

Evaluating community participation policy and practice: Combining Theories of Change and Realist Evaluation methodologies to cope with complexity

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Overview

- Very brief intro to Theories of Change (ToC) and Realist Evaluation (RE)
- What the study was about and how it was structured methodologically
- Using ToC to manage complexity in policy analysis
- Combining ToC with RE
- Revised/combined evaluation cycle

Theories of Change evaluation

- Aims to develop a causal model of the entire initiative, linking inputs, activities, outputs and various stages of outcomes
- Models developed collaboratively with organisations, starting from long-term goals and working backwards
- Tests of plausibility, doability and testability
- Strong emphasis on formative learning as well as summative evaluation

Realist Evaluation

- Focuses on ‘what works, for whom in which circumstances’
- Emphasises notion of generative causation
- Examines outcome regularities to identify underlying causal mechanisms and relevant contexts
- Aims to develop and refine ‘context-mechanism-outcome’ (CMO) configurations

Outline of the study

- Focus on impact of community participation policy and practice in Scotland and England
- Analysis of Big Society/Localism and Community Empowerment policy
- Empirical work with six community organisations over two years
- Combination of Theories of Change (ToC) and Realist Evaluation (RE)...

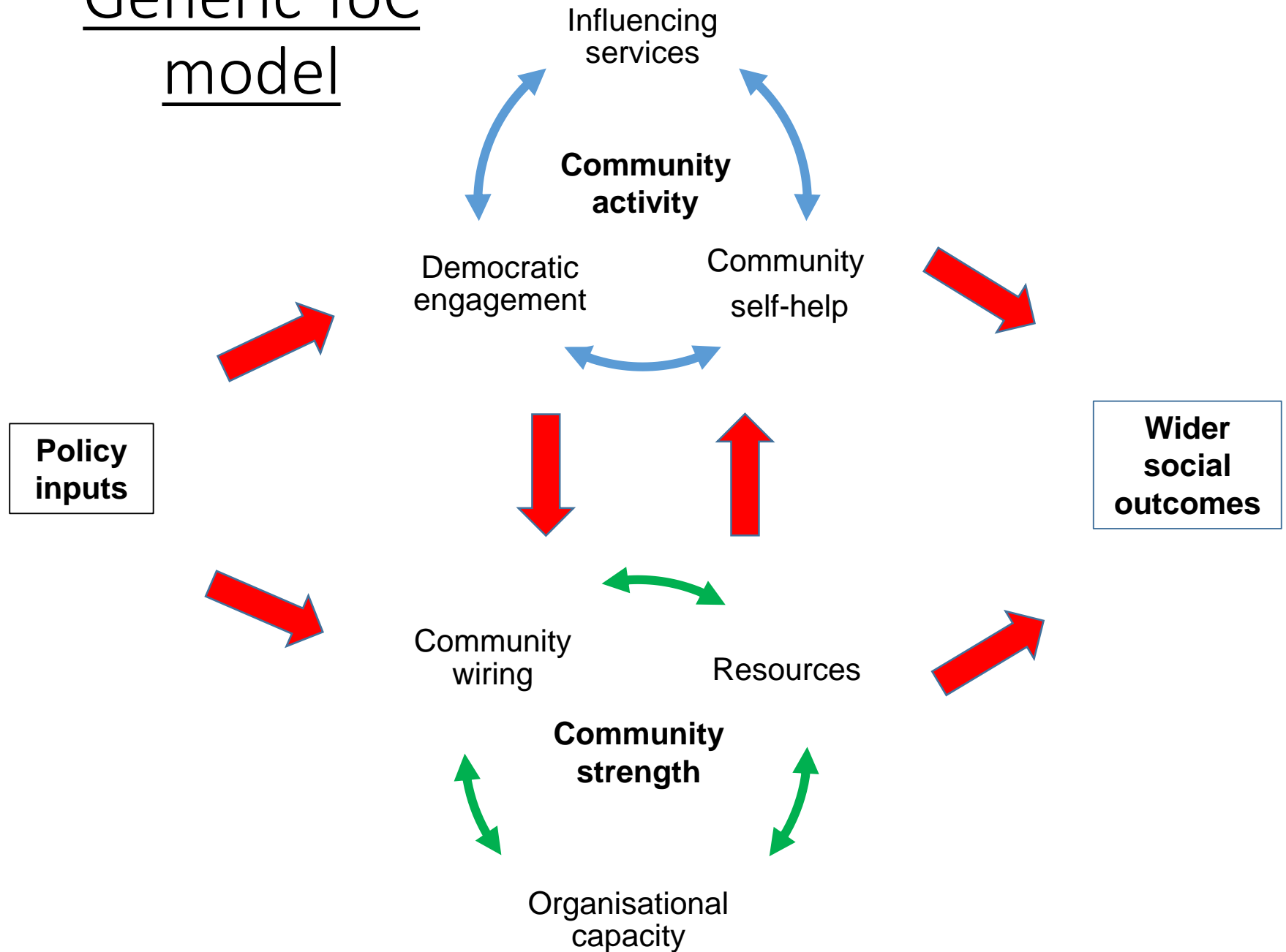
How the two approaches were used

1. ToC – development of generic model for community participation policy and analysis of policy agendas
2. RE – identification of possible mechanisms within the generic model and review of evidence
3. ToC – work with community organisations to develop their own models and evaluate impact
4. ToC – use of local data to assess plausibility and doability of national policy assumptions
5. RE – use of empirical data to develop and refine specific theories

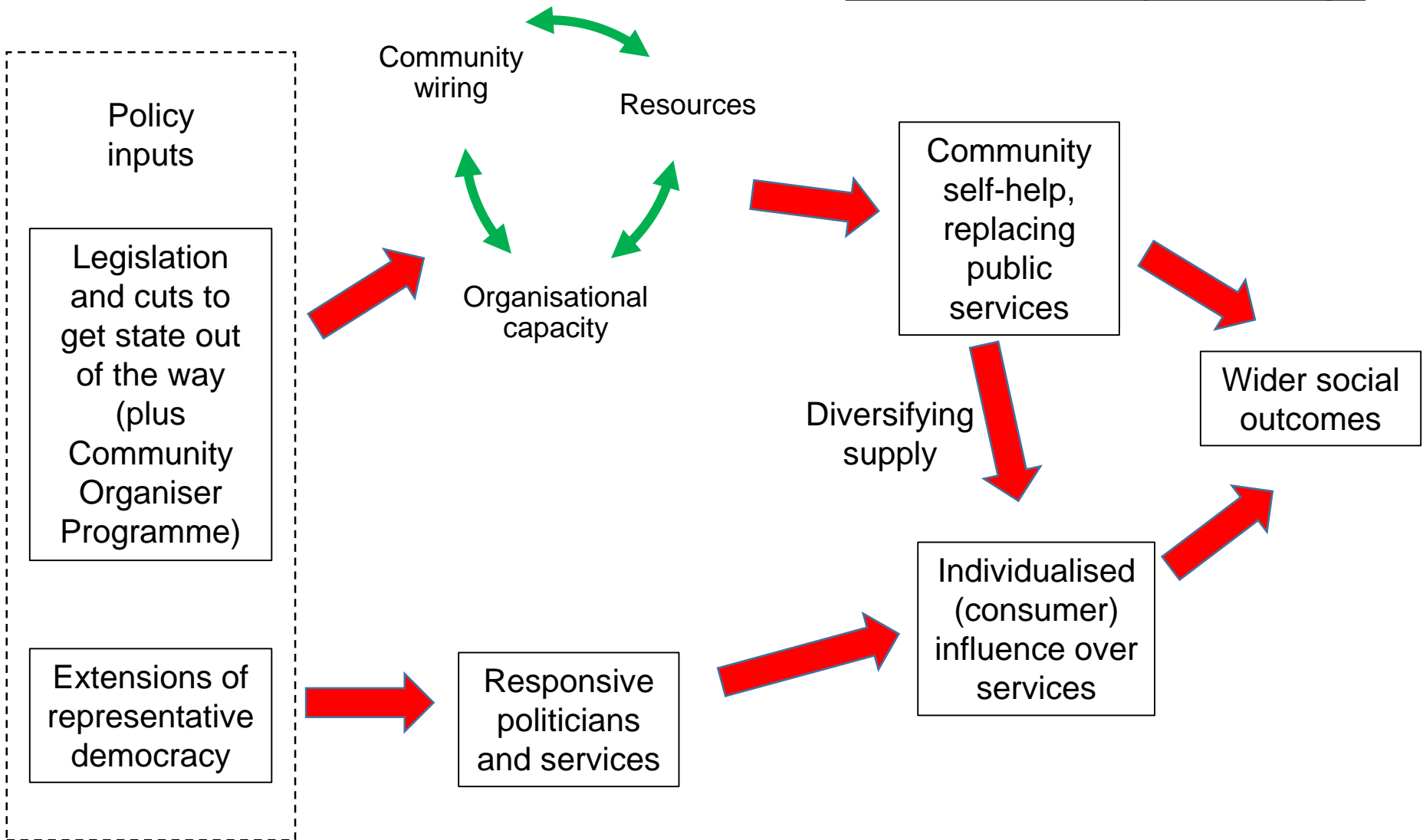
Using ToC to manage complexity in policy analysis and evaluation

- Challenges of evaluating diffuse, long-term policy agendas
 - Multiple and/or vague goals – e.g. ‘community cohesion’, ‘community empowerment’
 - Non-linear processes – e.g. skilled community activists taking action which enhances their skills
 - Multiple actors with lots of agency – interactions between state agencies, community organisations, community members, etc.

Generic ToC model



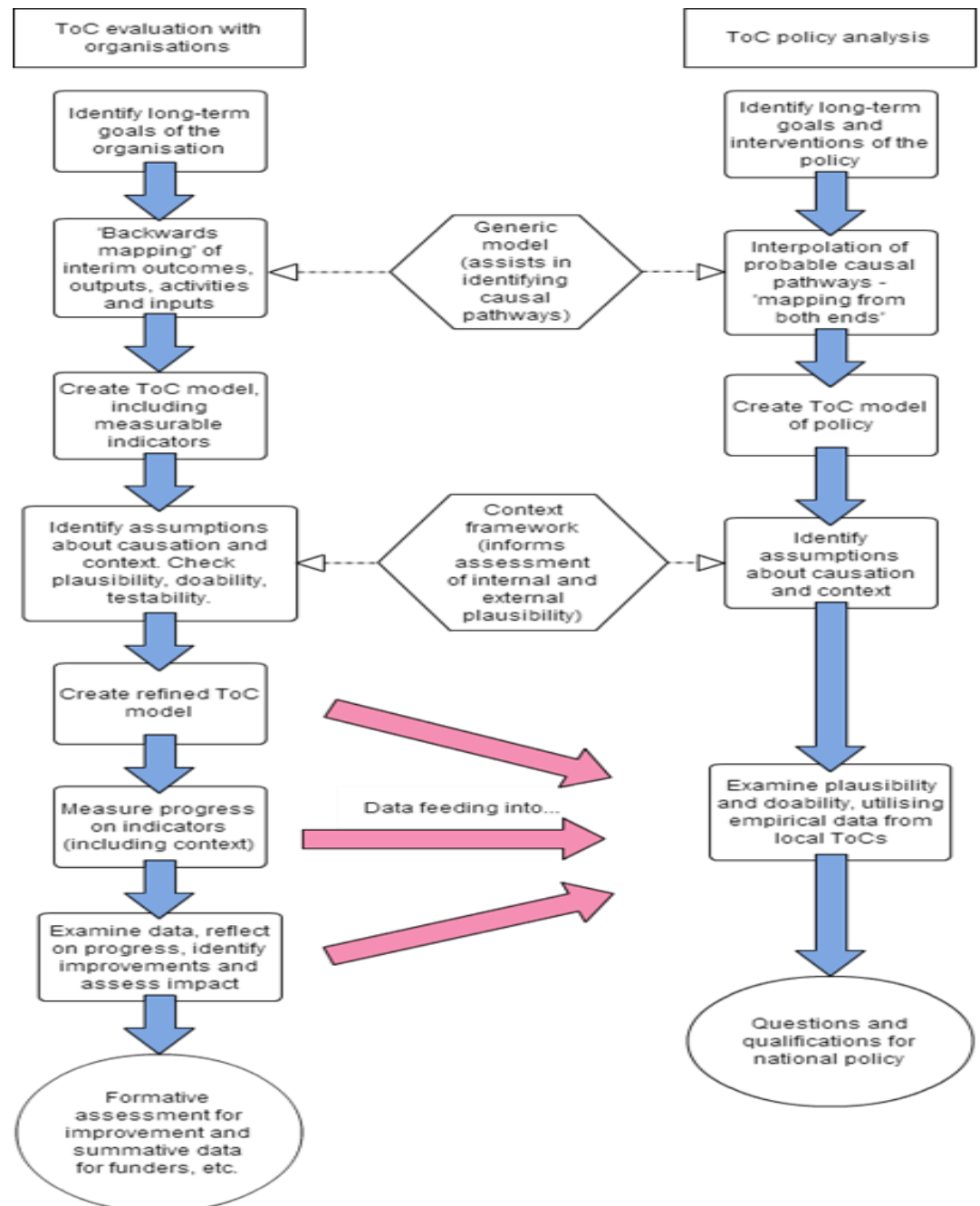
Localism theory of change



Combining empirical ToC work with ToC policy analysis

- Advantages of parallel data structure
- Examination of assumptions within cases
- Exploration of assumptions and context across cases
- Provides a clear framework to manage overwhelming detail, uniqueness of each situation and complexity of emergent processes
- Advantages of focusing on plausibility and doability

Twin-track approach to using ToC for policy evaluation



Combining ToC with RE



Introducing
'mechanism spaces'



Advantages of combining ToC and RE

- Finding a focus amongst multiple, non-linear causal pathways
- Interaction between broad ToC model and more specific RE analysis – refining both
- Potentially quicker and easier than a comprehensive ToC evaluation

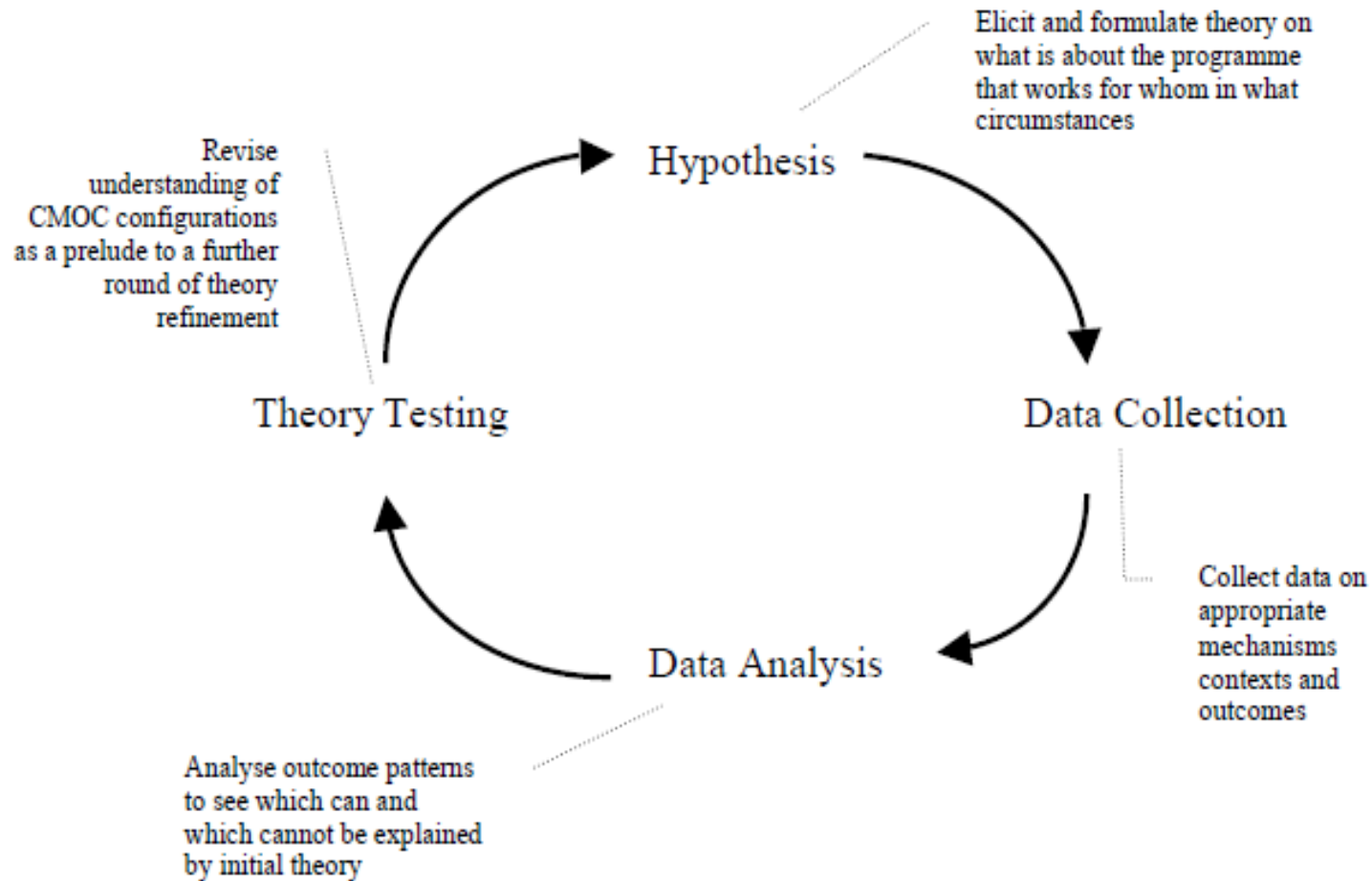
Challenges of combining ToC and RE

- Challenges for organisations, particularly in relation to RE
- Risk that cumulating information across case studies leads to learning 'less and less about more and more'
- Contextual factors are multiple, changeable and often mixed up with mechanisms and outcomes

CMO example

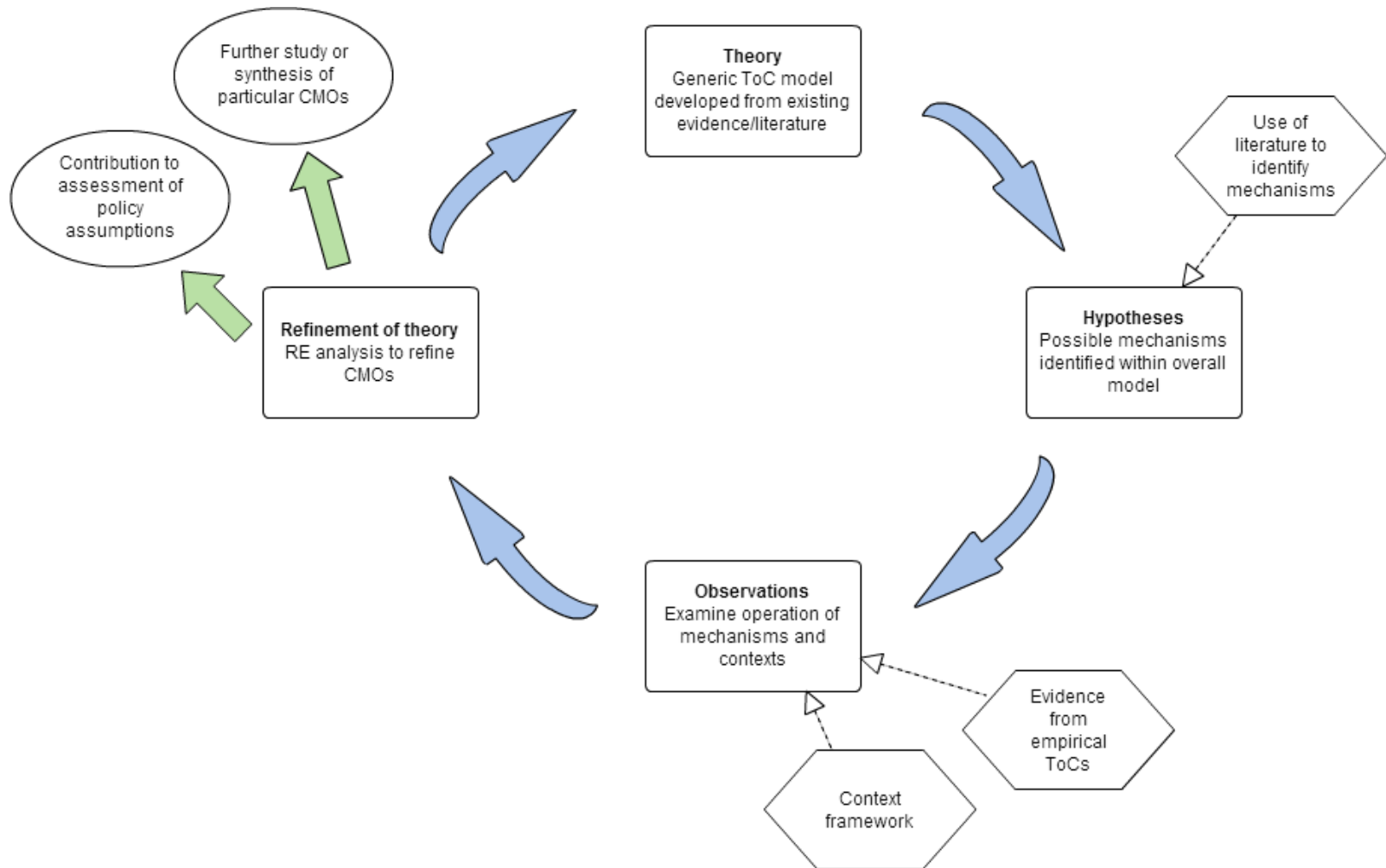
| <u>Context</u> | | | <u>Mechanism</u> | <u>Outcome</u> |
|--|---|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| | | | 'It wouldn't happen otherwise' | |
| 'Goldilocks zone' finance – enough money, but not too secure | + | Positive, supportive relationship with at least one key agency | + | Key individual(s) with professional skills to lead organisation |
| | | | + | Community organisations and communities deliver facilities and/or services that would not otherwise be delivered |
| | | | = | Services or facilities delivered (plausibly leading to wider social outcomes) |

The Realist Research Cycle



From Pawson & Tilley (1997)

A revised evaluation cycle



References

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