



From Aid Deliverer to Reflective Practitioner

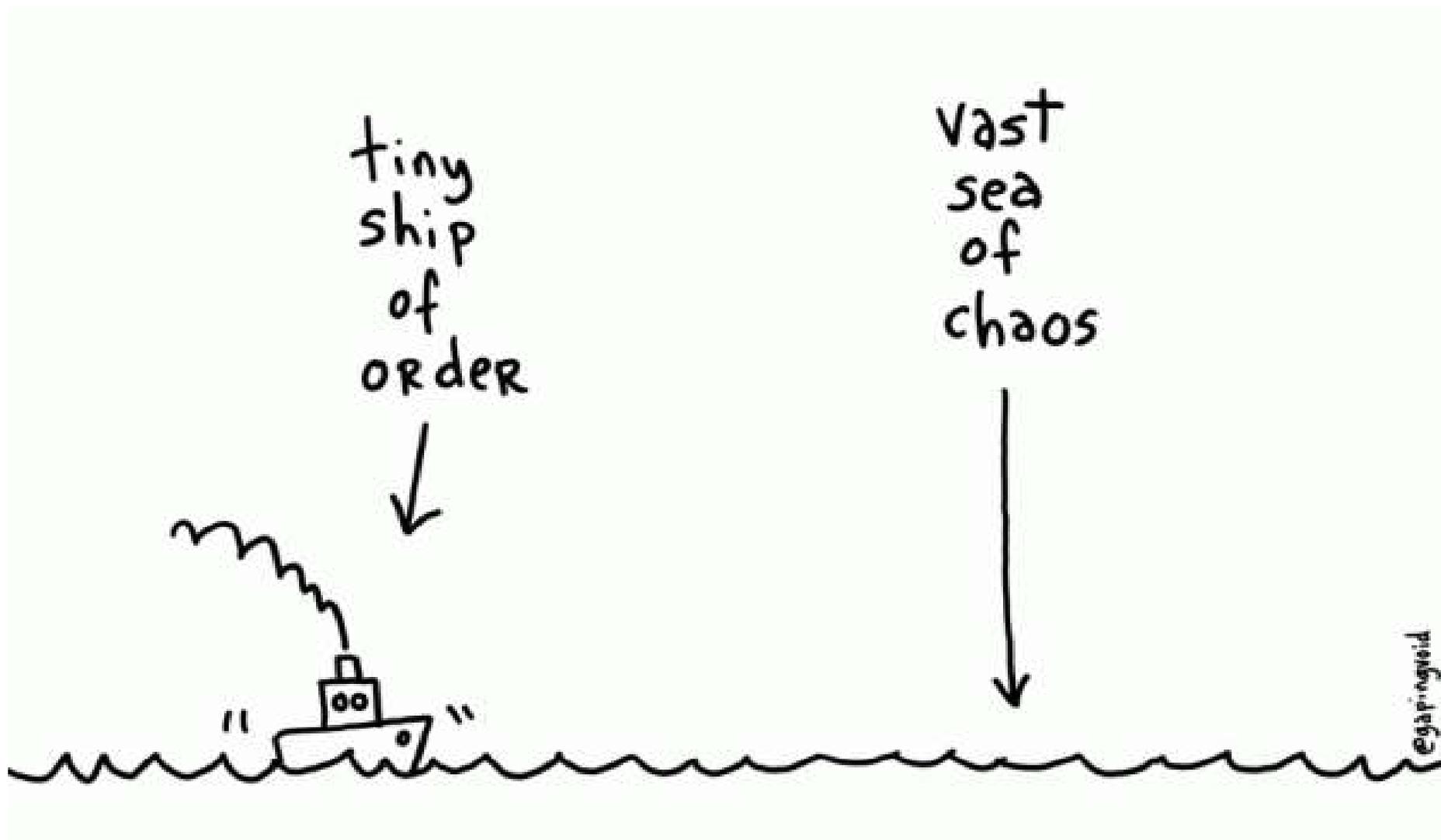
Promoting evaluative thinking to enhance learning and adaptive management in development work

Webinar, Core Group (M&E WG), January 2018

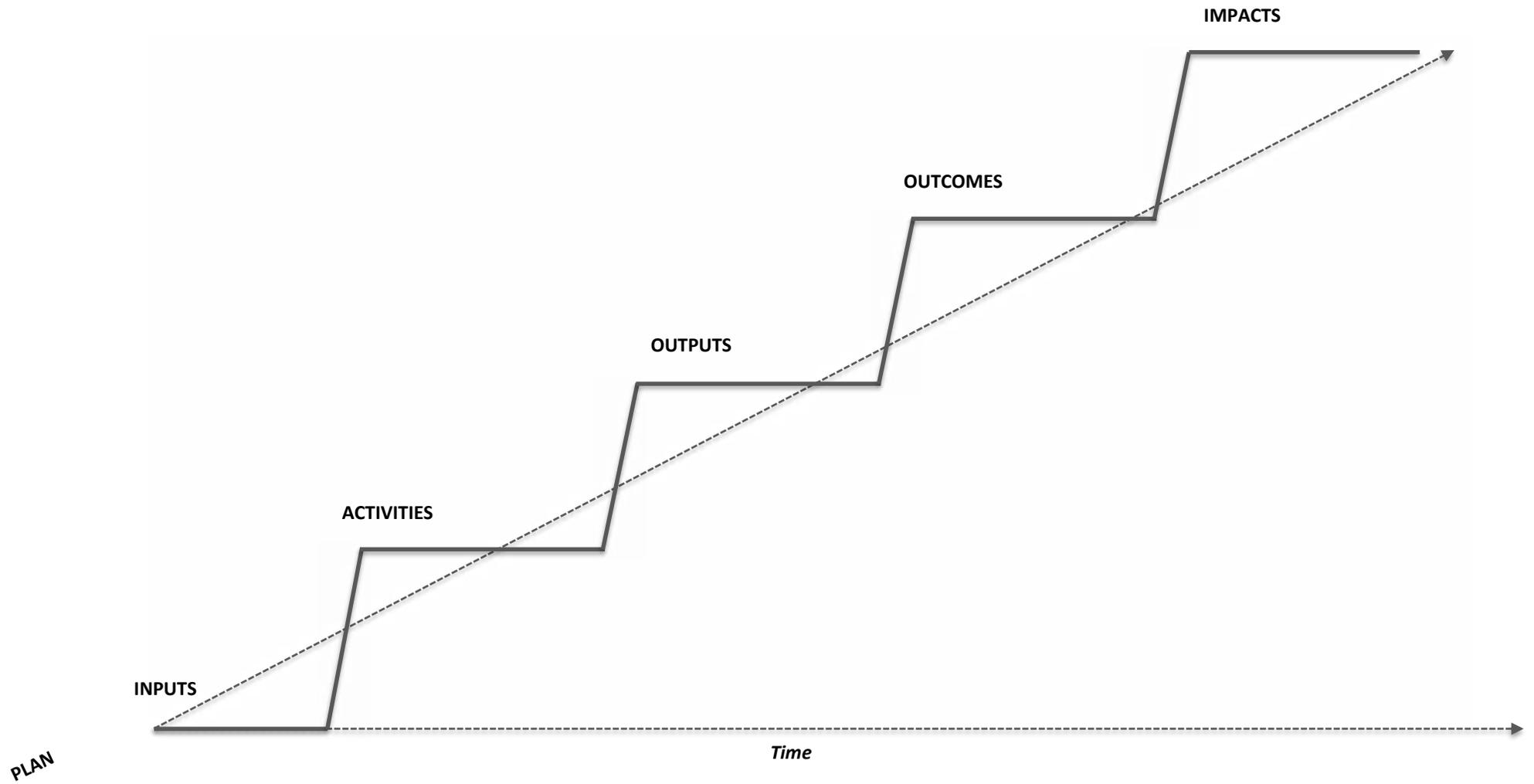
faith. action. results.

1. The Changing Context of MEAL

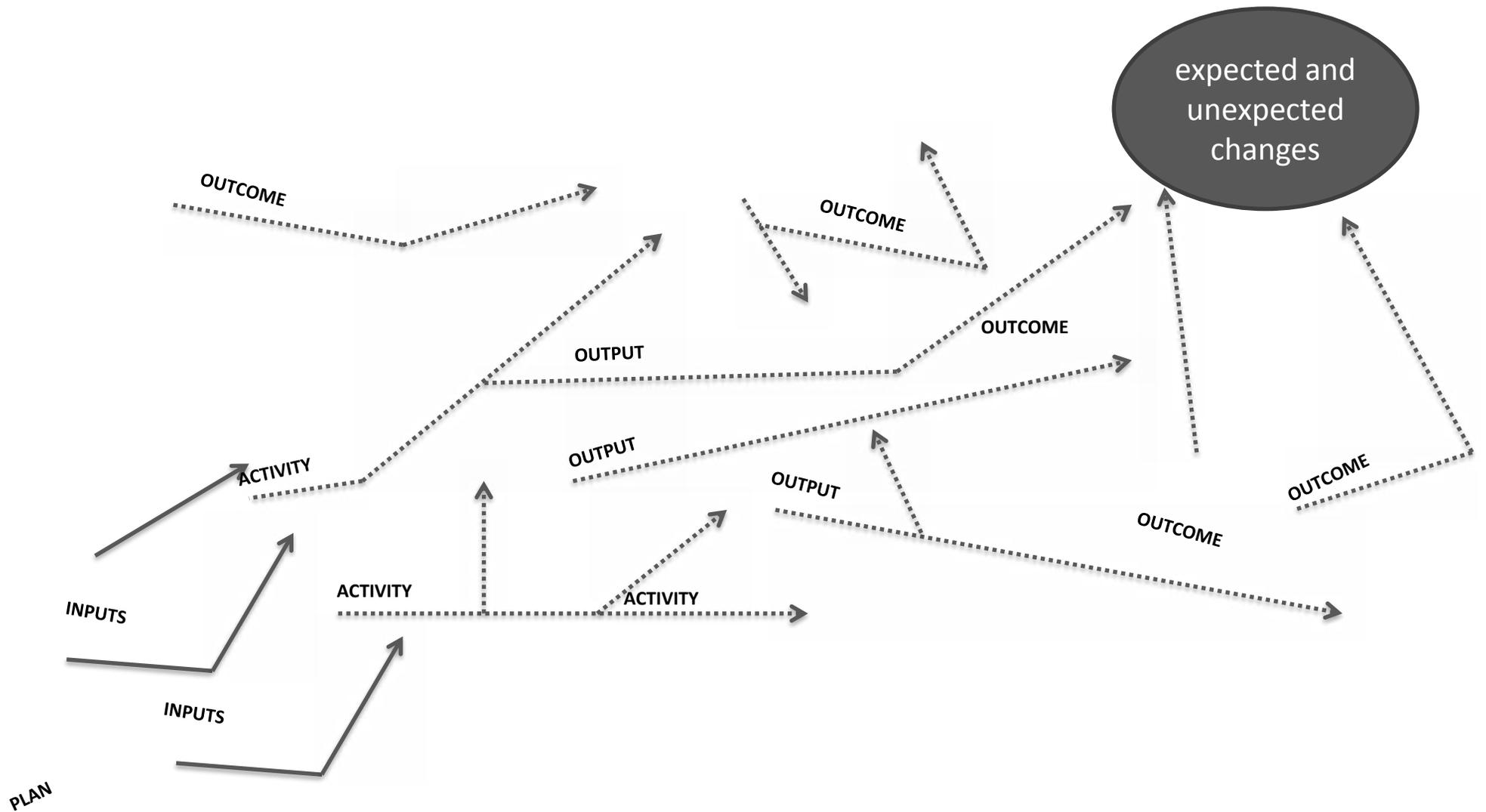
Development is not quite as orderly as we like to think...



What we get funded to do...



The reality we deal with...



M&E tools are not always fit for purpose...

Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flowers• Chocolates• Romantic music• Shoes• Clothes• Kind words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hugs• Kisses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sparks flying• Emotions running high• Separation anxiety	Eternal, Undying love

What would the indicators be?

Number of kisses per week?
Number of babies born per couple?
Number of years of marriage?

Need new MEAL 'machinery': Cynefin framework, SenseMaker, ToC...

COMPLEX

Cause and effect seen in retrospect,
and do not repeat

Emergent practice
(Probe-Sense-Respond)
Pattern management
Heuristics

"More stories like this, less like this"

**Sensemaking; stories;
monitor coherence**

COMPLICATED

Cause and effect separated
over time and space

Good practice
(Sense-Analyse-Respond)
Predictive planning
Rules
Expert Analysis

**Data provides options; experts interpret;
measure goodness**

Disorder

CHAOS

Cause and effect not usefully perceivable

Novel practice
(Act-Sense-Respond)
Act to bring stability
Crises management

Experience informs decisions; action is required;

OBVIOUS

Cause and effect repeatable
known and predictable

Best practice
(Sense-Categorize-Respond)
Standard operating procedure
Automation

**Data provides answers; anyone can interpret;
measure best**

2. Understanding Evaluative Thinking

ET = critical thinking in the context of MEAL...

A

- **Assumptions** – Discovering the assumptions that guide our decisions, actions and choices

C

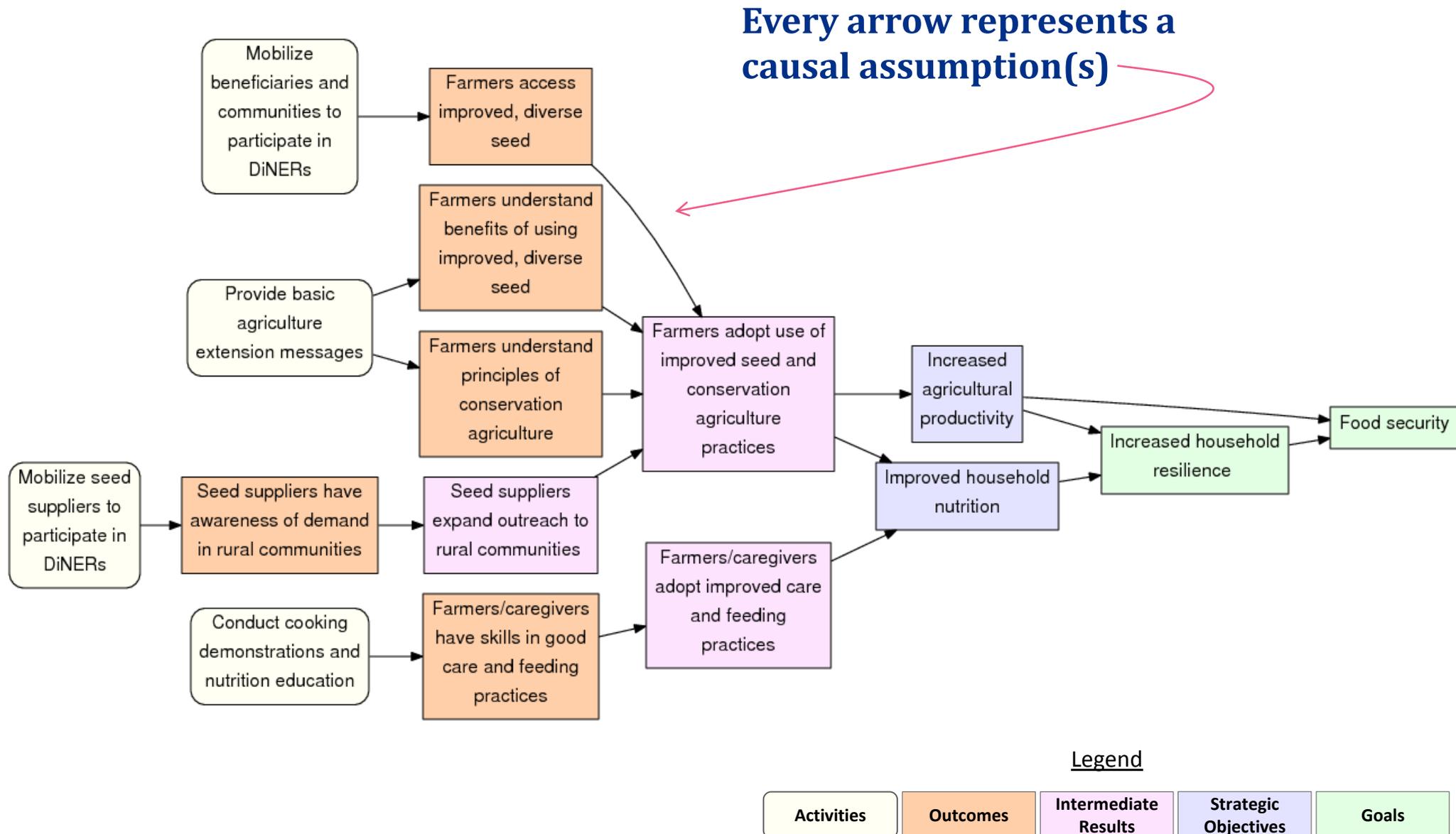
- **Checking** – Encouraging thoughtful questioning and pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and multiple perspective taking to check the validity of assumptions

T

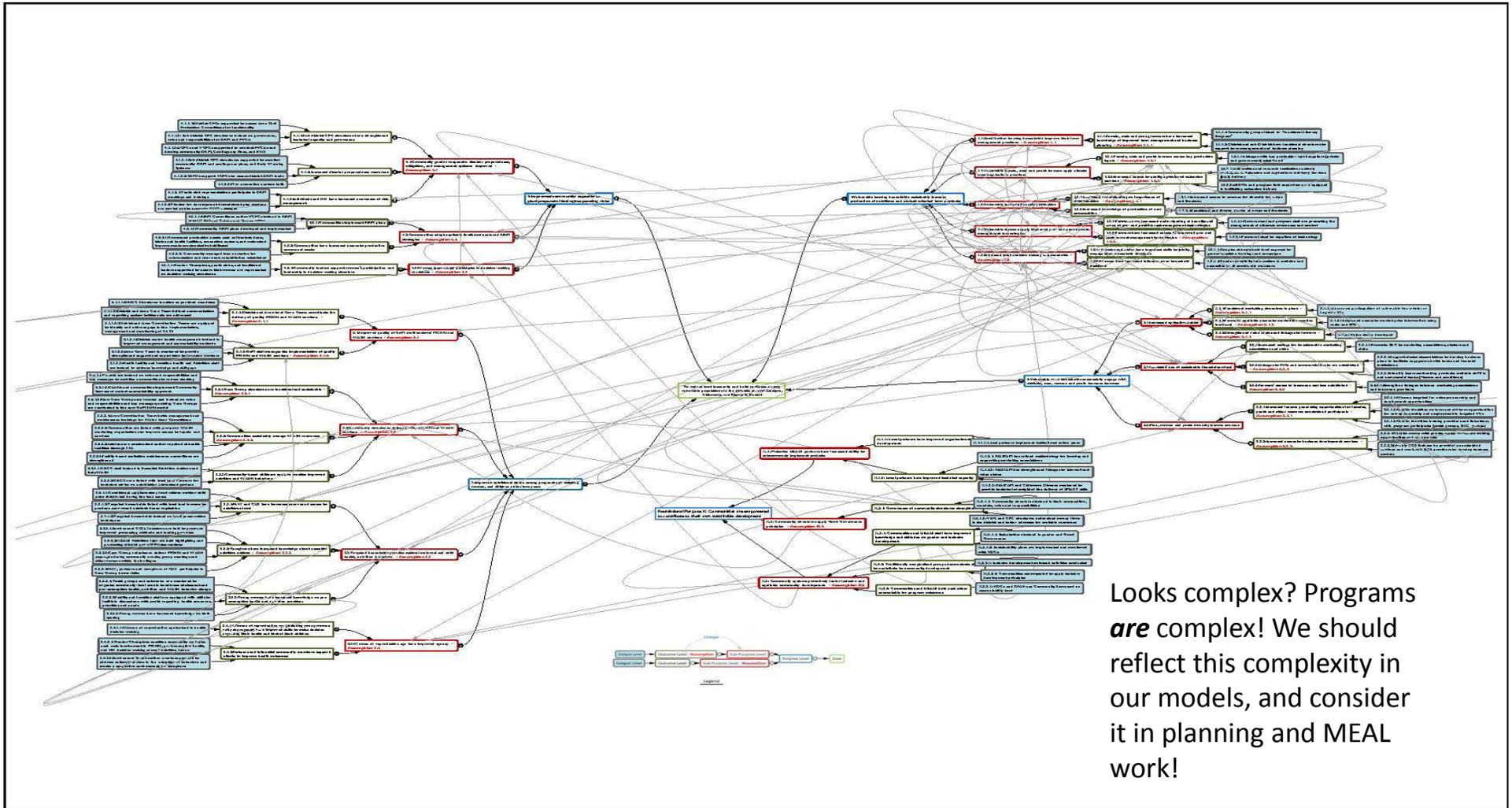
- **Taking decisions** – Enabling more evidence-based decisions in preparation for adaptive action and management

Adapted from Buckley, Archibald, Hargraves and Trochim, 2015

Theory of Change Pathway Models – demystify theory



Theory of Change Pathway Models – remystify practice



Looks complex? Programs **are** complex! We should reflect this complexity in our models, and consider it in planning and MEAL work!

UBALE - Project Level

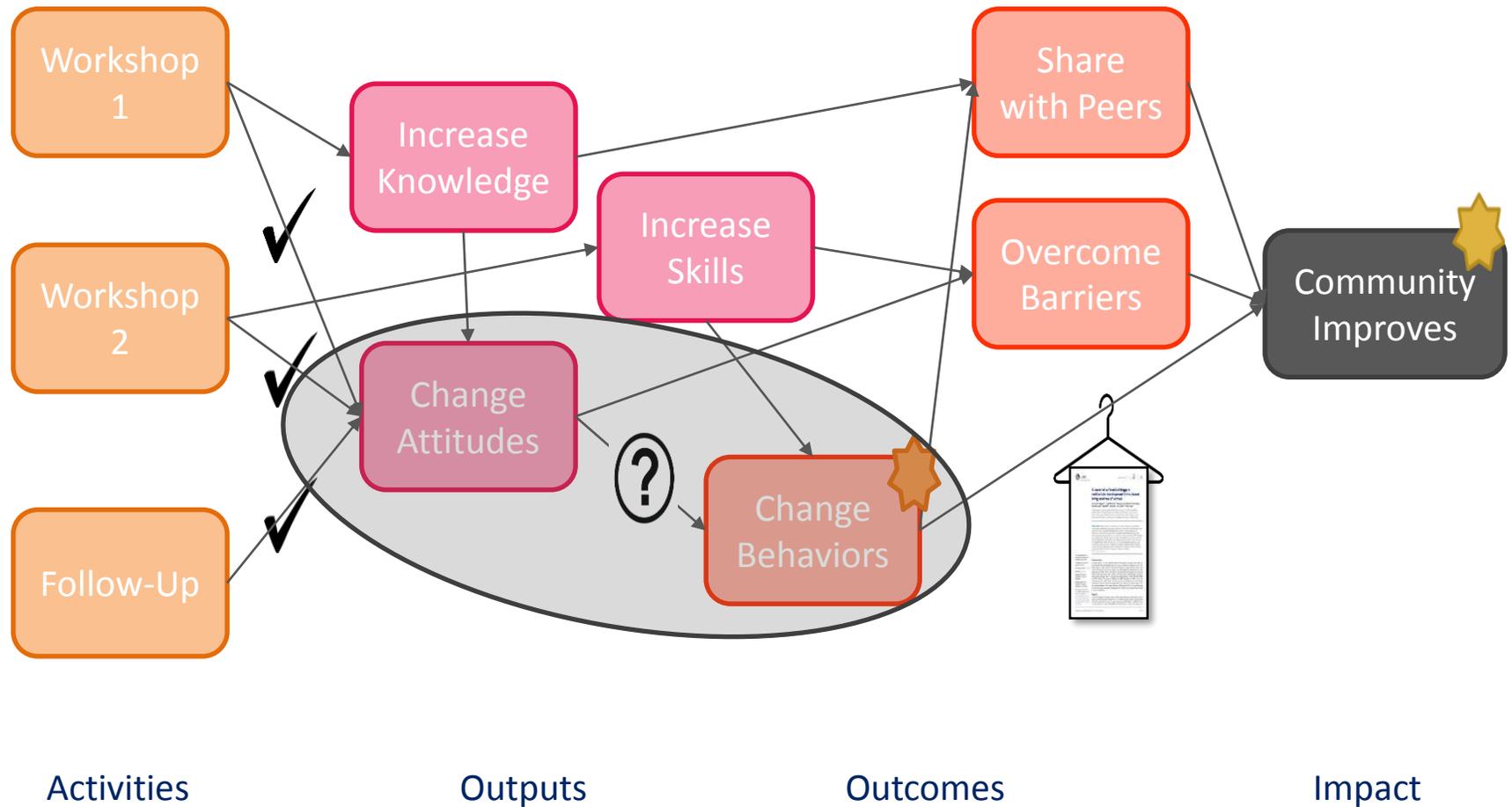


Source: Theory of Change – UBale Project, Malawi

Simple Scenario: Handwashing



Mining the Pathway Models for Evidence / Evidence Gap Mapping



“We live in a complex world, we often don’t know what is going on, and we won’t be able to understand its complexity unless we spend more time not knowing...Curiosity is what we need.”

Wheatley as quoted in Kania and Kramer, 2013

**What does
Evaluative
Thinking sound
and look like?**

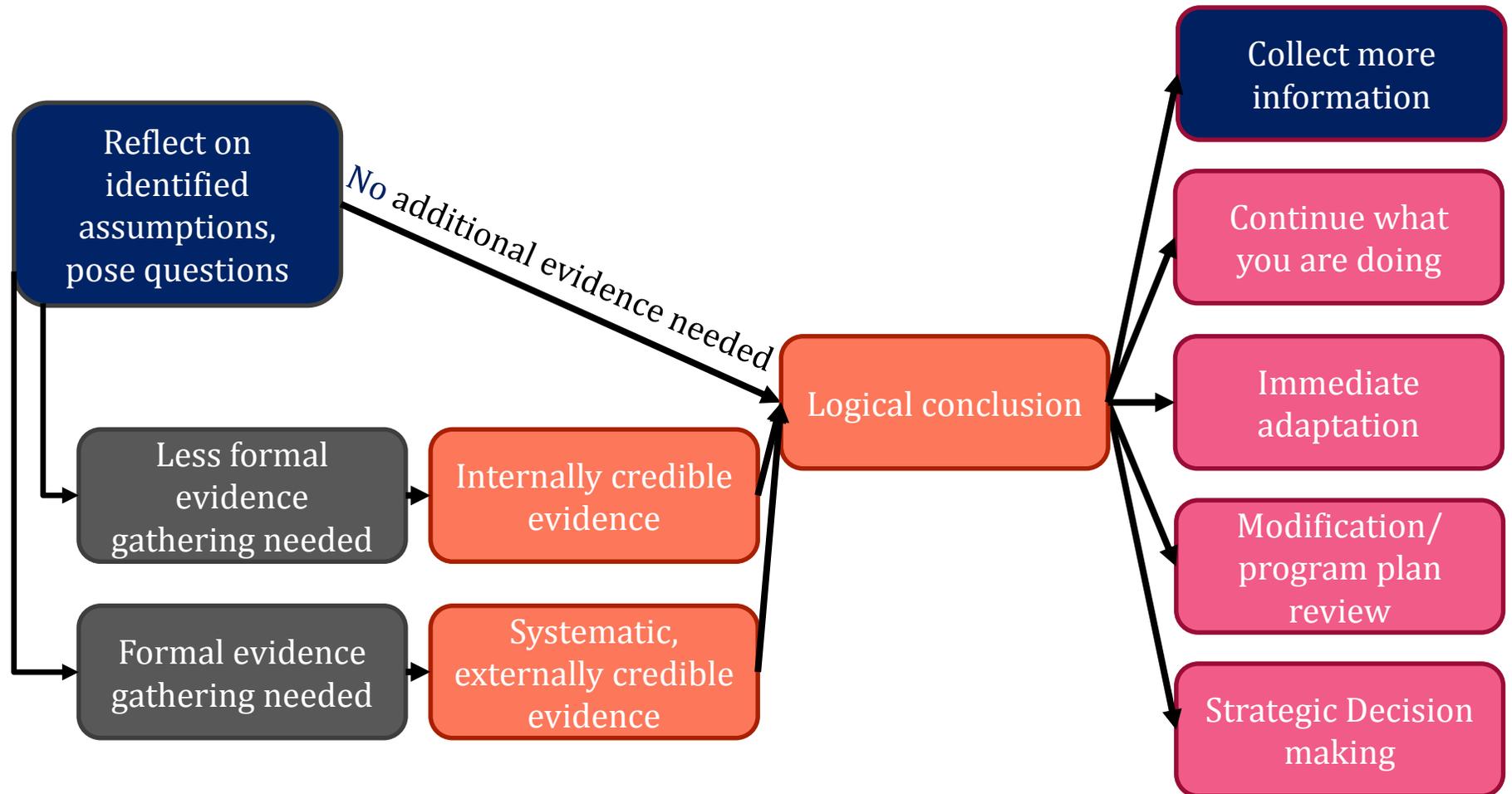


Photo: Gender Analysis – CRS Ethiopia

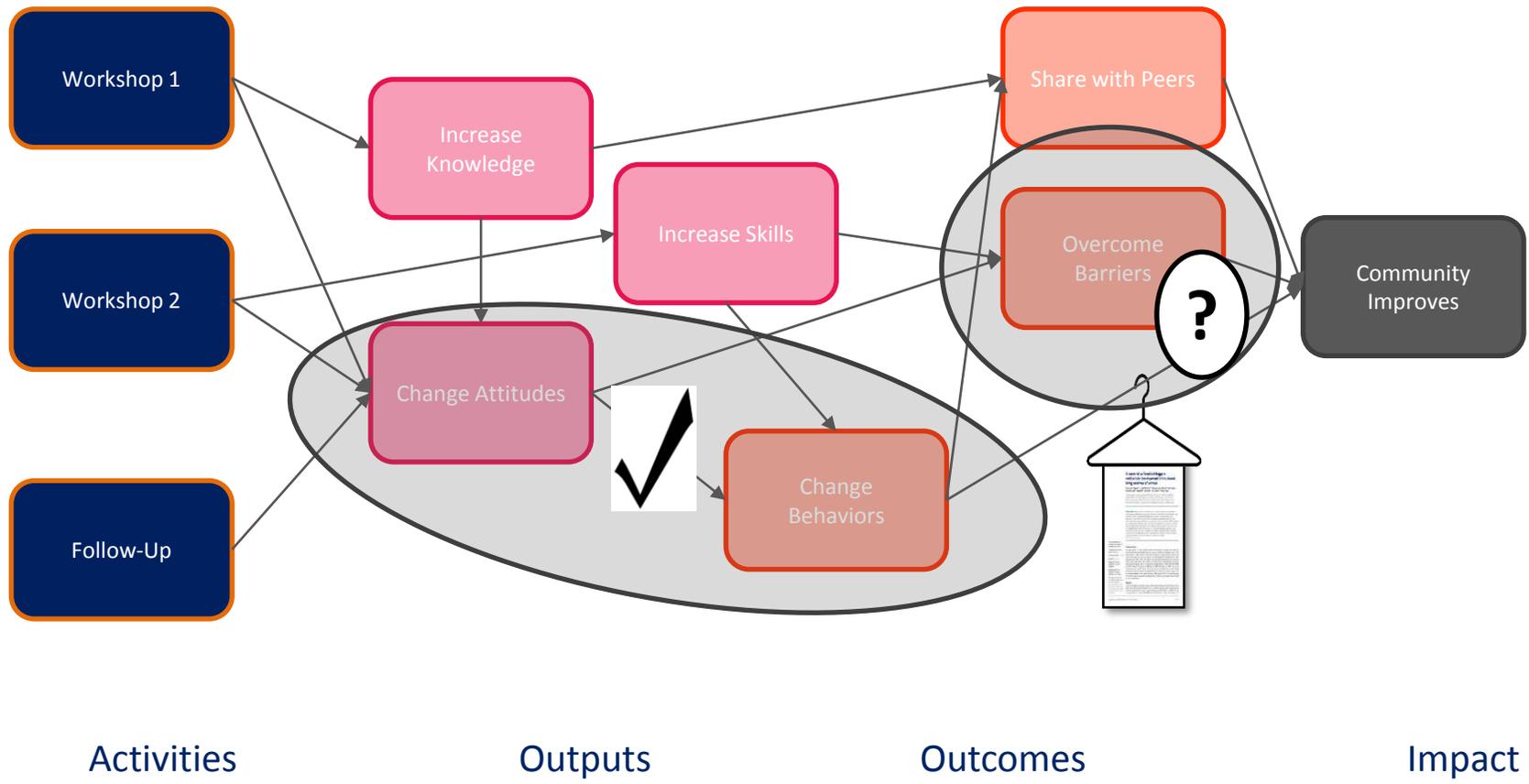
Evaluative Thinking: what it looks like in a program work context

- Things you may **hear**:
 - Why are we assuming this?
 - How do we know?
 - What evidence do we have?
 - What is the thinking behind the way we do this?
 - How could we do this better?
 - How does this connect to our intended outcomes?
 - Our stakeholder's perspective on this might be...
- Things you may **see**:
 - More evidence gathering
 - More feedback (all directions)
 - Reflective conversations among staff, beneficiaries, leadership, etc.
 - More model making/illustrating thinking
 - More motivation to do systematic MEAL work
 - Program evolution
 - More effective staff and programs
 - Greater field staff influence over project decisions

Working with Questions: Putting ET to use



Revisiting the ToC Pathway Model – annually



Learning to Action Discussions

Learning by 'looking back'

1. What did we plan for the month? Quarter? Six months?
2. What did we achieve?
 - a. Review the data on the monthly data reports
 - What do these data tell us?
 - What don't the data tell us?
 - Who do the data represent?
 - Who don't the data represent?
 - What else do we need to know?
 - b. Are these data consistent with our observations on field visits?
3. etc.

Action as 'looking forward'

1. What initiatives are successful?
 - a. How can they be reinforced?
 - b. Are there other places in the project area that might adopt these initiatives?
2. What initiatives are not going well?
 - a. What needs to change?
 - b. Should any activities be dropped?
3. How best can community members be informed of our current thinking?
4. etc.

3. Growing Evaluative Thinking in CRS



Initially 2 Country Programs, 3 groups, 3 years

	Target audience	<u>Year 1</u> Identifying Assumptions	<u>Year 2</u> Seeking Evidence	<u>Year 3</u> Making Decisions
Group 1	Locally-based partners	√	√	√
Group 2	Program managers	√	√	√
Group 3	Country leadership	√	√	√

Piloted in **Ethiopia** and Zambia; now extending to other countries, including: Honduras, Kenya, Malawi, Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania

ET Workshop Series

NINE WORKSHOPS IN ALL: 1 PER GROUP PER ROUND

GROUP 1
FIELD-BASED STAFF

GROUP 2
SENIOR PROGRAM
STAFF

GROUP 3
COUNTRY
LEADERSHIP

ROUND 1

- Introduction to Evaluative Thinking
- Identifying assumptions
- Multiple perspectives
- Theory of Change (ToC) Pathway Models

ROUND 2

- Using the ToC Pathway Models to determine learning plan scope
- Posing learning questions
- Components of a learning plan
- Learning plan alignment

ROUND 3

- Making meaning from results
- Participatory analysis
- Making informed decisions (utilization)
- Communicating results

Strategies	Examples of Activities
1. Create an intentional ET learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Display logic models in the workplace—in meeting rooms, within newsletters, etc. b) Create public spaces to record and display questions and assumptions. c) Post inspirational questions, such as, “How do we know what we think we know?” (Patton, 2005). d) Highlight the learning that comes from successful programs and evaluations and also from “failures” or dead ends. e) Have office ‘leaders’ model evaluative thinking behavior in all that they do.
2. Establish a habit of scheduling meeting time focused on ET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Have participants “mine” their logic model for information about assumptions and how to focus evaluation work (for example, by categorizing outcomes according to stakeholder priorities) (CORE, 2012). b) Use “opening questions” to start an ET discussion, such as, “How can we check our assumptions for accuracy?” (Brookfield, 2012); “What plausible alternative explanations are there for this finding?” (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). c) Use checklists to ensure intentionality towards evaluative thinking. d) Conduct a media critique (critically review and identify assumptions in a published article, advertisement, etc.) (Taylor-Powell, 2010).
3. Use role-play when planning evaluation work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Conduct a scenario analysis (have individuals or groups analyze and identify assumptions embedded in a written description of a fictional scenario) (Brookfield, 2012). b) Take on various stakeholder perspectives using the “thinking hats” method in which participants are asked to role play as a particular stakeholder (DeBono, 1999). c) Conduct an evaluation simulation (simulate data collection and analysis for your intended evaluation strategy).

Strategies	Examples of Activities
4. Diagram or illustrate thinking with colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Have teams or groups create logic and pathway models (theory of change diagrams or causal loop diagrams) together (CORE, 2012). b) Diagram the program's history. c) Create a system, context and/or organization diagram.
5. Engage in supportive, critical peer review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Review peer logic models (help identify leaps in logic, assumptions, strengths in their theory of change, etc.). b) Use the Critical Conversation Protocol (a structured approach to critically reviewing a peer's work through discussion) (Brookfield, 2012). c) Take an appreciative pause (stop to point out the positive contributions, and have individuals thank each other for specific ideas, perspectives or helpful support) (Brookfield, 2012).
6. Engage in all evaluative activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Ensure that all evaluation work is participatory and that members of the organization at all levels are offered the opportunity to contribute their perspectives. b) Encourage the use of learning to action discussion prompts each time data passes hands. c) Access tools and resources necessary to support all formal and informal evaluation efforts (including the support of external evaluators, ECB professionals, data analyzers, etc.).

4. Changes we are seeing



FRANCIS TAN
PHOTOGRAPHY

4.1 *Better staff engagement*

Senior project staff proactively seeking a wider range of views.

Staff report that there is now more attention to creating 'free and fair' opportunities to surface multiple perspectives and encourage new insights.

Less 'stove-piping'. Staff now recognize that colleagues outside of their specific technical domain can have valuable insights.

A more 'level playing field' for expressing opinions. Staff now feel their opinions are valued and feel more able to provide alternative explanations for project results even when contrary to 'received wisdom'.

More intentional use of informal learning to action discussions.

Conversations between staff at different points in the SMILER 'data flow map' are now more common. 'Learning to action planning'.

4.2 Better participant engagement

Greater project participant accountability. Since ET obliges project staff to validate assumptions through ‘check-ins’ with community members and traditional leaders, staff noted that there is more opinion seeking from project participants.

Making more time to listen, discuss and learn. Staff seem more able and willing to reflect with community members and on why intervention results may be different from earlier expectations.

4.3 More productive work processes

Use of simple checklists can trigger valuable improvements. The use of checklists for field monitoring visits and monthly learning meetings helps to ensure that ET is embedded in existing work processes.

Improvements in how monthly learning and annual review, stakeholder platform, and other reflection meetings are conducted. The focus has shifted to more critical analysis of field observations, and results and spending trends, and discussion of implications and possible responses, and follow-up planning.

Deliberate use of techniques and tools to review learning and inform decision making. Examples now used include chalk-talk, circle of voices, six thinking hats, role playing, pathway model mining for context and linkages, and so on.

Use of ET language in discussions. Staff are now saying, “let me put on my [color] hat” before making a comment aligned with the chosen color. A potentially significant change management result?

4.4 More substantive reporting

More detailed engagement with monitoring data. Learning how to summarize, interpret, analyze and report data has started to create a subtle shift in perceiving monitoring as evaluation.

Greater local contextualization of ToC. ET-informed discussions have enabled staff to utilize their deeper knowledge of the local setting to adapt earlier versions of the ToC.

Richer reporting. The multi-perspectives of field staff, volunteers, project participants, program managers (e.g., collectively analyzing annual survey trends as well as spending trends) all enrich the content of reporting and communication with donors and other key stakeholders. USAID/Zambia has been very appreciative of the ‘honesty’ of project reporting.

Better forward planning. Using analyses taken from the annual report to inform activities in upcoming FY17 work.

5. What we have learned so far...



Things that seem to help...

Be intentional and start small. Initial steps into evaluative thinking that fit easily into existing MEAL systems.

Importance of leadership and champions to motivate and model new practices. People and projects need support from “top” to “bottom” to build a culture of evaluative thinking

Establishing trust. Can be challenging in a results-focused environment as there can be conflicts of interest. Relationship with the donor is critical for creating a safe space for learning from ‘failure’.

To question is not to criticize. Evaluative thinking is about figuring out the “why” – not about “right” and “wrong.”

Be comfortable in the unknown. As difficult as it may be, encourage staff from rushing to an easy – and sometimes wrong – conclusion!

Focus on responsive implementation. Finding ways to engage frontline staff in decision-making. ET seems to be a great conduit for greater field staff and community engagement.

Simple checklists can be surprisingly helpful. Use them to help ‘nudge’ changes that start to embed ET in existing work processes. Checklists help to make practical the notion of intentionality.

Keep it simple. Tempting to over-think every little problem or possibility, but focus on the “sticky” issues.

Aim for parsimony. Particularly in aligning methods to learning questions, and where a ‘safe-fail’ solution may be appropriate.

Evaluative thinking as a social process



Photo credit: Creative Commons on flickr

6. The direction of travel

Applying complex adaptive thinking systems thinking

- in **Execution/Implementation** (wider community engagement in creating small safe-fail interventions that nudge the system in the desired direction of travel, learning, adapting)
- in **Monitoring** (e.g., monitoring *as* evaluation, complexity-aware monitoring, ‘sensemaking’)
- in **Evaluation** (‘developmental evaluation’, systems thinking)

Adaptive Management

- USAID’s ‘Collaborating, Learning and Adapting’ program cycle
- high level policies (Automated Directives System) revised to include learning and seeking opportunities and ways to operationalize revised policies on the ground

USAID's Framework for adaptive management – Collaborating | Learning | Adapting



Embedded ET creates lasting impact

Evaluative thinking is most meaningful when it is embedded in an organization's culture ... Evaluative thinking is what characterizes learning organizations.

Michael Quinn Patton
Program evaluation consultant