Helen Wilkinson

Selecting complexity-appropriate evaluation approaches

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Choosing an evaluation approach

- Wide range of approaches available
- No simple, mechanistic way of selecting the right ones for your needs
- Hybrid designs likely to be most useful
  - mix may change over course of the evaluation
- Three key, interrelated considerations

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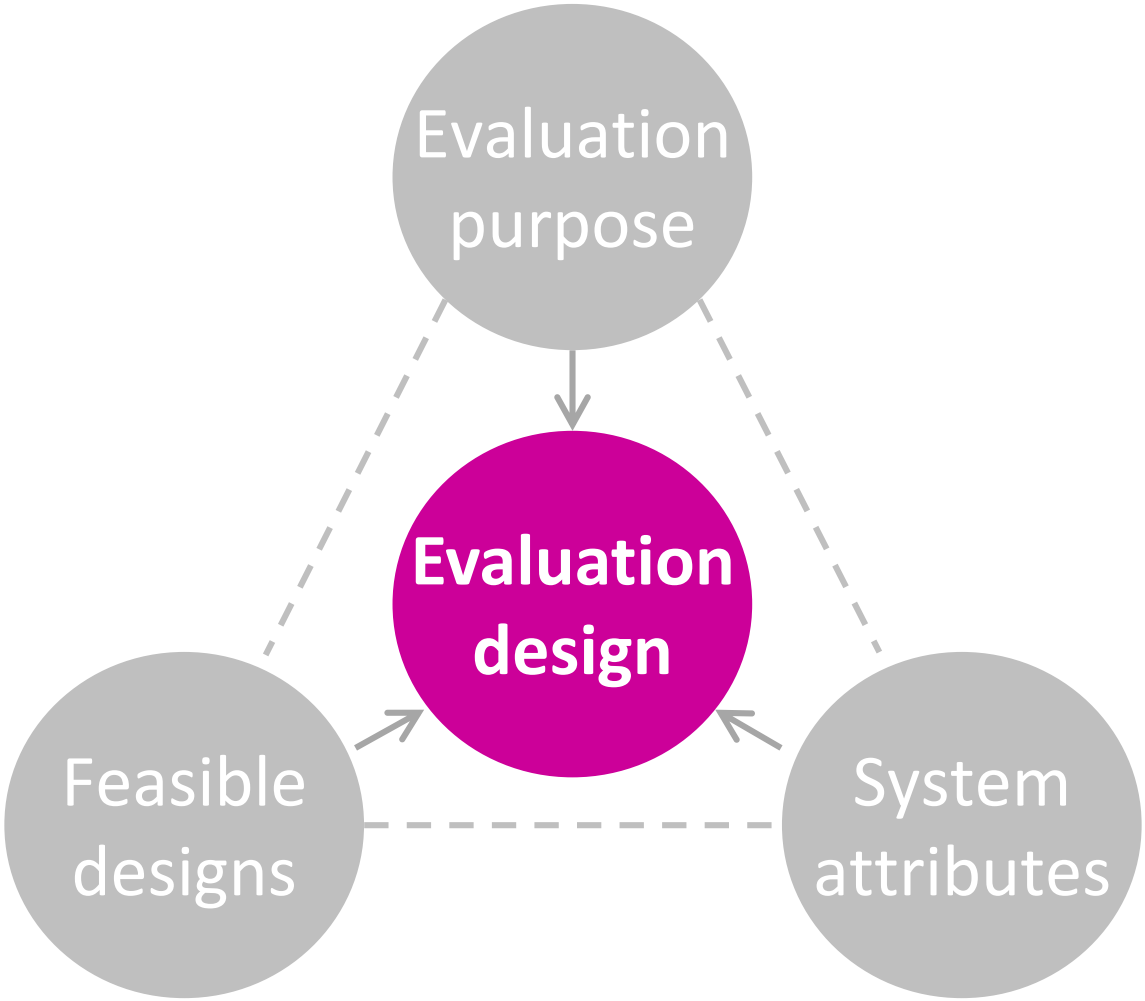
Choosing an evaluation approach



Adapted from:
https://www.bond.org.uk/data/files/Impact_Evaluation_Guide_0515.pdf,

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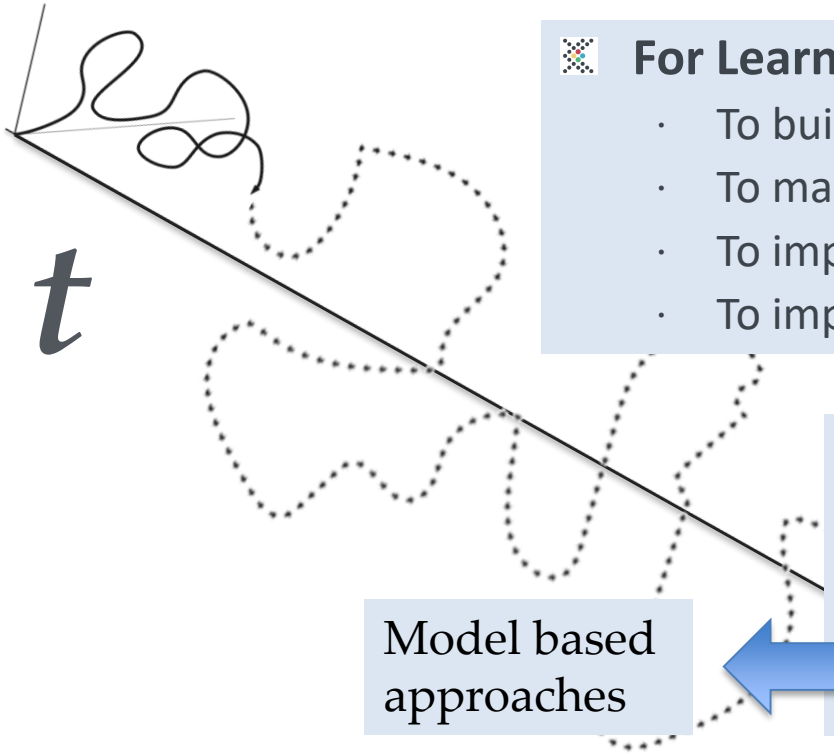
Useful questions: clarifying purpose

How will the findings be used?

Evaluation purpose

- **For Listening and Building:**
  - To ensure diverse voices are heard
  - To build trust and legitimacy
  - To generate champions for change

→ Emancipatory approaches



- **For Learning:**
  - To build understanding
  - To manage risk and uncertainty
  - To improve this policy
  - To improve similar policies

→ Theory based approaches

- **For Accountability:**
  - To establish if the policy:
    … was implemented as intended …
  - … is having the impacts anticipated …
  - … is delivering value for money?

← Model based approaches

System attributes

Useful questions: system attributes

Is there a good, common understanding of the system and its complexity - for example:

- **Agreement:** Are view points aligned, OR
  - Are there multiple perspectives OR even
  - Controversy?

→ Participative approaches

- **Certainty:** Is there a clear understanding of what influences outcomes and how:
  - Is there a clear direct relationship between your intervention and outcomes, OR
  - Do many factors influence outcomes in ways that are difficult to understand and predict
  - Have unanticipated outcomes occurred
  - Can you clearly define the scope of the evaluation?

→ System mapping

  - Do outcomes differ depending on context?

→ Realist approaches

  - Is the policy (and the system in response to this) still evolving?

→ Developmental approaches

Developmental evaluation (Quinn Patton)

- Developmental Evaluation

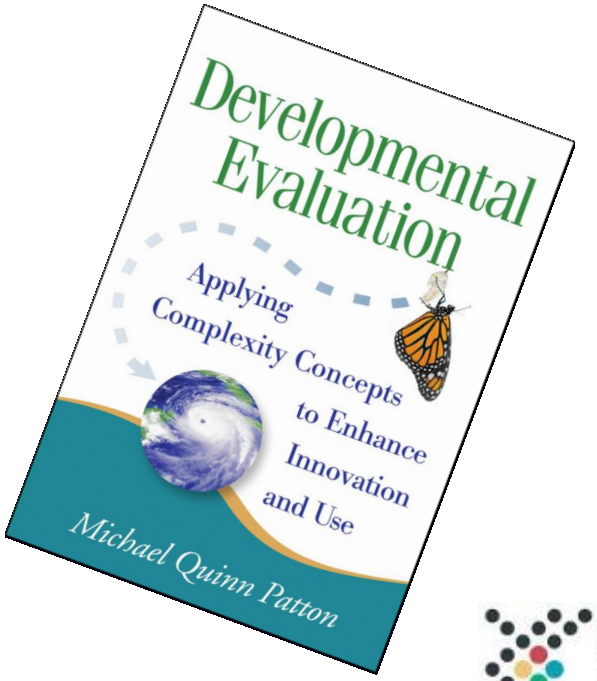
  "provides evaluative information and feedback" to

  "change initiatives in complex dynamic environments" in ways that support the ongoing development of the innovation

(Patton, McKegg and Wehipeihana, 2015)

Key principles:

- Developmental purpose
- Evaluation rigour
- Utilisation focus
- Innovation niche
- Complexity perspective
- Systems thinking
- Co-creation
- Timely feedback



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Useful questions: feasible designs

Feasible designs

- Are the evaluation methods and approaches affordable and proportionate in terms of:
  - the expertise required
  - the data available or obtainable
  - the information you need / the risks of getting the answer ‘wrong’?
- Are key stakeholders comfortable with the approach proposed:
  - Is the approach acceptable
  - Is there an appreciation that the level of quantitative rigour and certainty of outcome may be limited, even using sophisticated evaluation methods

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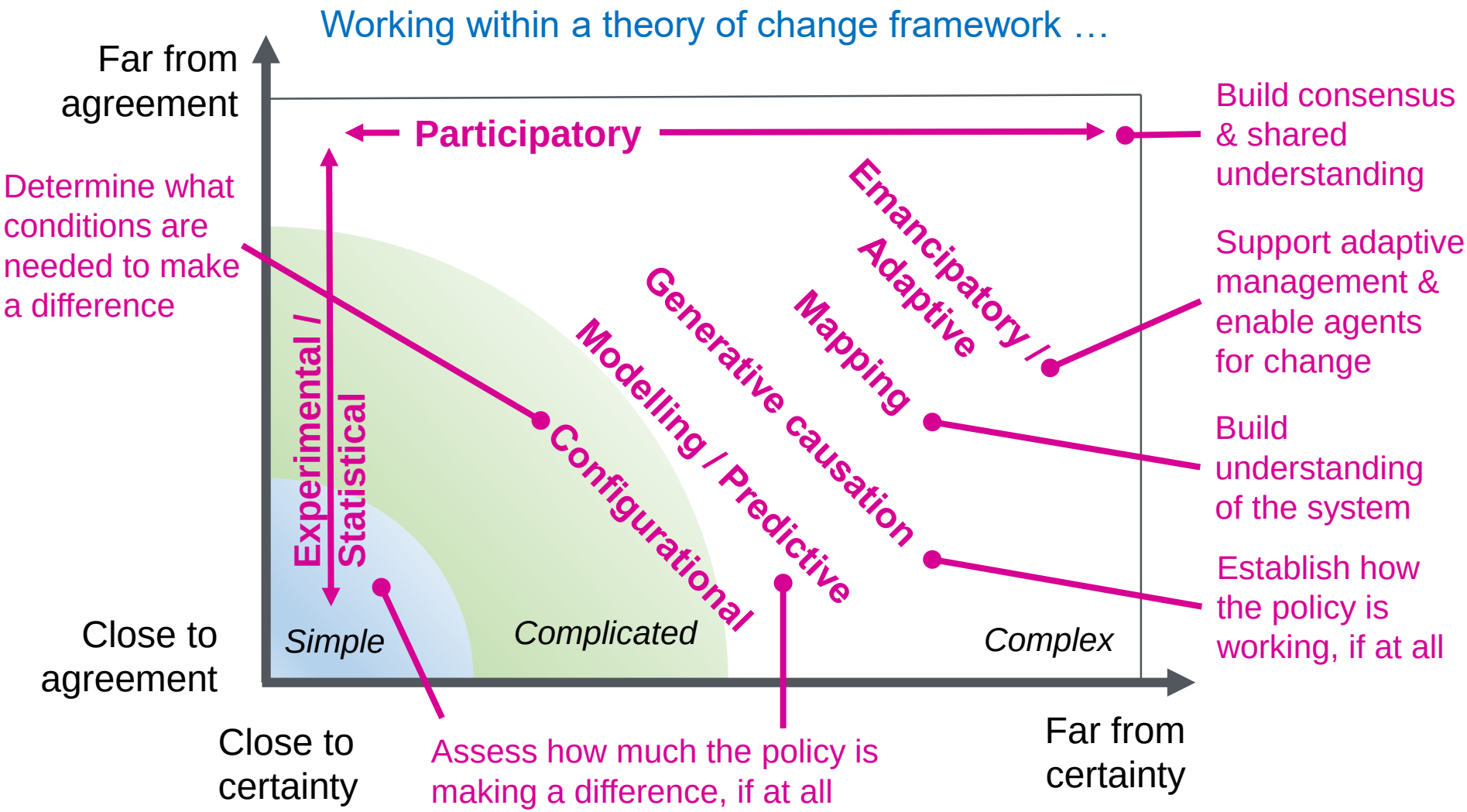
Evaluation approaches



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How the Supplementary Guide can help …

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Table 4: Answering evaluation questions

Evaluation question	Approach / method	Benefits
What is important to different groups, who can champion change? **What levers are generating change, what may be inhibiting change?**	**Most significant change** **Participatory system mapping**	Most significant change is an iterative participatory process that aims to clarify the values held by different stakeholders Participatory system mapping brings stakeholders together to build a system map and develop trust and mutual understanding Structures conversations about whether and how the policy is delivering change, can be used to develop the theory of change If begun at the option appraisal stage, forms a consistent framework for design, monitoring and evaluation through piloting and full implementation
	Big data and associated methods	Might ultimately allow local emergence of system dynamics that subsequently spread throughout systems to be understood Can provide near real time data to support learning
How well was the policy implemented? How can this be improved?	**Participatory, adaptive approaches**	Generates trust and shared understanding, champions and agents for change
Is the policy making a difference, by how	**Experimental approaches**	Provides robust evidence of whether a policy h difference, and to what extent
	Statistical association	Weaker than ex quanti

Table 5: Tackling different aspects of complexity

Complexity challenge	Approach / method	How it helps
Sensitivity to context	**Generative causation, configurational and system mapping and modelling**	Treats context as a variable affecting outcomes, rather than a factor to be isolated and controlled, which in complex systems is often not possible
Openness/ open system	**System mapping**	Can guide division of a programme wide theory of change into multiple 'nested' theories to split complex programmes into more readily manageable segments without losing sight of the interactions between sub-systems and between the system and the wider environment
Multiple interactions and influences **Long, indirect causal chains linking inputs to impacts**	**System mapping and modelling**	Can capture the key influences and interactions and guide construction of complexity-appropriate theories of change Provides a framework for exploring the strength and importance of relationships affecting outcomes and impacts
Continual change, difficult to predict outcomes arising from e.g. feedbacks, non-linearity, tipping	**Computational system modelling**	Provides exploratory tools in domains that are complex and "theoretically-insecure" (i.e. where th widely agreed and acce agent based the

Table 6: Circumstances affecting feasibility

Approach	More feasible if …	Less feasible if …	Specialist skills and resourc
Participatory and adaptive approaches	Appropriate range of stakeholders are willing and able to engage actively in the evaluation Useful when policy is participatory or has an empowerment objective	The findings must be seen to be rigorously objective and the evaluators need to retain independence from the system	Experience working embedd partnership, with stakehold May require experience wor to reach individuals and com Support for evaluators imm can be difficult environment provided to help evaluators objectivity as far as possible stress Facilitation skills, the ability collaboratively and to keep oversight of the work, will b
System mapping and modelling	Appropriate range of stakeholders are willing and able to engage actively in the mapping or modelling exercise	More challenging where there is a high degree of ambiguity or many relevant influencing factors operating on different scales (time or geographical)	Specialist facilitators and sys Can be an efficient way of ra synthesising key informant k existing data (see synthesis evidenced conclusions, so ca where time and funding is li
Generative causation	It is possible to formulate theoretical assumptions about the influence of context and the behaviours.	More challenging … compl…	

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In summary

In complex and adverse settings

- Use a complexity lens to analyse situation
- Prepare yourself (and other stakeholders) for unpredictability and uncertainty
- ‘Map’ the system (systems mapping, theory of change)
- Consider innovative evaluation approaches and hybrid designs
- Work hard to get, and keep, stakeholders on board
- And be willing to change the approach in response to changing situation or understandings

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And above all

Any questions?

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For more information

- CECAN: https://www.cecan.ac.uk/ for information and events related to complex evaluation across the Nexus
- Tavistock Institute for evaluation support http://www.tavinstitute.org/ or d.hills@tavinstitute.org
- Risk Solutions: for evaluation and system mapping support https://www.risksol.co.uk or helen.wilkinson@risksol.co.uk
- https://www.betterevaluation.org/ for information about evaluation strategies and methods
- http://complexitylabs.io/ for information about complexity and complex adaptive systems

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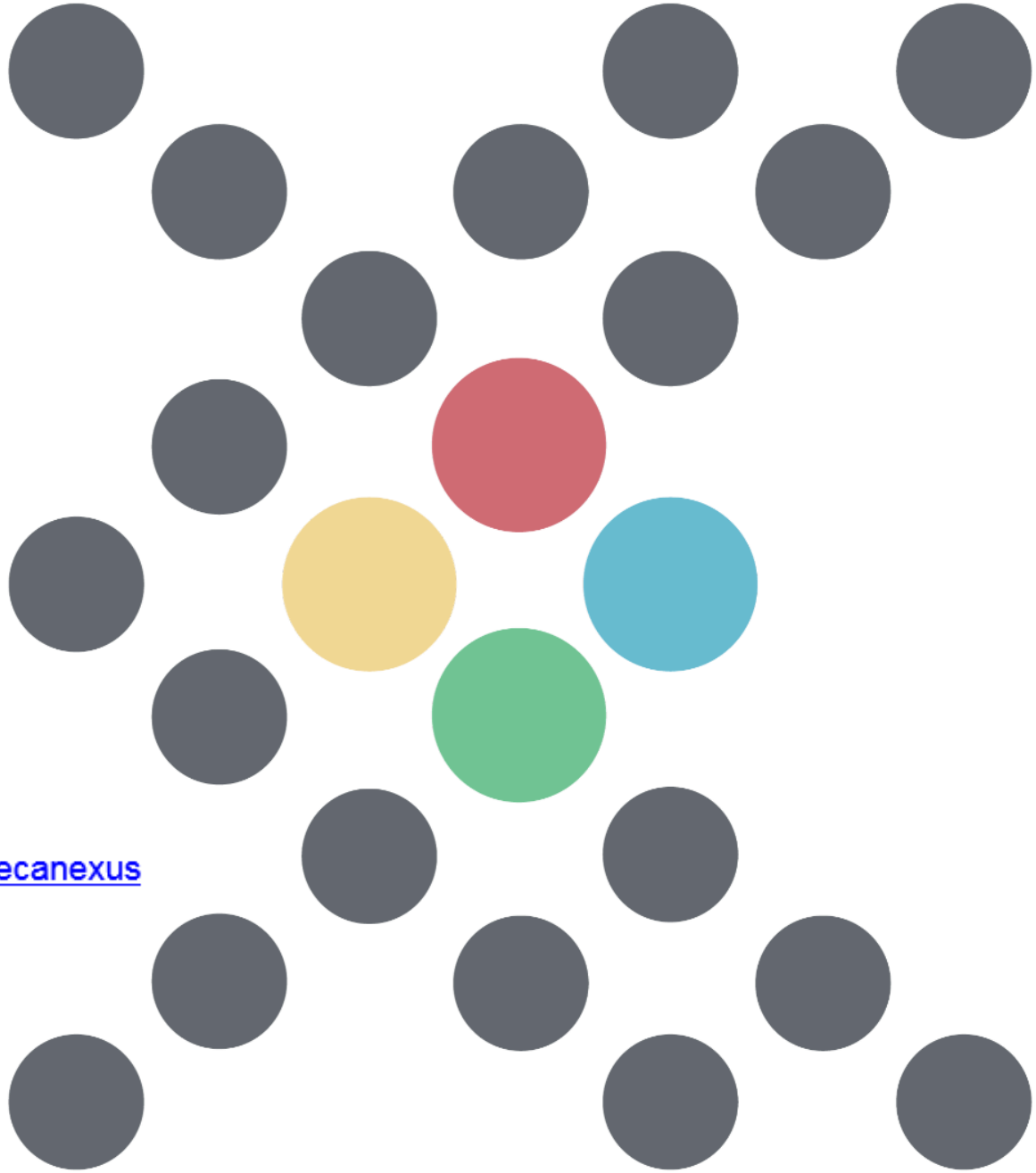

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