



Using Realist Evaluation

Itad experience

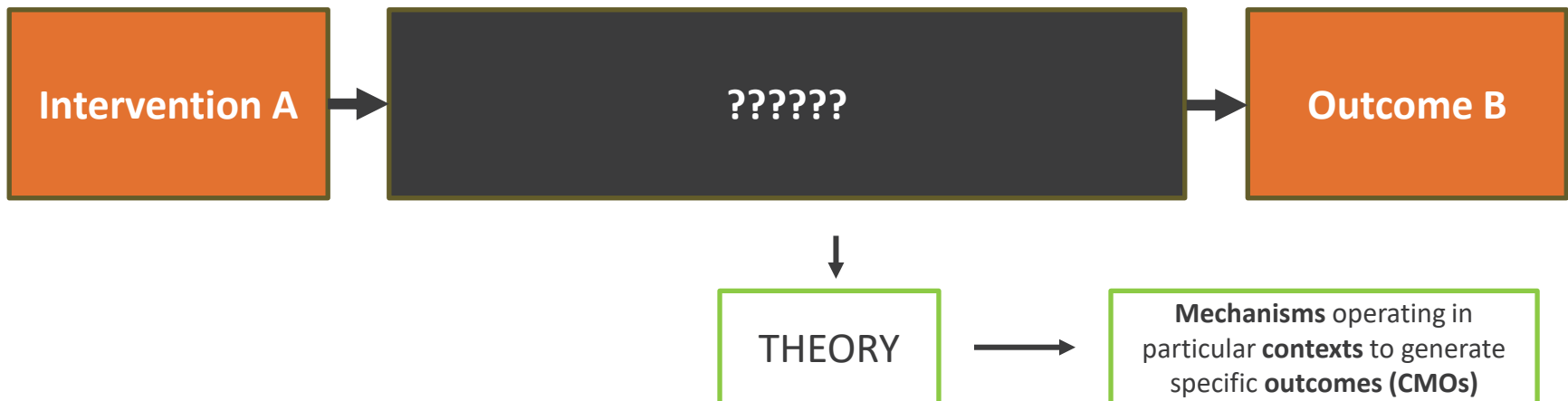
21 February 2018

An introduction to realist evaluation

- What is realist evaluation?
- Why choose realist evaluation?
- How does it work? (examples)
- *There be dragons*: health warning
- How best to use it

What is realist evaluation?

- Theory based approach, developed by Pawson & Tilley (1997)
- Not 'what works' but 'what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why?'
- Answers this through **opening up the black box**: developing and testing theories about how the resources introduced by programmes in particular contexts 'spark' mechanisms which generate outcomes.
- **Generative** model of causality



Why choose a realist approach?

- If you're interested in understanding not just *whether* a programme worked, but *how and why* it did.
- ...To inform decisions about whether to fund, or **how to design** a programme, or **whether to scale up or close**.
- Realist evaluation is useful when we don't yet understand how, why and for whom programmes work/don't work... And when we want to know how to adapt a programme to new contexts and new people



Why choose realist evaluation?

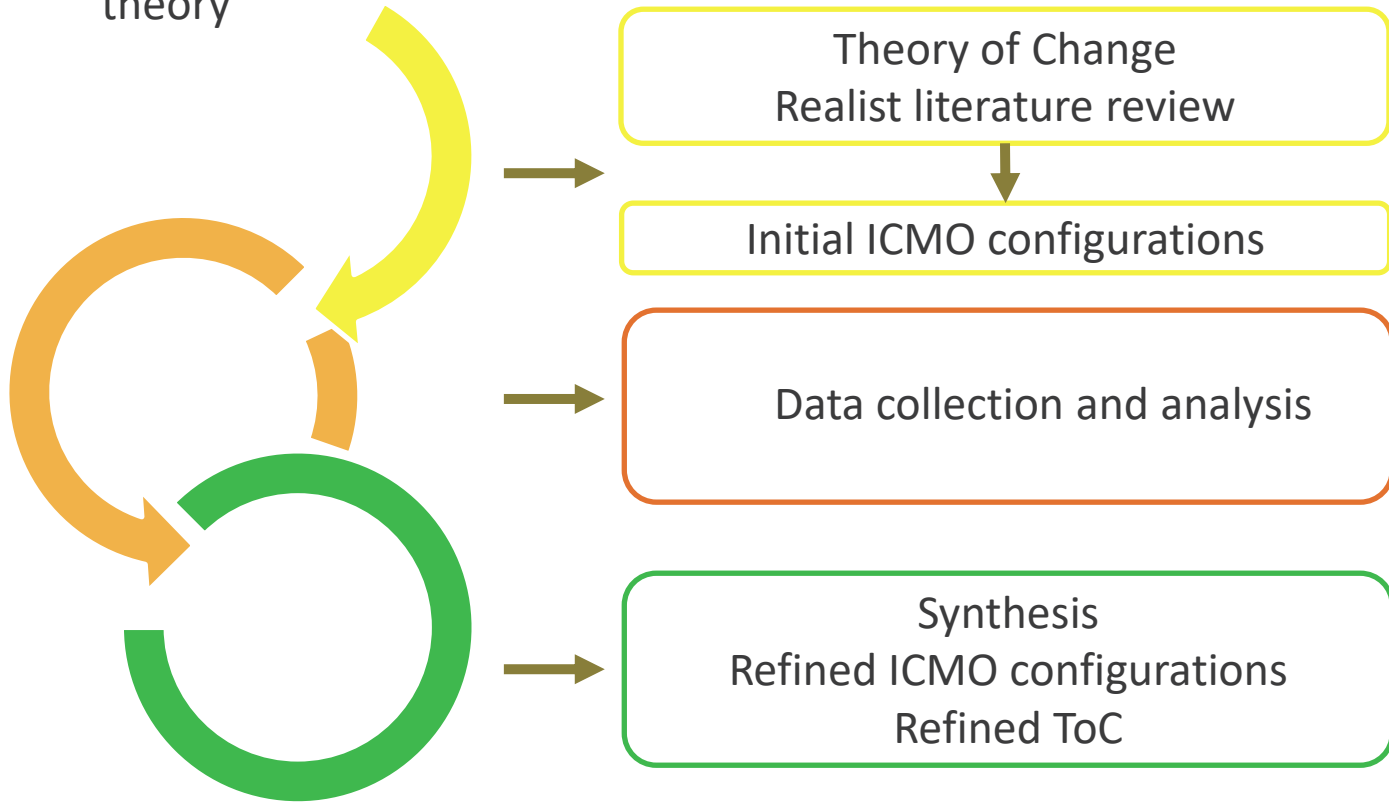
Can provide *generalisable insights* on how to scale a programme up or roll it out to different contexts, therefore provides findings with *external validity*.

Causal *mechanisms* are *real* forces or processes that exist in the world...which are not unique to a particular setting...similar mechanisms are present and explain causal links in different situations.

How do you do a realist evaluation?

Three broad iterative stages

Developing theory



Results in Development

How do you do a realist evaluation?

- These steps look quite familiar...so what's different about realist evaluation?

1) A different approach to interrogating theory

- Focuses explicitly on what works for whom (O) in what contexts (C) and why (M)
- This guides literature review, sampling, tool development, interviewing and data analysis.

2) Heavily focused on KIIs, but with a twist (realist interviewing)

3) It's a philosophy!!!



CMOs: the core analytical unit of RE



Context

Conditions which influence *whether* mechanisms spark, and *which* mechanisms spark, for different groups of people

Mechanism

Forces or powers that explain *how and why* an intervention leads to change

Outcome

Short, medium and long-term changes, intended and unintended, resulting from an intervention

Real perceived risk of apprehension

Deterrence

Reduced car theft

People know the cameras are there

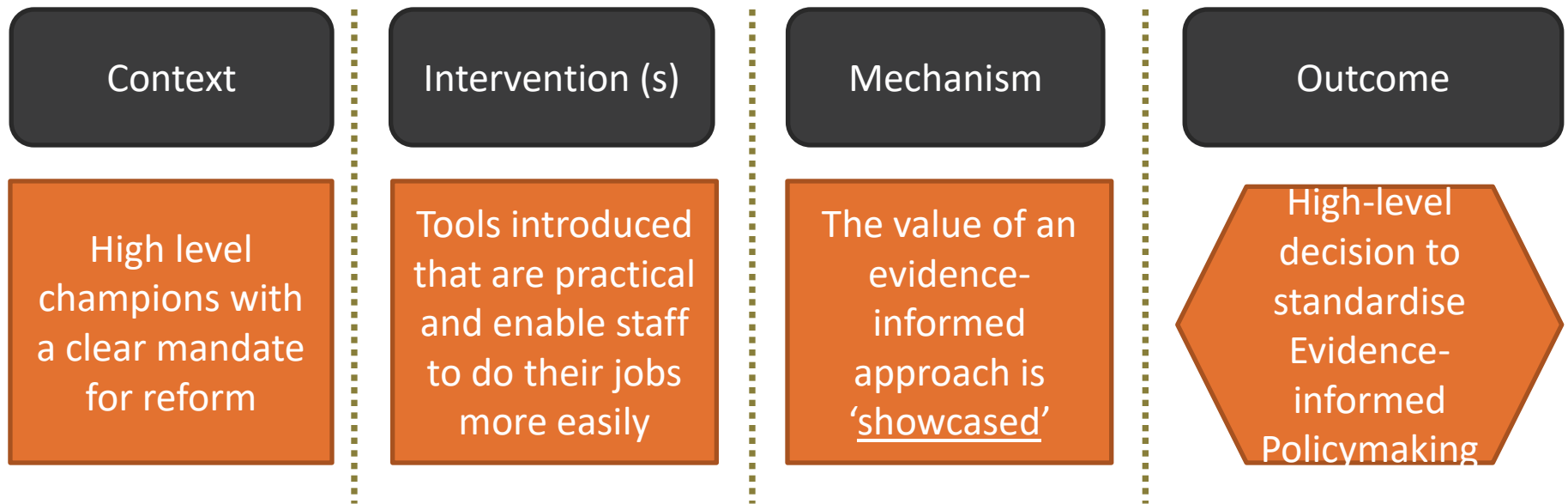
Natural surveillance

Reduced car theft

Results in Development

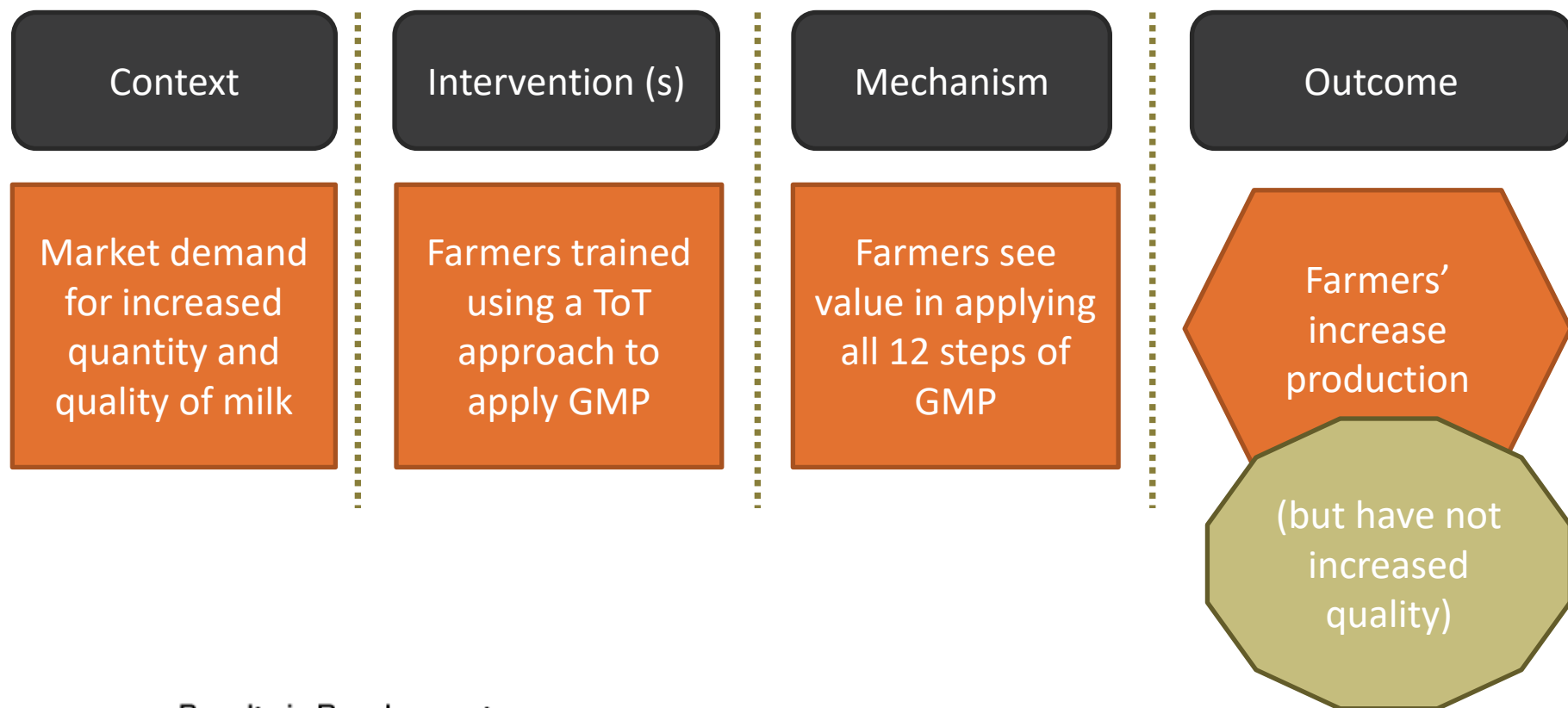
Example of using realist evaluation to generate new insights on what works and why, in different contexts (taken from BCURE)

- How does training and skills development lead to behaviour change in everyday working practices?



Example of an M4P CMO

- How does training in GMP lead to increased production and quality of raw milk?



How and where are we using realist evaluation?

Title	Thematic area	Duration	Evaluation focus countries
Foodtrade East and Southern Africa (FTESA)	Agriculture and Trade	5 years	4 in East and Southern Africa
West Africa Food Markets (WAFM)	Agriculture and Trade	5 years	4 in West Africa
Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED)	Climate Change and Resilience	4 years	13 in Africa, Myanmar and Nepal
International Climate Fund (Compass)	Climate Change Finance	5 years	Lesson learning across global portfolio of 230 programmes
Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE)		3 years	6 across Asia and Africa

Health warning: risks and dangers

1) How realist can you really be in international development? (practical considerations)

Frequently encountered challenges:

- Resource constraints (trying to do too much)
- Scarce data
- Researchers unfamiliar with the approach
- Language, culture and power considerations make 'realist interviewing' challenging

Health warning: risks and dangers

2) The risk of truisms, especially in complex evaluations (the *flattening effect*)

May not be appropriate in situations where:

- The theory is relatively well understood
- You try to do too much (testing multiple outcomes across multiple cases, for multiple respondent groups)
- In attempting to answer broad questions, you synthesise upwards leading to 'lowest common denominator findings'

How best to use realist evaluation?

- Applying realist approaches sparingly and to maximum effect!

(think carefully, *why am I choosing this approach?*)

- Consider combining realist evaluation with other approaches



Thank you for listening

Any Questions?

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