

# Working in complex contexts;

Implications for programme design and impact assessment

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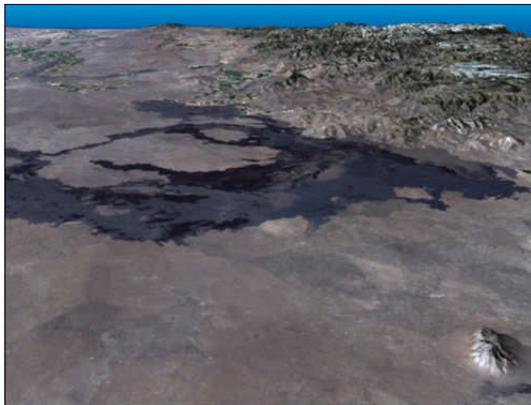
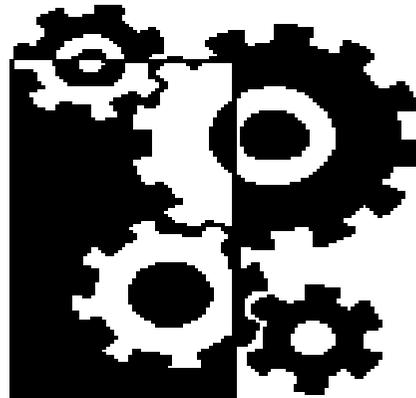
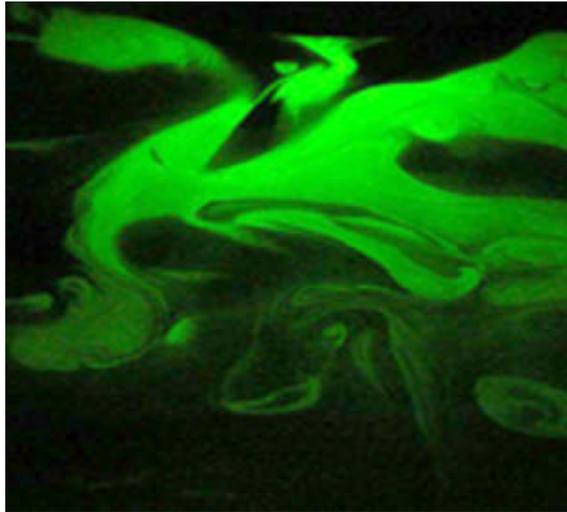
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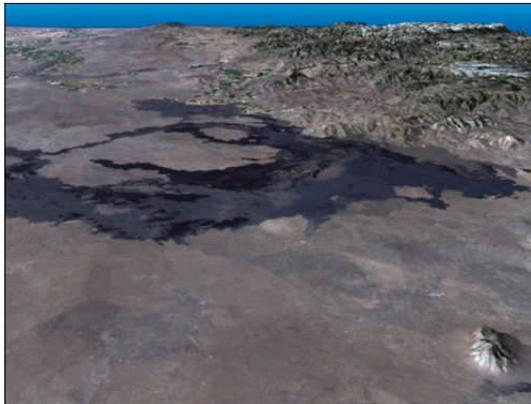
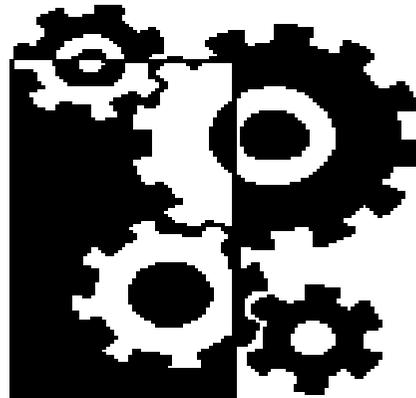
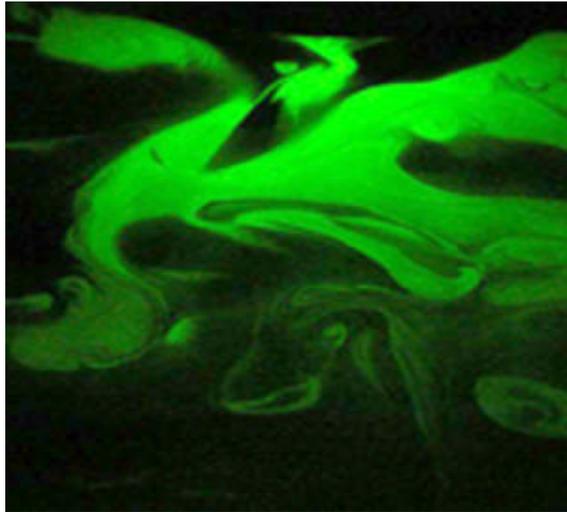
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Which pictures are most congruent with the way the world functions?



# Which pictures are most congruent with the way we manage programmes and organisations?



Traditional professional methods implicitly assume the world works like a **machine**:

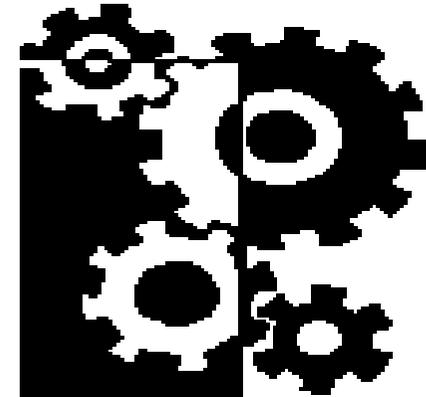
Predictable

Linear

Objective

Measurable

Reducible to clear, cause-and-effect chains



Our experience suggests that the world is more **organic**:

Emergent

Interconnected

Changing

Contexted

***Should we try to ride the wave or run the machine?***



# Complexity theory

The science of open systems



What causes the wave to be the shape it is?

# Complexity theory

The science of open systems

Weather

Terrain

Journey to the beach

Conditions on beach

Chance

**All working together**



What causes the wave to be the shape it is?

# Complexity theory

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**All working together**



History

Context

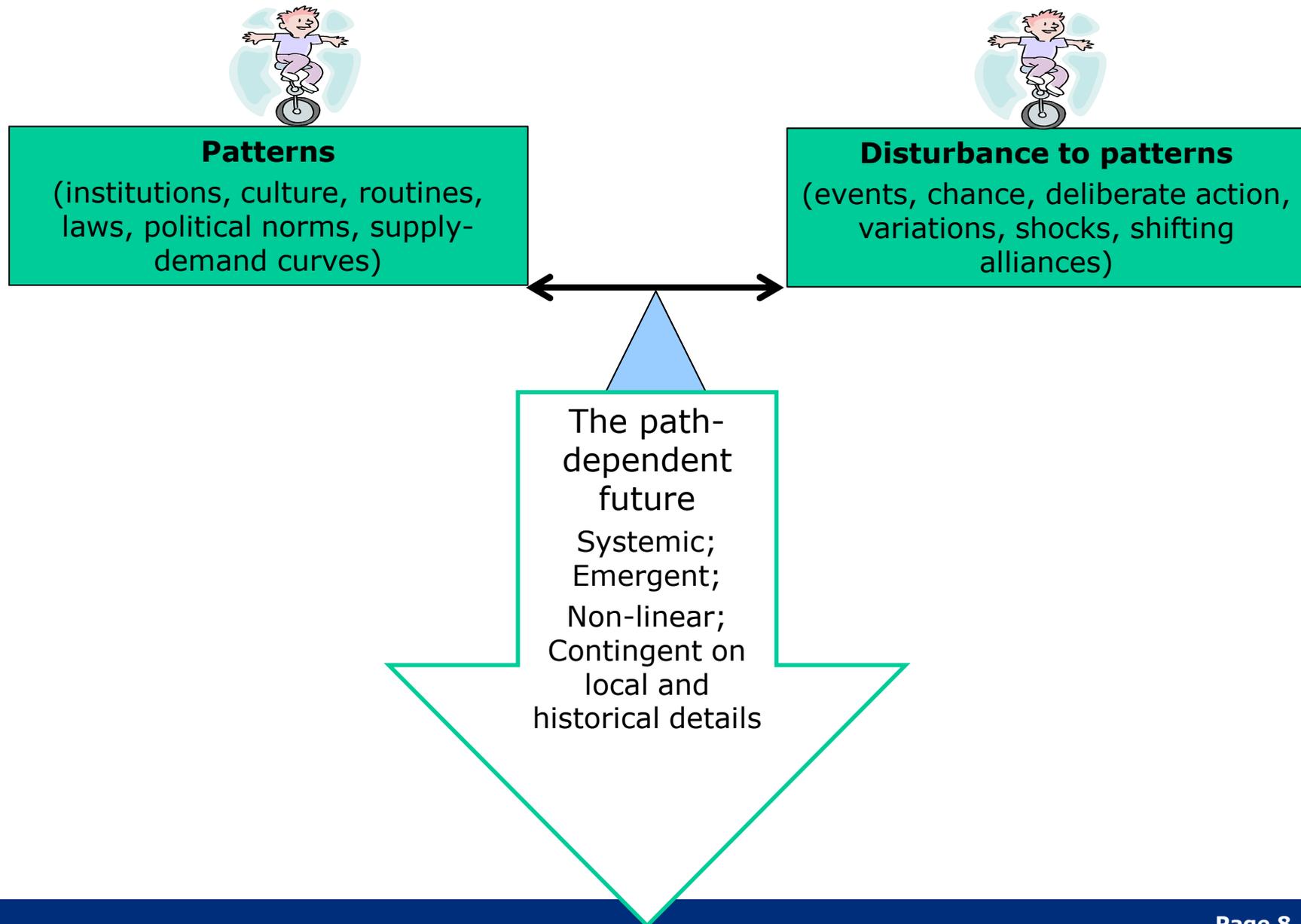
Local conditions

Chance

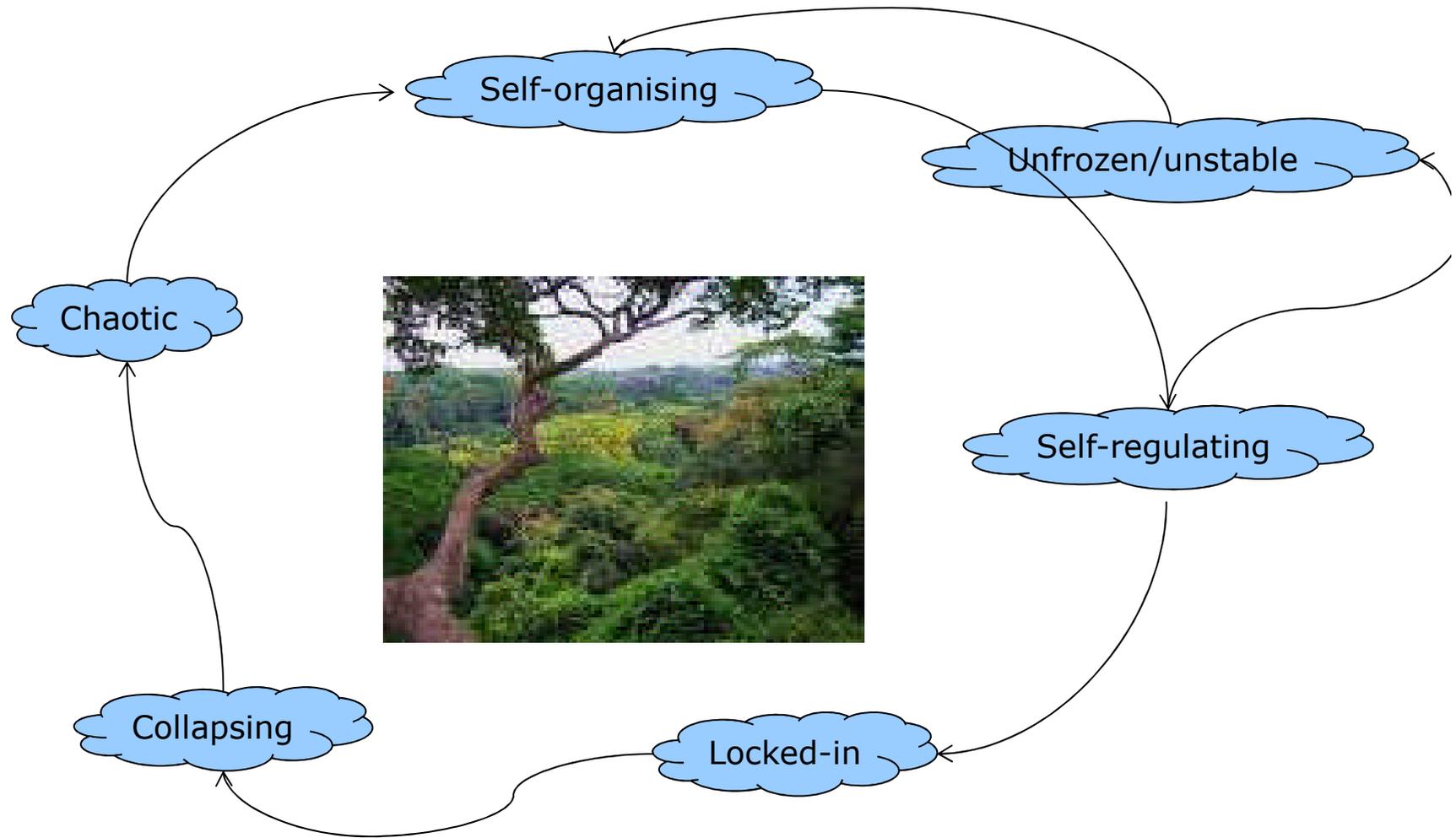
**All working together**

What causes the wave to be the shape it is?

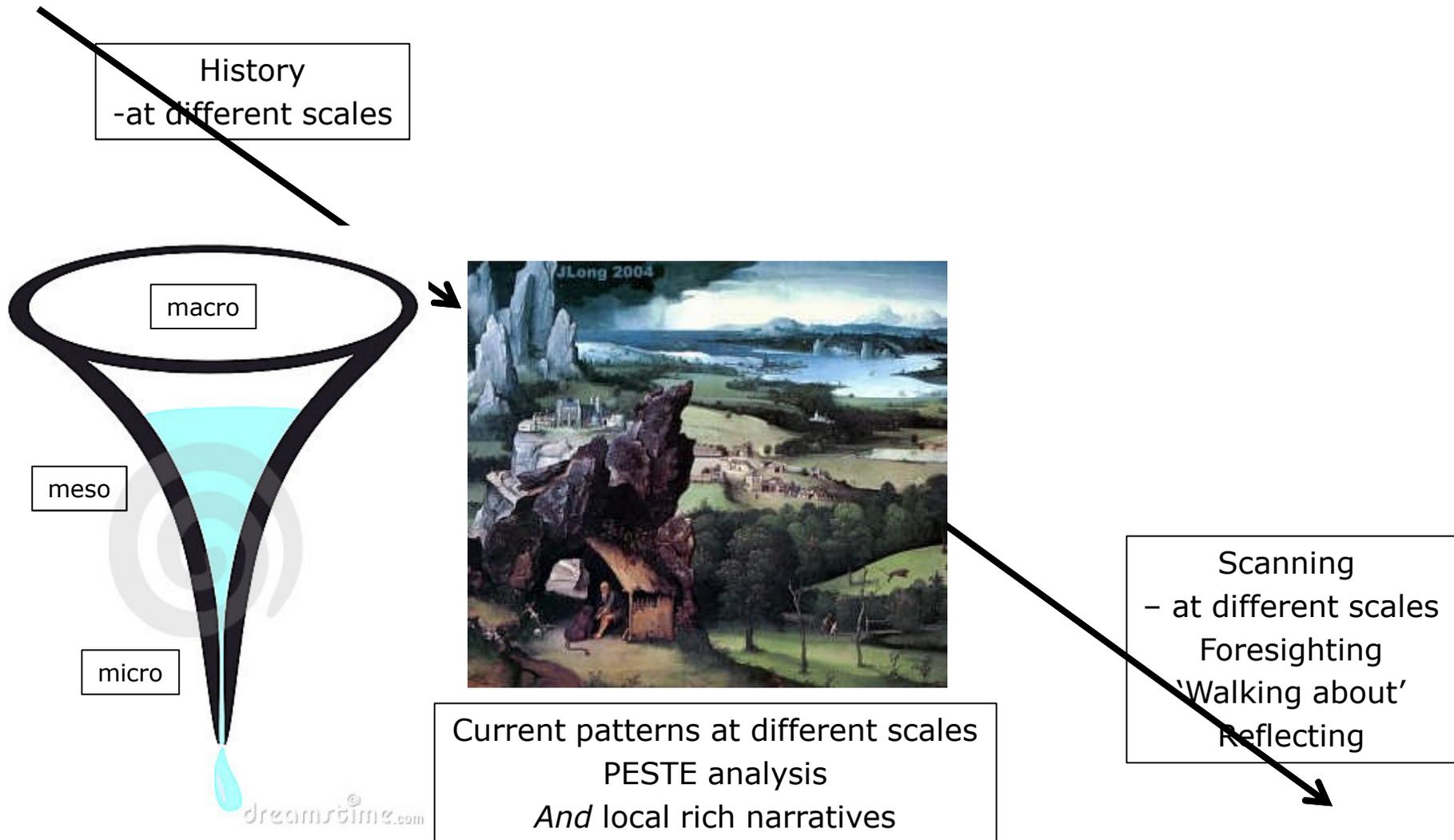
# The nub of complexity theory



# Judge the life cycle stage of the current context



# Implications for programme design – working with different scales and contingent historical development



# Engaging in a complex context

## **When designing engagement**

Think systemically not thematically

Consider different scales

Take a historical perspective

Judge the stability of the context

View things from the perspective of the ground

Build on what works

***Expect and allow local diversity***

Expect things to change over time

## **When engaging**

### ***Multiple hypotheses***

Weave intentions

Some local autonomy within intentions and principles

Participation and shared learning

wide stakeholder group

'Journal' qualitative change

Regular review and reflection and dynamic response

Work integratively over many levels and issues

Look for signs of impending change at different scales

***Set up programme as systemic, dynamic, responsive, learning***

# Capturing impact in a complex context

## Issues affecting impact

- Time delay
- Change is cumulative
- Changing context
- Attribution: many causes working synergistically – from local to wider context
- Unintended consequences (including unexpected successes)
- Need for multiple hypotheses
- Impact at different levels: individual, community, programme design, organisation, policy

The path-  
dependent  
future  
Systemic;  
Emergent;  
Non-linear;  
Contingent on  
local and  
historical details



***How can we modify existing methods to evaluate effectively in complex contexts?***

***Do we need additional methods?***

# The need for qualitative methods with rigour

## **Rigour in qualitative methods**

Collect narrative fragments (journal what strikes you/interviews/comments)

Identify emergent themes (through collective discussion)

Critical subjectivity

Create hypotheses and test (quantitatively as well as qualitatively)

Case studies – good and bad

Following stories of people, situations chosen at random at the beginning



## Conclusion

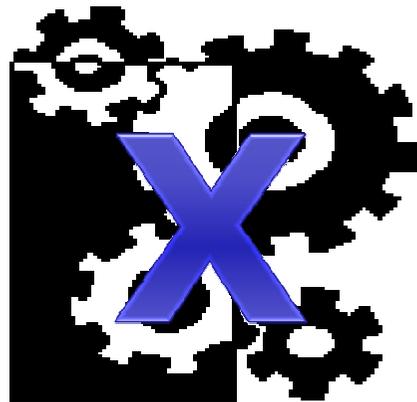
**Complexity science reminds us that the world is:**

Dynamic

Emergent

Systemic

Contingent on local and historical detail



To act professionally in such a complex world requires methods that reflect this complexity.

To act as if the world is measurable, predictable and stable when it is not does not make it so...

And the use of such methods can create unintended consequences which themselves can work against success.