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Ten Steps towards the Construction of a Middle-level Theory

Wednesday 13th May 2020

12:45 – 14:00 GMT

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A lecture followed by a Q&A session

If you have questions

please click on the icon to raise your hand, and wait to be given the floor

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Who are the authors



Lucy Charlton – Goldsmith's



Matt Juden - SOAS



**Nancy Cartwright
Durham and UCSD**



Richard Williams – Durham



Tamlyn Munslow – Durham

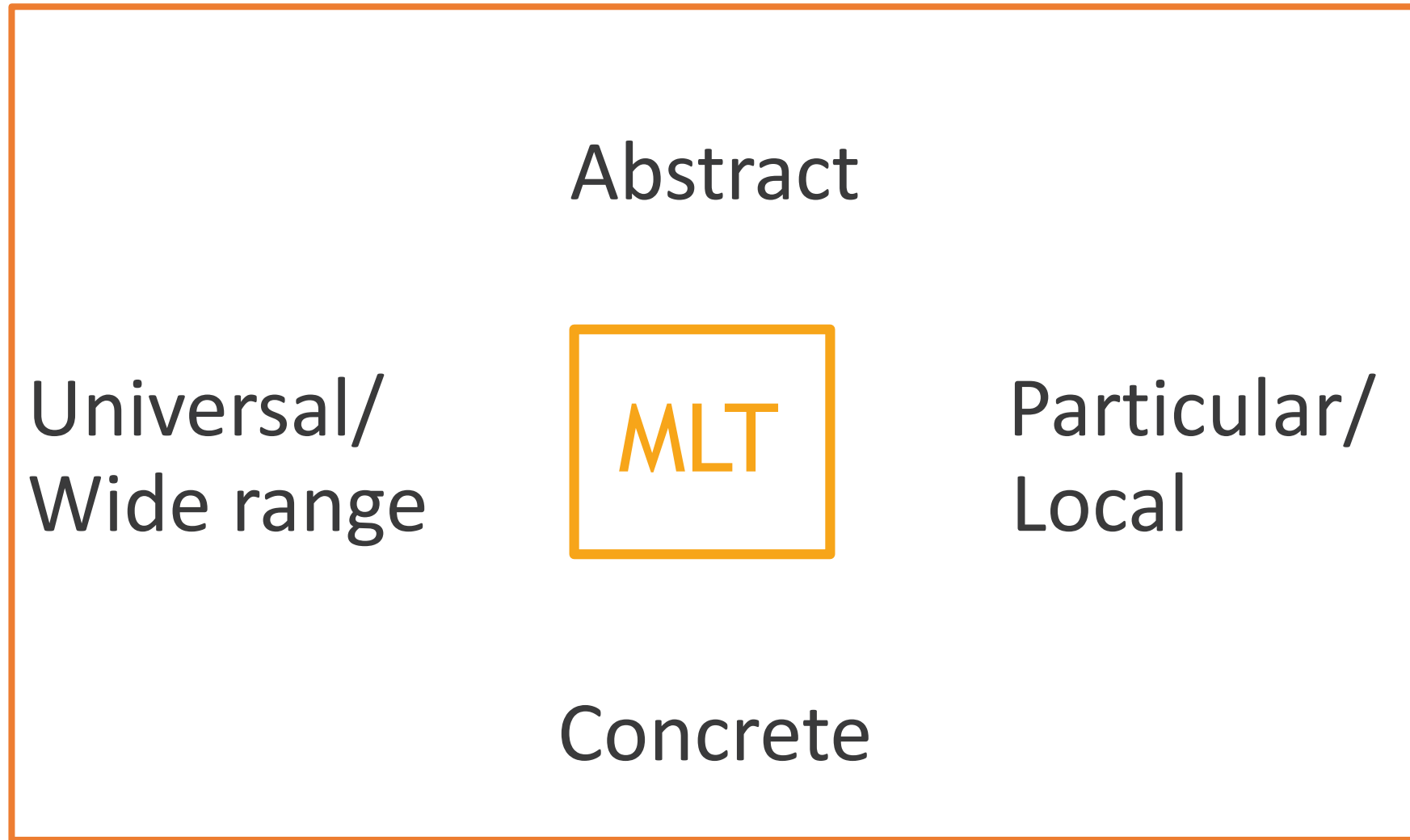
MLT is useful in development planning & evaluation



MLT

1. Predict effectiveness in local settings
2. Suggest programme design features
3. Information for monitoring
4. Assumptions to be tested in an evaluation
5. Identify evaluation questions
6. Interpret evaluation findings

Middle?



- Antonio Gramsci
- Tony Giddens
- Theda Skocpol
- Pierre Bourdieu
- Emil Durkheim
- Judith Butler

Middle-level theories

Ex post: A detailed evaluation of a specific programme implemented at a specific time and place.

E.G. An evaluation of Peru's Juntos programme, Brazil's Bolsa, NY's Opportunity NYC

Ex ante: Designs for the DRC Tuungane reconstruction programme or for Ghana's programme providing scholarships for secondary education

High level

Subordinated individuals become passionately attached to, and thus psychically invested in, their own subordination.

Agents act to maximize their expected utility in the face of expected actions of others.

Middle-level

People respond to incentives.

People offered CCTs to do something tend to do it.

Parents enrol their children in school if offered CCTs for doing so.

Concrete & particular/local

In Brazil's Bolsa programme if conditional allowances are given preferentially to female heads of household through "Citizen Cards" that operate like debit cards where the funds can be withdrawn in more than 14,000 locations, the parents involved will enrol their children in school.

High level

Subordinated individuals are psychologically attached to, and thus psychically invested in, their own superiors.
Agents act to maximize their utility in the face of expected actions of others.

Wide ranging
Abstract language

Middle-level

People respond to incentives.
People offered CCTs enrol their children in school.
Parents enrol their children in school in response to CCTs for doing so.

Range restricted
More concrete language

Concrete & particular/local

In Brazil's Bolsa Familia program, parents are offered cash transfers preferentially to female heads of household who open bank accounts and use debit cards where they make purchases.
Where parents are offered CCTs, the parents involved will enrol their children in school.

Tied to very specific places & times
Very concrete (operationalizable) language

From Audrey Prost... see different levels within MLT

USING SYNTHESIS TO DEVELOP MRTs

In high-mortality settings, Participatory Learning and Action will reduce neonatal mortality by including the poorest, building their self- and collective efficacy to identify and solve problems, and in so doing increase preventive essential newborn care practices and institutional delivery rates.

Participating in problem identification and problem-solving makes solutions identified by groups more relevant.

Generalisability

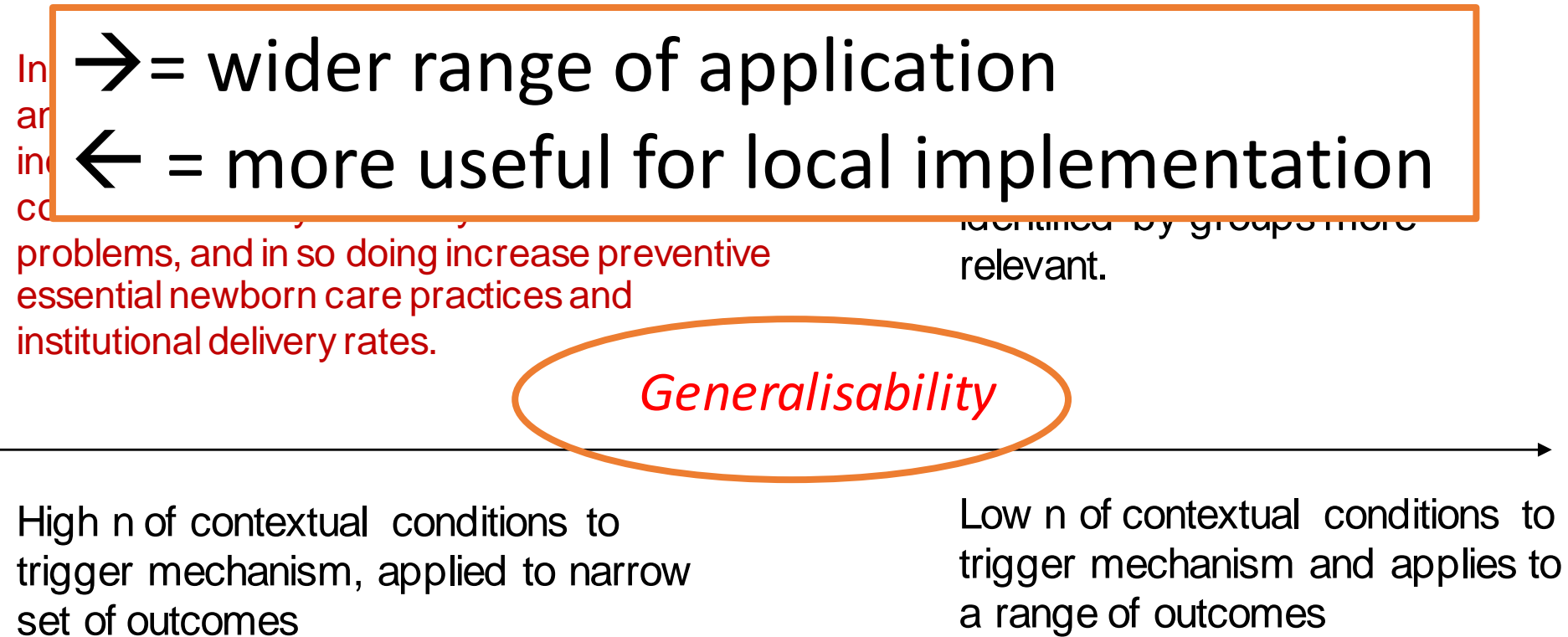
High n of contextual conditions to trigger mechanism, applied to narrow set of outcomes

Low n of contextual conditions to trigger mechanism and applies to a range of outcomes

Desai et al. forthcoming 2020

From Audrey Prost... see different levels within MLT

USING SYNTHESIS TO DEVELOP MRTs



Desai et al. forthcoming 2020

2 related types of MLT

1. A particular kind of *middle-level theory of change (ToC)* for a programme – a causal-process-tracing theory of change (*pToC*)
2. *Middle-level causal principles* – psychological, social, political, economic.

Middle-level causal principles. Examples

People respond to incentives

- People offered CCTs to do something tend to do it
 - Parents enrol their children in school if offered CCTs to do so

The substitution effect – increasing the price of a good encourages choosing an alternative to that good

- The conditionality of a transfer increases the cost of violating the conditions and thus encourages keeping them

Middle-level causal principles. Examples

Overall programme theory for educational CCTS:

Providing cash transfers to households conditional upon children attending school increases school enrolments.

Because:

Households spend in their children's interests if there are no strong barriers to doing so.

The combination of cash and conditions overcomes financial barriers to parents sending children to school.

Middle-level causal principles

- Often familiar behavioural principles
- Also the result of social science research
- Generally can't be relied on to tell what must happen
- Instead they describe what a cause **tends to**:
 - You may have to do something to call the cause into action
 - Even when the cause acts, the indicated effect may not be the observed outcome because other causes influence that outcome as well
 - Nevertheless, the cause may push the outcome in the direction indicated

Our brief

1. A particular kind of *middle-level theory of change (ToC)* for a programme – a causal-process-tracing theory of change (*pToC*)
2. *Middle-level causal principles* – psychological, social, political, economic

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1. A particular kind of *middle-level theory of change (ToC)* for a programme – a causal-process-tracing theory of change (*pToC*)

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Middle-level pToc



Thickening

Local pToc

Middle-level pToc



Thickening

Local ptoc

Middle-level pToCs



for constructing these

1. *Specify the overall theory*

Overall theory: **what** the programme is expected to achieve & **why**

Overall programme theory for educational CCTS:

Providing cash transfers to households conditional upon children attending school increases school enrolments.

Because:

Households spend in their children's interests if there are no strong barriers to doing so.

The combination of cash and conditions overcomes financial barriers to parents sending children to school.

Why do we need a middle-level pToC?

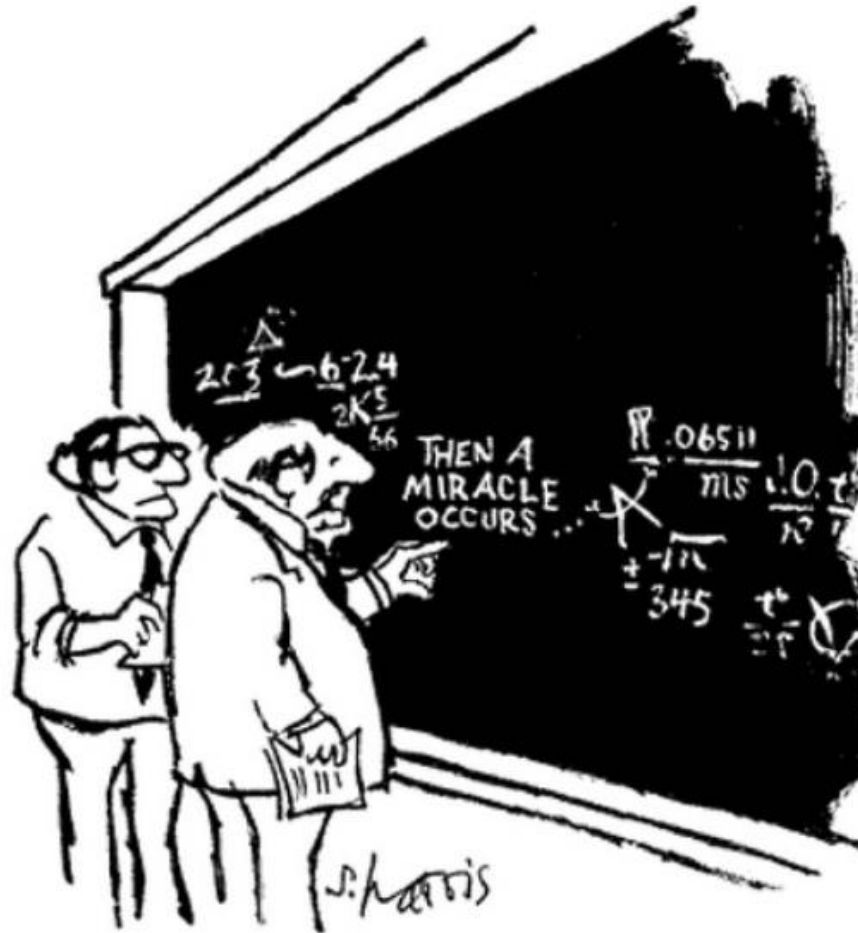
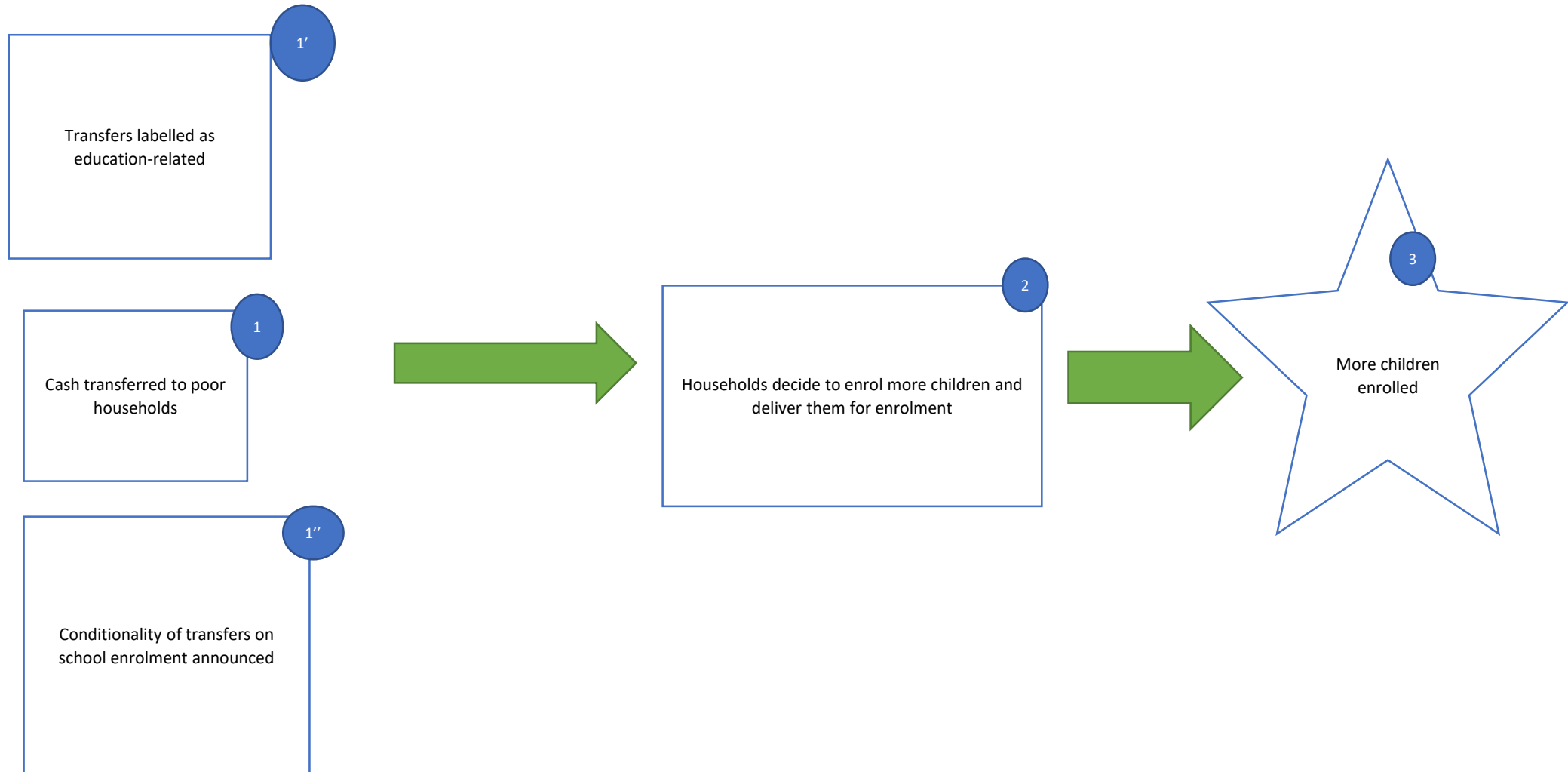


Image credit: Sidney Harris

"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

2. Produce a step-by-step diagram



3. Describe the causal principles at work at each step

Boxes 1., 1', 1'':

1. Cash is transferred to households.

1'. The cash transfer is labelled for education purposes.

1''. The conditionality of the transfer on school enrolment and attendance is announced.

Box 2:

Households enrol their children to school.

3. Describe the causal principles at work at each step

1. + 1'. → 2. The causal principle:

Labelling a cash transfer (e.g., 'for school attendance') increases the importance of the indicated good and in turn increases spending on that good even in the absence of a requirement to spend the transfer on that good.

1. + 1''. → 2. The causal principle:

Making continued cash transfers conditional on a requirement increases the financial cost of not meeting the requirement. This induces a 'substitution effect' – increasing the price of a good encourages choosing an alternative to that good – thus increasing the attractiveness of meeting the requirement. So, the more conditional cash transfers are transferred to the household, the more costly it is to fail to enrol children in school.

3. Describe the causal principles at work at each step

1. + 1'. → 2. The causal principle:

Labelling a cash transfer (e.g., 'for school attendance') increases the importance of the indicated good and in turn increases spending on that good even in the absence of

1. + 1''. → **The causal principles play a central role in figuring out what information is needed for the next steps.**

Making conditional cash transfers increases the financial cost of not meeting the requirement. This induces a 'substitution effect' – increasing the price of a good encourages choosing an alternative to that good – thus increasing the attractiveness of meeting the requirement. So, the more conditional cash transfers are transferred to the household, the more costly it is to fail to enrol children in school.

4. Add support factors to the diagram

- The actions in the antecedent of a causal principle are seldom enough to exert the influence expected
- They need support factors to be in place if they are to do so
- Also called 'moderators'/interactive variables

Support factors: examples

1.+ 1''. → 2. The causal principle ('Making cash transfers conditional on a requirement increases the expected cost of not meeting that requirement') suggests 2 support factors:

1''a. The conditions for the transfer that have been announced are conveyed to the recipients

1''b. There is a credible threat of enforcement of the conditions

2. → 3. The causal principle ('When a school is presented with a child for enrolment, the child is enrolled') suggests 2 support factors:

2a. The school is competent to enrol students

2b. Places are available

Caution

- *Each step* must have its support factors in place to produce the next step
- If *any* support factor is missing along the way, and no substitute is in place, the *whole process* collapses



5. Add derailers to the diagram

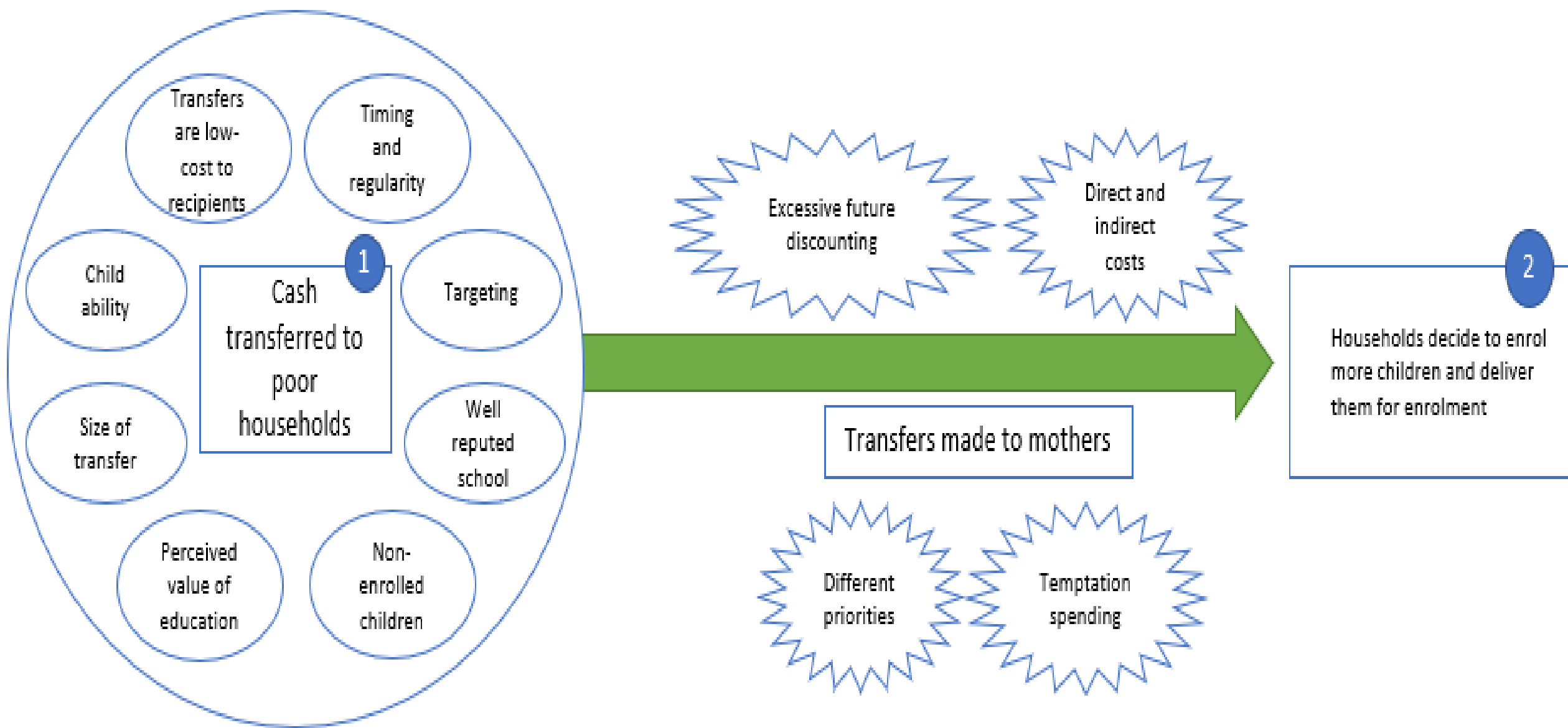
Derailers = anything that can intervene and stop the causes from exerting their influence or substantially diminish it

For CCTs: the household may accept the cash understanding that it is meant to defray the costs of sending children to school and intend to do so but then give in to temptation spending or yield to other priorities

6. *Add safeguards against the derailers*

- Safeguards = ‘walls’ preventing derailers from intruding
- For CCTs: mothers are often more concerned about the education of their children than fathers and less likely to give in to temptation spending or yield to other priorities. Giving the CCT to mothers is a safeguard in these circumstances
- Caution

When safeguards cannot be implemented against every suspected derailer, be wary of predicting programme success



7. Allow for causal loops

Causal loops = circular processes that can be **positive or negative**

Frequently operate over a longer time than the project itself

Example: As more children are enrolled, some may be withdrawn from schooling due to external circumstances. Cash transfers are supposed to be stopped for them. If this is widely noticed and the reason for it understood, this increases the credibility of the threat to stop transfers if conditions aren't met. This incentivises parents to keep their children attending school

8. *Specify the expected range of application*

- Be explicit about **where** the middle-level pToC should apply
- Indicators come from
 - The overall programme theory
 - Individual middle-level causal principles
 - Supporters, derailers & safeguards
- If essential features are missing in a setting and cannot be substituted for or derailers are likely that cannot be guarded against, it is risky to try the programme there

Overall programme theory: CCTs remove financial barriers standing in the way.

- CCTs won't work where households don't send children to school because they think it's of low quality, they don't trust it or they disapprove of school education and not because they lack resources
- Getting children into school requires addressing these non-financial barriers

Support factors, derailers, safeguards: tell what must be present & absent for the programme process to carry through successfully. **Hence where it can work.**

- Transfers are low cost to recipients. A CCT programme is not likely to work where there is no way to achieve this
- School places are available. (There have been CCT programmes set up to encourage households to attend clinics that didn't exist.)

9. Draw implications for evaluation questions and for monitoring & evaluation indicators

9. Draw implications for *evaluation questions* and for monitoring & evaluation indicators

- Identifying the causal principles, supporting factors & potential derailers & safeguards informs **evaluation questions**
 - Availability of school seats?
 - Beneficiary understanding of the conditions?
 - The extent to which conditions are monitored and enforced?
- If it is discovered ex post that essential features were missing, that's evidence that the programme had little responsibility for the results even if the expected outcome occurred

9. Draw implications for evaluation questions and for monitoring & evaluation indicators

The causal principles, supporting factors & potential derailers & safeguards from a pToC suggest these **monitoring & evaluation indicators**:

- Number of intended beneficiaries participating
- Parental knowledge and understanding of the CCT scheme
- Verification of receipt of the transfer
- How well conditions are monitored and enforced
- The outcomes of school enrolment and attendance

Indicators at various levels

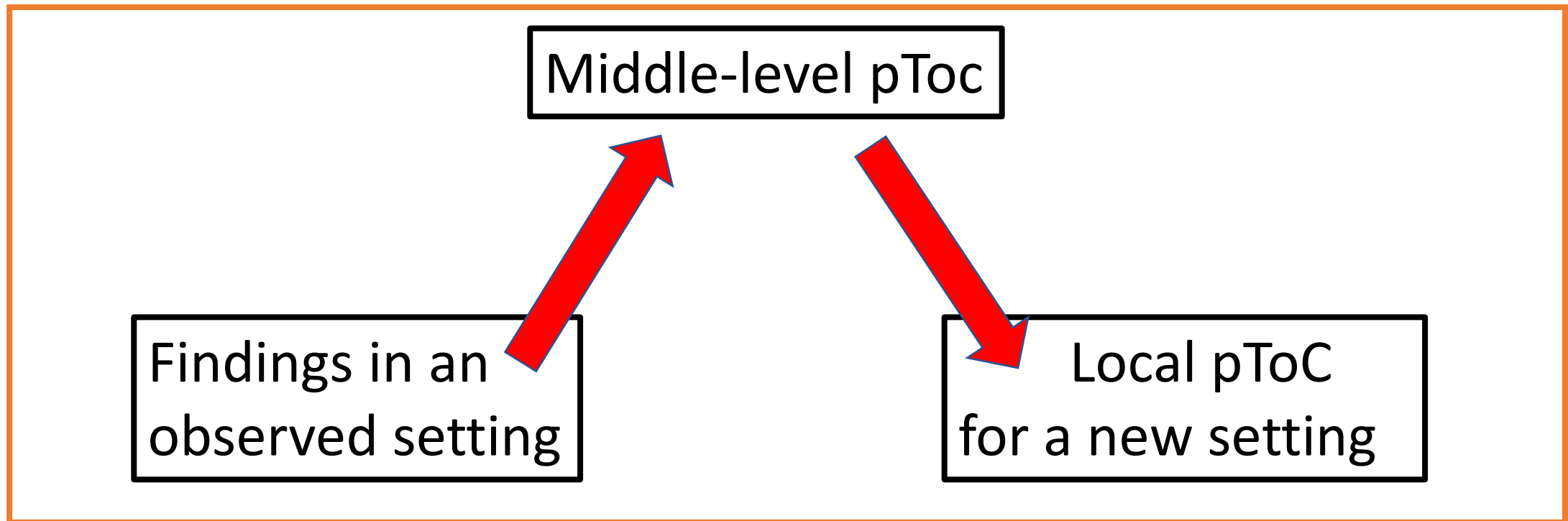
We introduced pToCs at two levels:

- the middle-level pToC, which is meant to apply across a range of settings
- the local pToC designed for a specific setting

The middle-level pToC suggests general types of monitoring & evaluation indicators that may be adapted to specific programme contexts through thickening

10. Draw implications for future programme design

Middle-level pToCs help with **applying evaluation findings** from one setting to inform programme design in another



Implications of findings

- Finding in the observed setting:
Households didn't take part because transfers were made to bank accounts. Households didn't have bank accounts.
- MLT: transfers should be made in a way that makes them accessible to intended beneficiaries.
- In new settings: the time & place of the transfer needs to be chosen in a way that is convenient & accessible for eligible recipients in those settings.

Justification

- From a variety of sources
- Requiring a broad mix of methods
- The better the support for each component of the pToC, the stronger the warrant
- It can also be tested by looking to see if the programme works when it accords with an appropriately thickened local pToC
 - Requires warrant for the thickening
- This leads to a process of mutual adjustment between the middle- and the local-level that can continue as the theory is used in designing & implementing a programme or gathering evaluation evidence

Final advice

For those designing programmes for repeated use

- Building a MLT pToC can be hard – needing new theorising & research
- Building it step by step as described here should make it easier
- Difficult or easy, **this job must not be avoided**
- Those making decisions about what to do locally are generally not in a good position to figure out what must be in place if the programme process is to carry through there
- You need to assist them by providing the maximal information possible

For those deliberating at the local level

- You need to build a good local-level pToC if your decisions are to be reliable and warranted
- A good middle-level pToC is an invaluable starting point
- Thickening that theory to fit the local circumstances requires local knowledge
- This may take additional research
- Designing the local programme and its theory should be done in consultation with key stakeholders



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THANK YOU

Levels of theory

Abstract & Wide-ranging:

- People respond to incentives.

Middle-level:

- People offered CCTs to do something tend to do it.
- Parents enrol their children in school if offered CCTs to do so.

Concrete & particular/local:

- In Brazil's Bolsa programme if conditional allowances are given preferentially to female heads of household through "Citizen Cards" that operate like debit cards where the funds can be withdrawn in more than 14,000 locations, the parents involved will enrol their children in school.