



Conceptual platforms in realist evaluation

AN EXAMPLE

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Extract from abstract

- ▶ The evaluation added to this by developing program-theory-style models for four key concepts: the concept of 'fidelity' when contextualisation is expected; high-quality contextualisation when fidelity to models is expected; impacts on equity; and the contributions of fidelity and contextualisation to sustainability.
- ▶ Theory models were developed for three concepts (fidelity, contextualisation and sustainability) early in the evaluation and tested and refined through the evaluation. A new model for sustainability was also developed from the evaluation findings. The evaluation also took into account, to the extent possible, the impacts of two overarching contexts – developing states and fragile states – on the issues investigated.
- ▶ The evaluation generated specific insights for each program. It also found support for the main tenets of the 'concept theories' and identified ways in which each could be improved. These will be presented.
- ▶ Because the concept theories are not specific to individual programs, they are potentially applicable to a range of programs, and have the potential to make a significant contribution to the theory and practice of adaptive management. The implication is that evaluation practices can be adapted to escape the boundaries of 'single program' evaluations, and to contribute to portable learning across program types.

Context for this presentation

In evaluation

- ▶ Endless 'reinventing the wheel'
- ▶ Call for 'conceptual platforms' (Pawson, 2013)

In policies and programs

- ▶ Increasing interest in adaptive management
- ▶ Tensions between 'fidelity' and 'contextualisation'
- ▶ Relatively little data about whether and how they contribute to program outcomes

The idea of conceptual platforms

- ▶ “Evaluation science needs to be more venturesome in widening the focus of inquiries from that of ‘the programme’ ... It needs to avoid the perpetual, regressive habit of ‘starting from scratch’ and should expect each new investigation to respond to and develop from ‘what is already known’.” (Pawson, 2013, p xvi)
- ▶ Strategy: developing ‘conceptual platforms’.
 - ▶ “distinguish different classes of interventions and to set out their component theories” (ibid p 86).

Our hypothesis

- ▶ It is equally possible to approach implementation issues as conceptual platforms: to develop “recyclable” theories for issues of implementation that apply across multiple program types
- ▶ It is possible to identify their implications for outcomes. This provides a framework on which subsequent investigations can be built

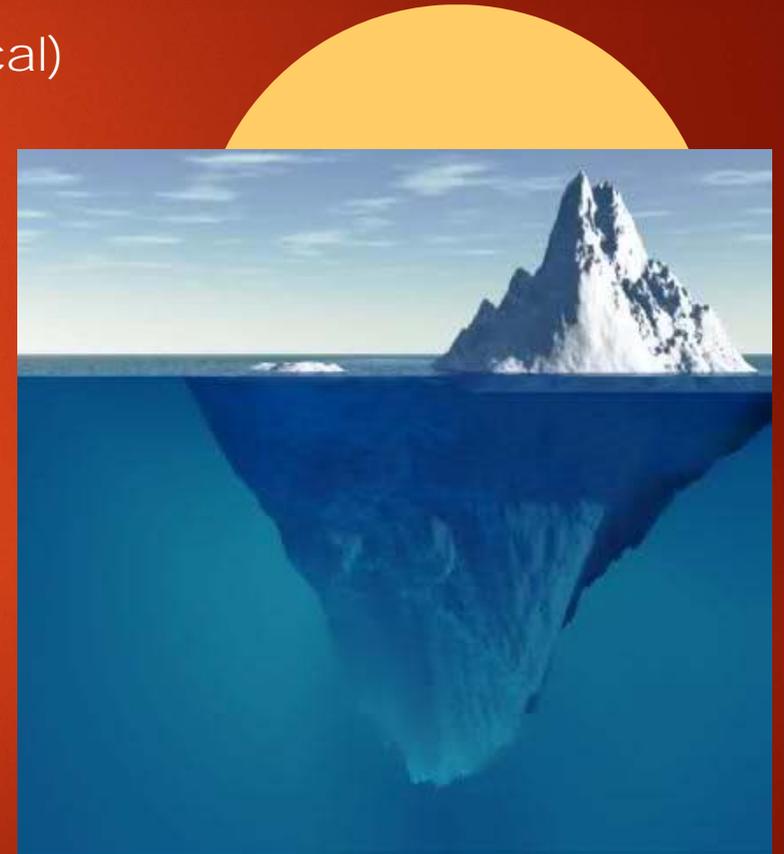
In this example:

- ▶ The ‘implementation issues’: fidelity and contextualisation
- ▶ The outcomes of interest: equity and sustainability.

Reality according to realists

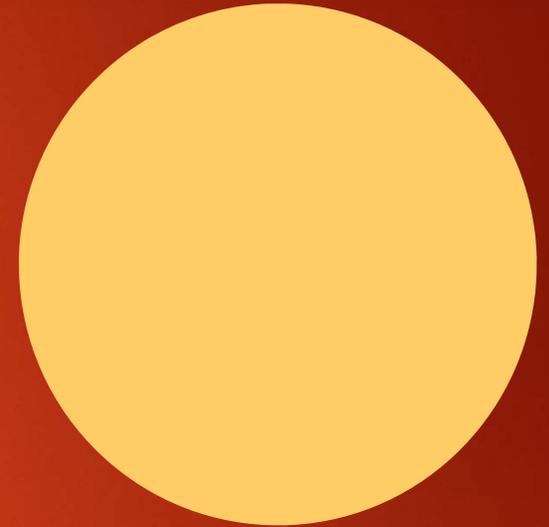
There exists:

- ▶ That which we experience or can measure (the empirical)
- ▶ That which is or happens (the actual)
- ▶ That which causes what happens (the real)



Bhaskar, 1978, *A Realist Theory of Science*, p 13

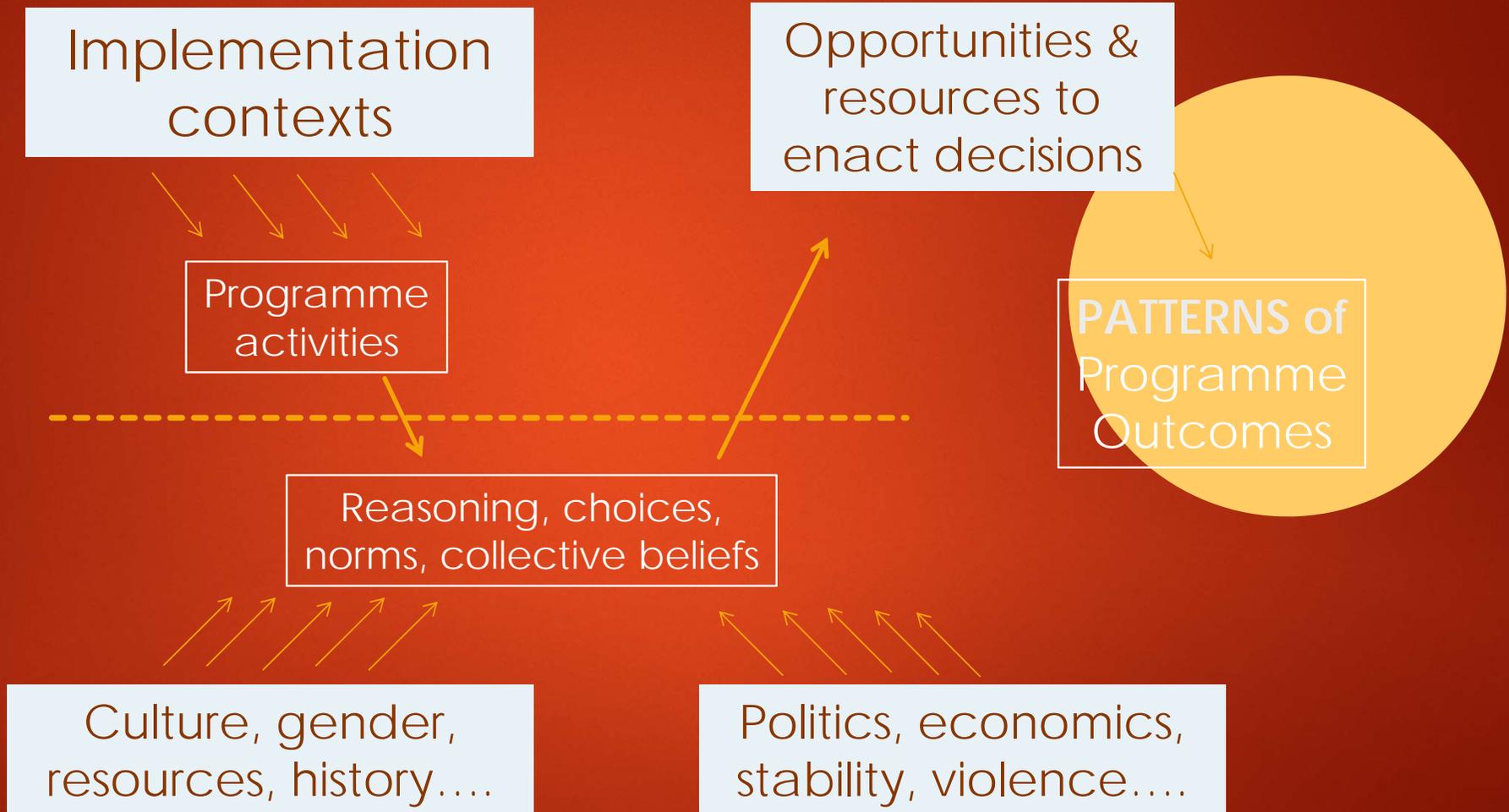
Three key ideas in realism



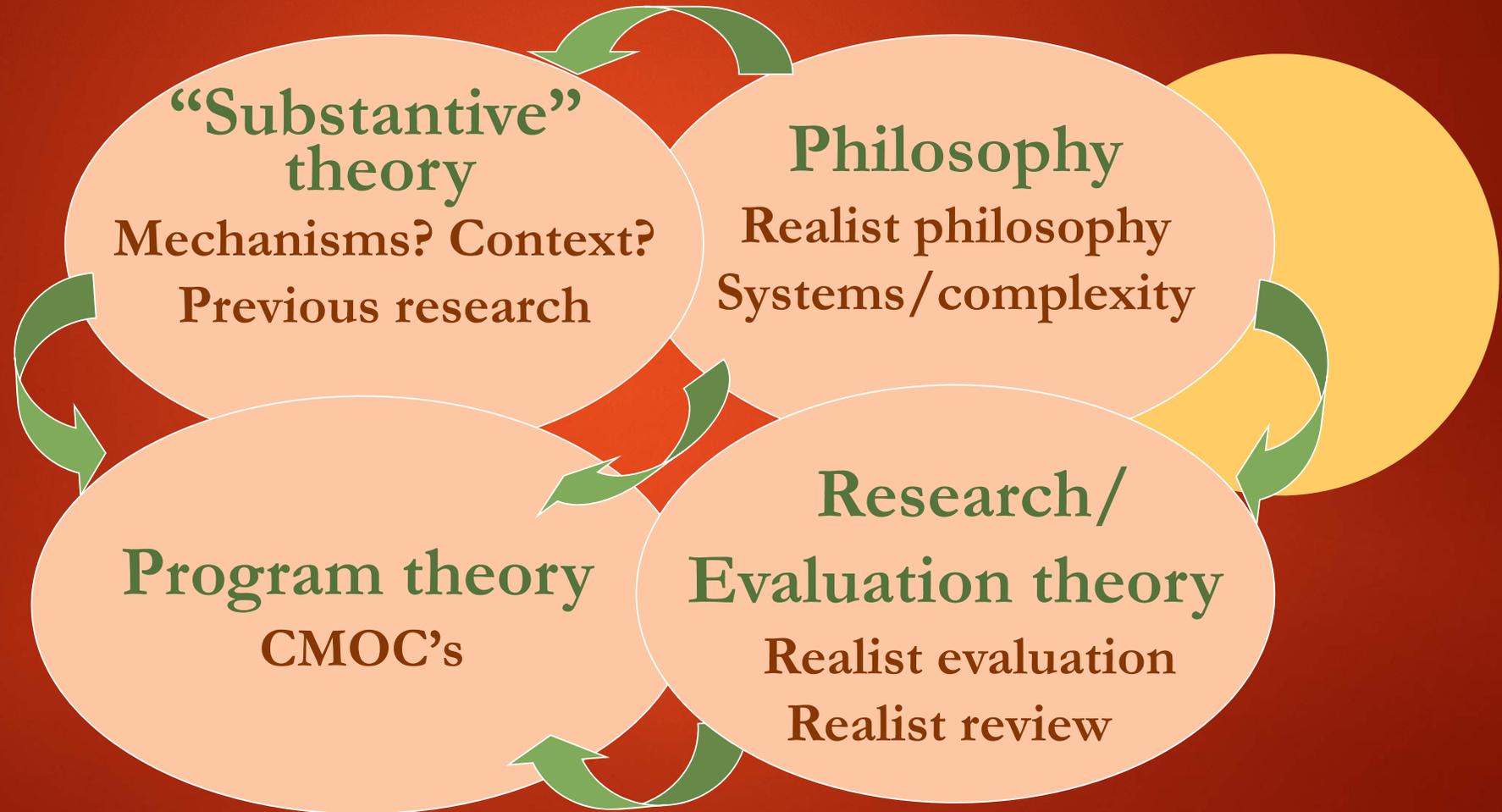
How programs cause outcomes



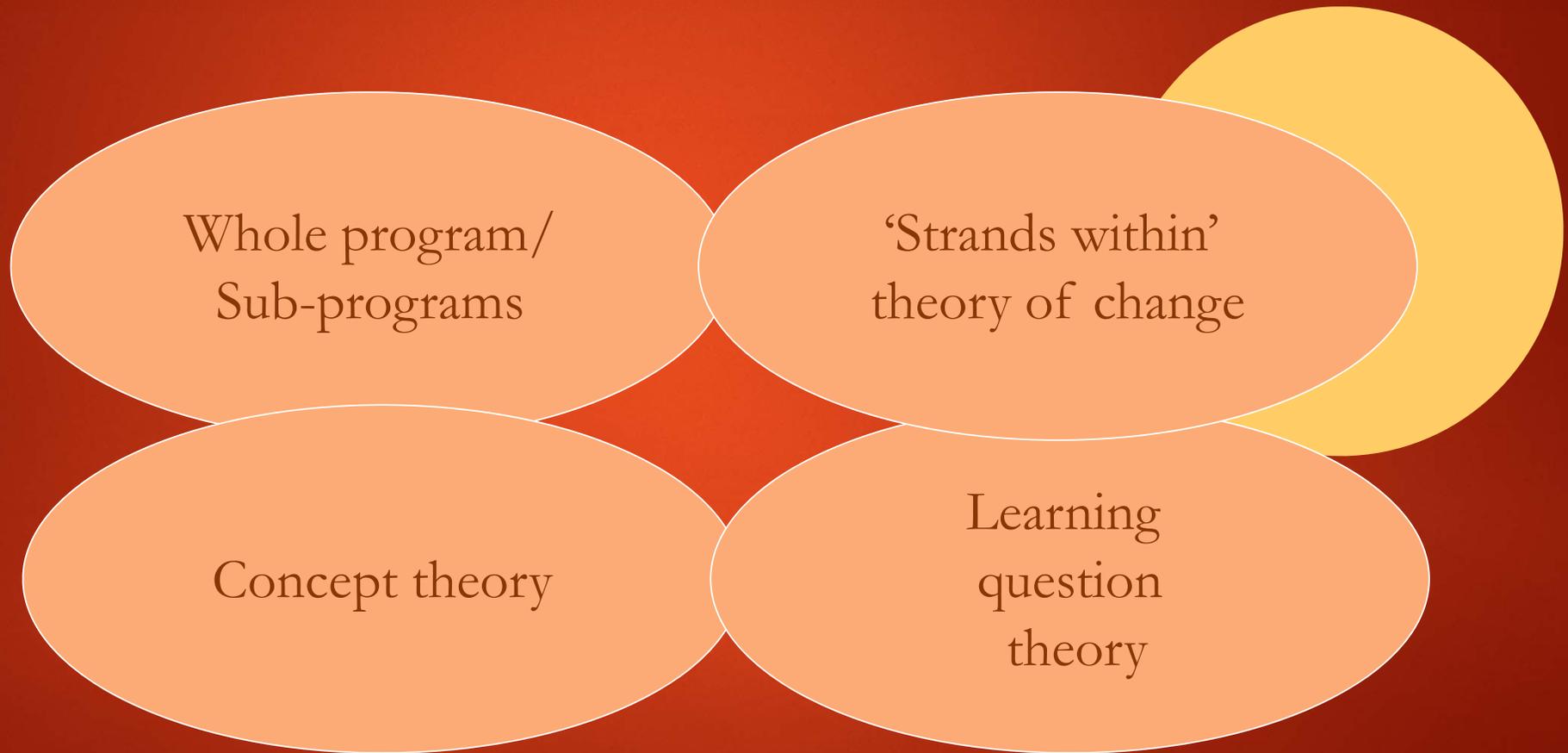
CONTEXT and mechanism



4 kinds of theory - With a realist overlay...



In place of 'program theory':



The project

- ▶ World Vision: almost 100 organisations in as many countries
- ▶ Child-focused international development
- ▶ Seeks to use evidence-informed models and concurrently supports adaptation to context:
 - ▶ 'What constitutes fidelity to program models in C of contextualisation?'
 - ▶ 'What constitutes appropriate contextualisation in evidence based programs?'
- ▶ Regular monitoring and evaluation of funded projects: different outcomes were achieved in different contexts, without establishing how or why:
 - ▶ Do differences in fidelity and contextualisation contribute to differences in outcomes?

Key research questions

- ▶ **Fidelity** – How were our models understood and to what extent were they implemented on the ground as planned?
- ▶ **Contextualisation** – In what ways were the approaches contextualised, in what circumstances, and why? What were the effects of contextualisation on fidelity, outcomes and sustainability?
- ▶ **Environment** – What factors affected the success/failure of our models on the ground, in what ways and how?
- ▶ **Equity** – To what extent and in what circumstances did our models reach the Most Vulnerable Children (MVC) and their carers?
- ▶ **Sustainability** – In what circumstances and to what extent have our models been owned by the communities and local partners? In what circumstances have they been able to (or are likely to) continue functioning without World Vision's support?

Methods



- ▶ Developing 'program theory' for the concepts of fidelity, contextualisation, and sustainability
 - ▶ Review of program documentation
 - ▶ Workshops with WV-UK and WVI staff
 - ▶ Draft program theory diagrams
- ▶ Site visits: four sites in three countries – staff, volunteers, stakeholders
- ▶ Remote interviews, WV staff only, additional six projects
- ▶ Documentary data extraction: evaluation reports, monitoring reports
- ▶ Research ethics through Charles Darwin University

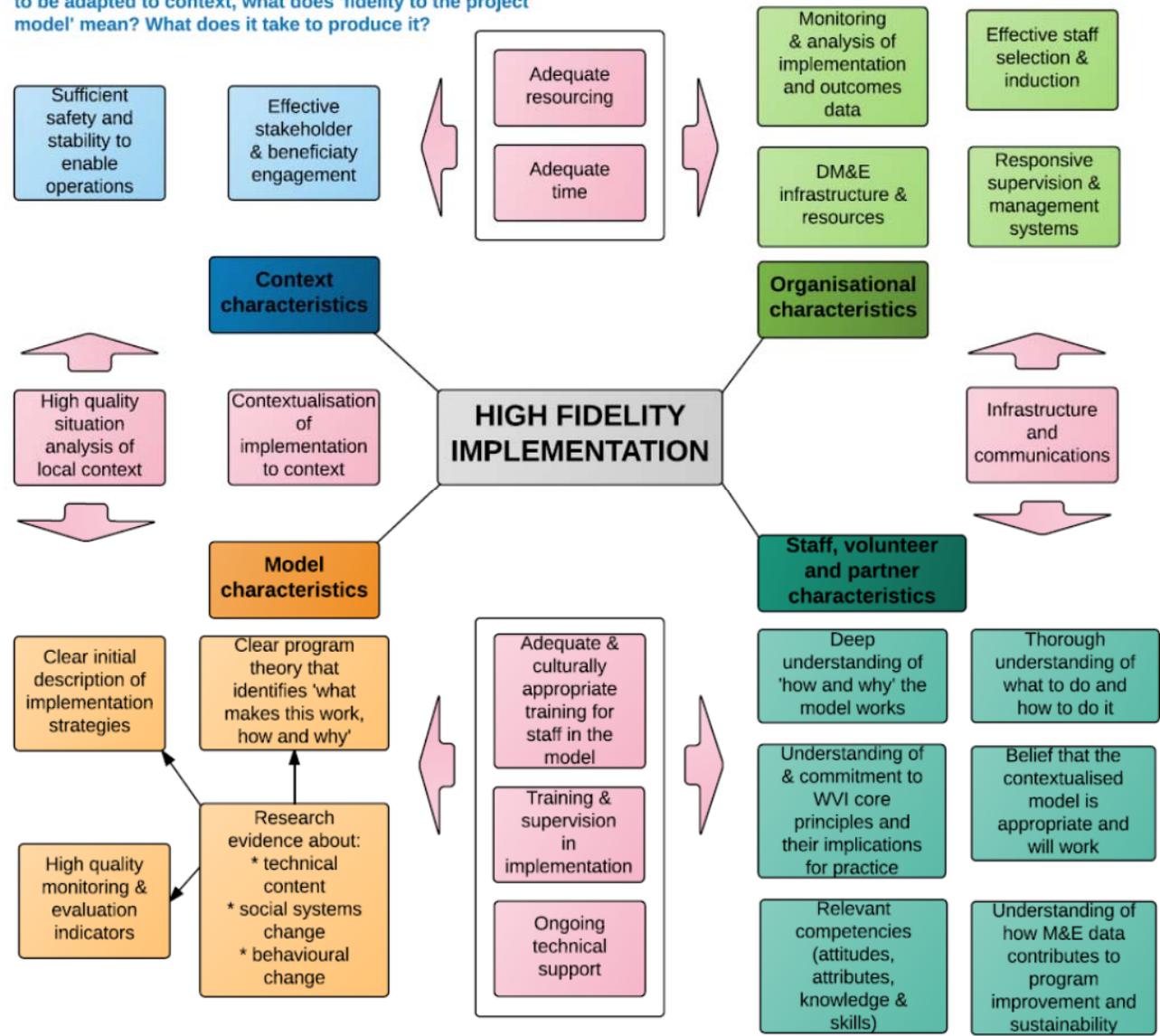
Developing program theory: clarifying concepts

- ▶ **Fidelity:** 'fidelity to the underlying principles and mechanisms that enable or generate program outcomes'
- ▶ **Contextualisation:** 3 categories:
 - ▶ anticipated within the project model itself;
 - ▶ not already 'designed in' to the model, but consistent with the underlying principles, appropriate to the context and enables the program to achieve the same (or better) outcomes as the original model;
 - ▶ inconsistent with program principles and/or less effective than the original model.
- ▶ **Sustainability:** of outcomes, not models/programs
- ▶ **Equity:** participation of and benefit to 'the most vulnerable'

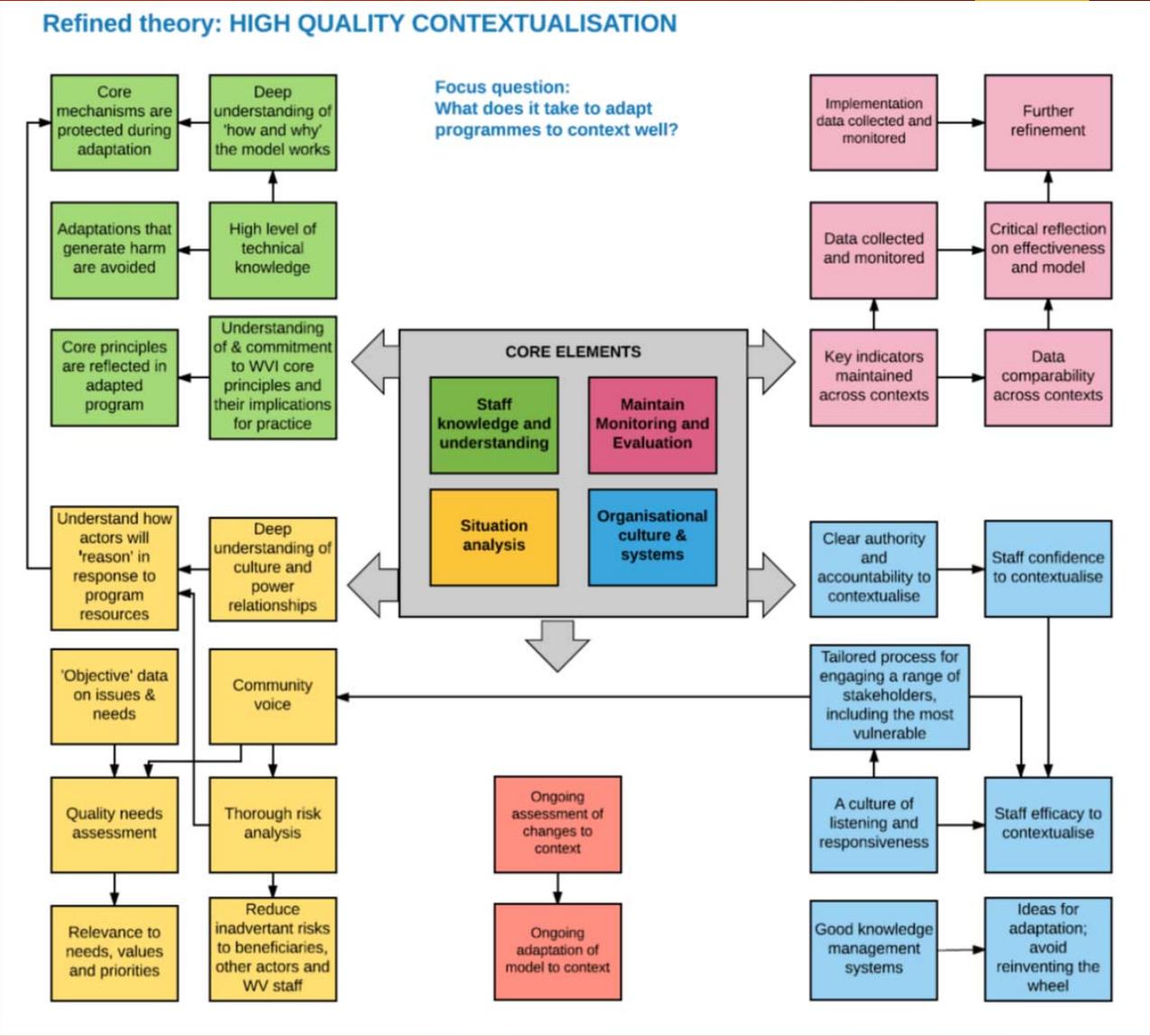
High fidelity implementation

Revised theory: "PROGRAM FIDELITY IN ADAPTIVE PROGRAMING"

Focus Questions: In an organisation that expects models to be adapted to context, what does 'fidelity to the project model' mean? What does it take to produce it?

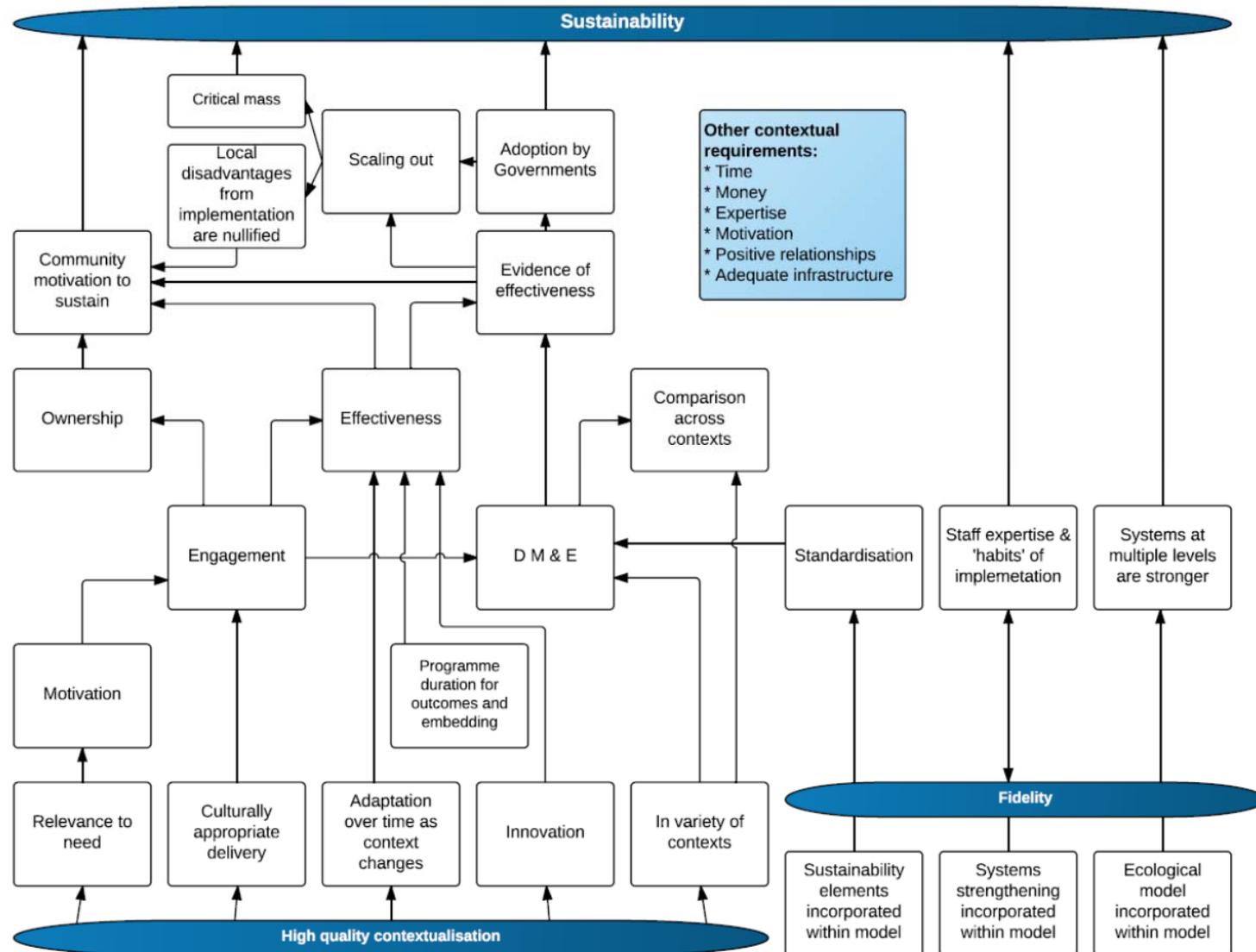


High quality contextualisation

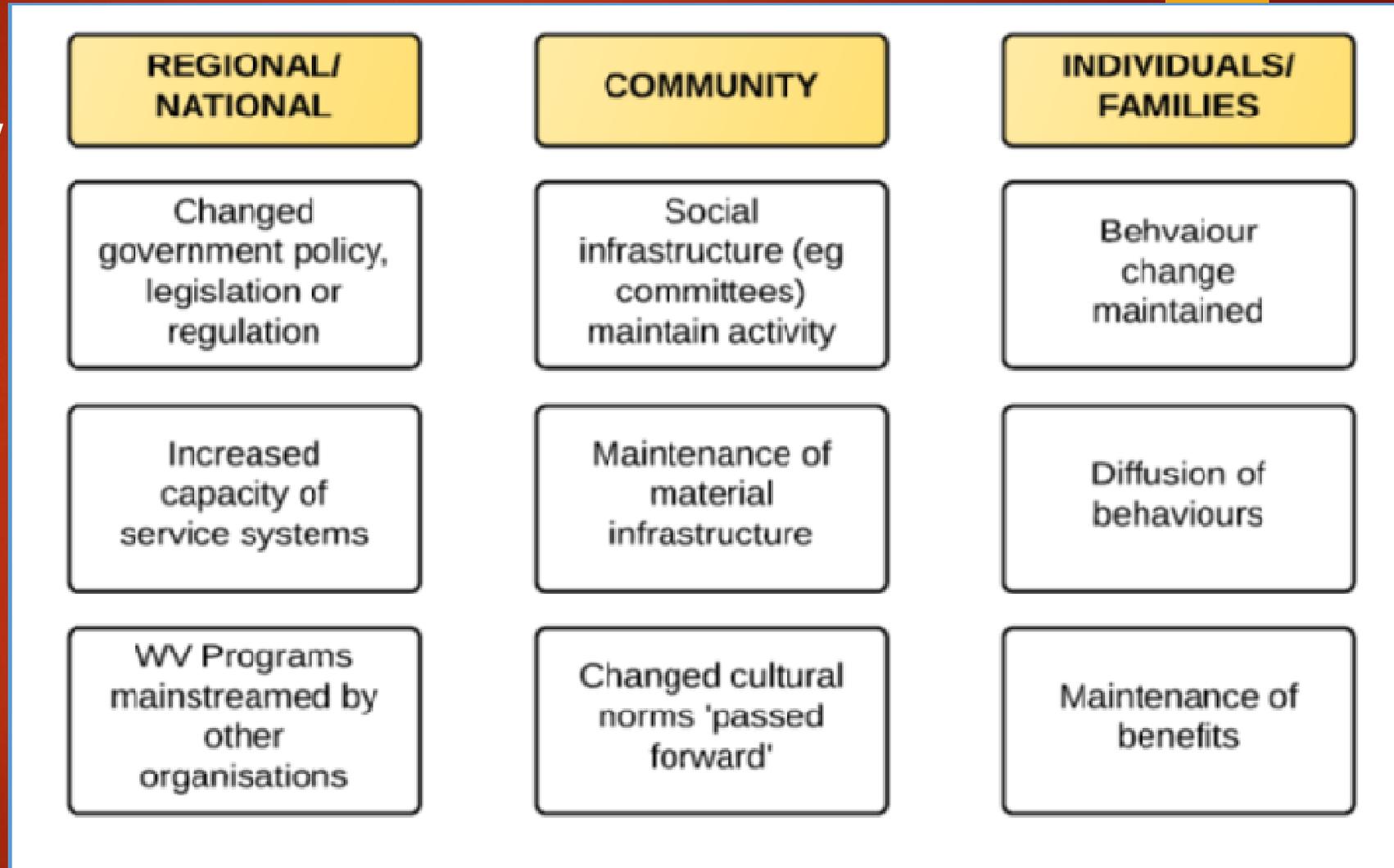


How fidelity and contextualisation contribute to sustainability

Revised theory: FIDELITY, CONTEXTUALISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY Focus question: How do fidelity and contextualisation contribute to sustainability?



Pathways to sustainability



Resources required for sustainability

Table 4. Resources for sustainability

Financial resources

- *Pay salaries/honoraria*
- *Pay transport & other costs*
- *Buy consumable resources*

Provided by WV during the program

Require continual replenishment/input both during and after WV involvement.

Resources created by the program

- *Social infrastructure*
- *Material infrastructure*

Use both imported (know-how, facilitation, costs) and local (human, relationships) resources to develop

Retained in community but require active maintenance (financial & human resources)

Can generate/mobilise other resources

Program resources

- *Models*
- *Curricula and training materials*
- *Other materials*

Initially external to the community, imported and contextualised

Can be retained for re-use in the community but requires expertise.

Local resources mobilised by the program

- *Existing social infrastructure*
- *Existing powers, authority, capacities*
- *Existing norms, motivations*

Pre-existed the program but 'put to work' in the service of the program objectives

Retained in the community

Can be 'distracted' to other purposes

Exercise



- ▶ One 'concept' issue
- ▶ In relation to one evaluation question
- ▶ Five minutes in table groups – how might we define, describe or deconstruct this issue, in relation to that question
- ▶ Sketch

Summary

- ▶ The sorts of theories we use in evaluations make a difference to the questions we ask and answer.
- ▶ Program theory continues to be important, but evaluations that don't examine specific programs need different kinds of theories to guide them.
- ▶ Models of concepts related to implementation and outcomes can act as 'conceptual platforms' in Pawson's sense of the word