Keeping it real: using mechanisms to promote use in the realist evaluation of the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence Programme

Melanie Punton and Isabel Vogel

MELANIE PUNTON is a Senior Consultant at Itad, specialising in theory-based evaluation and qualitative research. She has applied realist evaluation within the multi-year, DFID-funded Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) and Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) programmes.

DR. ISABEL VOGEL is an independent evaluation consultant, specialising in theory-based evaluation, evidence-informed policy, and research and innovation for development in low- and middle-income countries. She has applied contribution analysis and realist evaluation in several multi-year evaluations, including the UK government's £1.5bn Global Challenges Research fund (GRCF); DFID's Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) and Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence (HIEP) programmes (2013-18).

Abstract

This chapter explores the use of mechanisms within the realist evaluation of the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme, a £15.7 million initiative aiming to improve the use of evidence in decision making in low and middle-income countries. The evaluation was commissioned to establish not just *whether* BCURE worked but also *how and why* capacity building can contribute to increased use of evidence in policymaking in the very different contexts in which the programme operated. This chapter argues that using mechanisms helped provide nuanced and robust insights into these questions, while also strengthening the usefulness and policy relevance of the evaluation. Drawing primarily on qualitative data, including interviews with more than 500 stakeholders over three years, the evaluation explored the mechanisms that promote capacities to use evidence in decision making, through developing and testing realist context-intervention-mechanism-outcome configurations (CIMOs). Uncovering the value of mechanisms for policy and programme learning was not easy, and the chapter sets out some of the thorny challenges faced and how the BCURE evaluation navigated these. Ultimately, the use of mechanisms in the BCURE evaluation helped to generate practical and nuanced insights that fed directly into the design of a £17m follow-up programme. The seven mechanisms uncovered are continuing to inform our own and others' work on institutional capacity change in a wide range of fields.

Introduction

Realist evaluation is a theory-based evaluation approach (Rogers, 2007), which investigates the question: how and why does this programme work or not work, for whom, and in what circumstances? (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This question is answered through developing and testing theory about the *mechanisms* that generate *outcomes* in specific *contexts* – providing a means of analysing how and why an intervention works.

This chapter explores the use of mechanisms within the realist evaluation of the DFID-funded Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme (Vogel & Punton, 2018). The aim of the evaluation was to provide valid causal explanations to underpin useful, policy-relevant findings (i.e., to meet both sides of the 'Causal Mechanism Claim' outlined by Schmitt, this issue). Reflecting on both practical and conceptual issues, we will discuss how a

focus on mechanisms strengthened the usefulness of the BCURE evaluation in three ways by:

- Drawing explicitly on existing literature to identify mechanisms and enhance their validity.
- Adding substantial conceptual precision and explanatory insights to strengthen confidence in findings of how and why BCURE worked.
- Supporting a close examination of specific features of context and how they interact with mechanisms to generate outcomes.

The use of mechanisms added depth and value to the evaluation findings and succeeded in generating portable and policy-relevant insights. However, realising these benefits in practice is not easy. The chapter will discuss how the evaluation team navigated a range of challenges to ultimately deliver an evaluation that was both useful and used.

The BCURE programme

The Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme was a £15.7 million initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) from 2013-2017. Six implementing partners worked with governments in 12 low- and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia to strengthen the capacity of civil servants and parliamentarians to use research evidence in decision making, through building skills, incentives, and systems required to access, appraise and apply evidence.

BCURE used a range of interventions designed and combined in different ways – including training, mentoring, policy dialogues, and technical support to develop evidence tools and guidelines. Projects ranged in scope and scale, some based in single ministries and others spanning whole government systems.

DFID commissioned an evaluation to run in parallel with the programme, conducted by an independent evaluation team from Itad from 2014 to 2017 (Vogel & Punton, 2018). The primary aim of the evaluation was to understand *whether* BCURE worked, and also *how and why* capacity building can contribute to increased use of evidence in policymaking in the very different contexts in which the programme operated, to inform programming decisions within and beyond DFID.

Methodology

This emphasis on 'how and why' BCURE worked implied the need for an evaluation approach that made use of theory, as 'without theory, you cannot explain.' (Stern, 2015, p. 9). Realist evaluation is one of a family of theory-based evaluation approaches, alongside contribution analysis, theory-of-change based approaches, and process tracing (Stern et al., 2012). These approaches typically use a generative model of causality (in contrast to the correlational or counterfactual models underpinning variance-based approaches), explaining in detail how and why the programme works as the basis for causal inference (Stern et al., 2012). For the BCURE evaluation, realist evaluation was selected over other theory-based approaches because it is particularly useful in pilot programs where it is not clear exactly how and why the intervention will work; where programs are implemented across multiple settings and are likely to lead to different outcomes for different groups in diverse contexts; and where commissioners are interested in learning lessons about how to scale up or roll out an intervention (Westhorp, 2014).

In realist evaluation, mechanisms are central to the analysis of causality. As in other mechanism-based approaches, the definition of 'mechanism' is contested and continues to evolve (see Lemire et al., this issue). The BCURE evaluation used the following definition, drawing on Pawson & Tilley (1997) and Westhorp (2014):

"Mechanisms are the causal forces, powers, processes, or interactions that generate change within an intervention – including the choices, reasoning, and decisions people make as a result of the resources the programme provides." (Vogel & Punton, 2018, p. 5)

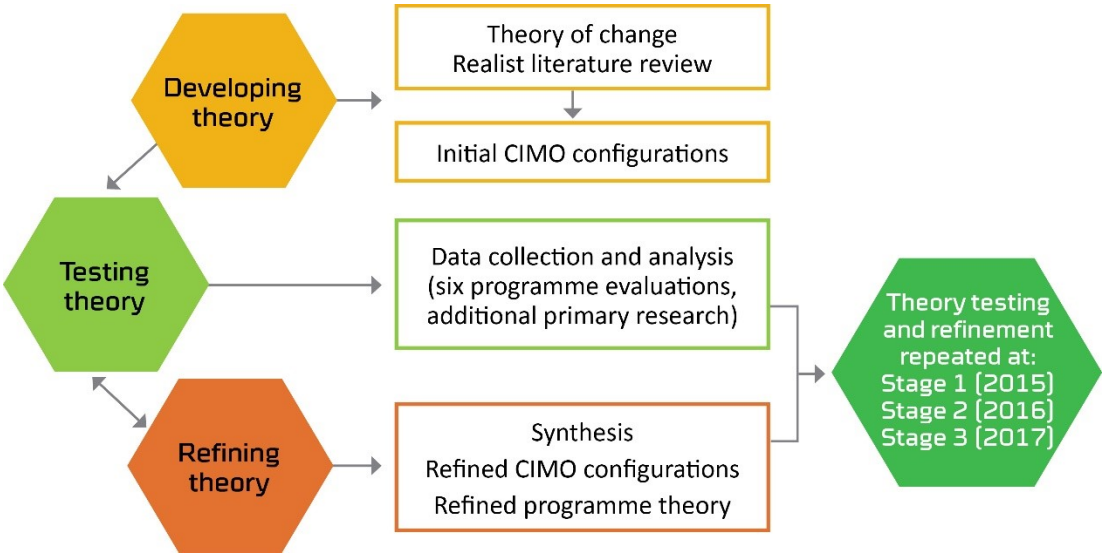
In this conceptualisation, mechanisms are real, although usually invisible. They often occur at the level of individual behaviour, including the choices, reasoning, and decisions that people make as a result of the resources provided by a programme – for example, an intervention may seek to *incentivise* or *deter* particular behaviour among its participants. However, mechanisms can also include the interactions between people or groups and the powers and liabilities that people or institutions have as a result of their position in a group or society (Westhorp 2018). This broader interpretation was important in the BCURE evaluation, as interventions worked at multiple levels: targeting individuals working with evidence as part of their jobs, within organisational systems and processes relating to evidence use, and embedded in the broader evidence systems and networks within BCURE countries.

Realist evaluation explores mechanisms through a specific heuristic: the 'context–mechanism–outcome' configuration (CMO). CMOs are hypotheses about how programme *outcomes* (any changes brought about by a programme) are caused by mechanisms triggered when programme resources (e.g. information, money, expertise) interact with specific (individual, organisational, interpersonal or institutional) features of the *context* (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). CMOs are the core analytical units of realist evaluation and are developed and tested by evaluators to explore causal relationships (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Wong, Westhorp, Pawson, & Greenhalgh, 2013). Evaluators have suggested various modifications to this basic heuristic (see Lemire, this issue). We decided to incorporate *features of the intervention* as an additional element to our CMO configurations, to give the formulation C+I+M=O. This helped to separate out intervention factors that BCURE controlled (such as training design or length) from contextual factors that it did not (such as the attitudes of trainees).

Data collection and analysis

There are no step-by-step frameworks for conducting a realist evaluation. The approach is methodologically eclectic - evaluators can use any data collection or analysis tool and any form of evidence that is relevant to test their theories (Marchal, van Belle, van Olmen, Hoeree, & Kegels, 2012). We conceptualised the BCURE evaluation in terms of three broad stages: developing theory, testing theory, and refining theory. These stages were iterative rather than linear, with the theory developed, tested, refined, and tested again as knowledge accumulated (Wong et al., 2016). Figure 6.1. provides an overview of the evaluation design.

Figure 6.1. Application of the realist approach in the BCURE evaluation



Source: Vogel & Punton (2018), p. 5

Developing theory

A draft programme theory was developed, drawing on the evaluation team's existing knowledge and professional hunches about the nature of capacity building and how it can contribute to evidence use in policymaking. These insights shaped the research questions for a realist literature review (Punton, Hagerman, et al., 2016), which identified additional theories and possible mechanisms in the wider literature. These were used to develop a more detailed programme theory and the first iteration of CIMO configurations.

Testing theory

Data collection took place in six of the 12 BCURE countries – Bangladesh, Kenya, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Countries were selected during the inception phase using case replication logic to ensure 'typical,' 'challenging' and 'favourable' cases were included (Yin, 2003). The evaluation drew primarily on qualitative data, in the form of realist semi-structured interviews (Manzano, 2016) with 567 stakeholders over three years, using tailored topic guides to test the latest set of CIMOs. Interview respondents included programme staff and implementing partners, government officials, and parliamentarians who participated in BCURE activities and non-participating colleagues and managers, high-level stakeholders with an insight into how the government system operates, and stakeholders from civil society and other external vantage points. The evaluation also drew on monitoring data, programme documentation, and where possible government documents, such as tools and policies developed in collaboration with BCURE partners.

Refining theory

CIMO configurations were revised through an iterative process. We used a customised Microsoft Excel database to analyse data at a country level, with rows representing the outcomes referenced by interview respondents and columns capturing stakeholders' descriptions of how and why the outcome did or did not come about, as intervention, context, and mechanism factors. Each year, evidence from the country level was synthesised, to explore how and why different interventions contributed to different patterns of outcomes in different contexts. The synthesis involved the whole evaluation

team via analysis workshops to identify patterns, concepts, and metaphors that applied across the cases and interrogate differences. This process produced an evidence-based set of refined CIMOs, framed in terms that were abstract enough to make them applicable across the BCURE contexts ('middle range'), but not so far abstracted that they became 'grand,' general theories and lost meaning (Merton, 1967; Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Over the course of the evaluation, our CIMOs evolved significantly through multiple rounds of testing and refinement. The literature review identified 19 CIMOs, refined down to 15 following Stage 1 data collection. At Stage 2, some were dropped, others merged together, and new ones added, with 14 CIMOs tested. At Stage 3, there was a recognition that fewer CIMOs were needed to enable in-depth investigation. A subset was prioritised for investigation, guided by DFID's interests, and a final set of five tested CIMOs (encompassing seven mechanisms – see Figure 6.2.) were presented in the final report.

Figure 6.2. Mechanisms underpinning success in BCURE

Findings and discussion

The use of mechanisms strengthened the ability of the BCURE evaluation to provide valid causal explanations and generate useful, policy-relevant findings (i.e., both sides of the 'Causal Mechanism Claim' outlined by Schmitt, this issue). In this section, we illustrate the advantages that mechanisms brought, describing the evolution of one particular mechanism.

Drawing on previous thinking from research, evaluation, and practice

Realist evaluations explicitly draw on previous thinking about mechanisms from research, evaluation, and practice, 'standing on the shoulders of giants' to build on existing theories

(Pawson, 2006). A substantial literature review conducted during the inception stage (Punton, Hagerman, et al., 2016) explored theories from empirical studies across a wide range of fields, from adult learning theory to organisational change. This allowed us to uncover mechanisms within existing studies that might help explain how BCURE contributed to capacity building and institutional change. For example, many of the BCURE programmes used the term 'champions' in their theories of change, as a broad concept to describe the supportive role played by certain individuals within organisations. The literature review allowed us to interrogate this in more detail – suggesting that 'champions' often play a crucial role by formally or informally promoting and embedding new evidence practices:

The 'Champions' CIMO: insights from the literature
Some studies suggest that champions can bring about change through the mechanism of 'transformational leadership' – building support for change within an organisation, or securing new resources. (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, Traynor et al. 2014). The personal characteristics, strategies and experience of champions appear to be important contextual factors in enabling them to lead to change – including vision, commitment and dedication to evidence-informed policy making; seniority, stability and continuity within an organisation; and ability to apply external learning from a different job or field within a new context (Pappaioanou et al. 2003; Peirson et al. 2012).

The first round of data collection investigated this theory and confirmed that senior leaders often played an important role in influencing and persuading others to adopt new practices, helping build consensus, and promoting collaboration and coordination to support reforms (Vogel & Punton, 2016). The mechanism was identified as 'transformational leadership,' and we developed a CIMO to explain the intervention factors and contexts that helped transformational leaders build buy-in for evidence-informed policymaking:

Stage 1 CIMO: 'Transformational leadership'
Identifying and supporting senior stakeholders to promote evidence-informed policy making (I), where they have seniority within the system, commitment and passion, strong interpersonal skills, good political relationships, credibility and respect (C), enables them to act as **transformational leaders**, exercising high level influence to push change from above to support evidence use and initiative reforms (M), resulting in high level buy-in and support for evidence-informed policy making and/or new organisational tools and systems to promote evidence use (O).

Drawing on existing theories to identify mechanisms in realist evaluation helps to increase the relevance and validity of causal explanations, by ensuring they build on existing thinking and research rather than 'reinventing the wheel' (Marchal, Kegels, & van Belle, 2018). This also supports the accumulation of knowledge over time, as theories are continually tested and revised by new work (Pawson, 2013). However, we were well-aware of the cultural and semantic lenses embedded in the theories we found, especially as these were often drawn from research conducted in the US and North America. As we were working with implementing partners and stakeholders in Africa and Asia, our primary strategy to meet this challenge was to use annual workshops with implementers and interviews with participants to sense-check the latest round of theories, and discuss how far they resonated in their settings. We also expressed CIMOs in everyday language, attempting as much as possible to use stakeholders' own words and concepts to describe mechanisms.

Improving precision and nuance

Focussing on uncovering the causal forces at play within BCURE through unpacking mechanisms added nuance and conceptual precision to the evaluation, helping to 'dig below the surface' of interventions, identifying deeper insights about capacity building and changes in how evidence is used.

For example, when we tested the 'champion' CIMO in the second year of the evaluation, it emerged that some BCURE projects were helping to *create* internal champions through their activities. This often happened when BCURE provided technical support to government staff to produce new evidence tools or processes, which helped 'showcase' the value that evidence could bring to day-to-day work, and generate enthusiasm among individuals who then went on to champion evidence use within their organisation. This resonated with a theory discussed in our literature review – 'diffusion of innovations' – which is about how new ideas or practices spread throughout organisations (Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; E. M. Rogers, 2003). The Stage 2 evaluation dug deeper into this 'showcasing' mechanism,' to identify the crucial intervention and contextual factors that seemed to make it work. One of these was the *nature of the relationship* between the project and the government partner: one of 'co-production,' where BCURE worked hand-in-hand with government stakeholders rather than imposing a new tool or process from the outside.

Stage 2 CIMO: 'Showcasing'
Providing technical support to co-produce tools or systems that facilitate staff to use evidence more effectively (I), where this is done in a collaborative and innovative way (I), can generate good examples that 'showcase' the value of evidence for quality, performance and delivery, building understanding and buy-in among senior staff about the value of evidence for decision making (M). These 'showcases' provide user-friendly decision support tools that help individuals use evidence (O), help establish relationships with internal 'champions' (O), and lead to examples 'diffusing' out to inspire new reforms elsewhere (O).

However, the shift from a 'transformational leadership' mechanism at Stage 1 to a 'showcasing' mechanism at Stage 2 raises an important question: how did we decide which mechanisms were the 'right' ones? Given the complexity of social reality and the limitations of human understanding and tools of enquiry, many realists hold that our theories about mechanisms can only ever be an approximation of reality (Williams, 2018). All knowledge is partial, and theories will continue to evolve along with social reality and as new evidence emerges (Wong et al., 2013). Westhorp (2018) argues that mechanisms are constructs that can be framed in many ways – the aim is to do so in a way that is useful and pragmatic in a given situation. Guided by this, we aimed to uncover a set of mechanisms that were illuminating for policy and practice, underpinned by a *sufficient degree of confidence* that they explained observed changes within BCURE.

Given the nature of mechanisms as underlying, usually invisible causal forces that cannot be directly observed, evidence on them is often (although not always) primarily qualitative. In BCURE, our evidence largely derived from semi-structured interviews. In seeking to establish the strength of evidence behind our CIMOs, we recognised that respondents were positioned in unique ways in relation to BCURE, and that often only a small number of people could be expected to know why a particular change happened. Different respondents also have varying levels of capacity and interest in scrutinising 'how and why' questions, affecting the weight that should be given to their responses. Particular incentives may also

lead to biased responses; most obviously, an incentive to 'tell the evaluator what they want to hear' in the hope of securing future funding. In recognition of this, we pursued multiple types of triangulation: within interviews (through asking for examples and interrogating stakeholder theories, rather than taking them at face value), across interviews (e.g., with multiple individuals within the same team), and across different types of stakeholder (e.g., project participants, managers, and programme staff). We also considered the position, knowledge, analytical capacity, reflexivity, and potential biases of informants when developing purposive sampling frames and topic guides, and during data collection and analysis. This way of thinking draws on insights from process tracing and Bayesian Updating, which emphasises that different types of evidence have different 'probative value' (see Befani and D'Errico, this issue).

Encouraging a close and focussed examination of context

Realist evaluation requires a close examination of context, in order to understand when mechanisms do and do not 'fire' to cause outcomes. Contextual factors may include individual characteristics that affect how people respond to opportunities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, education); interpersonal factors that affect trust and buy-in (relationships between stakeholders); institutional factors (the rules, norms, and culture of the organisation in which the intervention is implemented); and infrastructural factors (the wider social, economic, political and cultural setting of the programme) (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Wong et al., 2016). In BCURE, the CIMO heuristic helped encourage a focussed investigation of how specific features of context interacted with mechanisms to generate outcomes – moving beyond more general descriptions of 'enablers and barriers' common in many evaluations. However, we found it considerably easier to build 'micro-level' contextual factors into our CIMOs (individual or organisational factors that affected specific behaviour) rather than 'macro-level,' institutional ones (relating to power and politics).

In the third year of the evaluation, we used political economy analysis to investigate how politics and power affected evidence use, allowing us to weave 'macro-level' insights into our CIMOs. One important factor that emerged was the inherent unpredictability of government reform processes, meaning it was rarely apparent at the start of BCURE projects what types of support, in which policy areas, would be more or less effective. This meant that the 'showcasing' mechanism worked in contexts where BCURE partners identified a political window of opportunity to promote evidence-informed policymaking, creating incentives aligned in support of the program's outcomes. It also worked best where project activities were flexible, shifting in response to the changing political landscape – however, this was frequently constrained by DFID's milestone-based contracting model, which made it difficult for programmes to adapt plans to changing contexts. These insights were built into the final iteration of the 'showcasing' CIMO.

Stage 3 CIMO: Showcasing:

Where technical support is provided to incorporate evidence within a policy process or develop a tool to improve evidence access, appraisal or use (I), this can generate high-quality policies or products (O) that showcase the value of evidence for quality, performance and delivery (M) and lead to adoption (O) and diffusion (O) of the procedure or tool. This is more likely where external actors 'accompany' government partners to co-produce policies or tools in a flexible, responsive and collaborative way (I), where policies are high priority or tools address a recognised problem

(C), and where tools are intuitive and interactive (I) and genuinely facilitate officials to make decisions and do their jobs better and more efficiently (M).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the use of mechanisms within the realist evaluation of the BCURE programme, describing the iterative process of developing and testing one of the seven key mechanisms that emerged from the final evaluation. Ultimately, the use of mechanisms in BCURE delivered on the promise to provide valid and policy-relevant causal explanations about *how and why* capacity building can contribute to increased use of evidence in policymaking.

Firstly, mechanisms offered a robust way to analyse causality within the BCURE programme. Developing and testing realist CIMO configurations added substantial precision and analytical depth to the findings. The iterative development, testing, and refinement of these theories helped ensure they were grounded in the experience of implementing partners as well as broader insights from the wider literature, which enhanced relevance, empirical weight, and portability to other settings.

Secondly, using mechanisms to investigate causality also helped generate useful, policy-relevant findings. In part, this was because theories were iteratively refined over the course of three years, informed by stakeholder perspectives and pragmatic considerations about how to frame theories in the most operational way. By pinpointing the contexts and intervention factors necessary for mechanisms to 'fire,' we were also able to generate intuitive and accessible lessons for future projects. This was helped by framing our mechanisms in everyday labels, and carefully considering how to communicate CIMOs in our final report to minimize realist jargon (discussed further in Punton, Vogel, Leavy, Michaelis, & Boydell, 2020).

In the immediate term, the BCURE recommendations were accepted by DFID, feeding directly into the development of a £17million follow up programme[i], and formulated into five principles to guide future programming on strengthening evidence use in low- and middle-income countries (DFID, 2018). In particular, the follow-up programme incorporated flexible management arrangements, responding to insights on the importance of interventions that can adapt to changing political windows of opportunity for mechanisms like 'showcasing' to work. In the longer term, the mechanisms identified through the BCURE evaluation have informed our own and others' work across a wide range of fields – including innovation, health, and climate change – to help explain institutional capacity change. For example, a WHO-commissioned programme to improve the use of evidence in health decision making has drawn on the BCURE insights, including the importance of institutional support to help individuals apply new knowledge and skills, and the importance of accompanying decision-makers through flexible, responsive support over time to embed and promote initiatives within the local system. [ii] We hope that other evaluators and implementers will be able to 'stand on our shoulders' to further explore these mechanisms in their own fields.

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[i] Strengthening the Use of Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI)

[ii] Heightening Institutional Capacity for Government use of Health Research (HIGH-Res)