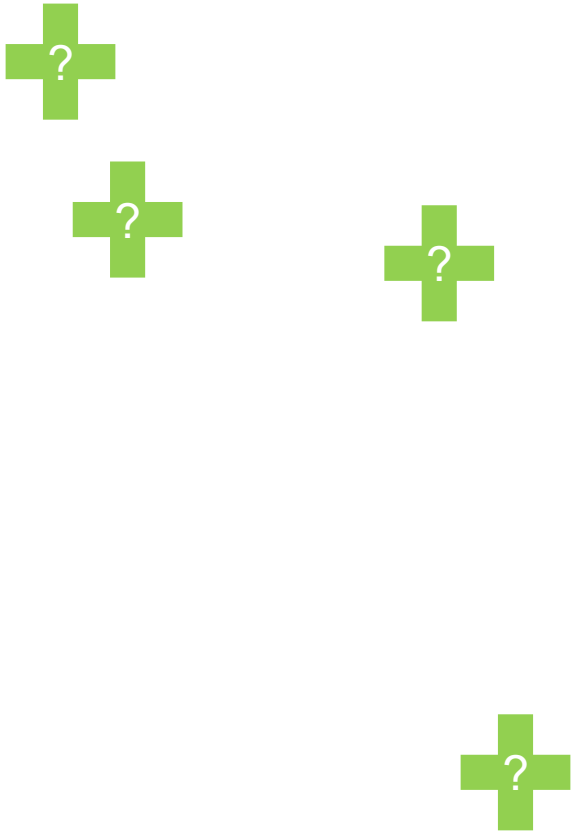
Using *bricolage* in our causal pathways evaluation design

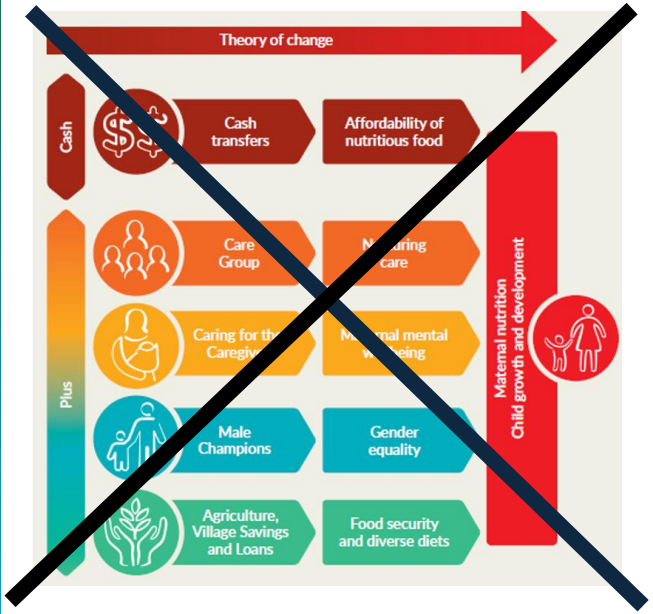
Methods & Data

- Process tracing
- Contribution analysis
- Outcome harvesting
- Qualitative impact protocol: QuIP
- Causal mapping
- Realist evaluation
- Causal link monitoring
- … &&&



Collecting data

Methods & Data



Interviewers did not have any detail on the interventions or the different groups.

Goal-free open-ended questions

- To reduce pro-project, framing and confirmation biases
- To give equal weight to all possible drivers of change

Questions framed around outcomes, not interventions

Let parents share **their** own stories of change - wider context

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Collecting data

Methods & Data

To test expected outcomes, we asked mothers in each group questions about *changes* in:

- Income, spending, and saving
- Household food production and consumption
- Child and maternal health
- Family relationships and parenting
- Maternal wellbeing

\+ Male focus groups on childcare and chore sharing

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Think of an initiative or program with which you are familiar:

- What causal questions might you ask related to it?
- Which related causal pathways might you explore?
- How would exploring these causal pathways benefit the initiative or program? What would it make possible?

If you are interested, you'll have the opportunity to share your thinking in a breakout session and reflect on the examples together.

SHARE BACK

In the chat, please share any:

- Lingering or emerging questions.
- Insights or key takeaways.

Causal Pathways Data Analysis

Causal Analysis

Increasing confidence in causal arguments requires careful and systematic analysis

Causal Analysis

Steps for undertaking causal analysis:

1. **Reflect on your research questions / theory of change.**
   - ***Which links in which causal chains are you interested in?***
2. Code for causality
3. Assessing strength of evidence
4. Triangulate (sensemake) data

"*Questions you can Answer*"

Apgar and Aston, January 2025, pp. 22-23.

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Causal Analysis

Steps for undertaking causal analysis

1. Reflect on your research questions / theory of change.
2. **Code for causality**
3. Assessing strength of evidence
4. Triangulate data ("sensemaking")

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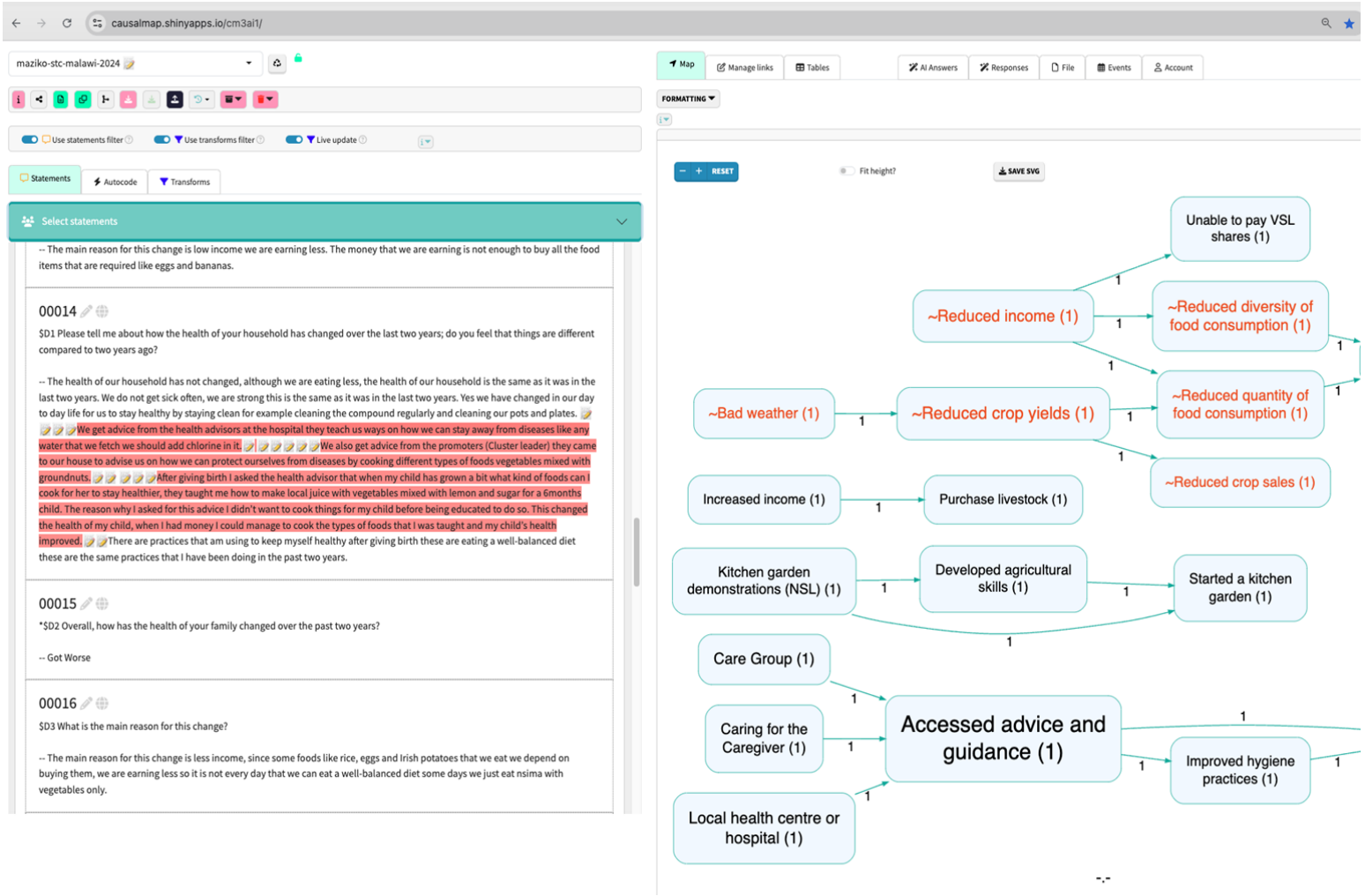
Case Example: causal qualitative data analysis

Causal Analysis

CAUSAL MAP



Analysing causal pathways

Causal Analysis

- Look at differences in pathways between groups receiving different interventions
- Go back to theory of change and look at effects of specific interventions, and drivers of specific outcomes
- Go back to what people said behind the link counts to understand what was happening

What important **outcomes** do people report - are they as expected?

What **processes** and **combinations** do they say led to the observed outcomes?

What **contextual conditions** enabled or inhibited causal effects?

Did any **unexpected causal pathways** develop?

How did causal effects **differ** across groups, e.g. men/women or treatment groups?

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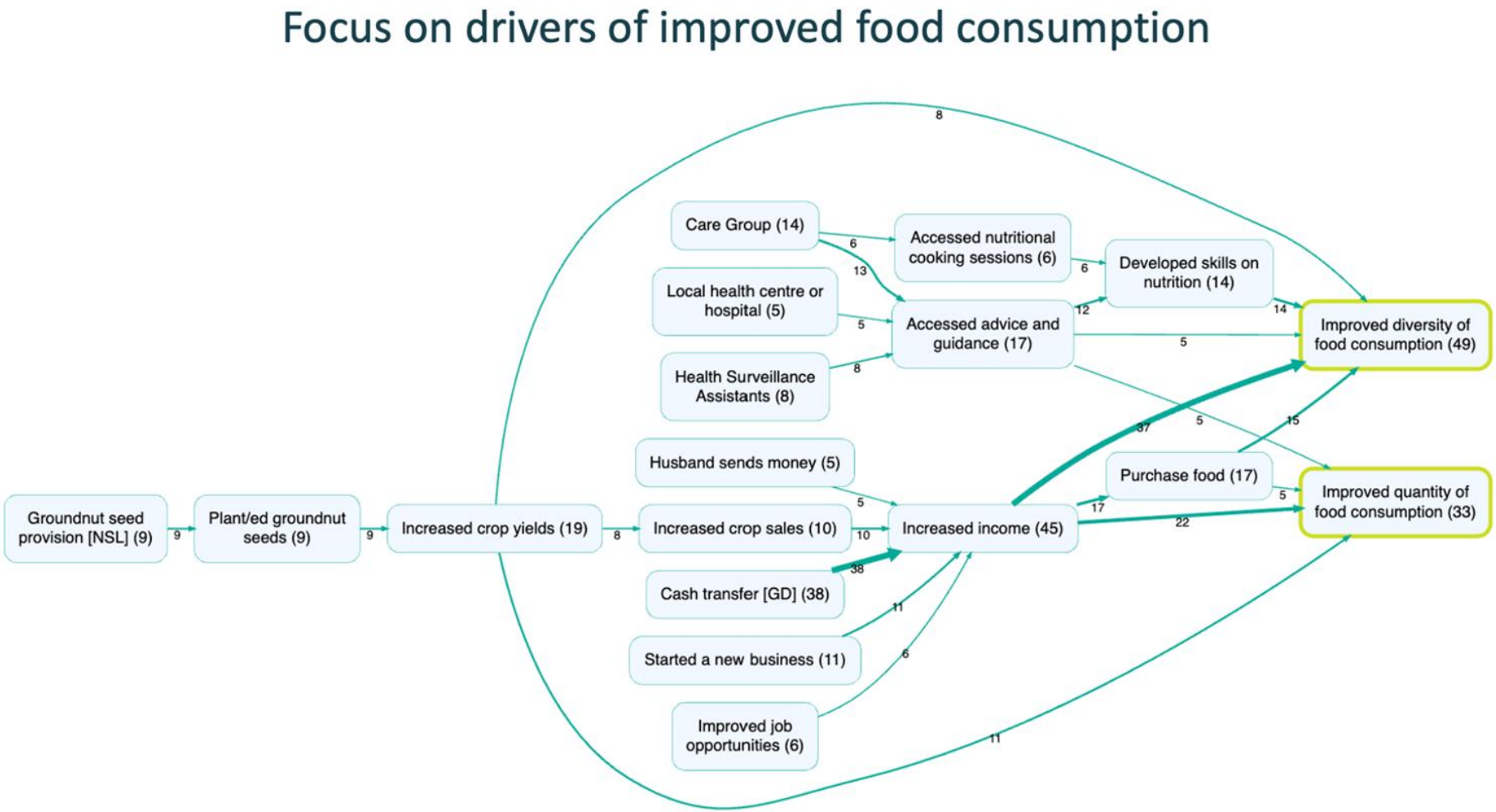
Causal data - maps



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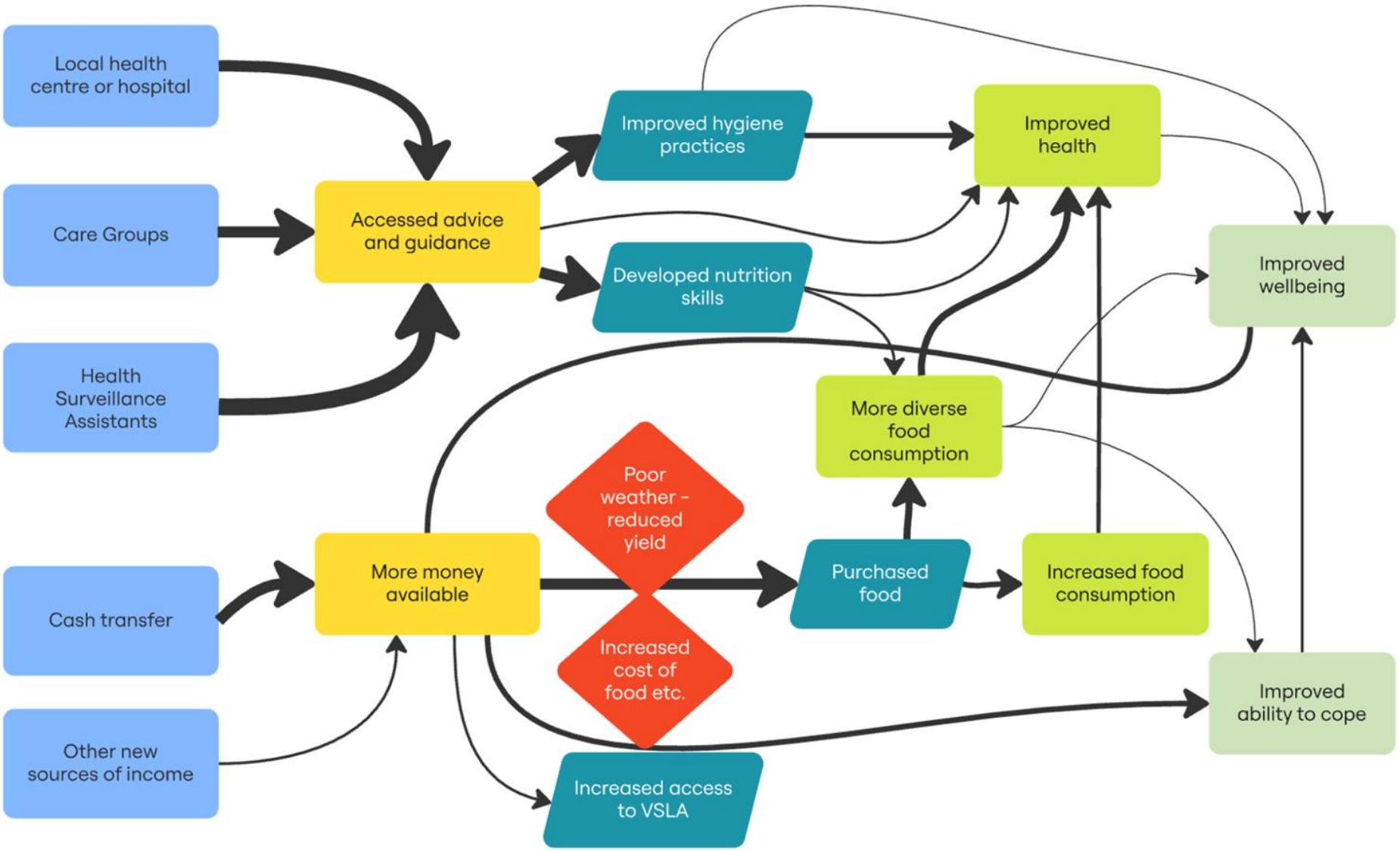
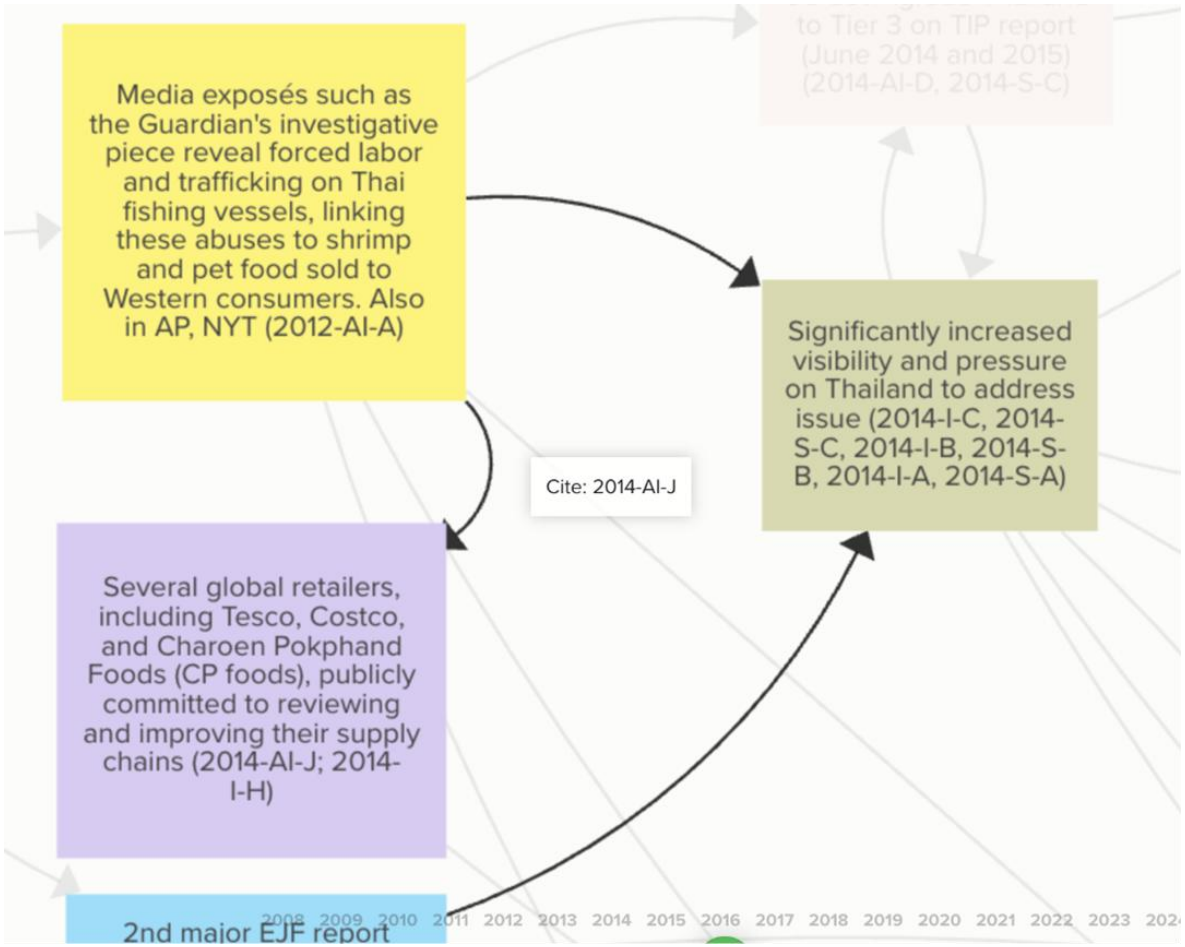
Causal data - maps



Coding for causality

Causal Analysis



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Assessing the Strength of Evidence / making evaluative judgements

Increasing confidence in causal arguments requires careful and systematic analysis

Steps for undertaking causal analysis

1. Reflect on your research questions / theory of change.
2. Code for causality
3. **Assessing the strength of evidence**
4. Triangulate data ("sensemaking")

Apgar and Aston, January 2025, pp. 22-23.

Making evaluative judgements: Assess the strength of evidence and explore rival explanations

Assessing the Strength of Evidence

1.6 FULL EVALUATION RESEARCH QUALITY OF EVIDENCE RUBRIC

Table 1.6: Full evaluation research quality of evidence rubric (by performance level)

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
Plausibility	Unclear, illogical, or contradictory explanation connecting intervention to outcome.	Explanation indicates a possible connection between intervention and outcome.	Explanation is clear, logical and temporally consistent, and suggests a likely association between intervention and outcome.	Convincing explanation of how evidence connects intervention and outcome. Conclusions drawn tend to follow the data.	Highly convincing account, clearly and logically signposting key steps and specific data connecting intervention to outcome. Conclusions drawn unambiguously follow the data.

CLARISSA (2023) 'CLARISSA's Quality Of Evidence Rubrics', Design Note 2

Methods agnostic, e.g., by using values-based rubrics

Methods specific (e.g., within the QUIP and Process Tracing methods)

		SUFFICIENT FOR AFFIRMING CAUSAL INFERENCE	
		No	Yes
NECESSARY FOR AFFIRMING CAUSAL INFERENCE	No	**1. Straw-in-the-Wind**	**3. Smoking-Gun**
		a. Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis, but does not confirm it.	**a. Passing:** Confirms hypothesis.
		b. Failing: Hypothesis is not eliminated, but is slightly weakened.	**b. Failing:** Hypothesis is not eliminated, but is somewhat weakened.
		c. Implications for rival hypotheses: **Passing** *slightly* weakens them. **Failing** *slightly* strengthens them.	**c. Implications for rival hypotheses:** **Passing** *substantially* weakens them. **Failing** *somewhat* strengthens them.
	Yes	**2. Hoop**	**4. Doubly Decisive**
		a. Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis, but does not confirm it.	**a. Passing:** Confirms hypothesis and eliminates others.
		b. Failing: Eliminates hypothesis.	**b. Failing:** Eliminates hypothesis.
		c. Implications for rival hypotheses: **Passing** *somewhat* weakens them. **Failing** *somewhat* strengthens them.	**c. Implications for rival hypotheses:** **Passing** *eliminates* them. **Failing** *substantially* strengthens.

Testing causal explanations against expected outcomes

Assessing the strength of evidence

Main drivers linked to outcomes in that row

Most reported driver followed by second most (if applicable)

Outcomes reported	No cash	Low Cash	High Cash
Improved diversity of food consumption	Care Groups Other income	Cash transfer	Cash transfer Care Groups/ HSAs
Improved quantity of food consumption	NSL agri advice & inputs Other income	Cash transfer Other income	Cash transfer NSL agri advice & inputs
Improved health	HSAs Care Groups	Cash transfer HSAs	Cash transfer HSAs/ Care groups
Improved hygiene practices	Care Groups/ HSAs Local health centres	Care Groups/ HSAs Local health centres	Care Groups/ HSAs/ Local health centres
Improved wellbeing	HSAs/ Care Groups New business/jobs	Cash transfer New business/jobs	Cash transfer HSAs/ Care Groups
Improved ability to cope with household responsibilities	Local health services/ Care Groups Other income	Cash transfer/ Other income HSAs	Cash transfer Care Groups/ HSAs
Improved family relationships	HSAs Care Groups	Cash transfer	Cash transfer Health advice & services
Financial decisions made by respondent	Marital separation Self-confidence	Marital separation Increased income	Marital separation
Developed skills on ECD	HSAs Care Groups/ Elders	HSAs/ Health Centres Care Groups	Care Groups HSAs & Health Centres
Husband more involved with childcare			HSAs/ Care Groups Community advice

Increasing confidence in causal arguments requires careful and systematic analysis

Steps for undertaking causal analysis

1. Reflect on your research questions / theory of change.
2. Code for causality
3. Test causal relationships and explore rival explanations
4. **Triangulate data ("sensemaking")**

Assessing the Strength of Evidence

Apgar and Aston, January 2025, pp. 22-23.

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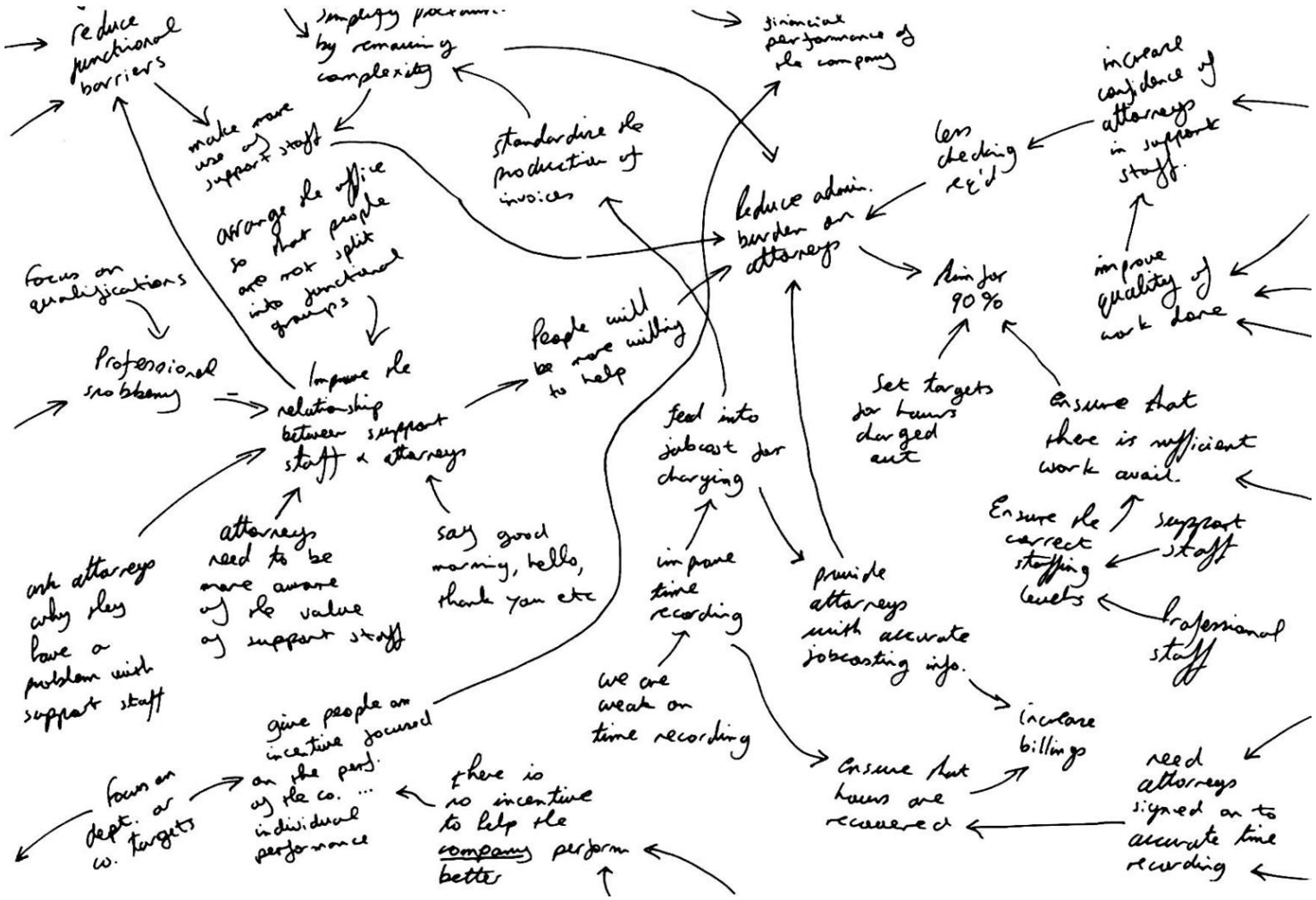
Sensemaking, Learning, and Adaptation Sessions with a Causal Pathways Lens



Assessing the Strength of Evidence

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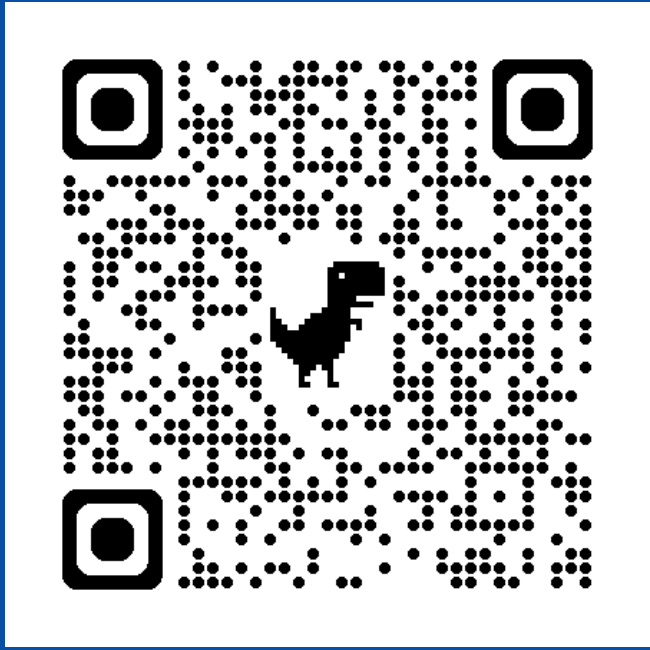
Different examples

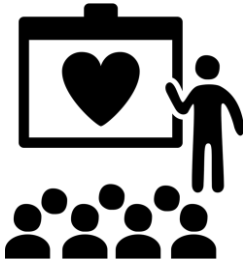


Questions and Commitments

Your questions…

Where to Find Out More about Causal Pathways

Resources from the Causal Pathways Initiative

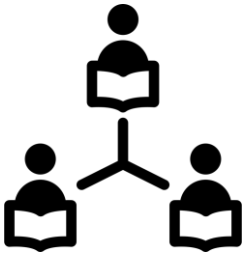


Presentations & trainings to build understanding and will

American Evaluation Association Annual Conference

Available to attend other events by request

Virtual 101 level training available on request



Resources to support understanding and action

BetterEvaluation.com resource hub on causal pathways evaluation

Case studies to provide stories and more detailed examples

Book chapter with step-by-step guidance on how to plan a causal pathways evaluation

Learning and acting together with support

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

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ABOUT THIS THEME

Theme type
Cross-cutting themes

Tags
Causal Pathways

Causal pathways

Contributing partner:
Causal Pathways Initiative

A causal pathways perspective on evaluation focuses on understanding how, why, and under what conditions change happens or has happened.

It is used to understand the interconnected chains of causal links that lead to a range of outcomes and impacts. These causal pathways are likely to involve multiple actors, contributing factors, events, and actions, not only the activities associated with the program, project, or policy being evaluated or its stated objectives.

Overview

Rather than being a specific approach, causal pathways evaluation might be best understood as a perspective on evaluation, which can draw on a combination of existing evaluation approaches, processes and methods. It uses a range of types of evidence, especially participant voices and narratives, and emphasises the use of participatory processes.

Causal pathways evaluation, as understood by the Causal Pathways Initiative, can be distinguished by the following features:

Taking Learning into Action

As you reflect on today's content, what is **one thing you can act on in the next three months**?

You might consider:

- Continuing to learn, leveraging Causal Pathways Initiative case studies, Better Evaluation, and other resources
- Sharing something you learned with a colleague
- Applying something you learned today in a current or new project
- Or something else!

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THANK YOU

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