Using Middle-level Theory:
Ten Steps for Constructing Middle-level ToCs

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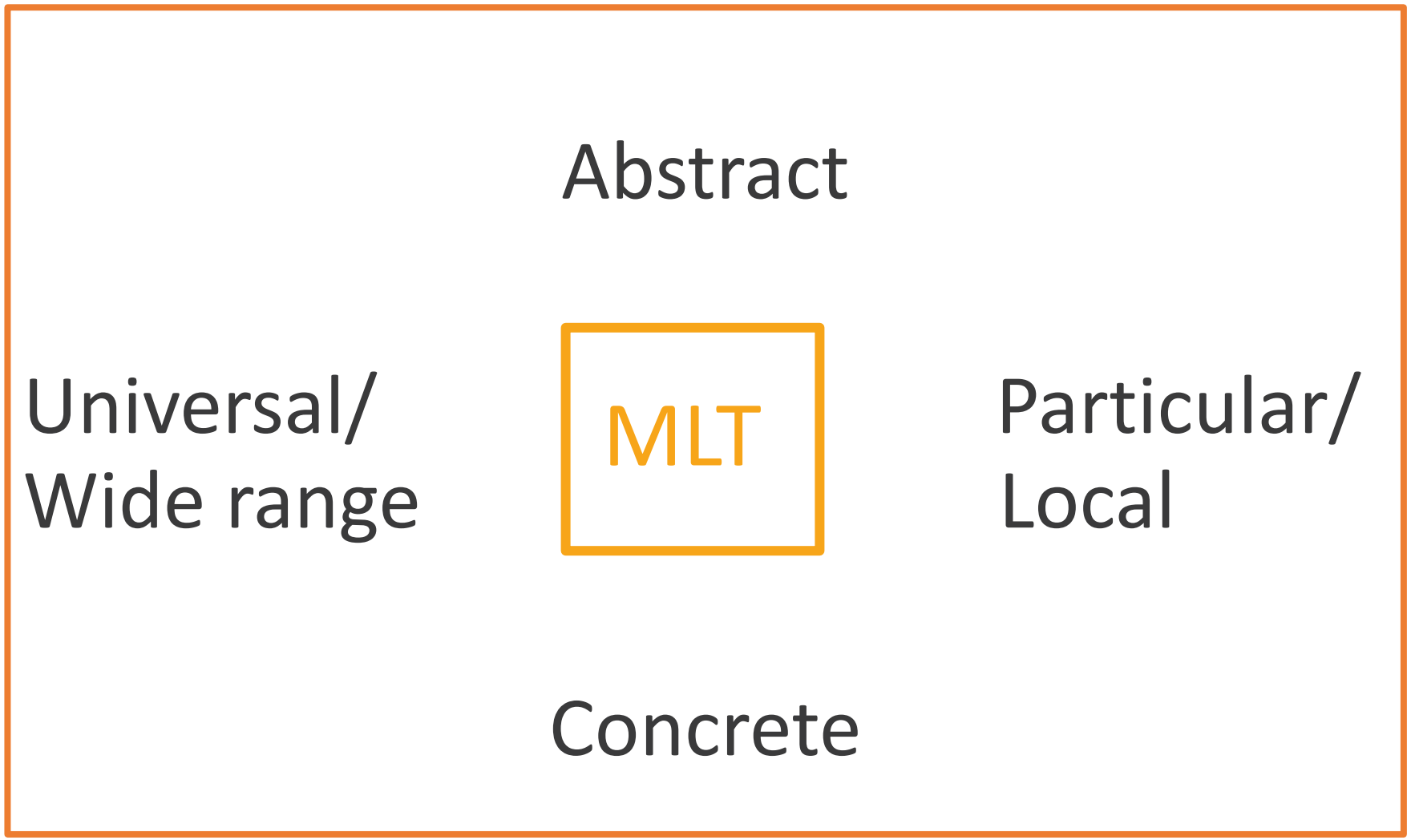
Middle-level Theory

2 kinds matter here

- ML causal principles
- ML pToCs

Middle?


Abstract
Universal/
Wide range
MLT
Particular/
Local
Concrete

High level

Agents act t pected utility

Wide ranging
Abstract language

Middle-level

People

People ning tend to do it

Parents enrol children in school if offered education-conditioned CTs

Range restricted
Very concrete language

Concrete & particular/local

In Brazil's Bolsa programme conditional allowances given

prefer rough "Citizen Cards"

that o can be withdrawn in

more than 14,000 locations induce parents to enrol children in school

Tied to specific places & times
Concrete (operationalizable) language

MLT: 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-level causal principles

- Often familiar behavioural principles
- Also the result of social science research
- Generally don't tell what will result
- But describe what the cause **tends to**:
  - You may have to trigger the cause
  - The indicated effect may not be the observed outcome because other causes also influence it
  - Still, the cause may push the outcome in the direction indicated

Today: Constructing...

ML causal-process-tracing theories of change (*pToCs*)

Using ML causal principles as guides

1. Specify the overall (ML) theory

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

Educational CCTS:

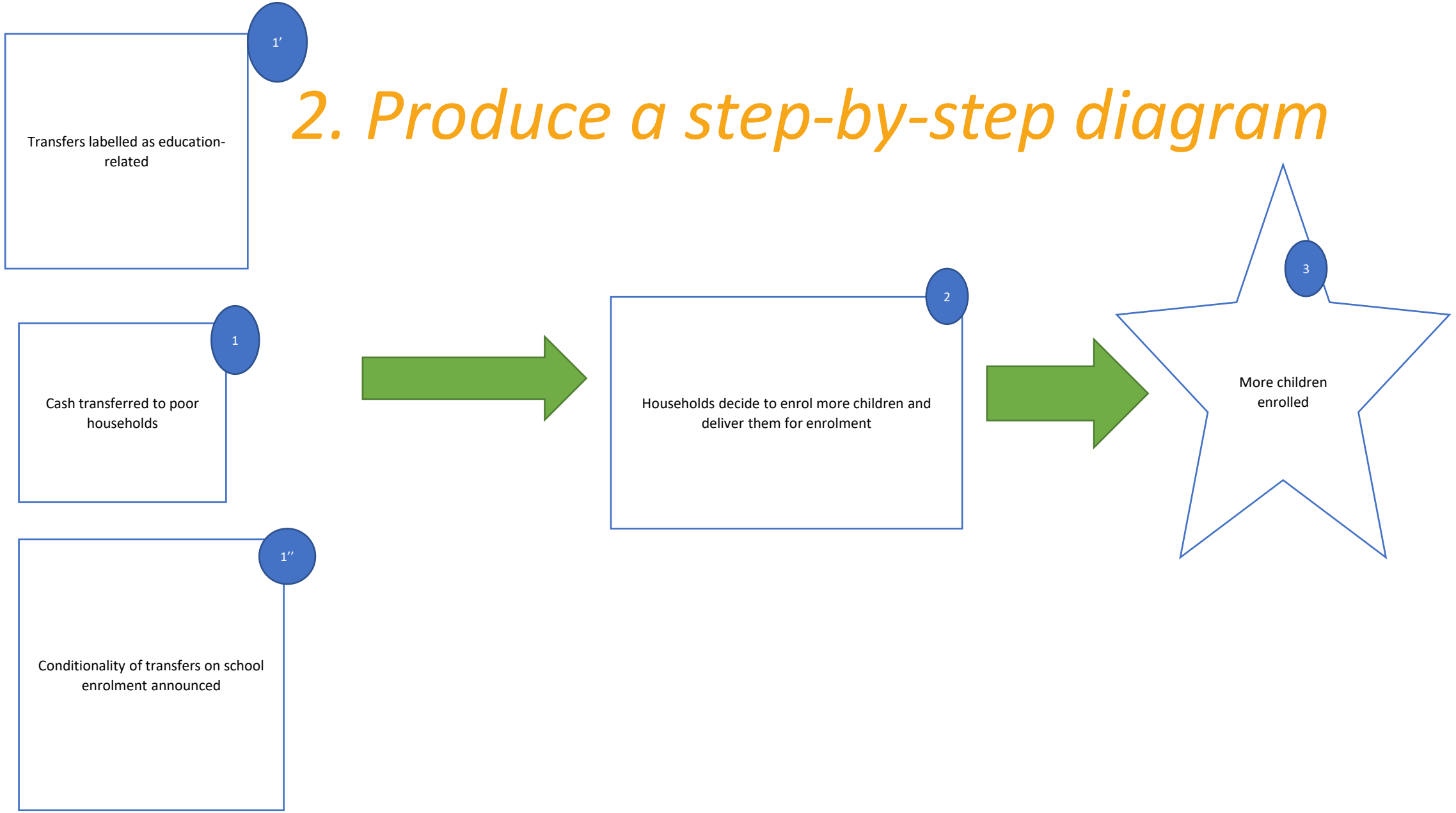
CTs conditional on children attending school increases school enrolments

Because:

Households spend in their children's interests failing strong barriers

The cash overcomes financial barriers

2. Produce a step-by-step diagram



3. Describe the causal principles at work at each step

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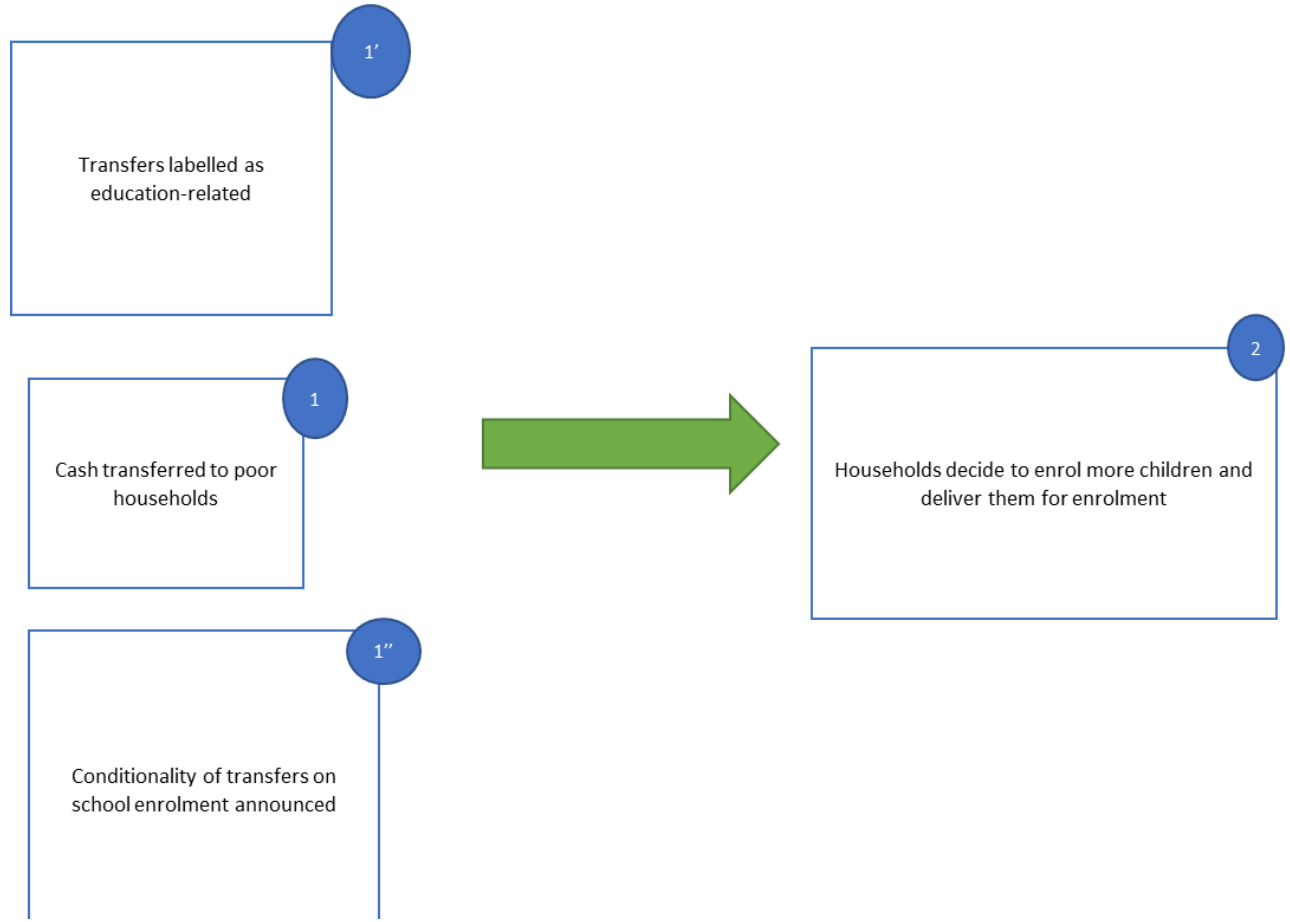
1. + 1'. → 2

Labelling a good →

Increased importance of that good →

Increased spending on it even absent a requirement to do so



3. Describe the causal principles at work at each step

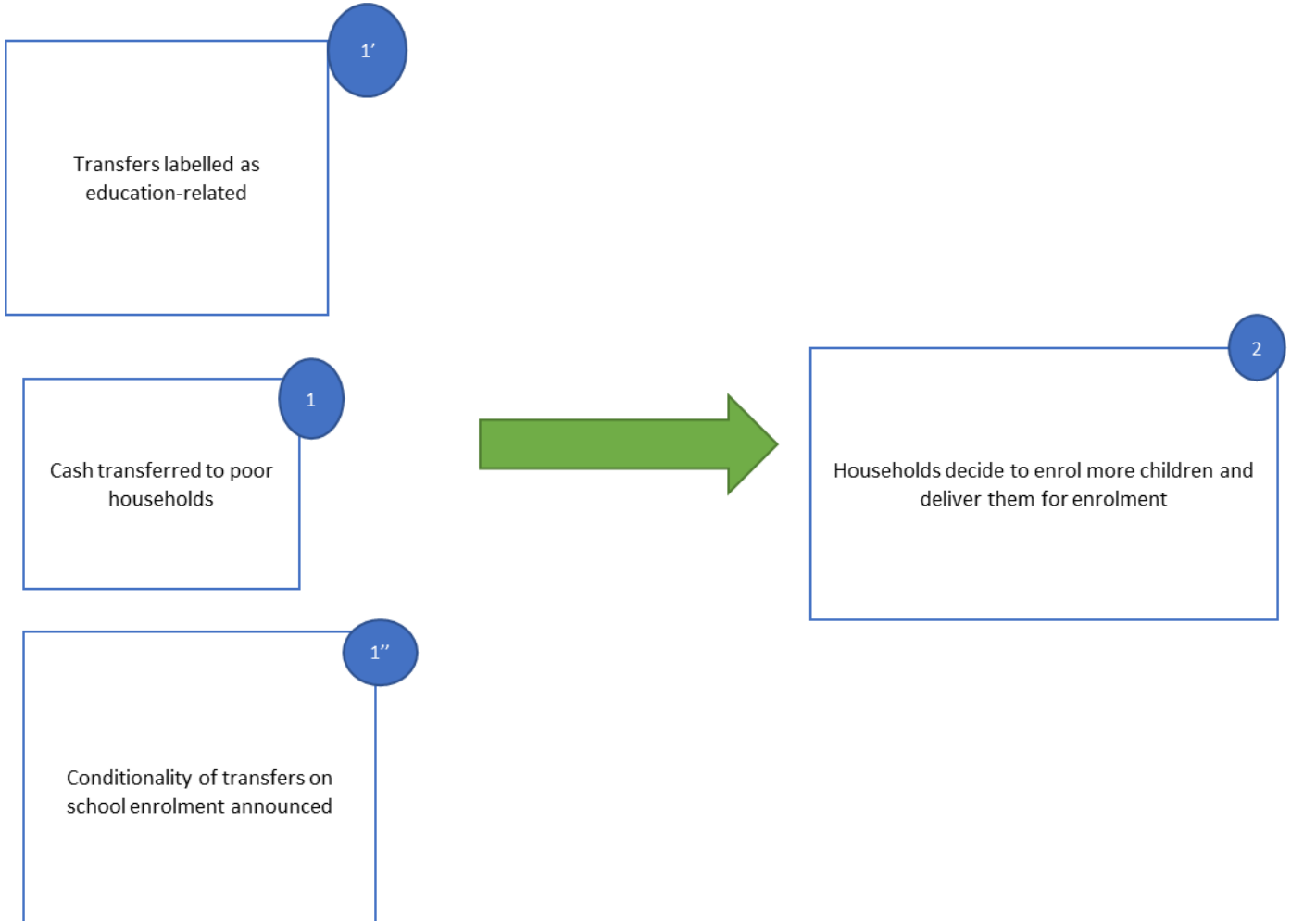
1.+ 1'. + 1''. → 2

Conditioning CTs on a known requirement →

Costs of not meeting the requirement →

'Substitution effect' (increasing cost of a good encourages choosing an alternative) →

Attempts to meet the requirement



3. Describe the (ML)causal principles at work at each step

The causal principles play a central role in figuring out what information is needed for each step to occur

4. Add support factors

- The actions cited are seldom enough to produce the influence expected
- They need support factors
- Also called ‘moderators’/interactive variables

Support factors: examples

1.+ 1”. → 2

Conditioning CTs on a requirement→ substitution effect→ attempts to meet requirement

1”a. Conditions are conveyed and understood

1”b. There’s a credible threat of enforcement

2. → 3

Presenting a child for enrolment → child is enrolled

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 anywhere, the *whole process* collapses

5. Add derailers

Derailers = things that intervene to prevent the effect

The household

- accepts the CT
- understands it's meant for sending children to school
- intends to do so

Then derailer

- gives in to temptation spending or yields to other priorities

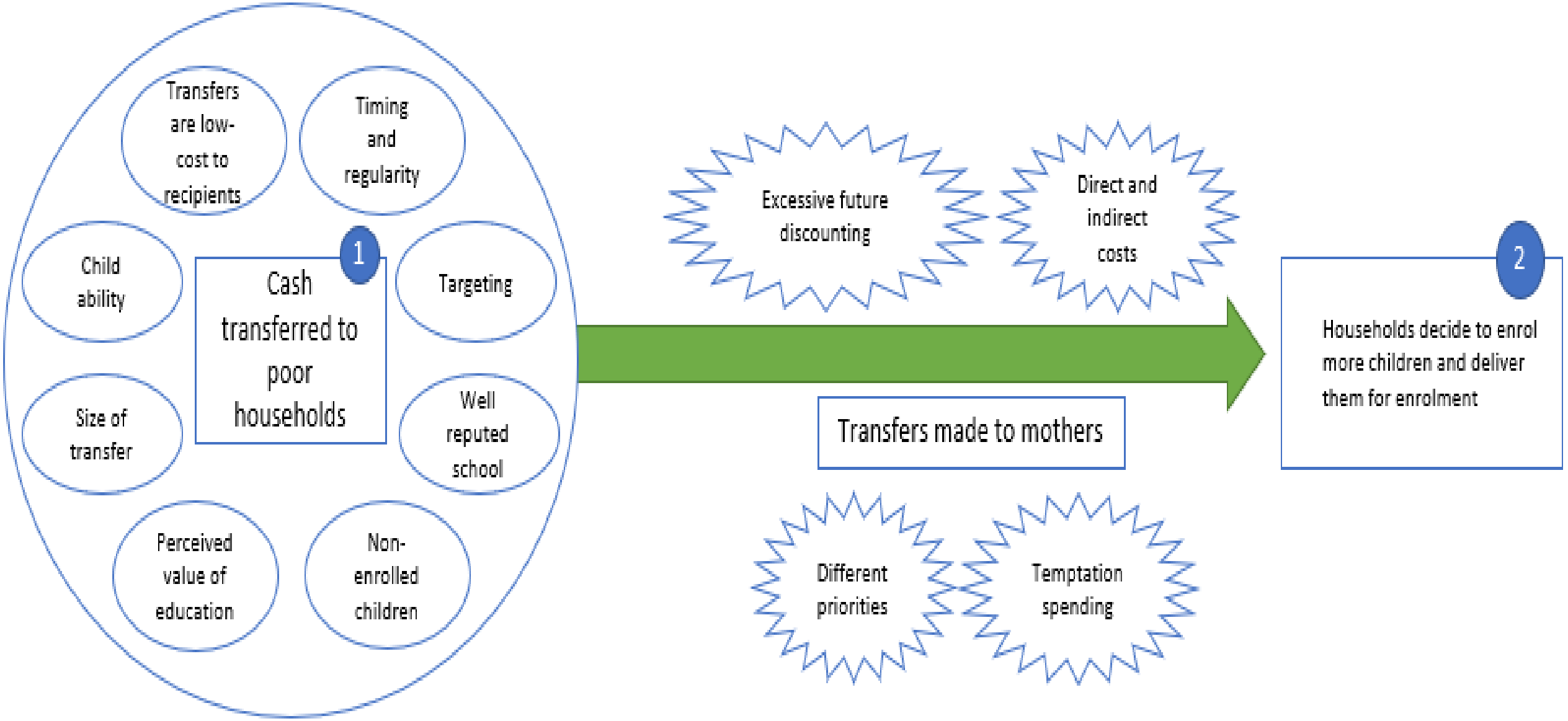
6. Add safeguards

Safeguards = ‘walls’ excluding derailers

Mothers may be

- more concerned about the education of their children than fathers
- less likely to give in to temptation spending or yield to other priorities

Safeguard: Give CCTs to mothers in these circs


Transfers are low-cost to recipients
Timing and regularity
Child ability
1
Cash transferred to poor households
Targeting
Size of transfer
Well reputed school
Perceived value of education
Non-enrolled children
Excessive future discounting
Direct and indirect costs
Transfers made to mothers
Different priorities
Temptation spending
2
Households decide to enrol more children and deliver them for enrolment

7. Allow for causal loops

Causal loops -- positive or negative

- More children enrolled →
- children withdrawn →
- CTs stopped for them (+ wide notice / understanding of the reasons) →
- credibility of stopped CTs if conditions aren't met →
- incentives to keep children in school→
- more children enrolled

8. Specify expected range of application

Where should the ML pToC apply ?

Indicators from

- Overall programme theory
- Individual ML causal principles
- Supporters, derailers & safeguards

Range of application

The programme's risky anywhere

- the ML(!) principles don't work
- support features are missing
- unguarded derailers are likely

Range of application

Overall (ML) programme theory:

CCTs remove financial barriers

CCTs won't work where households don't send children to school

- Because they think it's low quality, don't trust it or disapprove of school education
- **not** because they lack resources

Range of application

Support factors, derailers, safeguards

- Transfers are low cost to recipients
- School places are available

A CCT programme won't work where there's no way to achieve this

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

9. Draw implications for evaluation questions…

- Availability of school seats?
- Beneficiary understanding of the conditions?
- Are conditions monitored, enforced?

Finding ex post that essential features were missing is evidence that the programme had little responsibility for the results even if the expected outcome occurred

9. Draw implications for … 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, enforced
- Outcomes on school enrolment and attendance

Indicators at various levels

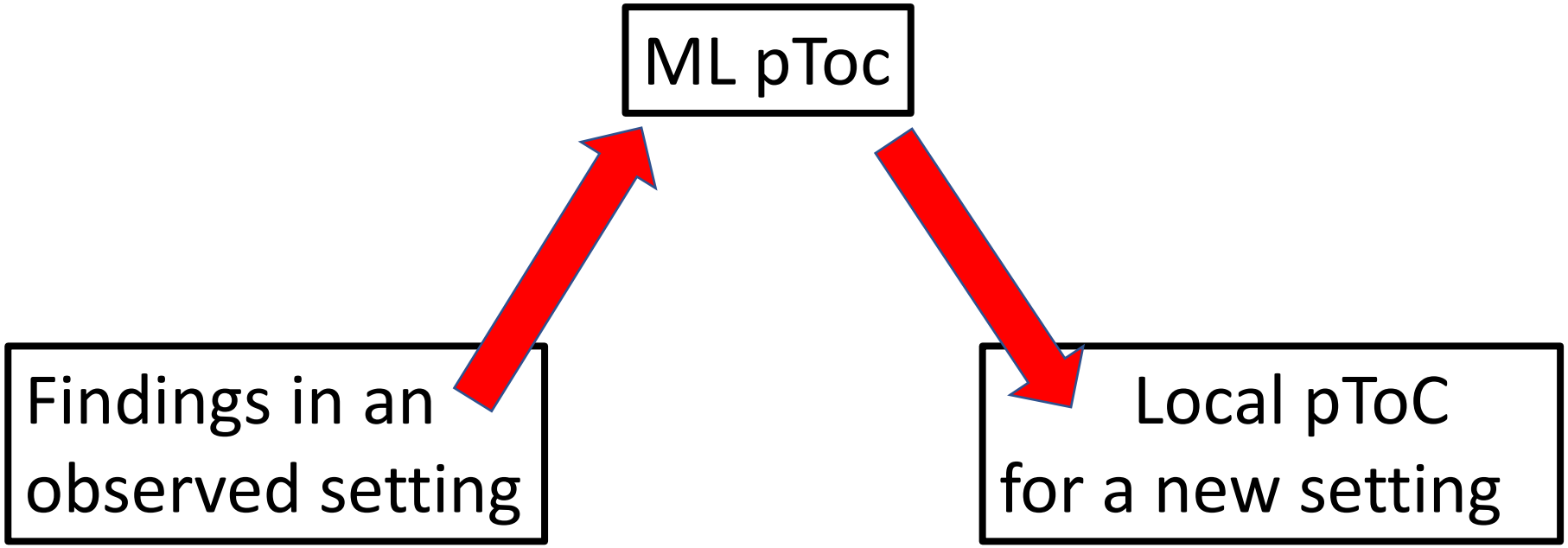
pToCs at two levels:

- the ML pToC meant to apply across a range of settings
- the local pToC for a specific setting

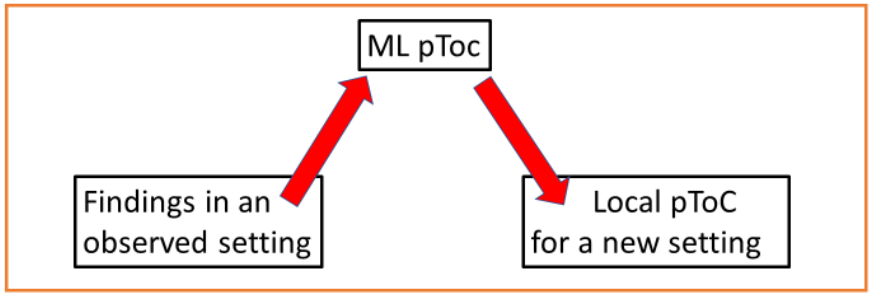
The ML pToC suggests **general types** of monitoring & evaluation indicators that may be **adapted** to specific contexts through thickening

10. Draw implications for future programme design

ML pToCs help with applying evaluation findings from one setting to 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 transfer needs to be convenient & accessible for recipients there

General credentialing

- From a variety of sources
- Requiring a broad mix of methods
- The better the support for each component of the pToC, the stronger the credentials
- It can also be tested by looking to see if the programme works when it accords with an appropriately thickened local pToC
- 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 ML pToC can be hard – needing new theorising & research
- Don’t duck this job
- Local decision-makers 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 maximal information

For those deliberating at the local level

- You need to build a good local-level pToC if your decisions are to be reliable and credentialed
- A good ML pToC is an invaluable starting point
- Thickening that to fit local circumstances requires local knowledge
- This may take additional research
- Best to do this with key stakeholders

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THANK YOU