A stylized sun graphic on the left side of the slide. It features a solid yellow circle at the bottom left, with several short, thick yellow dashes of varying lengths and orientations radiating upwards and to the right from its top edge, suggesting rays of light. The background is a solid orange color, and a large white semi-circle is positioned on the right side, framing the text.

The importance of Theories of Change & 'Theory' in ERDF/CF Evaluations

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Presentation to DG REGIO Evaluation Network Meeting

Disclaimer.....


Personal Reflections

Drawing on *my* learning
from Helpdesk experience

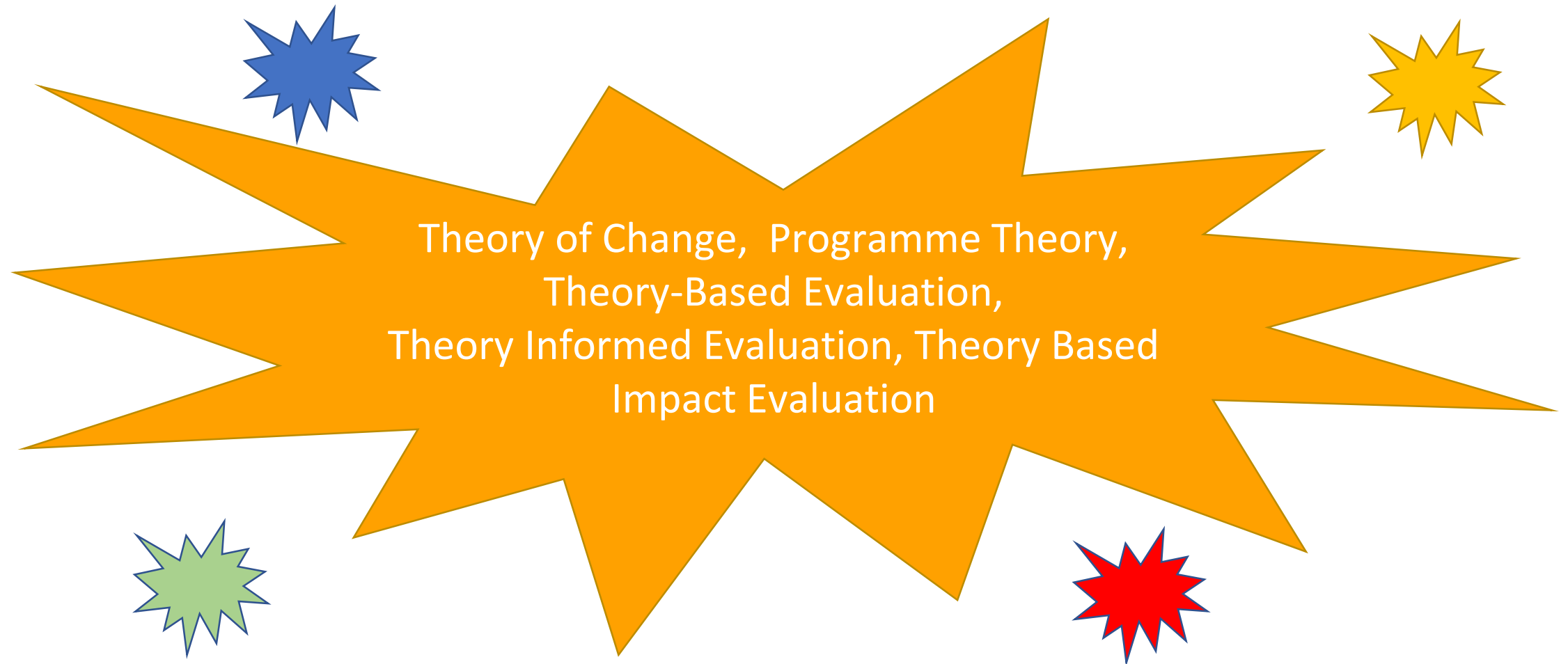
Not speaking on behalf of
Helpdesk or the Commission



Traditional
evaluations
avoided
'theory'

- 
- Evaluation were there to identify dimensions of success and measure success or failure

We have seen a theory explosion in evaluation....



Theory of Change, Programme Theory,
Theory-Based Evaluation,
Theory Informed Evaluation, Theory Based
Impact Evaluation



Explaining
causal
connections
between policy
interventions &
intended
results

- Explanation is the distinctive feature of all theory-informed evaluations – ToCs, TBEs and TBIEs
- They set out to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions rather than ‘what’ and ‘how much’ questions
- This is especially important when policy interventions are complex and new – when we are uncertain about what leads to success

If theory explains
'why an
intervention
works' (Carol
Weiss) what
kinds of 'theory'
is of interest?

Programming theory: how do programmes work?

Policy Domain theory: what do we know about health-promotion or energy transitions?

Economic theory: when do SMEs expand and how does competitiveness increase?

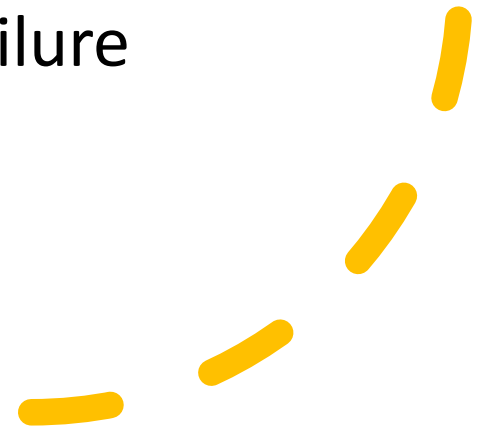
Social Change theory: how can change processes be supported?

Implications for where we get 'theories' from; & evaluation expertise, consortia construction, partnerships....

Why this 'explosion'?


Three main drivers:

1. Policy priorities & how priorities are delivered have changed
2. We are more interested in results – in making a difference
3. We are less tolerant of policy failure





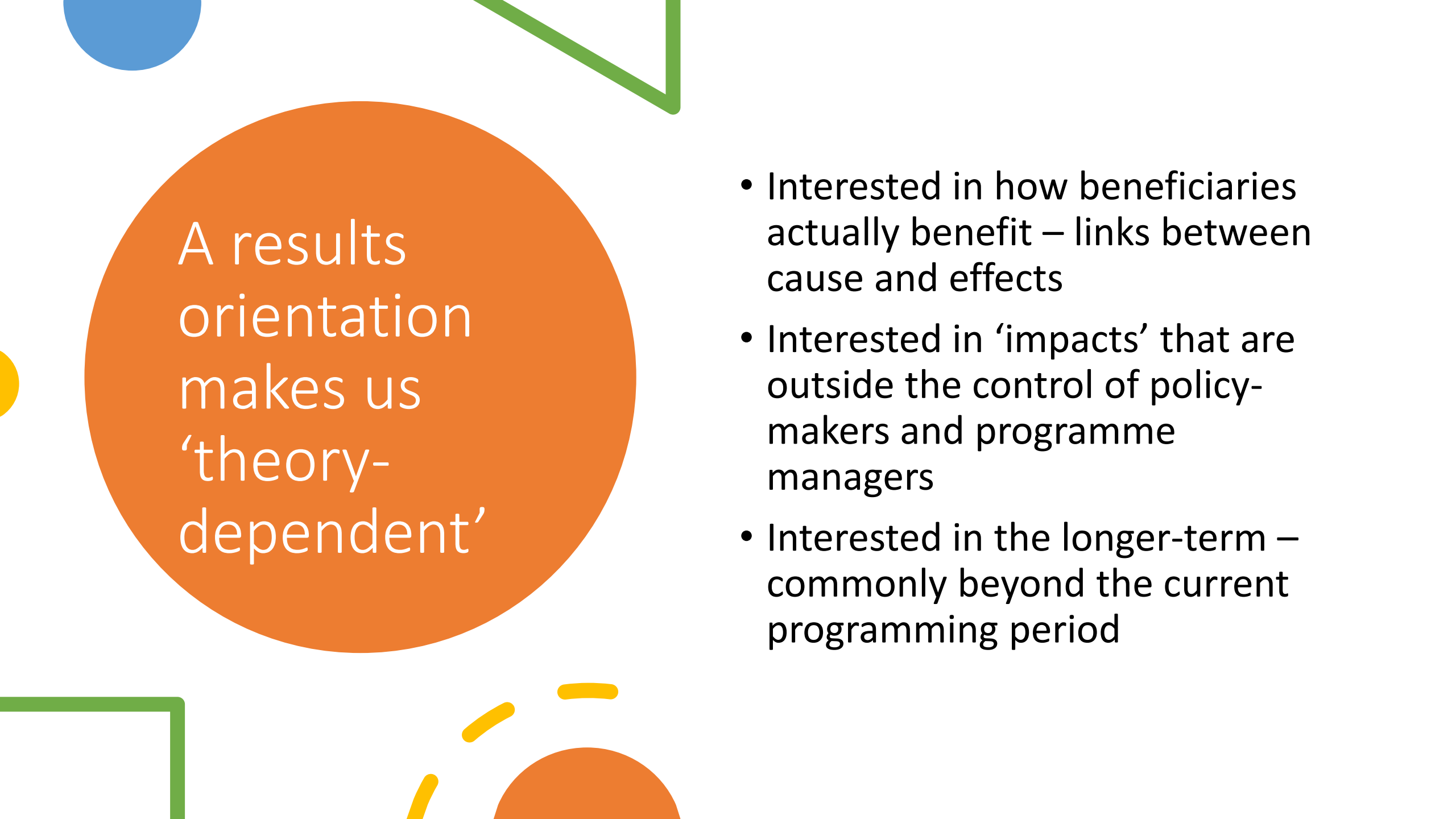
Changing Policy priorities

- From building roads, advanced factories & basic infrastructure to building competitive & innovative economies; from saving energy to reaching net-Zero or promoting the circular economy
 - ‘Innovation’ ‘competitiveness’ and ‘the circular economy’ are themselves ‘theorised objects’ – not directly observable, difficult to measure and to know *how* they come about
- 



Policy
priorities are
linked and
complex

- We now implement '*strategies*' rather than isolated 'interventions'
- One function of theory is to give coherence to separate but interconnected policy interventions
- Input/output models have less explanatory power than in those circumstances



A results orientation makes us 'theory-dependent'

- Interested in how beneficiaries actually benefit – links between cause and effects
- Interested in 'impacts' that are outside the control of policy-makers and programme managers
- Interested in the longer-term – commonly beyond the current programming period




Learning & Improving

- Nowadays citizens expect governments to *learn* from mistakes (and successes) and continuously improve....Less tolerance of failure
- In order to learn & improve we need to explain – understand how things work ...'open the black box'

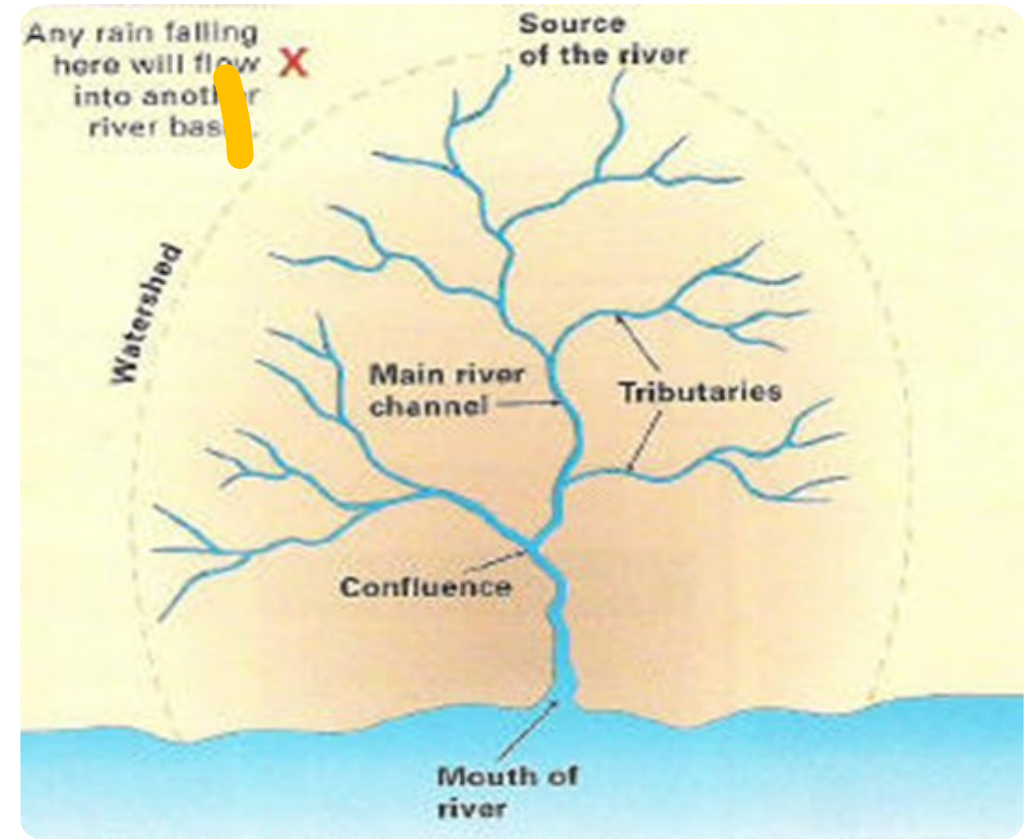


Four key challenges

1. Language confusion – based on history
 2. From brand loyalty to common principles
 3. Convergence on *de facto* practice standards
 4. Capacity challenges – and how to overcome them
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1. Language confusion: Evaluation becoming one river, with many streams.....

- Intervention Logic; Programme Theory; Log Frames; Theories of Change; Logic Models; Theory Based Evaluation; Impact Evaluation....

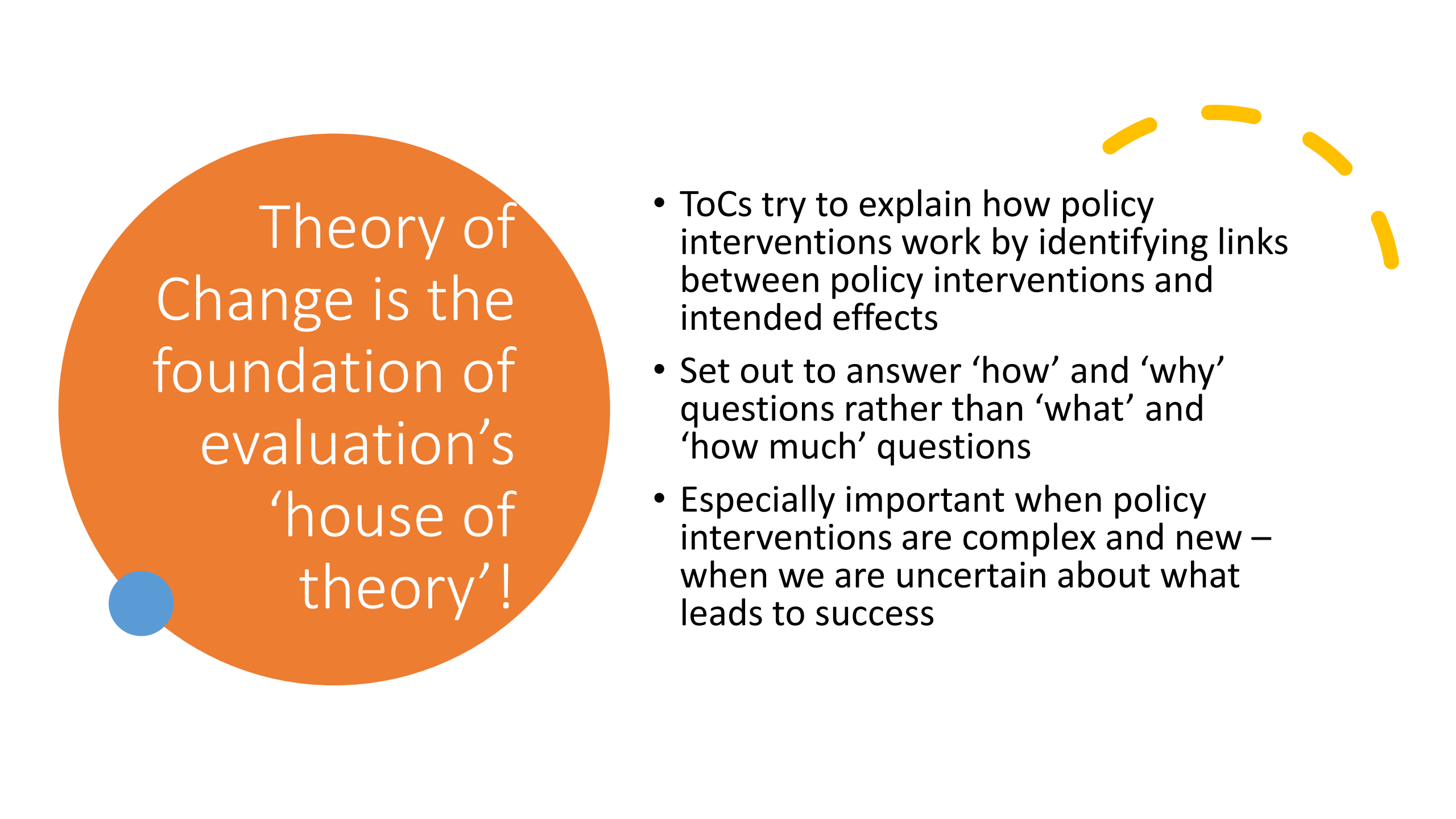


Three main tributaries to this 'river'

Planning and control: deciding how to deliver major projects, allocate resources and monitor time-lines – logic models, log-frames – *objectives/intentions* orientated


Participatory programme design: 'theories of change' was originally the theories/expectations / assumptions of stakeholders – *learning & improvement* orientated

Explanatory analysis: TBE & TBIE tracks the *effects* of programmes; & providing a map for evaluation questions & data collection – *impact and results* orientated



Theory of
Change is the
foundation of
evaluation's
'house of
theory'!


- ToCs try to explain how policy interventions work by identifying links between policy interventions and intended effects
- Set out to answer 'how' and 'why' questions rather than 'what' and 'how much' questions
- Especially important when policy interventions are complex and new – when we are uncertain about what leads to success



2. 'Brand loyalty' - the Nike™ /Adidas™ problem in evaluation theory!

- Early commercial adopters of 'theory'-informed evaluation approaches enter through a 'brand' gateway
- There are many 'followers' of Contribution Analysis, Process Tracing, Realist Synthesis...

3. Practice convergence: all theory informed approaches rely on common principles....

- *Causal mechanisms* – assumptions and theories about how a policy will or won't work
 - *Causal pathways* – the stages to travel from inputs & activities to reach intended (and sometimes unintended) effects
 - *Contextualisation* – identifying what else influences results, e.g. other programmes, economic trends, local administrative capacity etc. (Risks, enablers, supports, preconditions.....)
- 

Occupying
common
methodological
'space' ...

- Case based rather than population-based
- Concerned with the relationships between variables *within* cases rather than in distributions across populations

Pays attention to

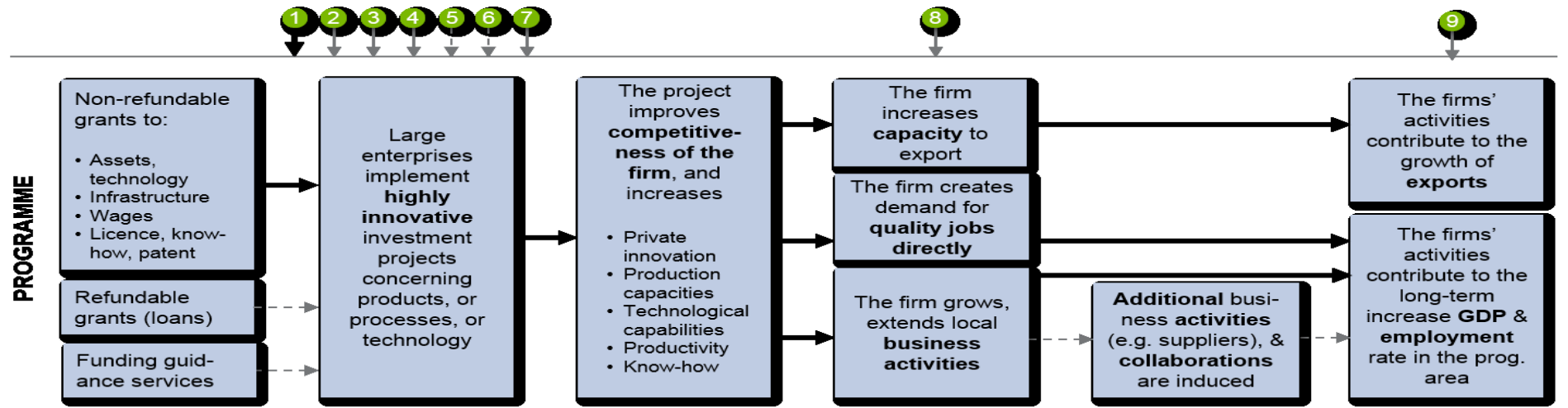
- Case-selection and typologies so as to support limited generalisation
- Units of analysis which may not conform with 'an OP', 'a project' or 'an intervention'

...and is committed to combining qualitative & quantitative approaches

This moves us away from the optimism of many programme documents.....



To a much more detailed analysis:



Assumptions and external factors

1. Company strategy foresees innovation, growth and export
2. Developed basic infrastructure (motorways, airport access, ICT infrastructure)
3. Developed regional innovation system (absorptive capacity) and R&D infrastructure (etc. research centres)
4. Availability of R&D partners for collaboration
5. Business culture is supportive of collaborations
6. Selection criteria facilitates the selection of innovative projects
7. Labour market supplies labour in required number and qualification levels
8. Innovation is not contrary to employment growth
9. General economic conditions enable growth and export

Indirect and wider effects

- a. Developed human capital base in the area
- b. Attracting other companies/R&D in the region
- c. Improved local R&D, transportation, ICT infrastructure
- d. Improved social infrastructure (education, culture etc.)
- e. Spillover of improved business practices, skills, knowledge, R&D and efficient technologies (local enterprises)
- f. Spread of improved working culture (working conditions, wage levels, timely wages, values, stability etc.)
- g. Greater workforce mobility („quality” jobs)
- h. Crowding-out of SMEs from labour market (skilled labour)
- i. Distort market equilibrium (effect on SMEs & non-supported)

Legend

- ➔ CAUSE: A is one of the main, fundamental causes of B) (‘must have’)
- ➡ PRE-CONDITION: A is a necessary pre-condition of B, but not the main cause of that (lacking of which prevents B)
- ➡ SUPPORTING FACTOR: A is contributing to B, but is neither a cause nor a pre-condition of that (‘nice to have’)



A 'Theory-Informed' Family of Approaches

- *Intervention logic and Programme theory: Objectives and Plans - Essential*
- *Theories of Change: our best guess & assumptions about how to get to where we want to go – Nearly always*
- *Theory Based Evaluation: Validation and confirmation that the ToC is based on sound assumptions - Selectively*
- *Theory-Based Impact Evaluation: Following rigorous causal reasoning to confirm that the intervention of interest is a necessary part of a causal package - Infrequently*

4. Capacity Challenges

- Skilled contractors able to deliver what they promise
- Data sources that are beneficiary and intervention relevant
- Flexible management capacities and procedures
- Coping with misaligned timescales






Contractors- the 'supply' side crunch!

- Beginning to see a few contractors who understand 'theory' in evaluation
- Preparing a Theory of Change is still a scarce skill
- Tendency to over-promise and under-deliver
- Poses serious management challenges for Managing Authorities



Data sources

- Familiar challenge of data-availability & preparation
 - Evaluation sometimes used for data remediation
 - The indicator system is not always well-aligned with 'case-based' requirements
 - Often difficult to link data-bases together at the case-level
- 




Importance of 'agile' & proactive management

- Dialogue with national stakeholders is of uneven quality: accountability or learning?
- Balancing centralisation and decentralisation: Getting close to beneficiaries
- Implications for contracting and procurement: quality and experience matters & how Lots are structured...
- Able to work across OP, territorial and sectoral boundaries: choosing the right unit of analysis
- Challenge of adaptation to crises, reprogramming and pandemics: how to explain results when results change....?



Aligning with Mis-aligned Timescales

When *is* ex-post?

- Theory informed evaluations span programming periods
 - Adaptive policy-making and unstable trajectories need adaptive evaluation
 - Theory based approaches require modularised, cumulative, iterative evaluations
 - Challenge for evaluation planning
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Some 'take-away' messages

Theory-informed approaches developing slowly but evidence of convergence in language and practice

Theories of Change are the foundation and are often enough

Answering 'how' and 'why' questions makes sense when these answer stakeholder questions – importance of dialogue

Benefiting from Theory-Informed approaches requires

We will continue to face capacity problems for some time to come...