

# **External validity and the portability of findings from there to here**

Clues on what to look for and how  
in development

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# Agenda

- What is it?
- Why worry?
- Illustrative example using a theory of change

# Punchlines

- External validity is about more than external replications, multi-site studies

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- Theory (of Change) is what allows empirical findings grounded ‘here’ to be potentially useful to those making decisions ‘there’
- Research designs (both monitoring and evaluation) and reporting guided by a Theory of Change and “pre-mortem” thinking
  - Allows others to better make assessments of whether what worked ‘there’ can work ‘here’ 2009

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- An attempt to answer a *causal* question:
  - How do I know my programme *caused* observed changes in outcomes?

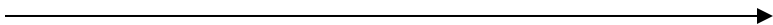
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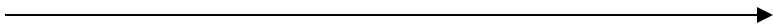
# What's impact evaluation?

- An attempt to answer a *causal* question:
  - How do I know my programme *caused* observed changes in outcomes?
  - To what extent can I *attribute* observed changes in outcomes to my programme?
  - Would the changes I observed in outcomes have *occurred in the absence* of my programme?

# But what is external validity? (and what's internal?)

Programme P  Outcome O

# But what is external validity?

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- External applicability
- External assessability

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# Why care about there if we're here?

- Increasing focus on using rigorous evidence (IE, SR), 'best practices' to inform decision-making 'here' about programs and policies
  - (continue, modify, expand, terminate... or rename)
  - Evidence-informed decision-making calls for evidence that is both internally and externally rigorous

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  - Evidence-informed decision-making calls for evidence that is both internally and externally rigorous
- But:
  - Often don't have rigorous evidence from 'here.'
  - What does it mean to be rigorous about external validity?



# Issues

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  - Relegated to discussion sections, critique of last-resort

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  - Relegated to discussion sections, critique of last-resort
- Quest for internal validity may undermine ability to make claims about transportability, applicability
- **We lack counterpart tools to make assessments about external validity, applicability, assessability**
  - We lack a ‘a coherent, system-level imperative’ to take external validity and claim-making seriously (Woolcock 2013)

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# Theory of change and pre-mortem

- Logframe components.
- Assumptions about why and under what conditions *implementing agents* will implement.
- Assumptions about what and under what conditions *intended beneficiaries* will participate, benefit
- Assumptions about features of the context may enable *or* block links between different logframe components.
- Assumptions about the time horizon over which outcomes should be realised.
- Expectations about the magnitude (size) of change expected and what will be considered “successful.”

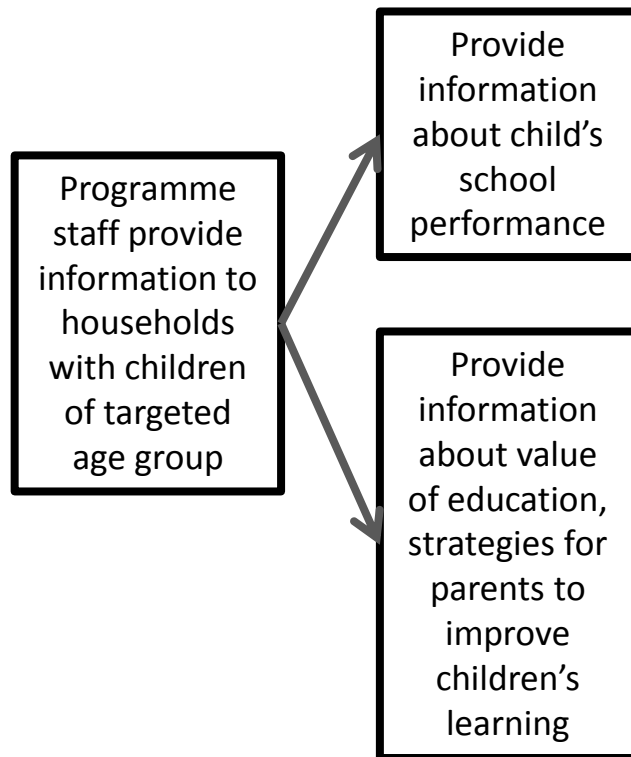
# Example: Twaweza (Lieberman *et al*)

Implicit theory of change:

Programme staff provide information to households with children of targeted age group

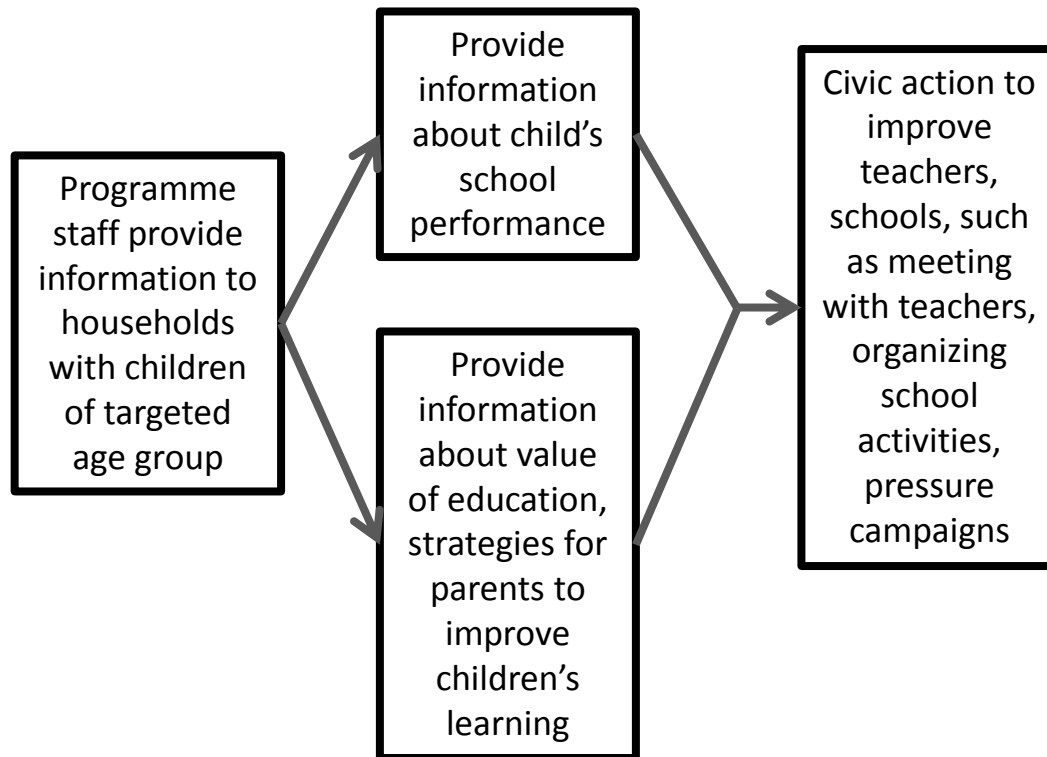
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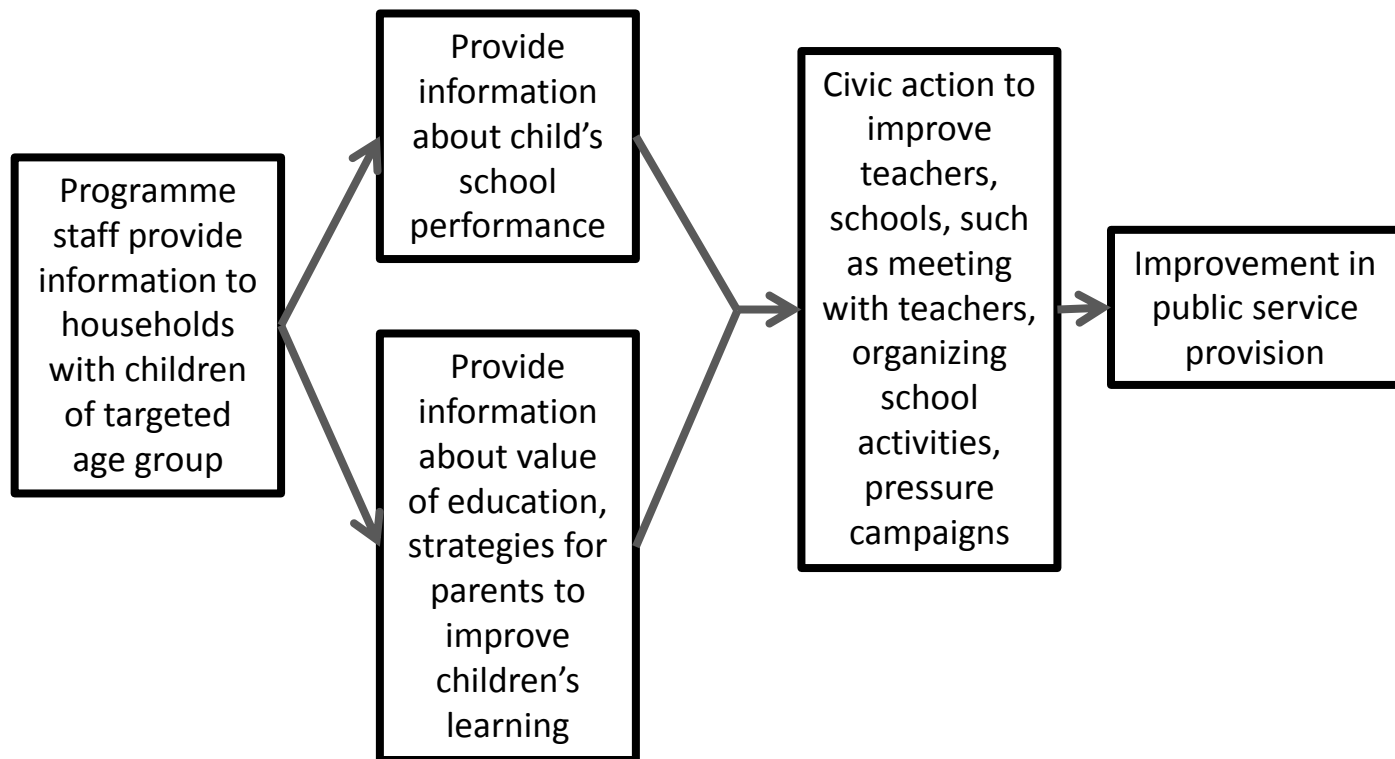
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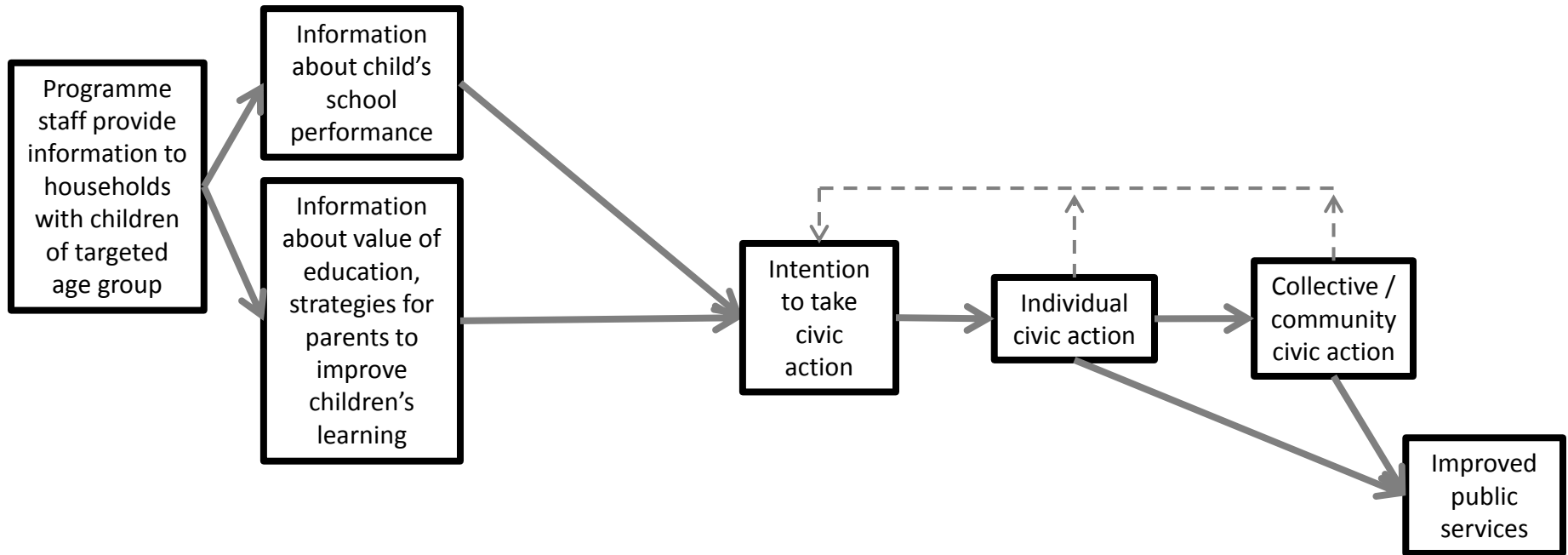
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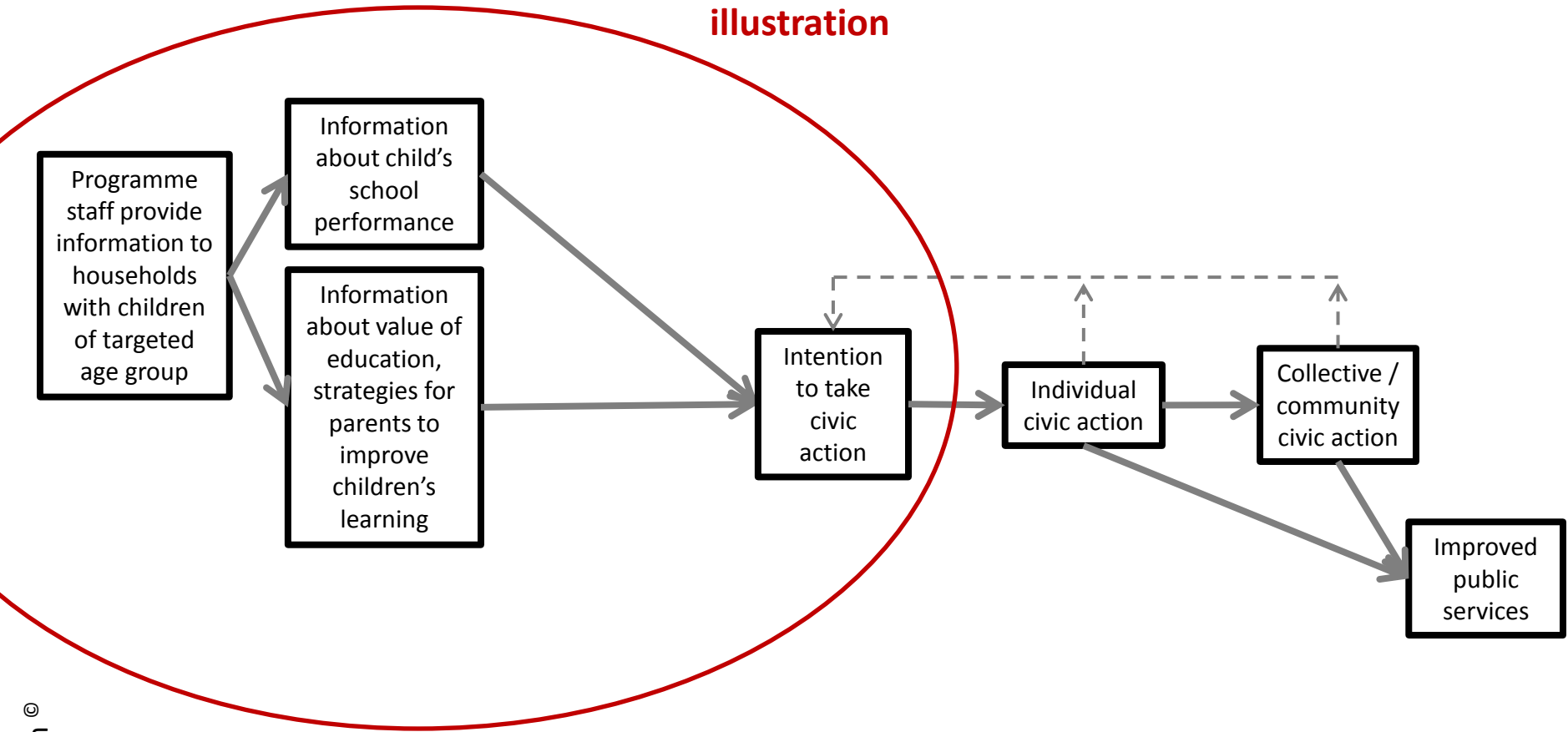
- Find no treatment effect
- Engage in post-mortem thinking to create an *ex post* Theory of Change

# Twaweza (Lieberman *et al*): modified

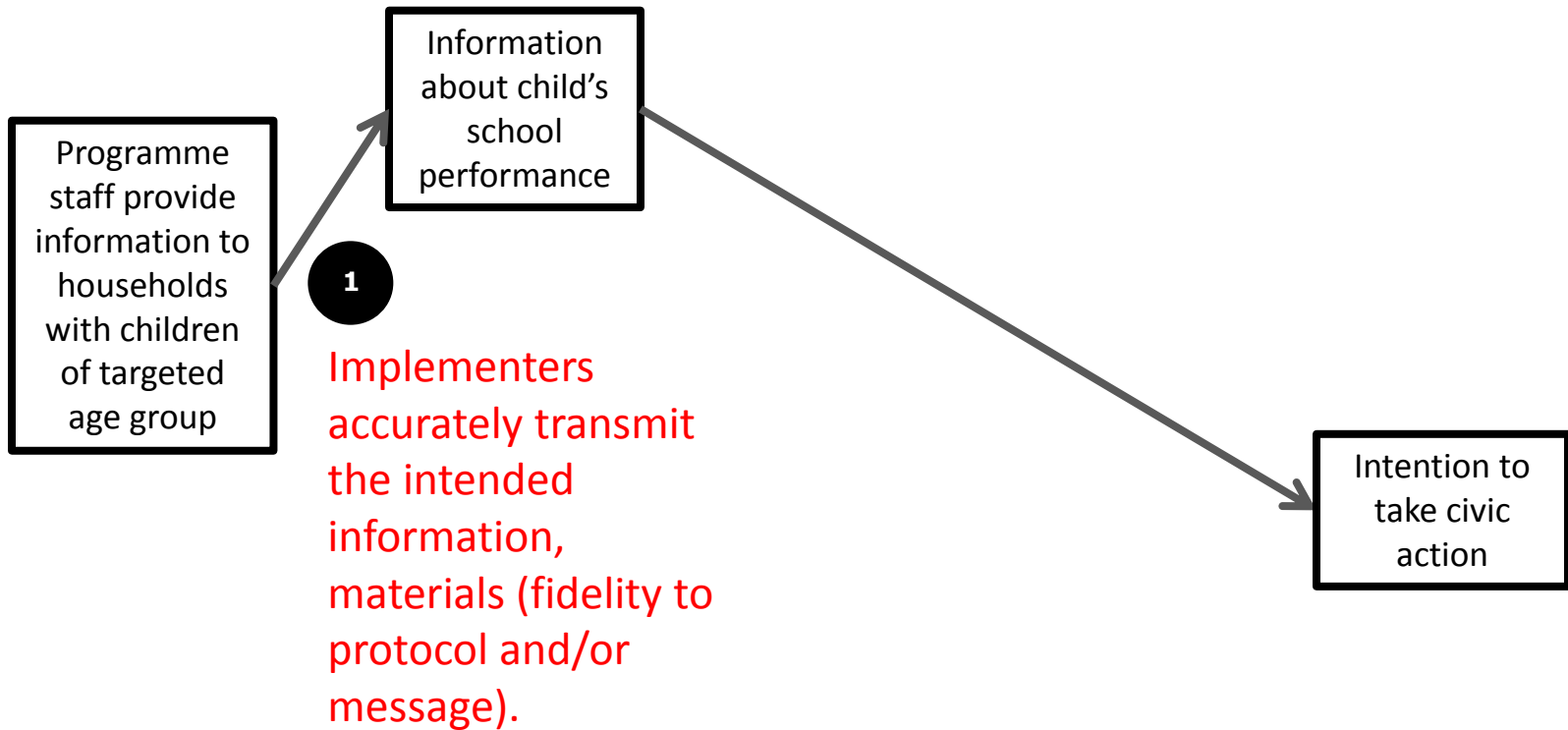


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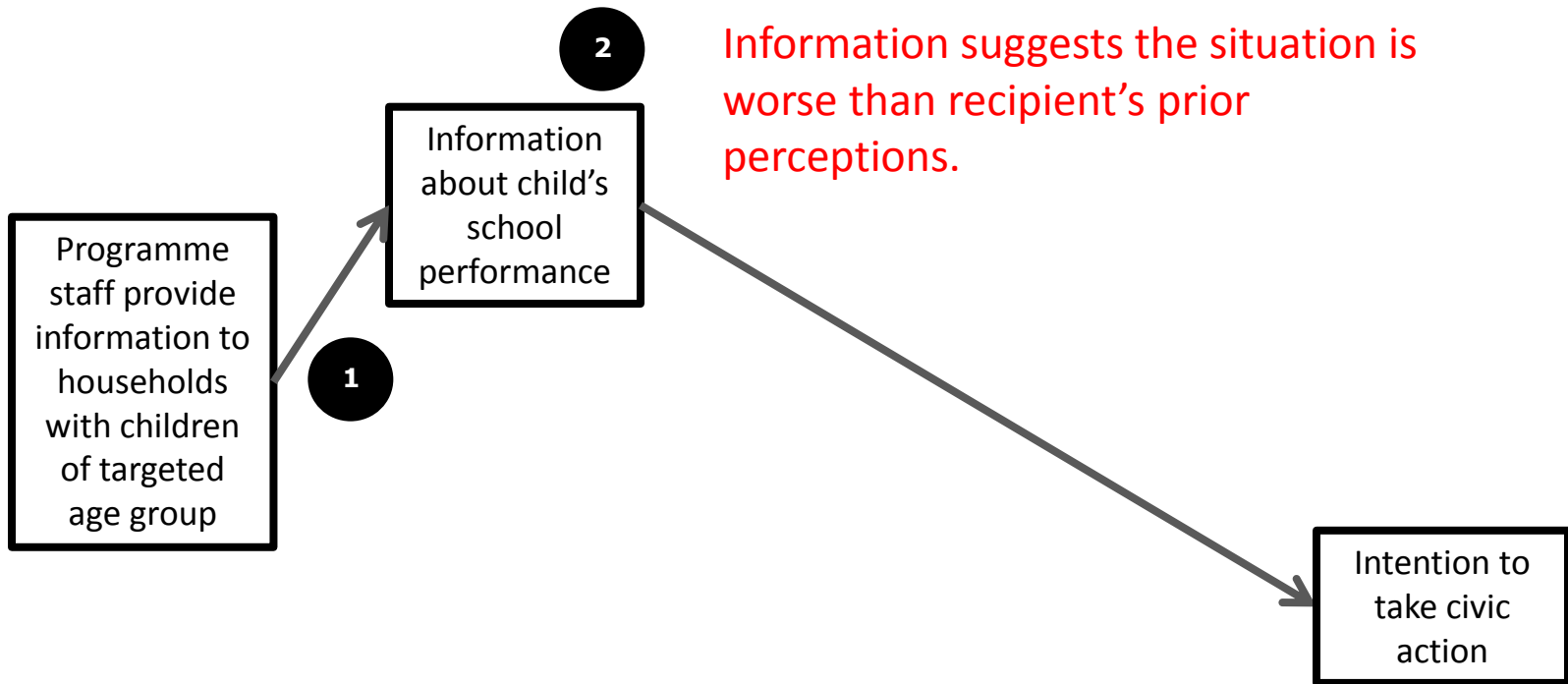
illustration



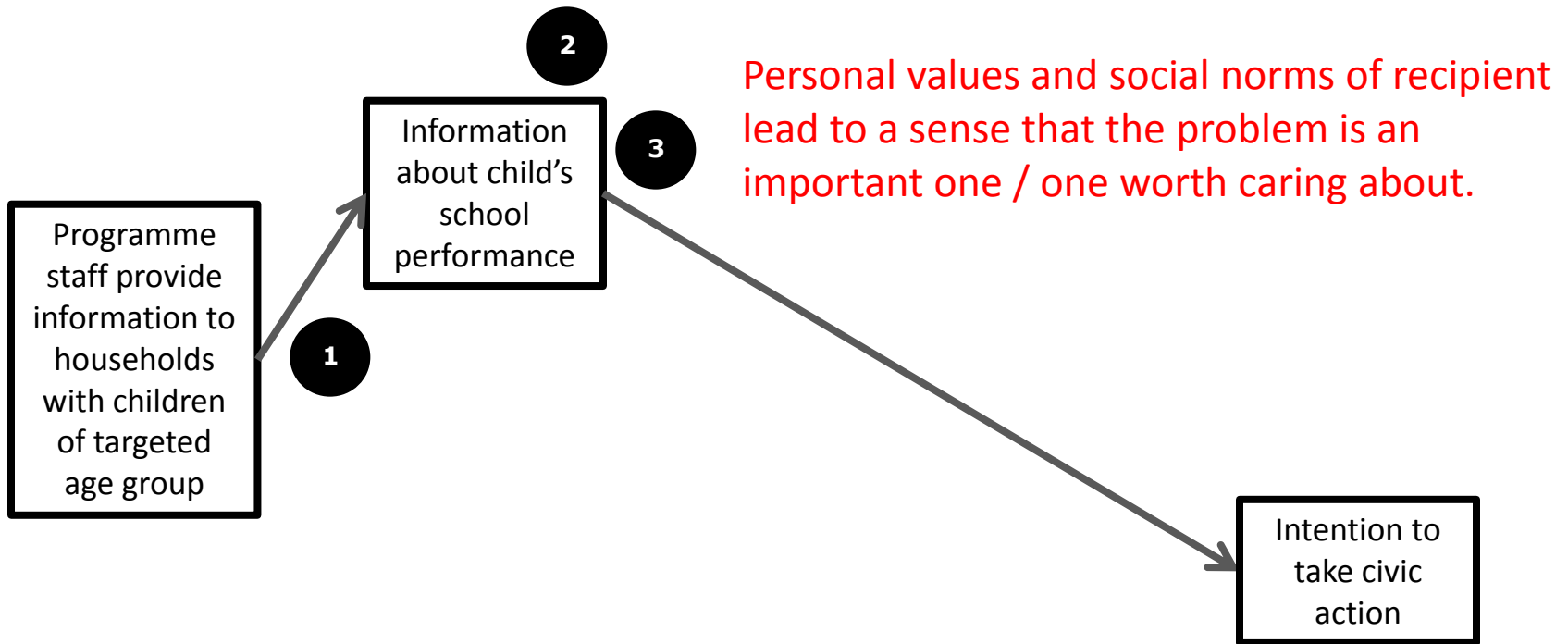
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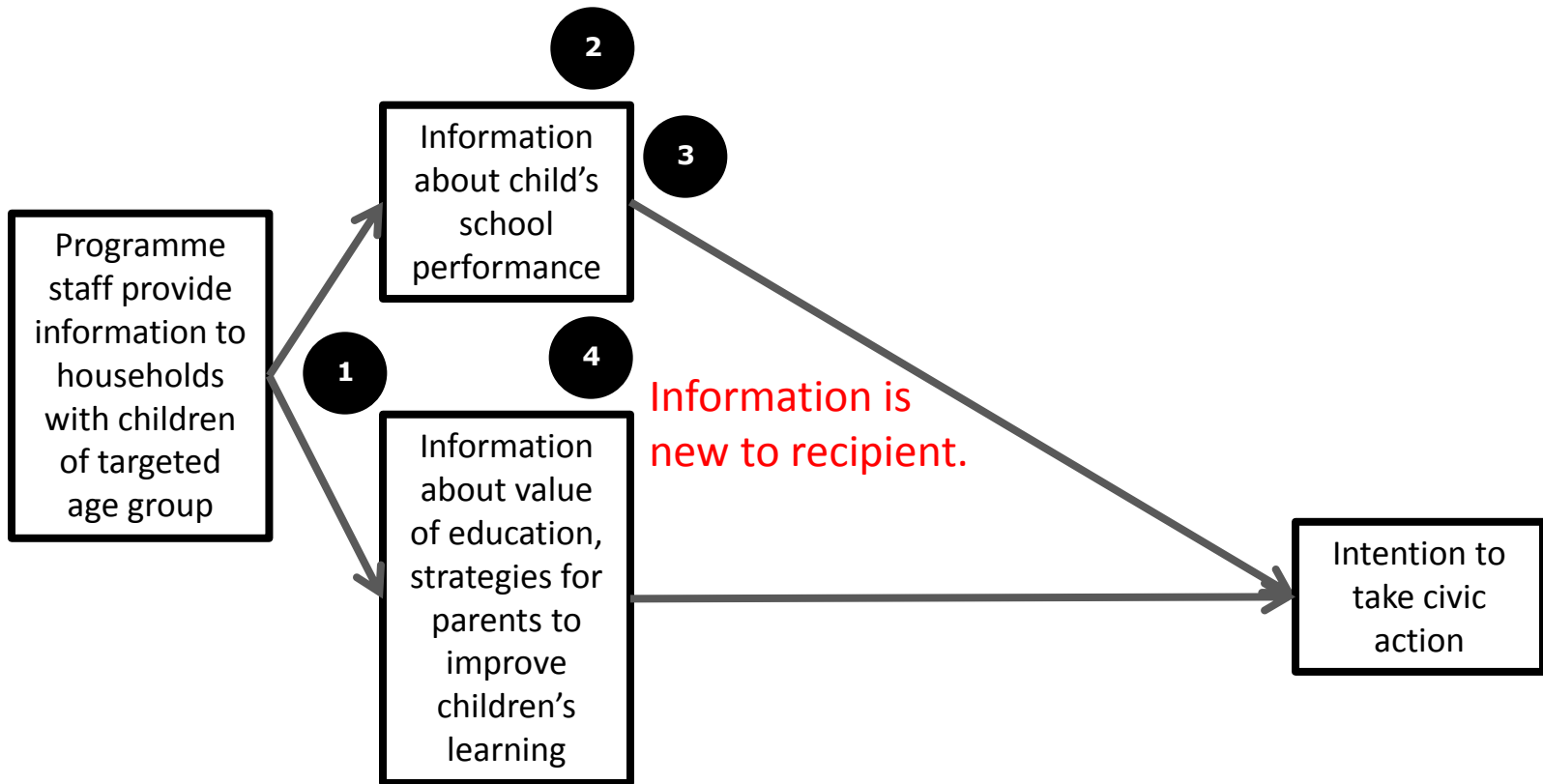
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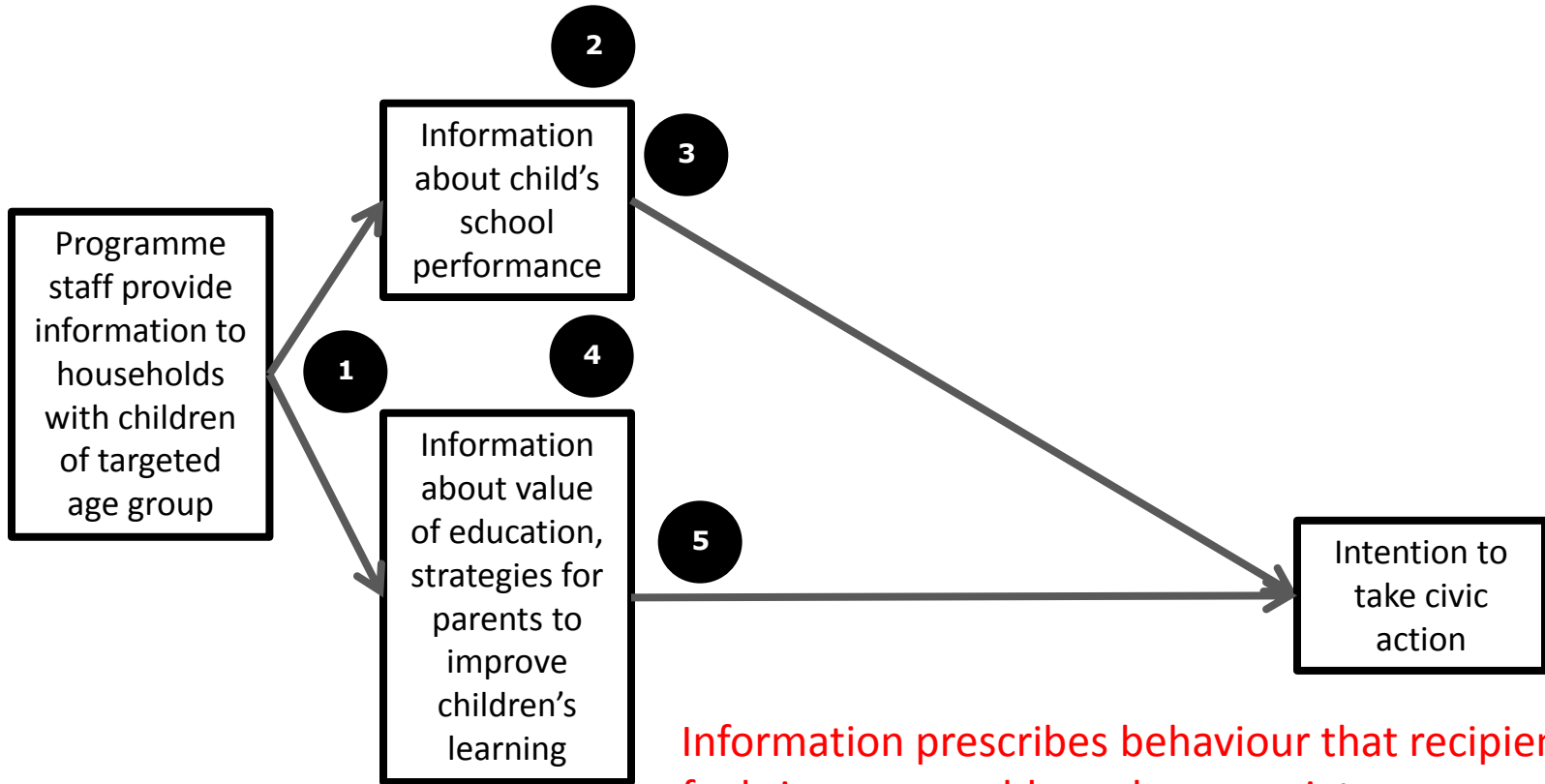


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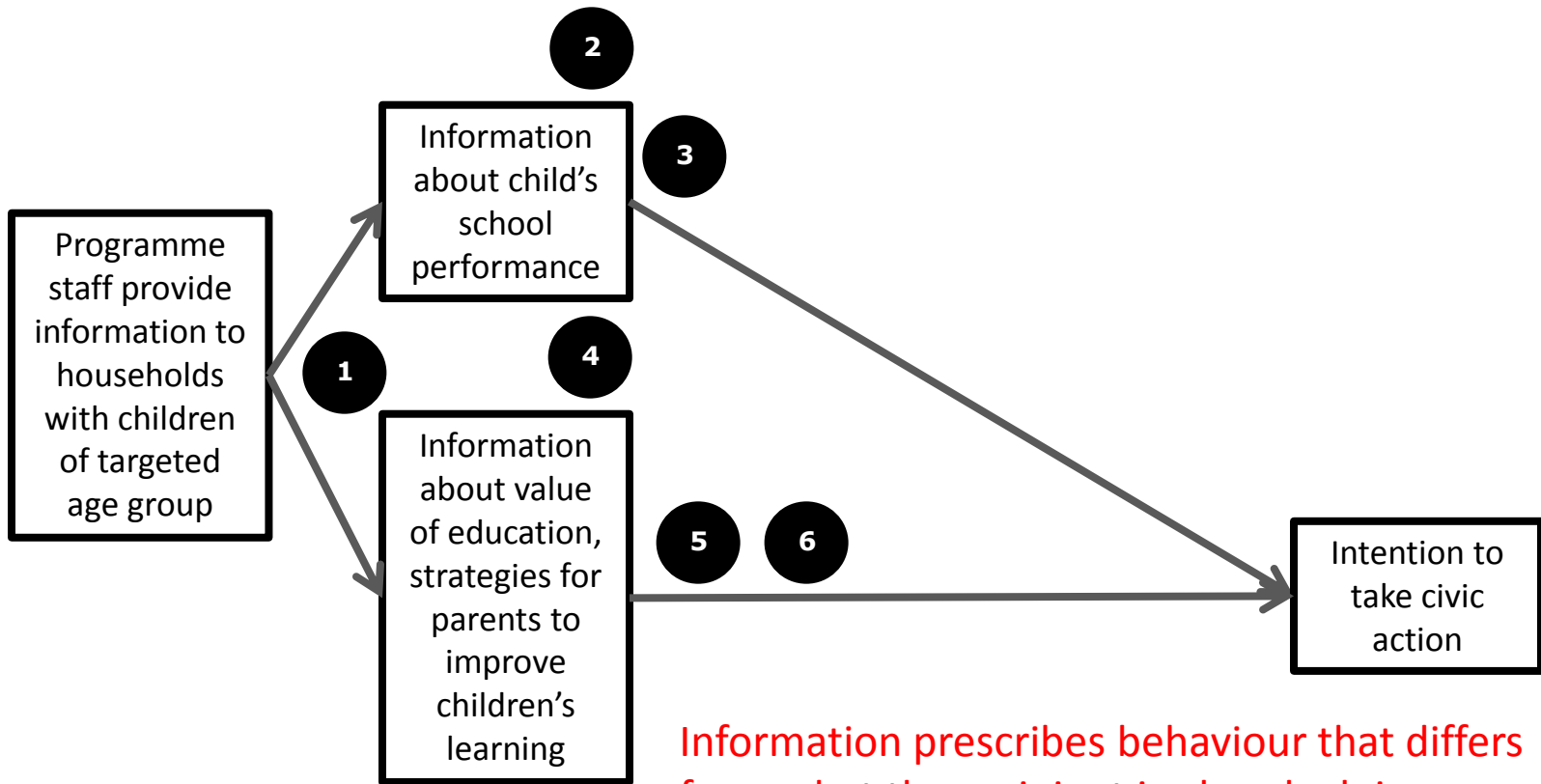


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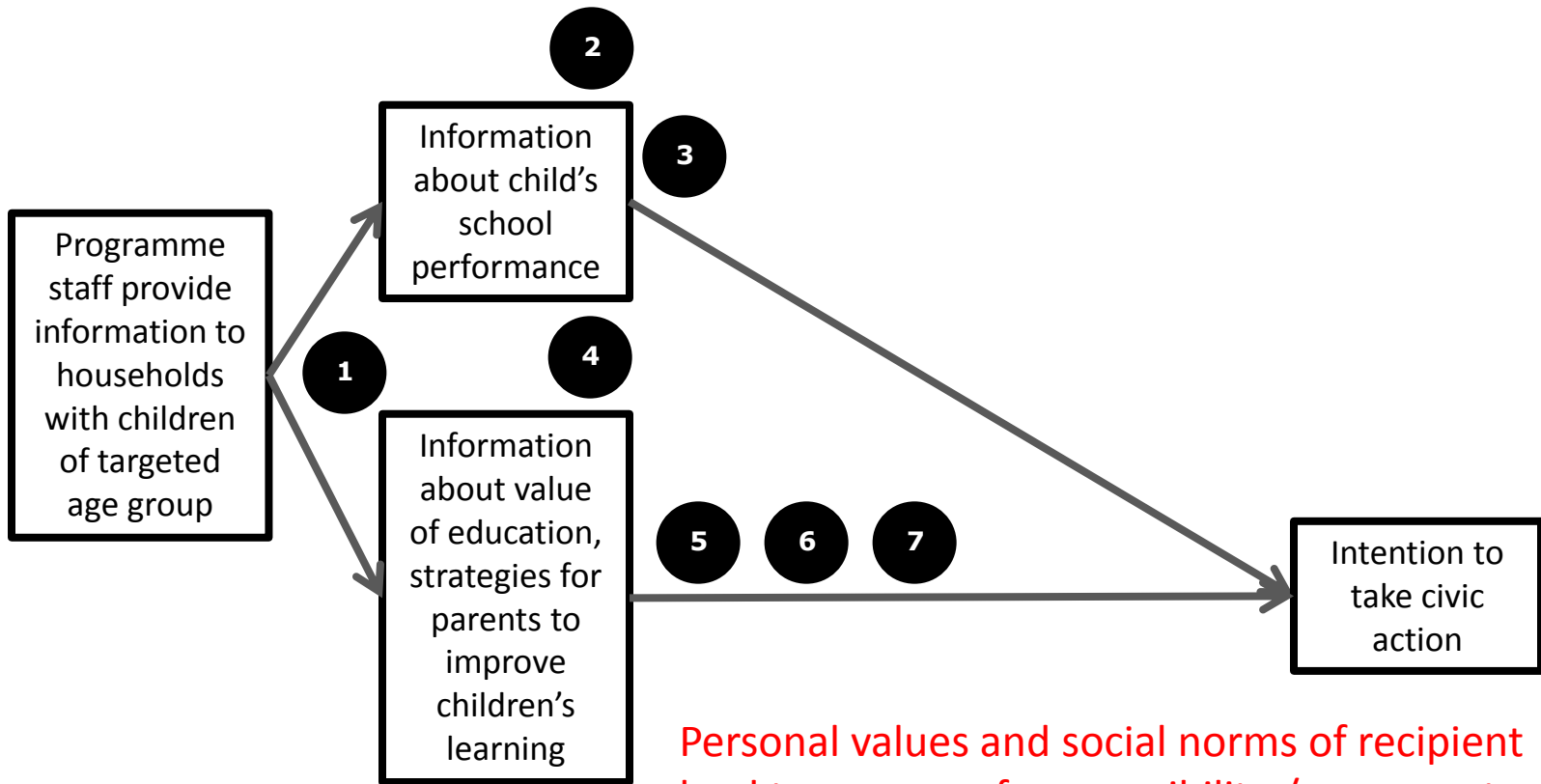
Information prescribes behaviour that recipient feels is a reasonable and appropriate response to the identified problem.

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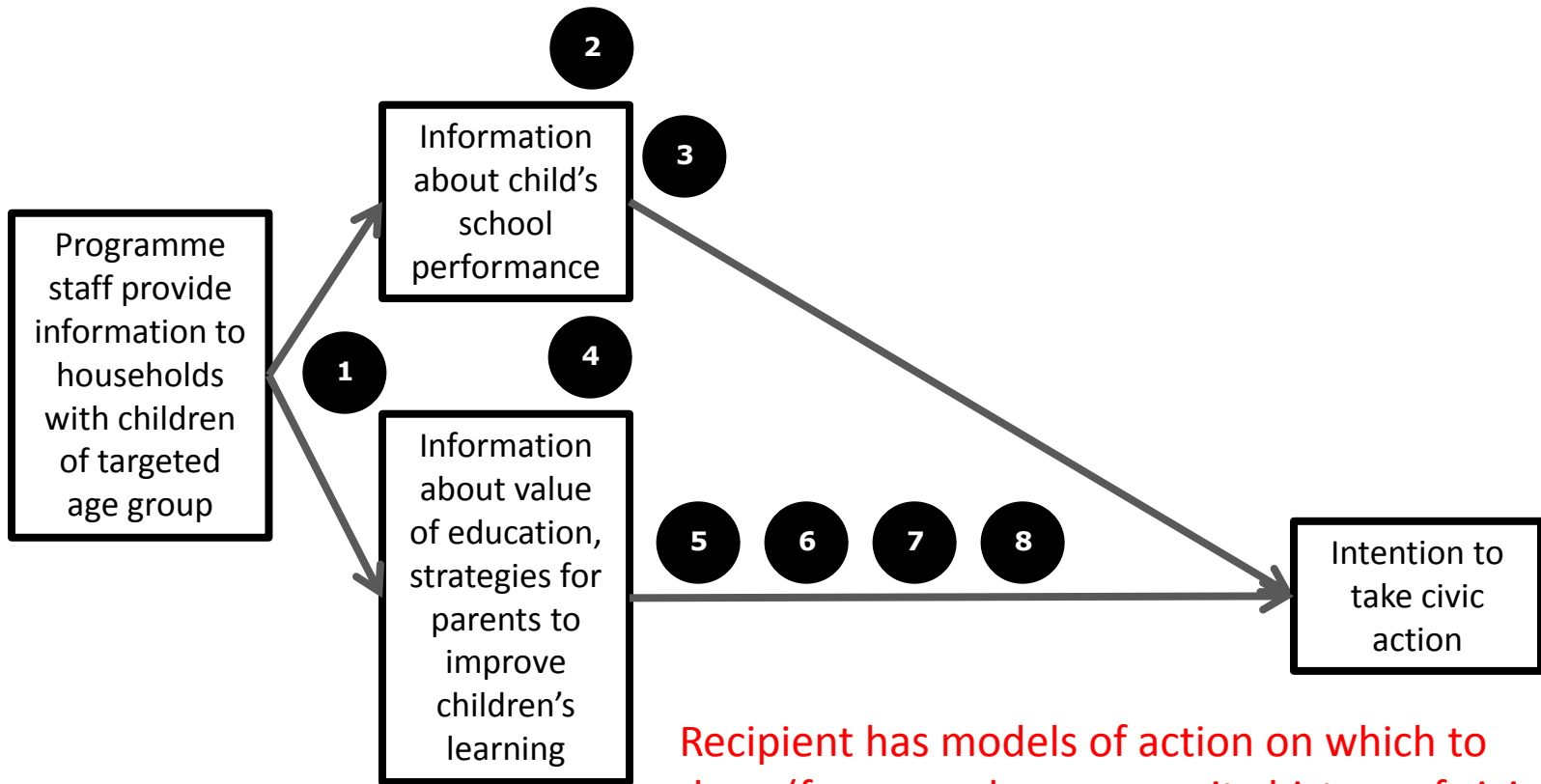
Information prescribes behaviour that differs from what the recipient is already doing.

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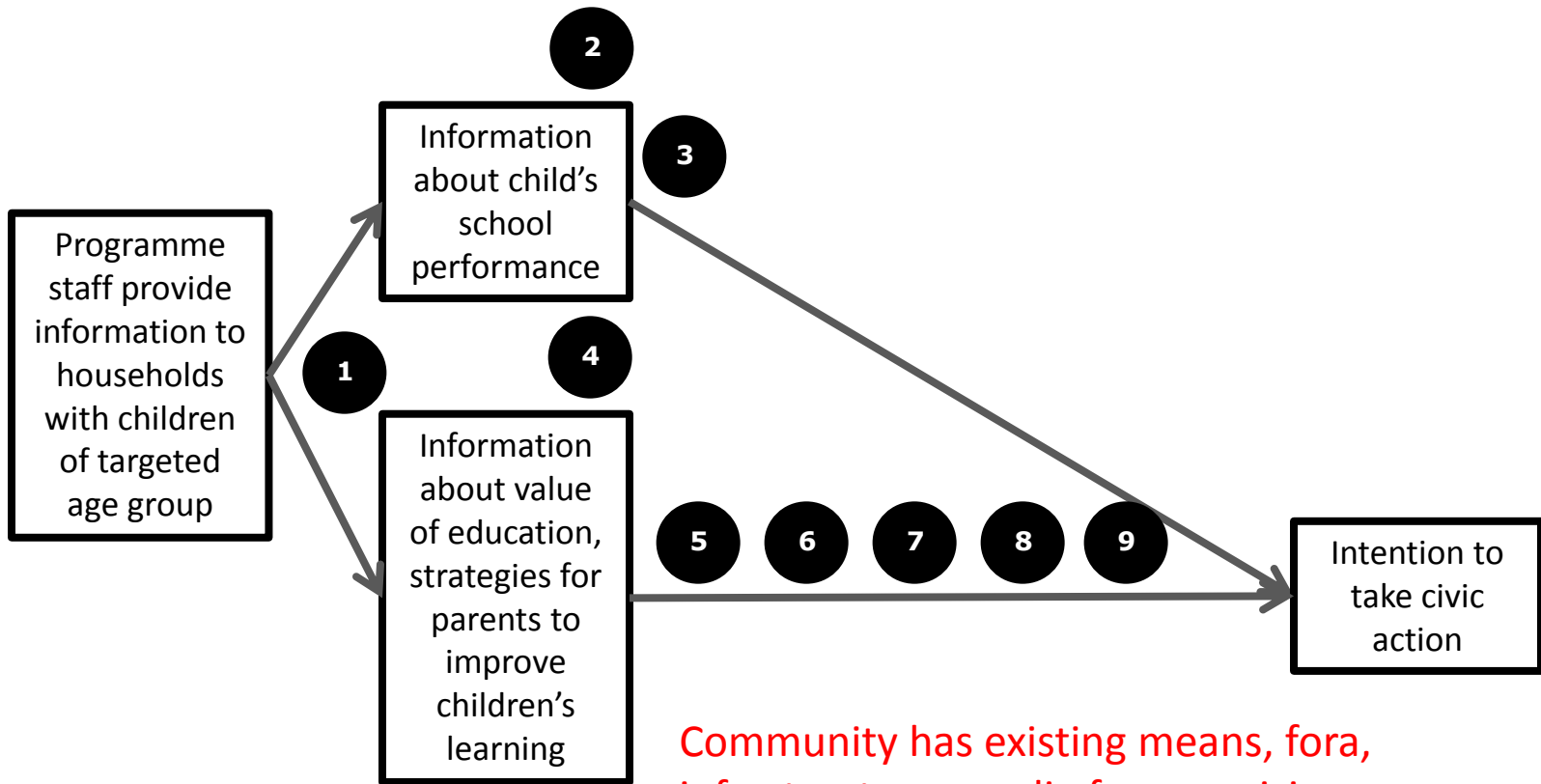
Personal values and social norms of recipient lead to a sense of responsibility / pressure to do something about the problem.

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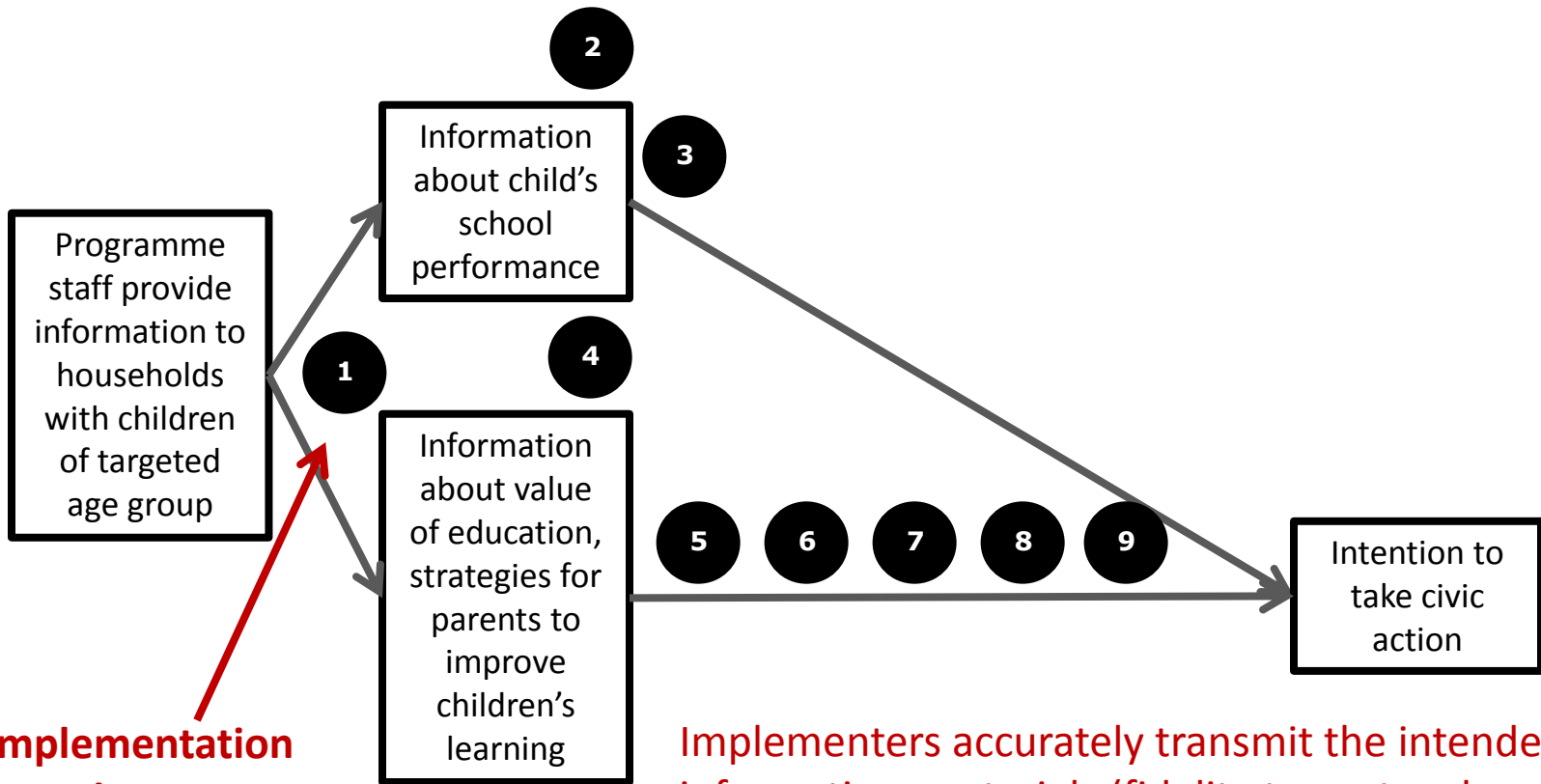
Recipient has models of action on which to draw (for example, community history of civic (successful) civic action).

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Community has existing means, fora, infrastructure, media for organising.

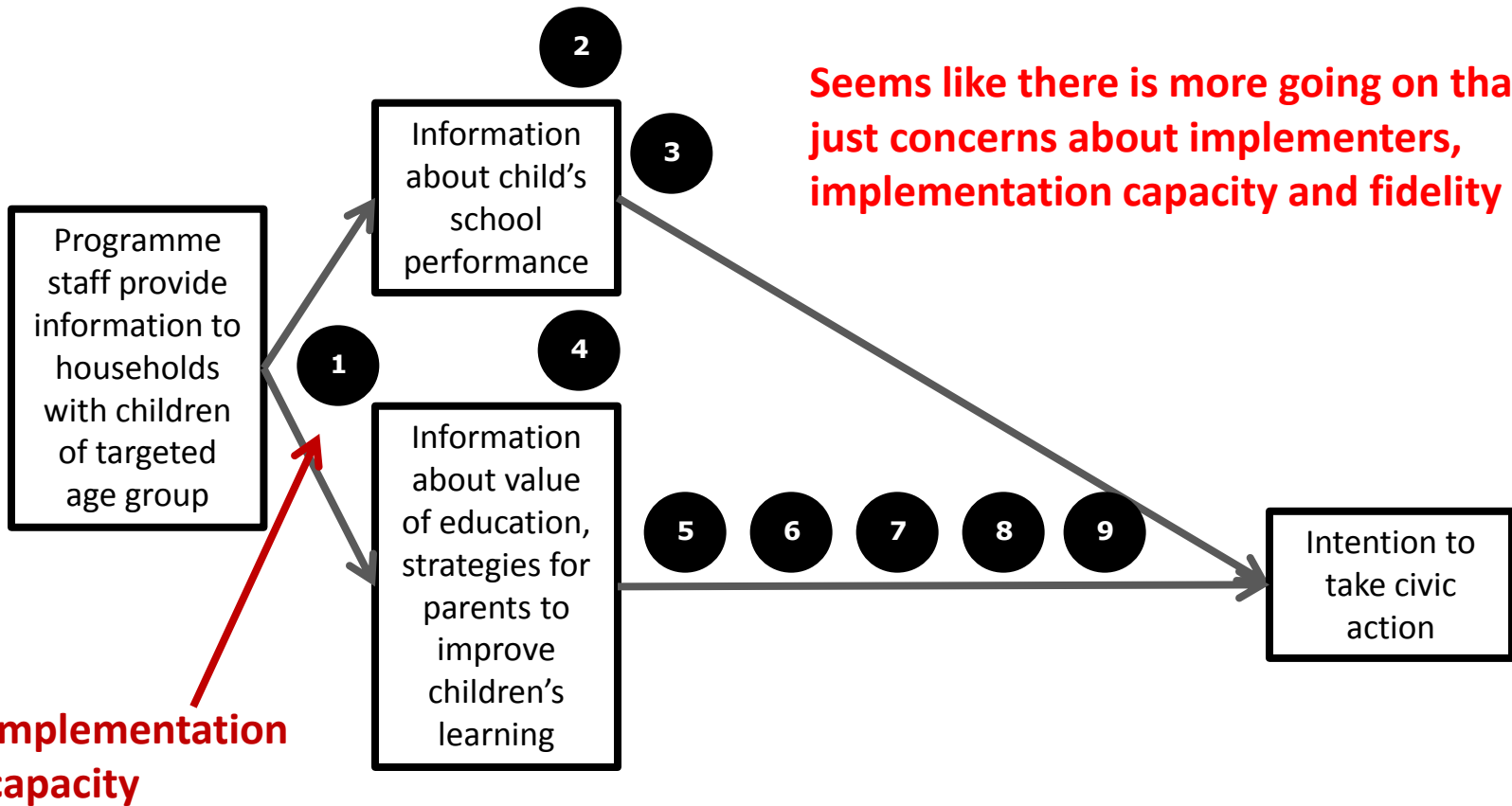
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**Implementation capacity**

Implementers accurately transmit the intended information, materials (fidelity to protocol and/or message).

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# Punchline 1: onus for portability

- Woolcock (2013) says: “*Burden of proof should lie with those claiming that the result is, in fact, generalizable*”
- But, those making such claims require good understanding of the settings and processes that produced the evidence of interest
  - This puts some onus on researchers to systematically monitor and measure settings and processes – *and to report on it*



## Punchline 2: multi-site studies

- External replication (trying Program P ‘here’ and a multitude of ‘there’s) will achieve external validity
- Just replicating, without learning and adapting, is probably not sufficient for those trying to make decisions in yet-unstudied “there”s

# Punchlines 3 & 4: theory rocks

- Theory is what guides generalization from the specific and grounded to the more abstract and portable
- “Pre-mortem” thinking and construction of ToC – which then guides research questions, monitoring plans, questionnaire items, etc – is requisite for producing evidence ‘here’ that those ‘there’ can reasonably use for decision-making