



# Southern Hemisphere

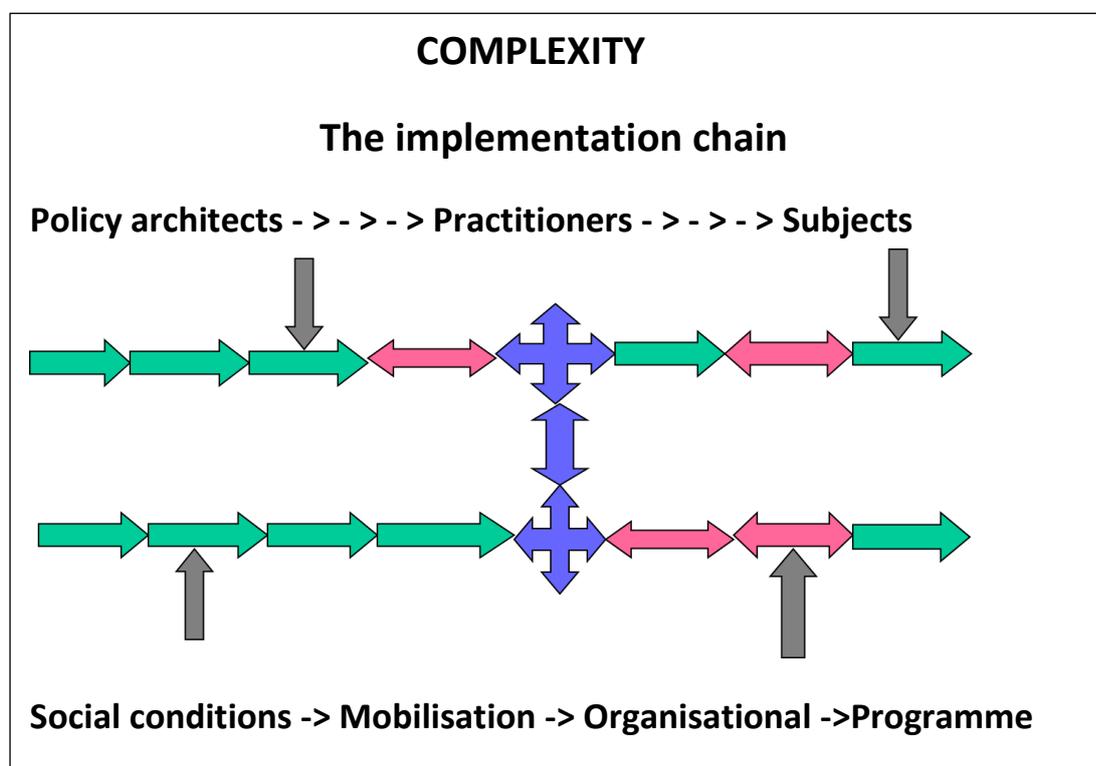
SUPPORTING MEANINGFUL CHANGE

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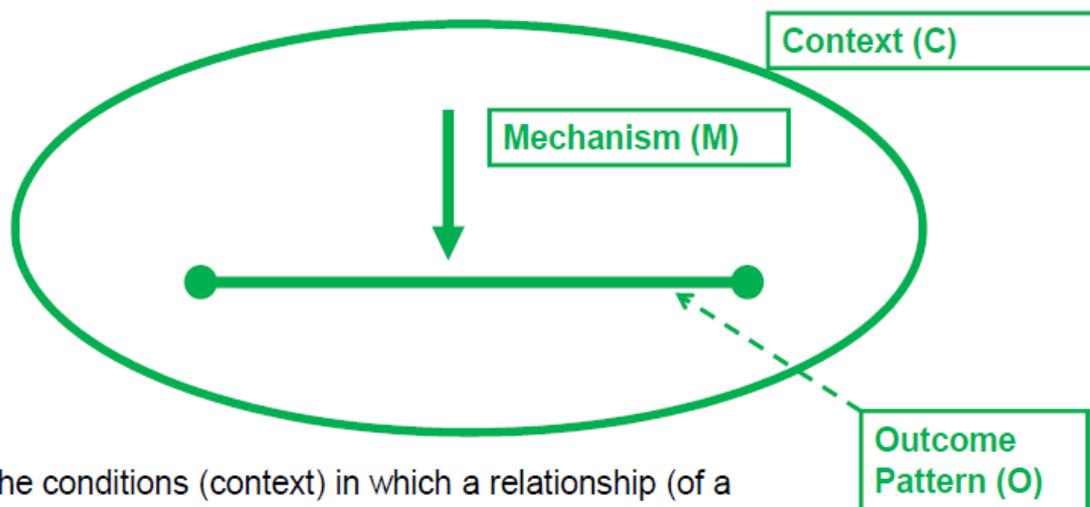
## Realist Evaluation! Its conception, application and implementation in the African context

Mark Abrahams of Southern Hemisphere ran the above workshop during the SAMEA (South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association) conference on 7 October this year. One of the reasons for offering this workshop was the increasing use of theory of change (ToC) as part of the requirements (ToR) for doing evaluations – be they with government or development agencies. Theory of change is also becoming part of the planning processes for development projects. Few people realise that the notion of a theory of change emerged from lines of reasoning within theory-based evaluations. Realist Evaluation falls within the branch of evaluation that is described as theory-based evaluation. It is therefore important that users of theory of change (ToC) are aware of the historical and conceptual underpinnings of the innovation so that it is not applied in a mechanical manner.

Realist evaluation helps assess whether underlying theories of change or assumptions of a programme are correct by identifying the causal linkages between different variables. It recognises that programmes or interventions are COMPLEX OPEN SYSTEMS: Pawson's (2006) anatomy of social programmes encourages us to think of social programmes as **active theories**, thickly populated by chains (linked mechanisms) that are non-linear and embedded in multiple social systems. These mechanisms are dynamic and change over time and as open systems, they change the very conditions that enabled them in the first place. A visual representation of a programme's complexity is offered below.



Realist Evaluation challenges the evaluator to treat every experience with intellectual dignity and as a basis for theorisation. This means that the evaluator must capture and consider the historical and contextual conditions prevailing at the time of conception, the influence of social and environmental conditions during implementation and be able to identify the ‘mechanisms’ of change that are triggered under those conditions. Realist evaluation is used to explain change in complex systems, using diverse forms of evidence in a way that is context-specific. Understanding that generative mechanisms are at the core of what happens when change occurs. The following diagram depicts the context-mechanism and –outcome configuration as shared by Pawson and Tilley (2004).



The conditions (context) in which a relationship (of a certain strength) between phenomena holds and the reasons why this relationship holds (the mechanism)

One of the tasks of evaluation is to learn more about ‘what works for whom’, ‘in which contexts particular programmes do and don’t work’, and ‘what mechanisms are triggered by what programmes in what contexts’. Instead of comparing changes for participants who have undertaken a programme with a group of people who have not (as is done in random control or quasi-experimental designs), a realist evaluation compares mechanisms and outcomes within programmes. It may ask, for example, whether a programme works differently in different localities (and if so, how and why); or for different population groups (for example, men and women, or groups with differing socio-economic status). Instead of relying on a single measure of success, realist evaluators strive to understand and explain outcome variations through systematic theory testing and refinement. Participants at the workshop were challenged to consider the contextual issues surrounding programmes in Africa.