Deep Dive: realist evaluation

Causal Pathways Virtual Symposium 2023

Thursday, September 21, 2023

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Structure of this session

1 Introduction to realist evaluation and how it helps explore causal pathways

2 Practical exercise to explore mechanisms

3 Advantages and disadvantages of realist evaluation

4 Discussion

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Introduction to realist evaluation

What is realist evaluation?

Theory based approach, developed by Pawson & Tilley (1997) as an alternative to RCTs
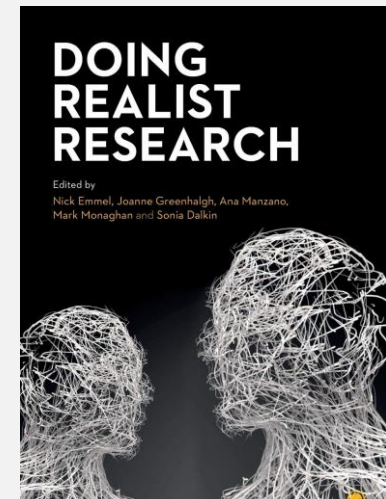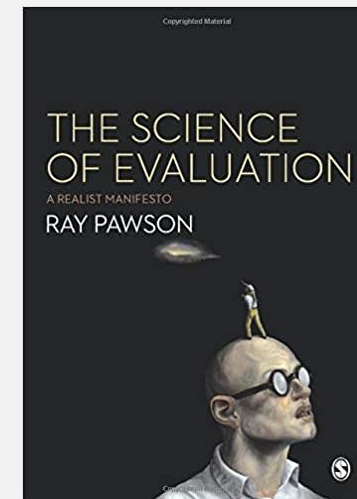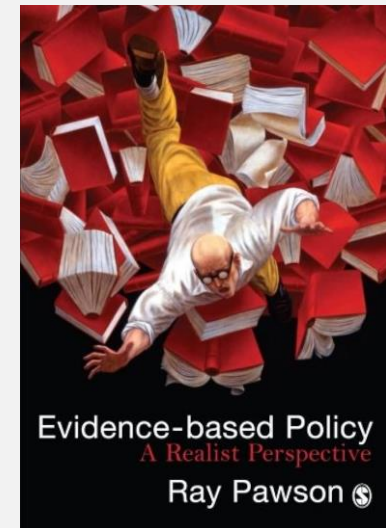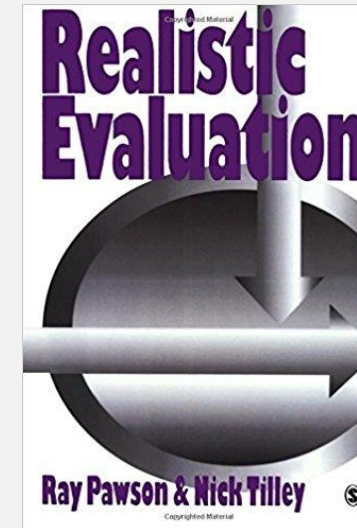
Doesn't ask '**what works?**' but '**how and why does this programme work or not work, for whom, and in what circumstances?**'

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?

Nuanced, rigorous explanations of 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

Practical and actionable insights for different stakeholders

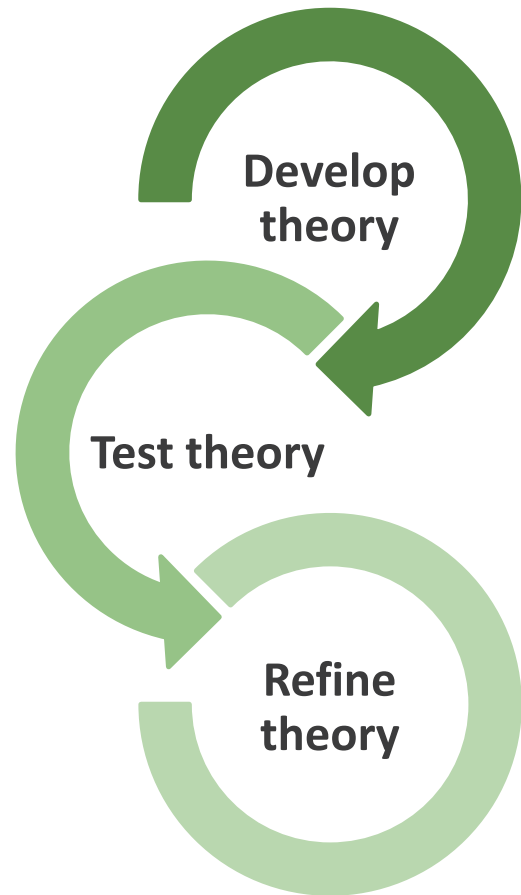# The core assumption of realist evaluation:

Realism: things we see and experience in the social world are caused by hidden (but real) processes

Empirical level: what we can observe
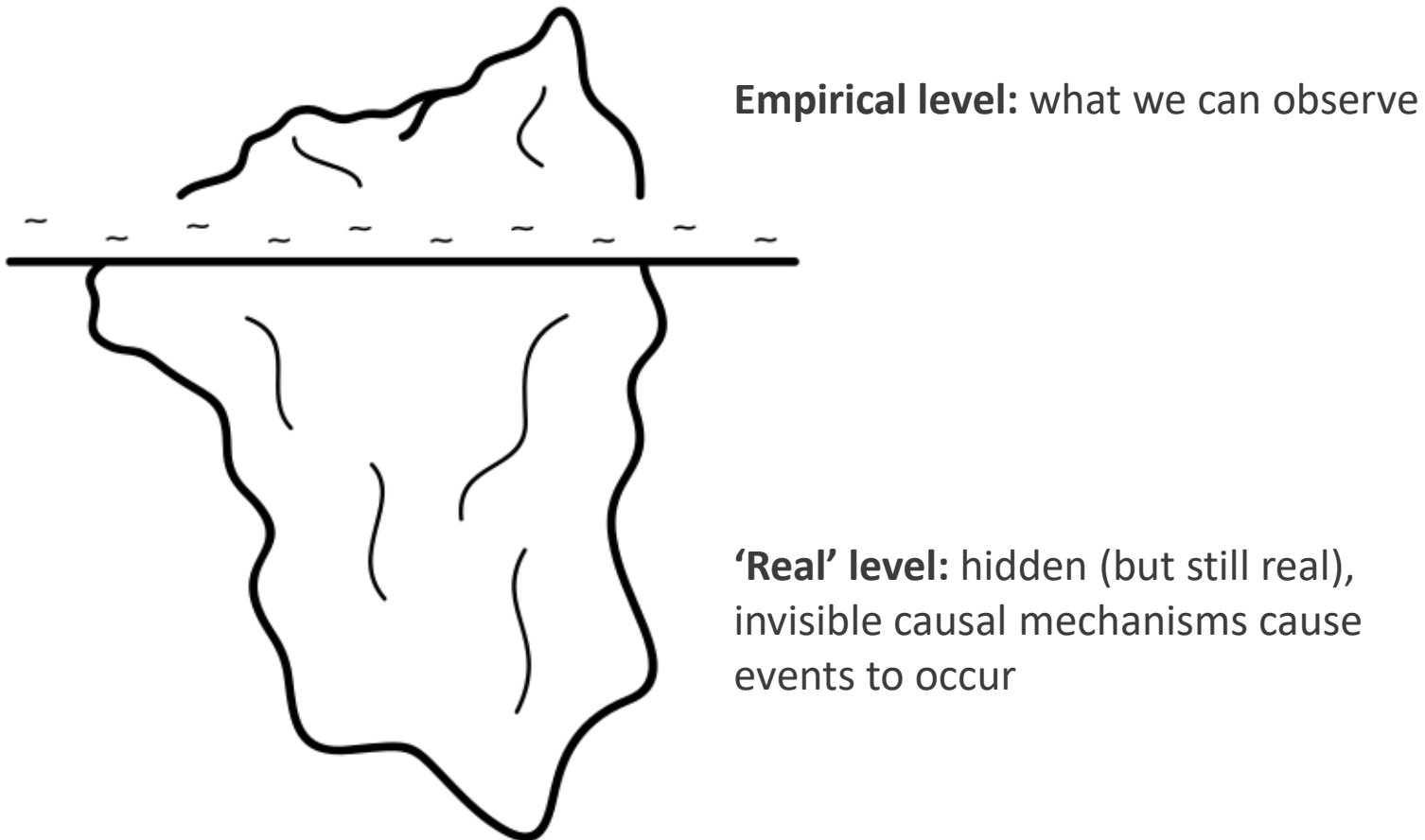
Realist evaluation involves **digging 'underneath the surface'** of interventions, to understand how and why they work

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

How does it work in practice?

...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 (C)

Mechanisms (M)

Intervention → Outcomes (O)
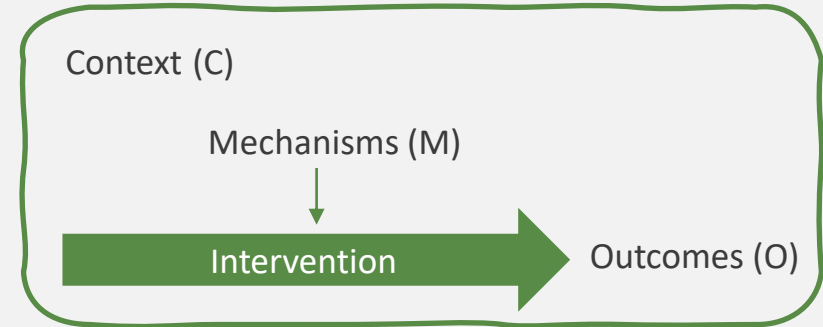
CONTEXT	**MECHANISM**	**OUTCOME**
Where there is an opportunity to implement policy change to address climate change but obstacles exist, and where the UK provides constructive, collaborative support.	ICF influences policy by equipping policy makers with the motivation, evidence and capacity to act, and systems to support action.	Delivery and implementation of policy to address climate change.

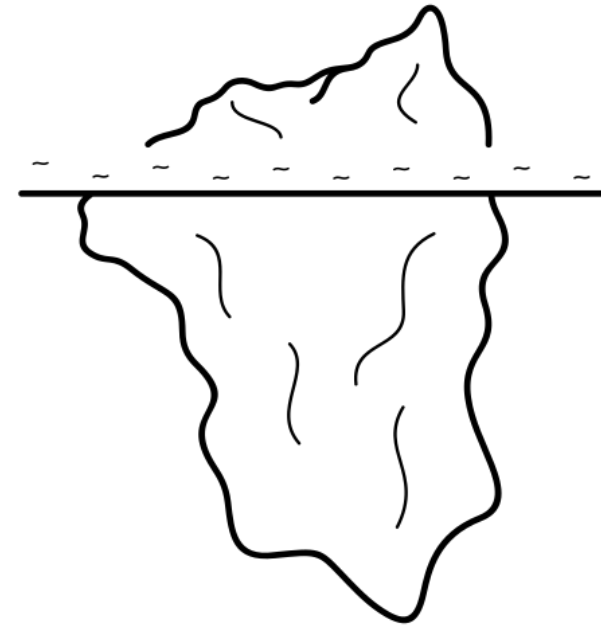Haplin et al (2020) Climate Change Compass Portfolio Evaluation 3 Technical Report [link]

What is a 'mechanism'?

✓

✗

Causal forces, powers, processes or interactions

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

Usually hidden or invisible – often 'inside people's heads'

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

What is a 'mechanism'?

The **training course** is not what causes change…

'Aha!' moment

Supportive networks

Makes work easier

Recognition and rewards
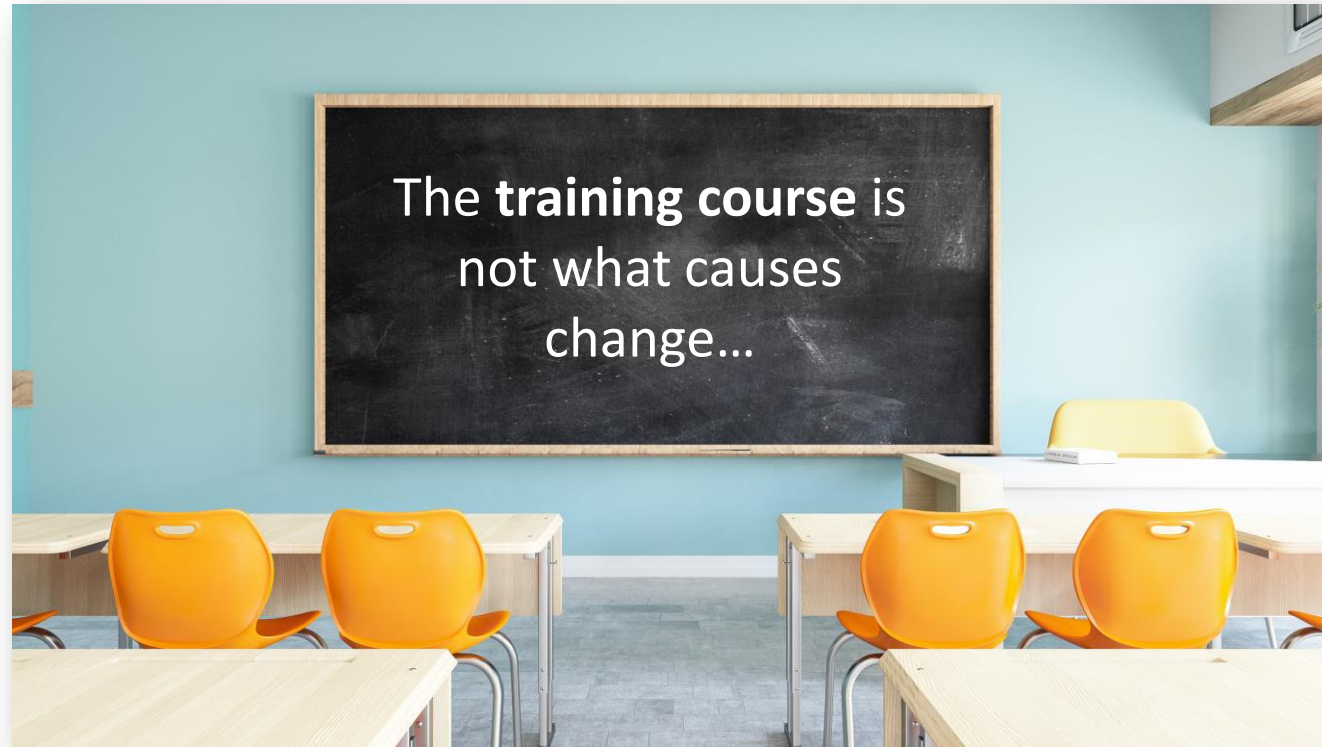
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Exploring mechanisms

Mechanisms can often by identified by unpacking *responses* to *resources*
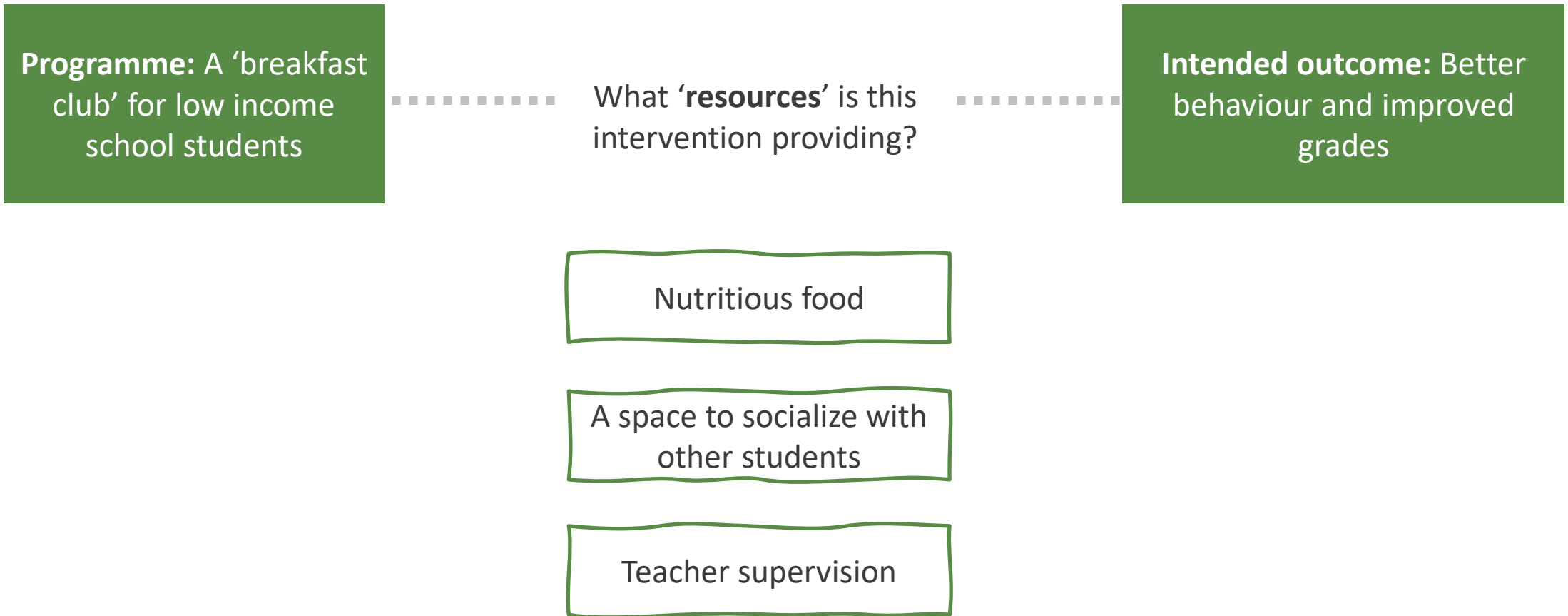
Programme: A 'breakfast club' for low income school students

What '**resources**' is this intervention providing?

Intended outcome: Better behaviour and improved grades

Nutritious food

A space to socialize with other students

Teacher supervision

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

Resources

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

Nutritious food

A space to socialize with other students

Teacher supervision

What are some of the different ways that children might *respond* to these resources? And some of the things that might affect *how* they respond?

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

Resources	Responses	
	🙂	🙁
Nutritious food	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 make them feel excluded
A space to socialize with other students	Kids who feel socially isolated because they are poor might develop stronger friendships and social bonds, improving their confidence and self-esteem	If 'badly behaving' kids are given a new space to socialize, this might give them a chance to plot bad behavior, leading to more disruption in school
Teacher supervision	Kids who don't have much time or support at home to do homework can get help from their teachers, helping them do better in class	Some kids might see this as being like detention, and feel punished for being poor

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:	Household food insecurity

Mechanism:	Physical energy

Outcome:	Improved concentration

"Where children are facing food insecurity 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 make them feel socially excluded and alienated from peers"

Context:	Religious restrictions on certain foods

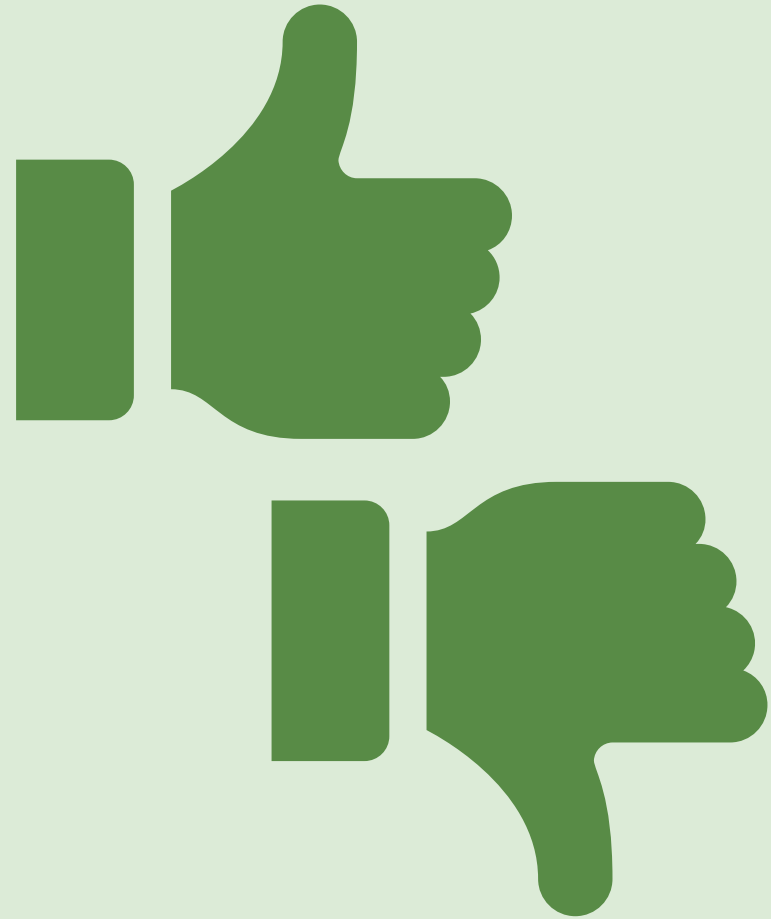|	
Mechanism:	Social exclusion

Outcome:	Increased feelings of alienation

"If breakfast clubs provide food that some children cannot eat due to religious beliefs (C), they might inadvertently exclude these children (M), increasing feelings of social alienation (O)"

3

Advantages and disadvantages of realist evaluation

Why is realist evaluation useful to explore causal pathways?

Nuanced, rigorous explanations of 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

Practical and actionable insights for different stakeholders

Example: Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE)

£15 million, 12 countries, 6 projects, 2013-2017

Aim: to increase the capacity of government officials in low and middle income countries to access, appraise and systematically use evidence in policy making
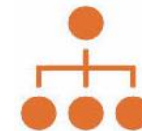
Training   Champions   Networking events   Workshops / policy dialogues   Tools, manuals and guidelines   Systems development

Realist evaluation explored programme effectiveness, **and** aimed to strengthen the global evidence base

Final BCURE evaluation report available here: http://www.itad.com/knowledge-and-resources/bcure/

# Nuanced and rigorous insights into causal pathways

The CMO configuration forces precision and depth – going deeper than a standard ToC to explain the 'arrows' underneath the 'boxes'
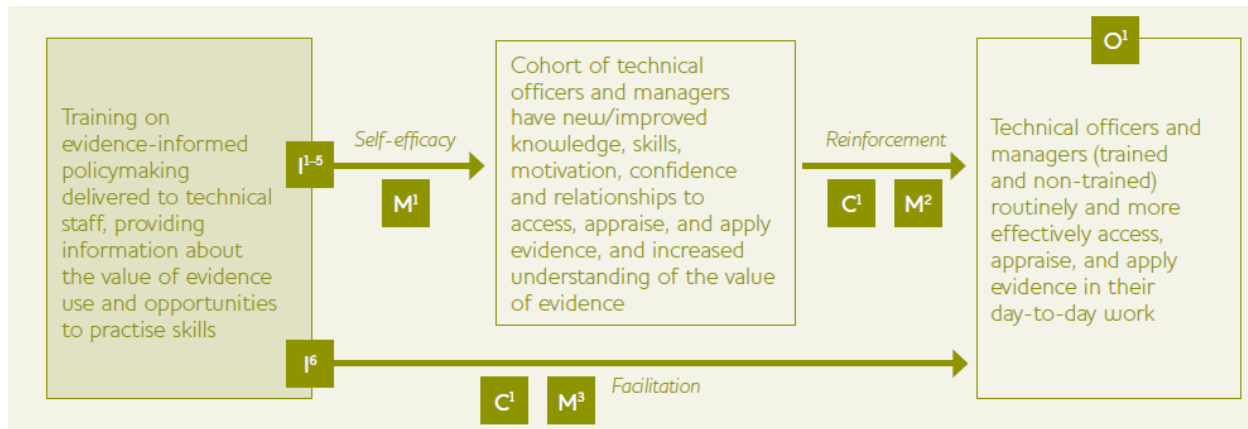
CIMO 1: Where information is provided about the importance of evidence-informed policymaking and how to access, appraise, and apply evidence, alongside opportunities to practise skills, this can generate **self-efficacy** among technical officers, building their confidence in their ability to do their jobs or achieve goals (M^1) leading to individual behaviour change around evidence use (O^1). 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 (M^2). 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 (C^1). 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 (I^1), and where activities are practical and participatory (I^2), incorporate a focus on soft skills as well as technical skills (I^3), use knowledgeable, patient, and confident facilitators (I^4), tap into incentives to encourage participation (I^5), and provide practical tools, systems or processes (I^6) that **facilitate** trainees to do their jobs more easily or efficiently (M^3).
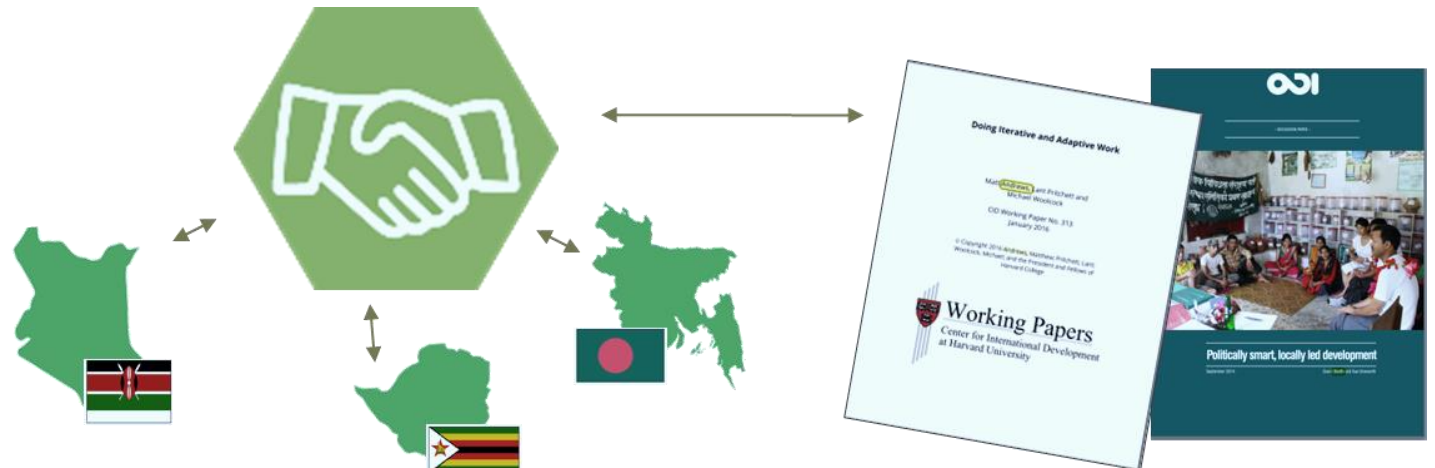
Theories build on existing knowledge

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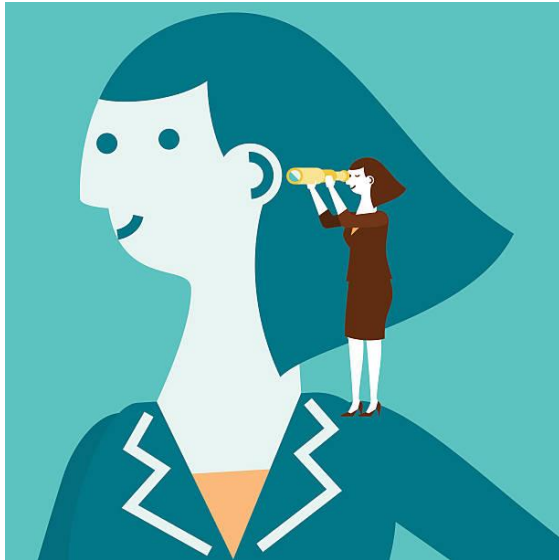
'Accompaniment' mechanism

'Where an external partner provides tailored, flexible and responsive support to a government institution through a process of reform, characterised by a high level of trust'
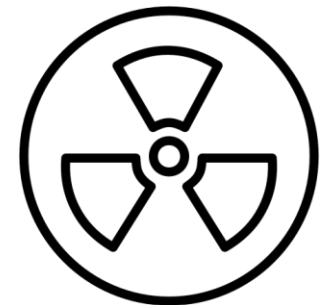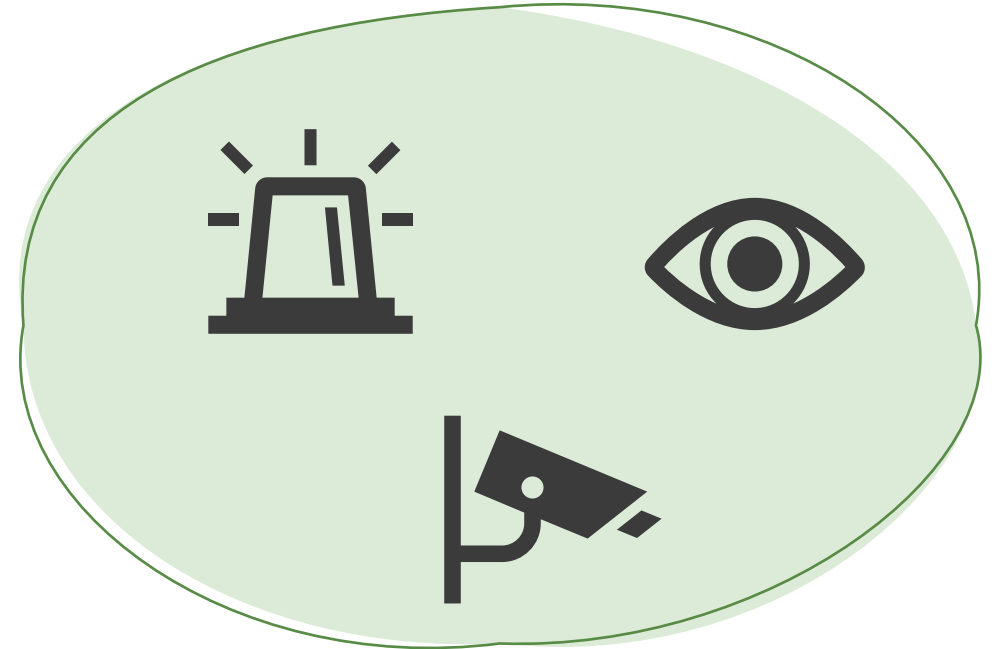
Generates generalisable insights

The same mechanisms are often present in very different situations

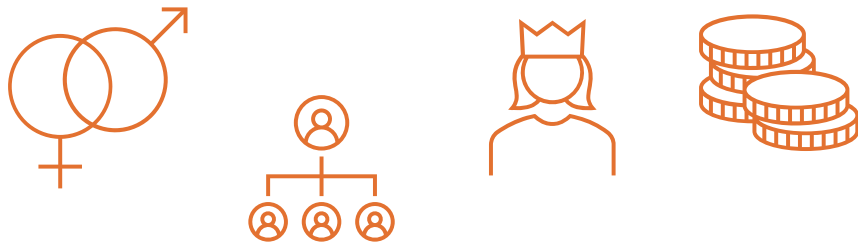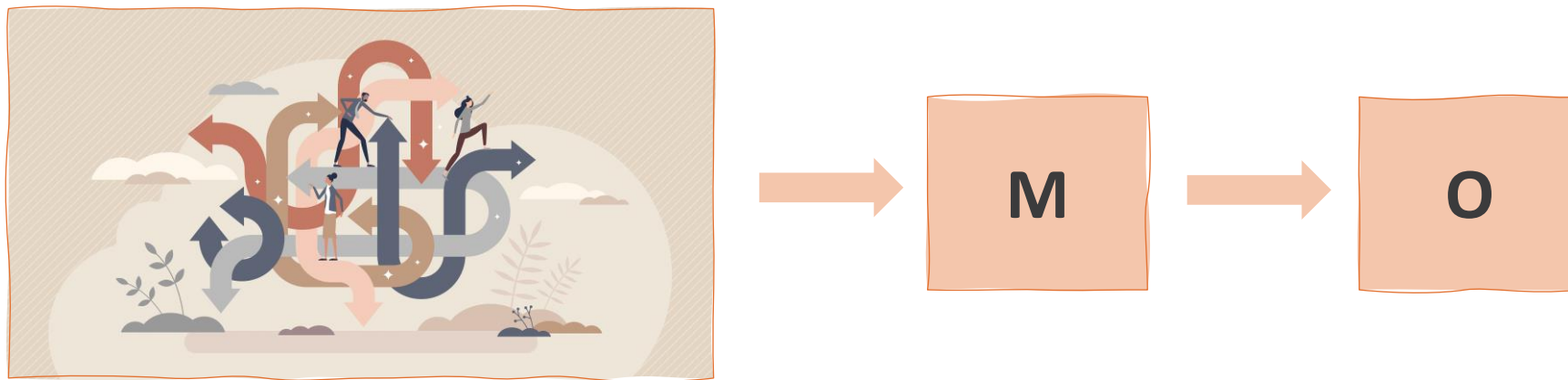In realist evaluation, you generalise based on mechanisms

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

Helps to grapple with context and complexity

CMOs also provide a framework to explore how change at one level of a system creates the conditions for change to occur at other levels
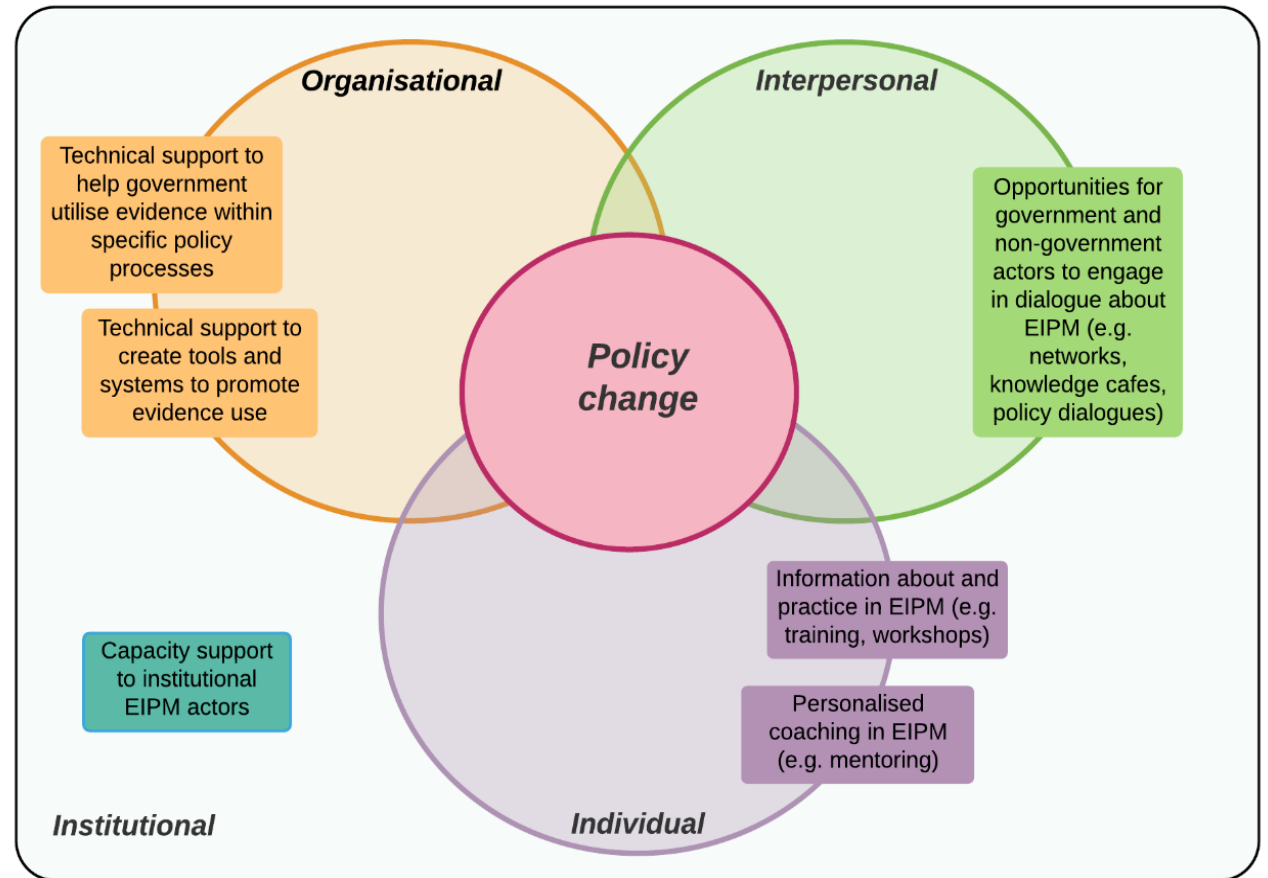
Practical and actionable evidence

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

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

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

'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

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

Can be very time consuming if not carefully managed

When to consider realist evaluation

You want to understand how and why a programme works for different people and/or in different contexts

For evaluating new initiatives or pilots – when you are unsure how they will work and/or to help understand how to scale them up or roll them out elsewhere

When learning and adaptation are a key focus of the evaluation

You will need…

Time and flexibility to iteratively develop and test theory

The scope to collect in-depth qual data (to explore mechanisms) as well as quant data (to measure outcomes)

An evaluation team who are willing and able to 'think like realists'

Active engagement from implementers and commissioners

To draw clear boundaries around the realist investigation – don't try to look at everything!

Discussion

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

Thank you

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