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Developing Research Agendas for EdLabs

OTT Consulting
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Overview

- 1 Context: Developing a Research Agenda (RLA)
- 4 Key Principles
- 20 Country examples
Ghana | Uganda | United Kingdom

This slide deck was produced as part of OTT's [technical advisory partnership](#) with Jacobs Foundation and its EdLabs.

Guiding Questions

- How to solve challenges that arise when sharing an RLA with other stakeholders, for example, disagreement on priority thematic areas.
- How to verify and update the RLA in a way that stays relevant to the main national and subnational priorities?
- Who has a say in the RLA thematic priorities?
- What mechanisms for accountability can be used to ensure the RLA follows what was agreed?
- How to manage the phrasing of questions especially when developed with non-research-specific stakeholders?
- How can the capability for ‘research mindsets’/phrasing within the ministries be strengthened?
- How to link the RLA/each piece of research to use from the start?



Key principles



Principles of research for policy



1. Embedded in policy context



2. Internally and externally validated



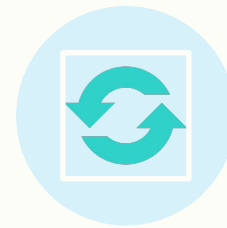
3. Responsive to policy questions and objectives



4. Fit for purpose and timely



5. Crafted with an analytical and policy perspective

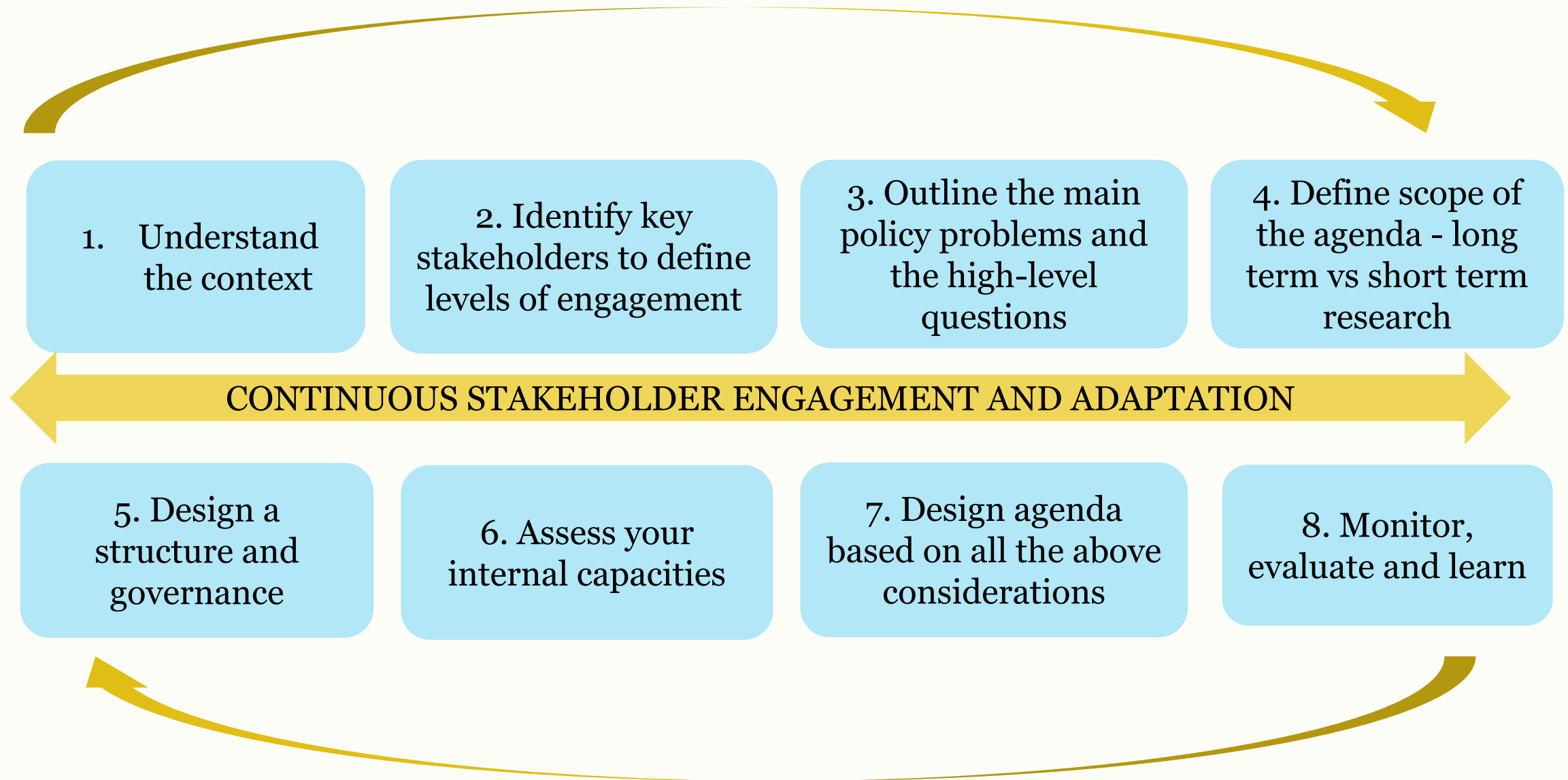


6. Open to change and innovation

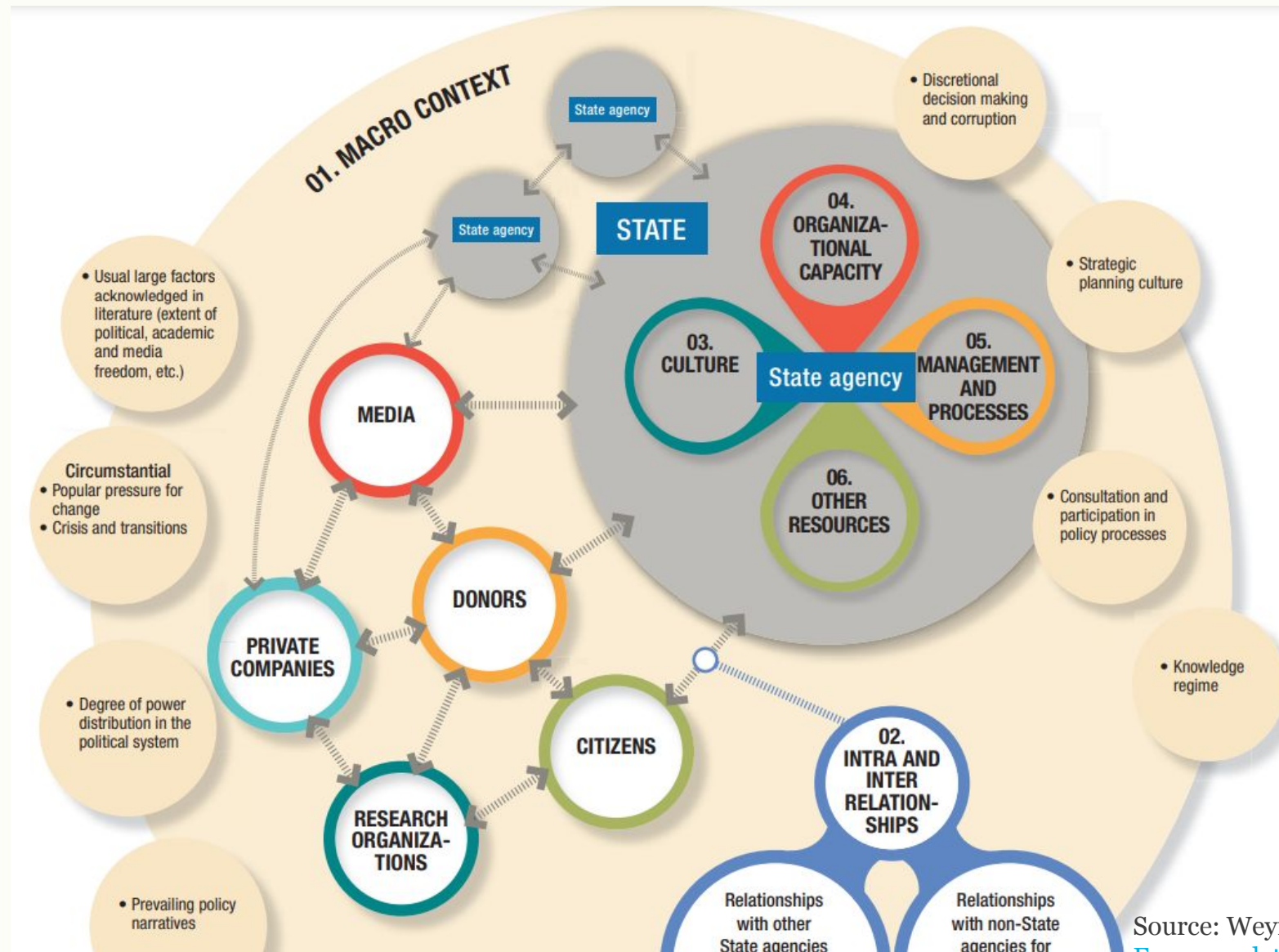


7. Realistic about institutional capacity and funding opportunities

Planning the research agenda



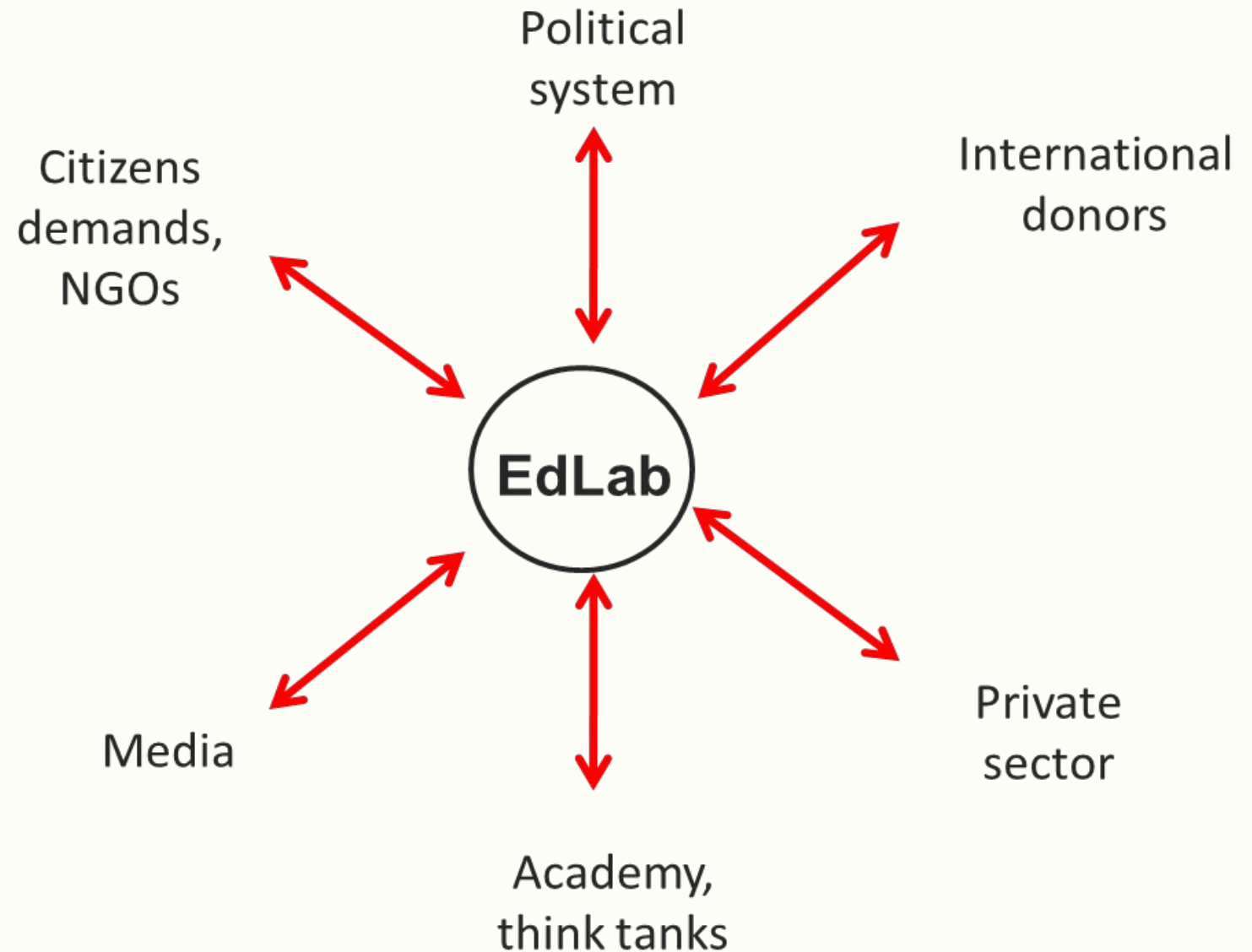
1. Understand the context: How can a diagnostic help?



Source: Weyrauch (2016). [Context Matters: A Framework to support Knowledge into Policy](#)

2. Nurture genuine engagement of critical stakeholders

“departments in which leaders worked together and shared responsibility for the change agenda were much better placed to take big strategic decisions and manage risk across silos. Where executive teams worked towards a common aim, this showed a deep-rooted commitment to change in the department.” (Page, Pearson, Jurgeit and Kidson: 2012)



Levels of engagement

Key to resolving problems, according to most authors, is being able to come to a shared understanding (between sectors, groups and individuals) of what the problem is and how to approach it

(National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy Fact sheet, 2013).

Collaboration is crucial to come up with an agenda with a decent level of consensus and buy in.

LEVEL	CONSIDERATIONS
Direct or indirect consultation	General interviews, analysis of newspapers articles and interviews, review of public documents, other creative strategies.
Advisor	Guide with their expertise. EdLabs maintains full control of the research decisions.
Exchange	Stakeholders are the users of the research: may be directly affected by the research.
Collaboration	Partner policy holds equal stakes at the project: the research is the result of an explicit negotiation of priorities, outcomes are shared between the EdLab and partners. Intensive role of partners: may affect the EdLabs full ownership of the research.

Methods and strategies for engagement

Interviews or informal meetings

- May yield more direct and honest responses.
- Do not imply a high level of commitment to the organisation.
- Improvements between each interview, and adjustments to questions.
- Do not create a sense of community or collaborative work.
- High level of control by researchers over what to do with the comments and suggestions.

Workshops or focus groups

- May cause groupthink
- Requires higher levels of planning both logistically and conceptually (one-shot strategy).
- Requires higher levels of commitment from participating stakeholders.
- EdLab is more accountable on what and how to incorporate the comments into the research.
- EdLab may lose some control over the research for more ownership from others.
- May have strong political and communicational implications.

“It seems that speaking to each other is not enough (...) Researchers have to learn to listen.

The language and stories of teachers and policy makers is not a scientific discourse but carries the deep knowledge of students, schools, teaching and learning.

Without understanding their experience and unpacking their knowledge, it is more difficult to ask relevant research questions, formulate meaningful hypotheses, and design appropriate research.

A good conversation between the different actors requires genuine curiosity, respect and active listening.”

Source: OECD (2024) [Bridging the research-practice gap in education: Initiatives from three OECD countries](#)

3. Reflecting on how problems are framed

“efforts to build state capability should begin by asking **“what is the problem?”**”

Focusing on **prevailing problems** is the most direct way of **redressing** the **bias** to externally prescribed forms towards internal needs for functionality; it ensures that **problems are locally defined**, not externally determined, and puts the **onus on performance**, not compliance.”

(Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2013:9))



Whose perspective is most important when it comes to a problem?



The EdLab's, other stakeholders (the people in government, private sector, NGOs, the donor or other political parties)?



How does the EdLab balance these different perspectives?



Does the EdLab usually prioritise the technical dimension of a problem or a political one?



Does the EdLab consciously or unconsciously shy away from certain types of problems?

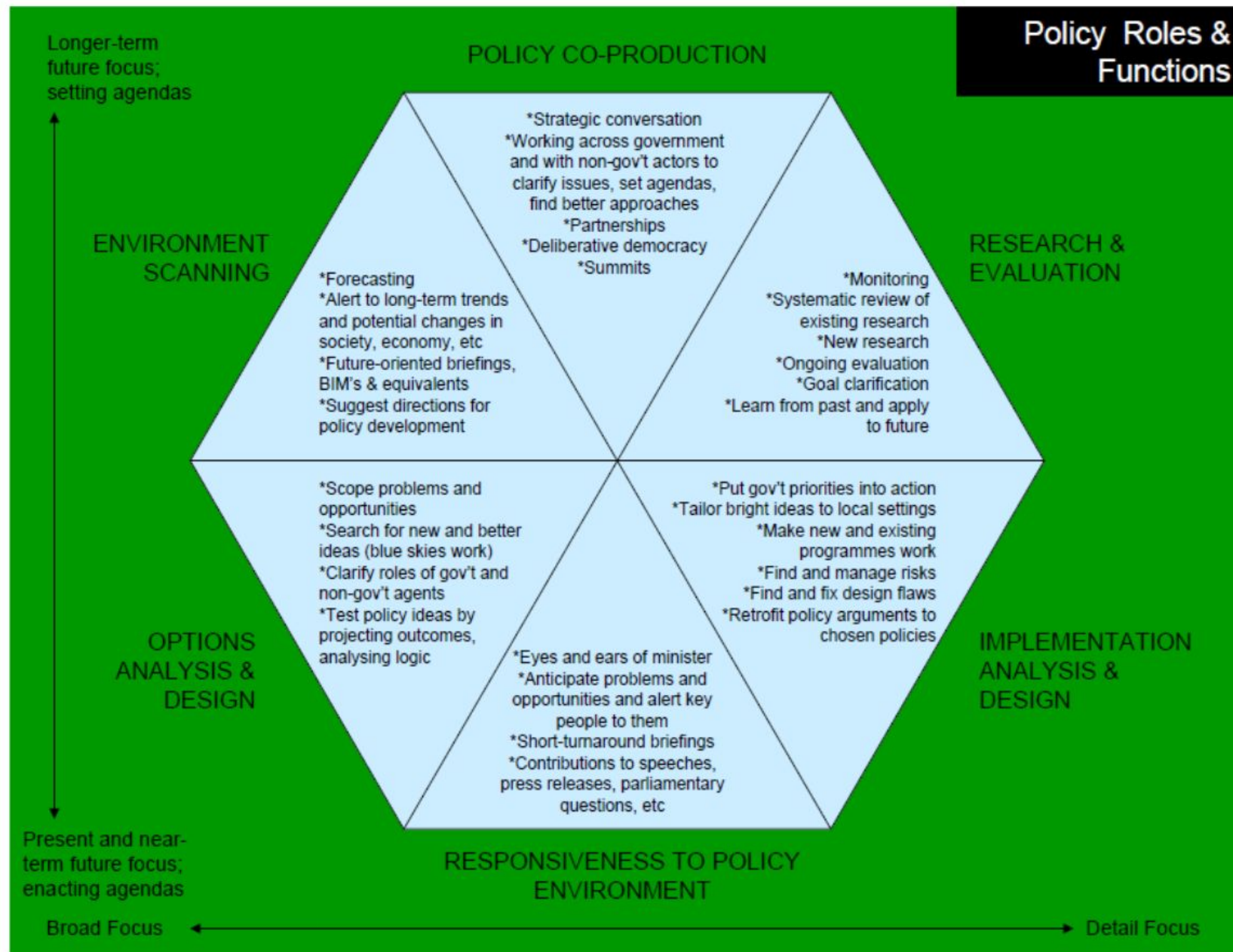
4. The types of problems may point out to strike a balance between immediate research and long-term research

Each type of problem entails possible uses of research:

	Structured	Moderately structured problems (value agreement)	Moderately structured problems (knowledge certainty)	Unstructured
Description	Stakeholders are ready to tackle the issue	Stakeholders share values, but have opposing knowledge.	Stakeholders do not agree on their values or priorities	Wicked: stakeholders do not know where to start.
What is the role of research?	Show clear options for policy design and how an idea can be implemented. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financing • Capacity • Technical knowledge • Maintaining support 	Make sense of existing knowledge. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather front-line evidence • Making sense of existing research • Knowledge translation 	Bring stakeholders together, find common ground among stakeholders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accomodating solutions • Long-term research agenda 	Structure ('domesticate') or prioritize parts of the problem to move forward. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Front-line knowledge • Developing new visions • Frameworks

Source: Ordoñez and Echt (2016)

Source: Ordonez and Echt (2016). [Crafting policy relevant research: thinking strategically about research](#)



How to balance long term research vs short term research?

5. What type of research agenda and what governance structure?

“It doesn’t matter where the policy lab stands. There is always somebody that will question the neutrality of the advice given (...) if you are too close, there is risk (...) if you are too far, it might seem the evidence is not relevant for the policy makers you want to inform.”

Review interviewee

Strategic Considerations

- At what level should the planning of the agenda be done?
- Size
- Governance structure
- Cross-fertilisation of themes

Who will participate in the process?

- Selected committee
- Researchers
- Communications and outreach staff
- Advisors

INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENT OF AN EVIDENCE OR RESEARCH UNIT

Potential Benefits Autonomous units with distance from political influence can have greater independence and transparency in producing evidence, particularly when it comes to communicating findings that may challenge government viewpoints. The distance can give them greater control over their research agenda and enable them to take a systematic and strategic approach to informing policy and promoting evidence use that is based on long-term priorities rather than short-term administrative needs or crisis.

Potential Challenges But distance from government can also make it harder to get political buy-in on policy matters and build the trust of government. Proximity to leadership or government that could come from being embedded in a central unit or an arms-length arrangement can provide increased leverage or inside access to an approval process or a window of opportunity like a budget or election cycle. It can also yield unexpected opportunities for timely policy influence (Tilley, Shaxson, Rea, Ball, and Young (2017)).

6. Assessing capacities

Assess your capacities, strengths, weaknesses and opportunities:

- Identify jointly your personal and institutional (the Lab as a group) strengths and how to make the best of them.
- Be open about your personal and institutional agendas.
- Maintain the spirit of “disagree but commit.”
- Do you need to cover any gaps in your skills?

Based on your SWOT:

- What percentage of the research will be carried out in-house vs commissioned?
- What are the opportunities and risks for one or the other option?

Who, then, among these groups could be part of this effort? You need to **know if the team will be able to perform and pursue the work**. Consider whether they will receive the right **incentives** to do so. Part of this engagement implies an assessment of where capacity gaps rely: as stated in the framework, policymakers need the **required technical and research skills** and **experience** both to **commission and interpret the results of research**, and to put the findings into practice.

Suggested Structure

In general, the following sections are key:

- Contextual background: link to policy/planning priorities
- Explanation of how the agenda was developed (ie who was consulted)
- Research priorities: clustered into themes, with specific questions for each
- Date and version number of the priorities

You may also want to consider including:

- Conceptual or ideological approach (if it exists)
- Division into short vs long term priorities
- Details on how the research will be carried out: funding sources, internal vs commissioned research, partnerships etc

Recap: applying lessons learned

Key themes from the review	Designing research agendas
Use a context diagnostic to identify entry points	This will give you important information to design the agenda
Build on existing mechanisms before introducing new ones	Explore how existing research priorities are set
Take a multidimensional approach to interventions	A research agenda on its own won't institutionalise evidence use—needs to be combined with interventions at individual, organisational, systems level—and buy-in, capacity and conducive working culture
Complex stakeholder landscape	Consultations around the research agenda will need to involve multiple layers and types of stakeholders
Not only 'who' engages but 'how they engage'	Give careful thought to how interactions are structured between researchers and policymakers around the agenda
Walking a political tightrope	Labs will need to consider the trade-offs between the agenda being perceived as too close to politics (by researchers) or remote and disconnected (by policymakers)
Strengthening research production	Opportunities to connect research agendas with efforts to strengthen production of research in the national system
Broad view of evidence	Consider how the research agenda can be inter-or trans-disciplinary



Country examples





Uganda's national research agenda on child labour, forced labour & human trafficking 2022



- Produced by an ILO-led project with funding from US Dept of Labour
 - Supported by an international advisory board
- 1 year process, including
 - Mapping existing research
 - Identifying priorities
 - Consultations: stakeholder workshop, interviews, & survey of govt, academics, funders & NGOs
- Research Agenda (8 pages) includes
 - 5 main research themes
 - Priority sub-topics for each
 - One research question for each sub-topic
 - Related policy/programme responses for each main theme

Source: [Uganda's national research agenda on child labour, forced labour & human trafficking](#)

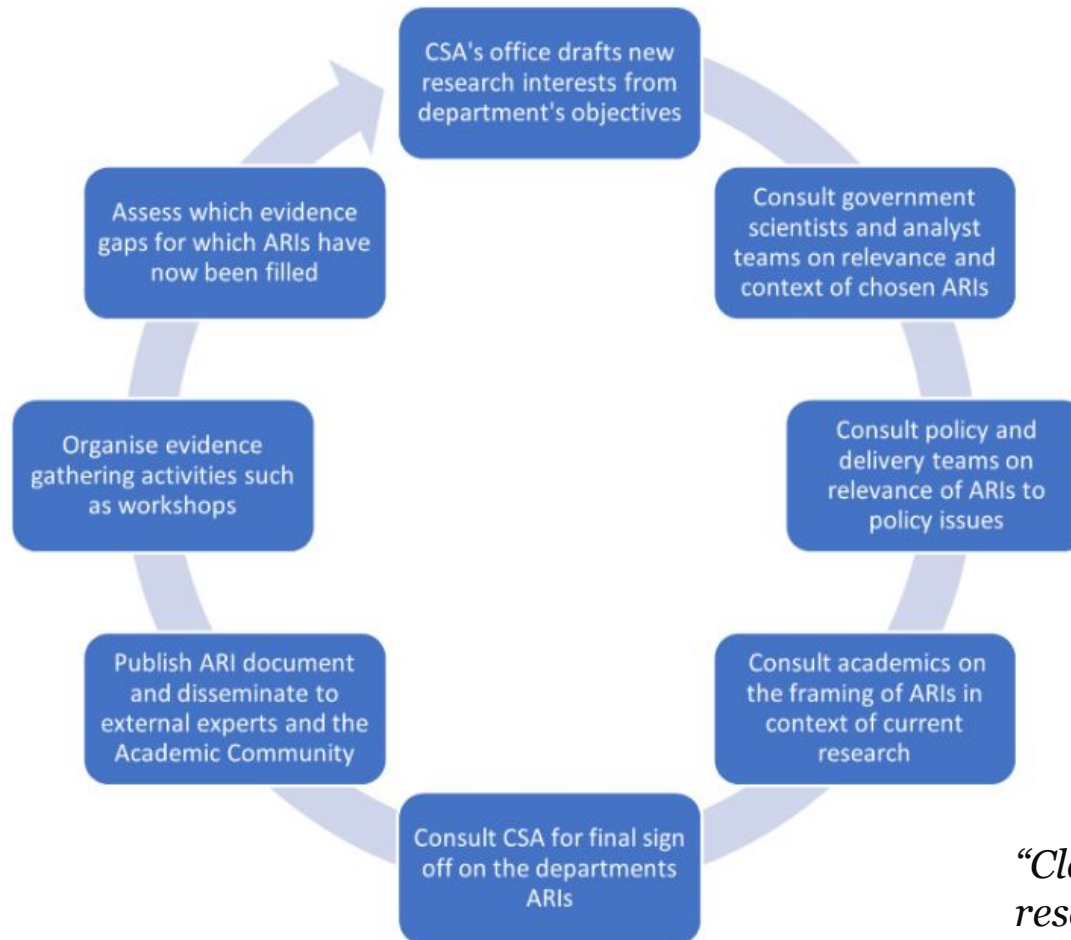
A snapshot of Uganda's national research agenda on child labour, forced labour & human trafficking

Theme	Key topics/ dimensions	Related research questions	Related policy/ programme response
Risk factors for vulnerability 	Migration	What are the vulnerability factors for migrants in child labour and forced labour?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decent work conditions/ related programmes (including targeting of specific services) Social protection policies
	Informality	How does informality act as a driver for child labour and forced labour?	
	Demographics	How to improve prevalence studies on forced labour? How does care for elders affect children's time allocation and education outcomes?	
	Child marriage	What is the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage?	
	Culture and social norms	What role does cultural and traditional practices play in increasing vulnerability to child labour, forced labour, and human trafficking?	
	Household chores	What is the impact of household chores on children's health and education outcomes (including drop-out rates and grades)?	
	Physical and mental health	What are the short- and long-term impacts of children working in (specific) potentially hazardous forms of work?	
Assessment of what works and what not 	Skill development (early childhood)	What is the effect of early childhood development programmes on child labour and schooling?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal commitment Labour recruitment practices Education policies Social
	Awareness raising and information campaigns	What is the effect of awareness raising campaigns on policy action (and/or reducing the prevalence of child labour, forced labour, and human trafficking)?	
	Vocational training	What is the role of technical and vocational education and training in small and medium enterprises in reducing child	

Source: [Uganda's national research agenda on child labour, forced labour & human trafficking](#)

UK government Areas of Research Interest (ARI)

2.2 The development of an ARI document



Areas of Research Interest

This publication sets out areas where DfE is interested in more research and new evidence². Given the broad policy agenda of the department it is not practical to provide an exhaustive list of research questions of interest. Instead this is a targeted list of areas which are both key departmental priorities and where we feel the research community is currently well placed to add to our evidence base. In terms of approaches to answer the questions, we are interested in both primary qualitative and quantitative research, secondary data analysis, and literature reviews/synthesis of existing evidence. For all questions we are interested in international perspectives and what has worked, or not, in other countries. For all our questions we are interested in how results differ for relevant sub-groups such as Free School Meal pupils, Pupil Premium pupils, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) pupils, Black and Minority Ethnic pupils, and gender.

Early Years

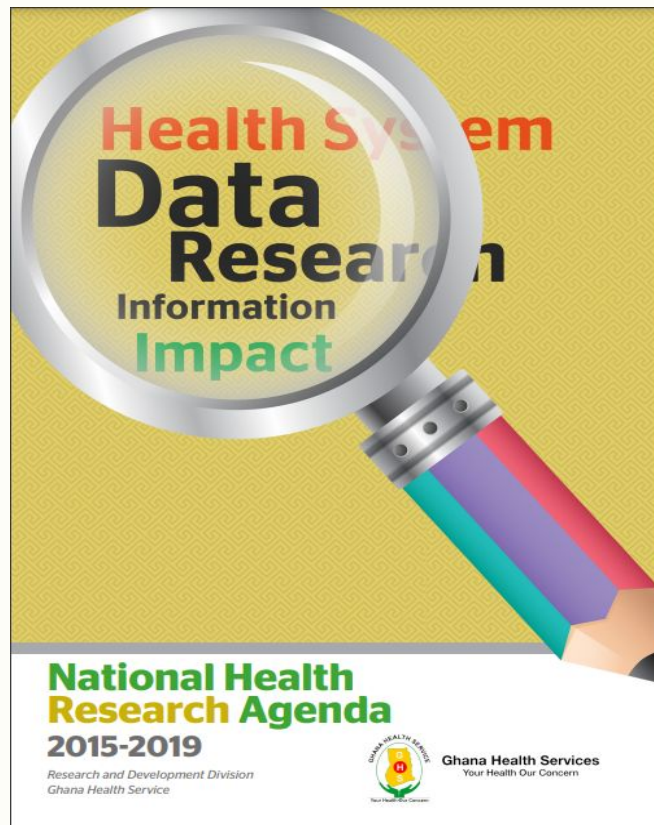
1. What is the prevalence of different pedagogical approaches in different early years settings, including maintained nurseries and nursery provision in primary schools? How does this vary across the workforce? Which of these approaches have the greatest impact on development?
2. How can schools best manage the transition from early years to school and minimise any negative effects on children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Schools

3. What types of approaches lead to better outcomes for condition-specific learning needs in mainstream schooling? What works for SEND outreach work, for example from special schools to support learners in mainstream schools?
4. Which interventions are most effective at recruiting and retaining good teachers within a constrained funding envelope - particularly in shortage subjects such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and Modern Foreign

“Clarifying the department’s research interests to the external research community facilitates conversations around them and helps build a network of interested experts that work in areas directly relevant to those research interests.” Source: [UK ARI](#)

Ghana's Health Research Agenda 2015-2019



- Produced by the Research and Development Division in Ghana Health Service
 - Spearheaded by one lead from GHS and one lead from the university
 - Funded by GHS, JICA and WHO
- Linked to the Health Sector Medium Term Development Plan
- Process involved:
 - GHS consultation with districts, regions, programmes, divisions & hospitals to identify priority research areas – multiple rounds of internal prioritisation
 - Wider consultation with 150 stakeholders from government, academic community, NGOs, donors & other groups
- Research Agenda (32 pages) includes:
 - 6 Objectives, each with a rationale, recommended preliminary activities & priority research topics,

Source: [Ghana's former health research agenda](#)

Snapshot of Ghana's national health research agenda

4.6 Objective 6: Intensify prevention and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases

Objective 6 addresses risk factors including lifestyle and social behaviours associated with ill health. It addresses diseases that are emerging, those earmarked for elimination and eradication, as well as those linked to climatic and environmental factors. International regulations are supported.

4.6.1 Rationale

Ghana is in a health transition with regards to disease burden. Ghana has attained Lower Middle Income Status with diseases associated with life style and behavior fast replacing the traditional diseases from infections and malnutrition. Recent evidence suggests that developing countries like Ghana face a triple burden of communicable, non-communicable diseases and socio-behavioural illnesses. Morbidity, mortality and disability were mainly attributable to major communicable diseases but in recent times non-communicable and Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) such as yaws, leprosy, buruli ulcer, filariasis also contribute significantly to disease burden. There is a need to formulate a national strategy to address factors that influence the disease burden such as climate change and sanitation. It is also important to strengthen Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response (IDSR) at all levels and implement fully the International Health Regulations (IHR).

With the on-going health transition and higher life expectancy, people are generally surviving for longer and as such the health needs of the aged need to be given greater attention.

4.6.2 Recommended Preliminary Activities

- Review of Ghana Health Service District Health Information Management System 2 (DHIMS2) for trends in morbidity and mortality for specific diseases over time
- Review of the Programme for Mass Drug Administration (MDA) carried out by the Disease Control Department over the years.
- Mapping out of hotspots for all diseases
- Review and synthesis of existing literature relevant to these topics in Ghana e.g published data, research reports, Ghana Health Service annual reports, Health Sector Medium Term Health Development Plan as background.
- Capacity building within Ghana to develop appropriate proposals to address the identified priority research issues and areas

4.6.3 Specific Research needs Identified

Implement the Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) Strategy

- Knowledge, practices and socio cultural beliefs on the major NCDs: Cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and cancers
- High prevalence of anaemia in pregnancy in CR: A fact or a fiction
- Prevalence of Anemia In Tolon District Among Adolescents
- Causes and types of anaemia among children under five and pregnant women in Ghana
- Compliance to medication for chronic NCDs (by the patients, health systems)
- Cost effectiveness of interventions for the control and prevention of NCDs
- Determinants of the major NCDs in Ghana
- Anaemia and parasitaemia surveys
- National Baseline prevalence studies on major non-communicable diseases e.g diabetes and hypertension
- Studies on compliance to medication for chronic NCDs (by patients/ health providers)
- Social and biological determinants of blood sugar and blood pressure level control among patients living with diabetes and hypertension
- Studies to assess the impact of various interventions on the prevalence of anemia among vulnerable groups such as children under five, pregnant women and adolescents
- Investigative studies on causes of malnutrition e.g micro nutrient, protein energy malnutrition

Review and Scale up Regenerative Health and Nutrition Programme (RHNP)

- Nutrition Surveillance
- KAP Study of mothers on nutrition and protein-energy malnutrition in Nakpachei of Yendi Municipality
- Reassessment of Baby Friendly Hospitals

Implement International Conventions and treaties including Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)

- Relationship between excise taxation and tobacco Consumption
- Understanding the prevalence of Shisha (water-pipe) and factors underpinning the increasing demand
- Financing non-communicable diseases particularly tobacco control
- Free zone facility and its use by the Tobacco Industry. What are the elements that the Tobacco Industry explores and how does this affect tobacco taxation and control efforts

Source: [Ghana's national health research agenda](#)

Example: UK DEFRA Evidence Strategy



- Led by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs with support from an external consultant
- Three 'evidence investment strategies' over a period of 12 years (2006-2018)
 - Intensive & comprehensive processes linked both to internal budgeting/planning and to external consultations
- Strategies cover questions such as:
 - Which types of evidence are needed now & in the future
 - How to prioritise & budget for those needs
 - How to work with stakeholders to procure the evidence needed
 - Ensuring internal capability within DEFRA is sufficient to perform all of these
- Elements of the process later adapted and adopted by the South Africa Department of Environmental Affairs

Source: [DEFRA Approach](#)

Types of evidence needed by DEFRA

Table 1: Rationales for evidence and types of evidence required.
Source: Harrison & Shaxson, 2006.

A-G heading	'Big questions'	Rationales for evidence needs	Types of evidence required
A: Understanding the context; fundamental processes and phenomena, baselines and benchmarks	Where are we now?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gather and analyse available / new data To evaluate risks, issues and uncertainties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviews of existing knowledge Surveys of social and environmental data Research on causality Risk assessment
B: Development of models, methodologies and tools	Where are we going?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand current drivers and trends To predict future drivers and trends To assess implications for policy outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sensitivity analysis Horizon scanning Forecasting and scenarios Modelling impacts and outcomes
C: Developing and using the evidence base to help set targets and formulate policy	Where do we want to be over the next 5-10 years?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand the economic / social value of change To understand the feasibility / cost of change To negotiate goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic and social research Deliberative engagement processes Feasibility and pilot studies Market surveys
D & E: D: Development and appraisal of options/ solutions E: Optimum decisions and effective implementation through communication, engagement and consultation to influence change	How do we get there?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To identify / evaluate current options To identify / develop new solutions To evaluate new / old options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Option / evaluation studies Regulatory impact assessments Interventions to promote innovation
F & G: F: Monitoring progress towards policy/ program targets G: Policy/program evaluation	How well did we do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To monitor progress To evaluate policies & programs To learn lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interdisciplinary evaluations Deliberative evaluation processes



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