'Taking relationships seriously': a realist review of community engagement with malaria research (Real1)

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Significant investment in community engagement in health research

Wide range of assumptions about the value of CE
- Improves the ethics of research
- Facilitates the successful execution of research
- Improves the impact/outcomes of research

Funders and implementation partners support CE

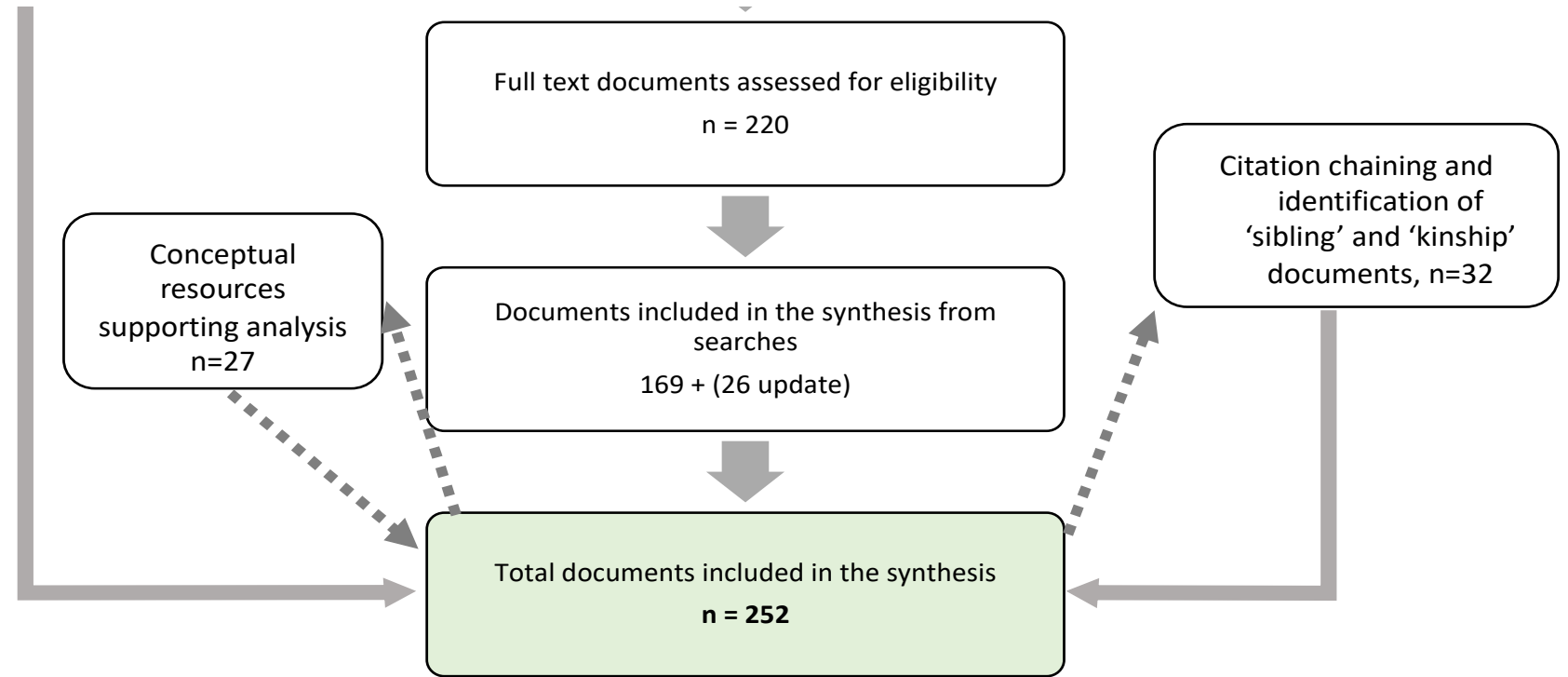Eg - Wellcome Trust, Gates Foundation, DFID, World Bank, NIH, CDC

lack of a robust evidence base, but empirical research suggested that these assumptions have some validity

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Persistent challenges for improving community engagement

- High degree of **variability** in CE:
  - Language/concepts; goals; guidance; practice
- Engagement typically emphasizes **activities/interventions**, rather than the nature of the interactions/relationships, underlying mechanisms and outcomes :
  - E.g., Community Advisory Boards (CABs); formative research
- Engagement activities are **complex social interventions**; dynamic multi-stakeholder processes
  - understanding relationships, context and culture is vital

Realist review – how CE works

Full text documents assessed for eligibility
n = 220

Conceptual resources supporting analysis n=27

Documents included in the synthesis from searches

169 + (26 update)

Citation chaining and identification of 'sibling' and 'kinship' documents, n=32

Total documents included in the synthesis

n = 252

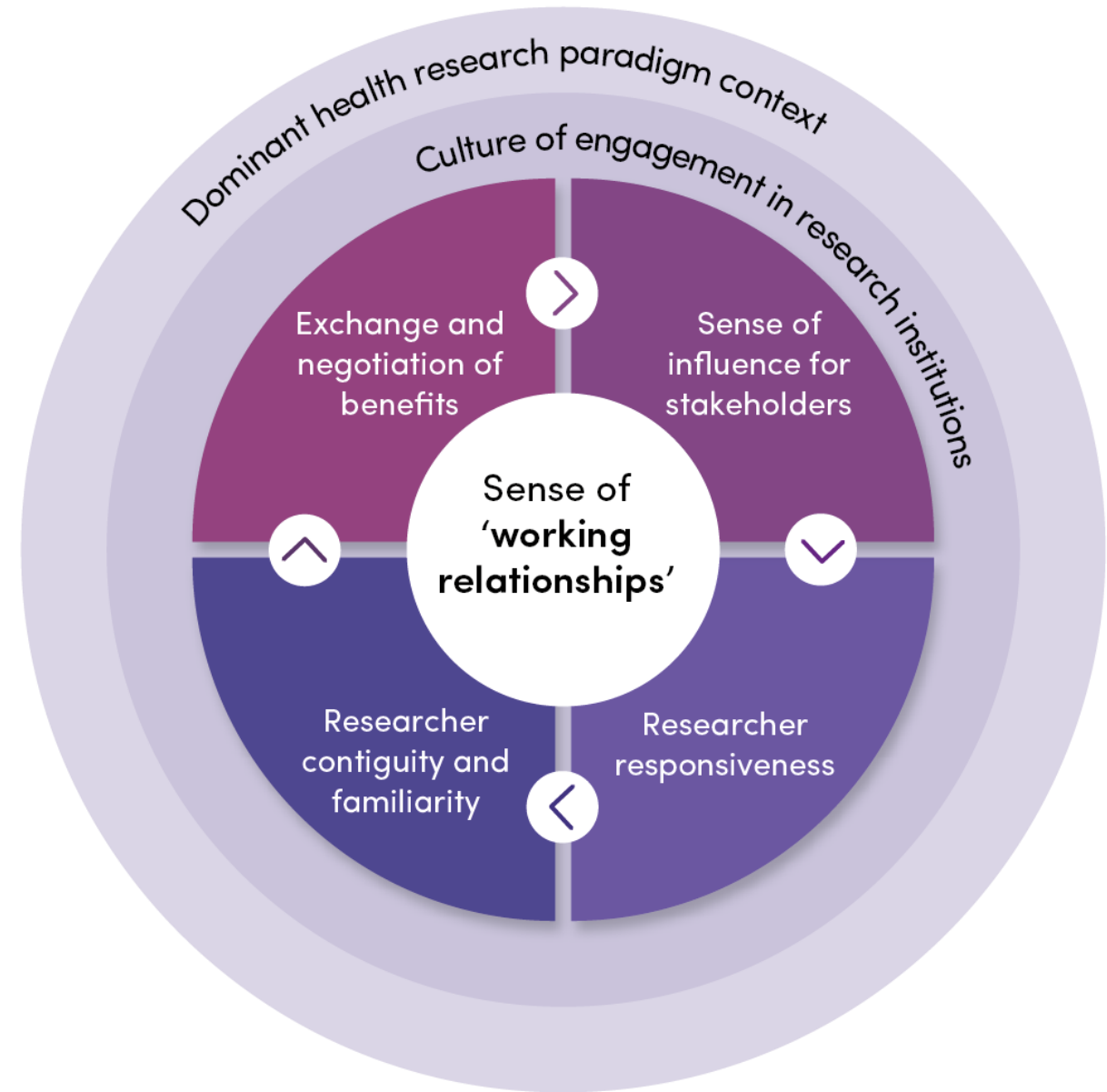RℓAL   **Community Engagement Realist Review**

CE establishes 'working relationships'

Four interlinked dynamics

Importance of **access to health care** accompanying research participation

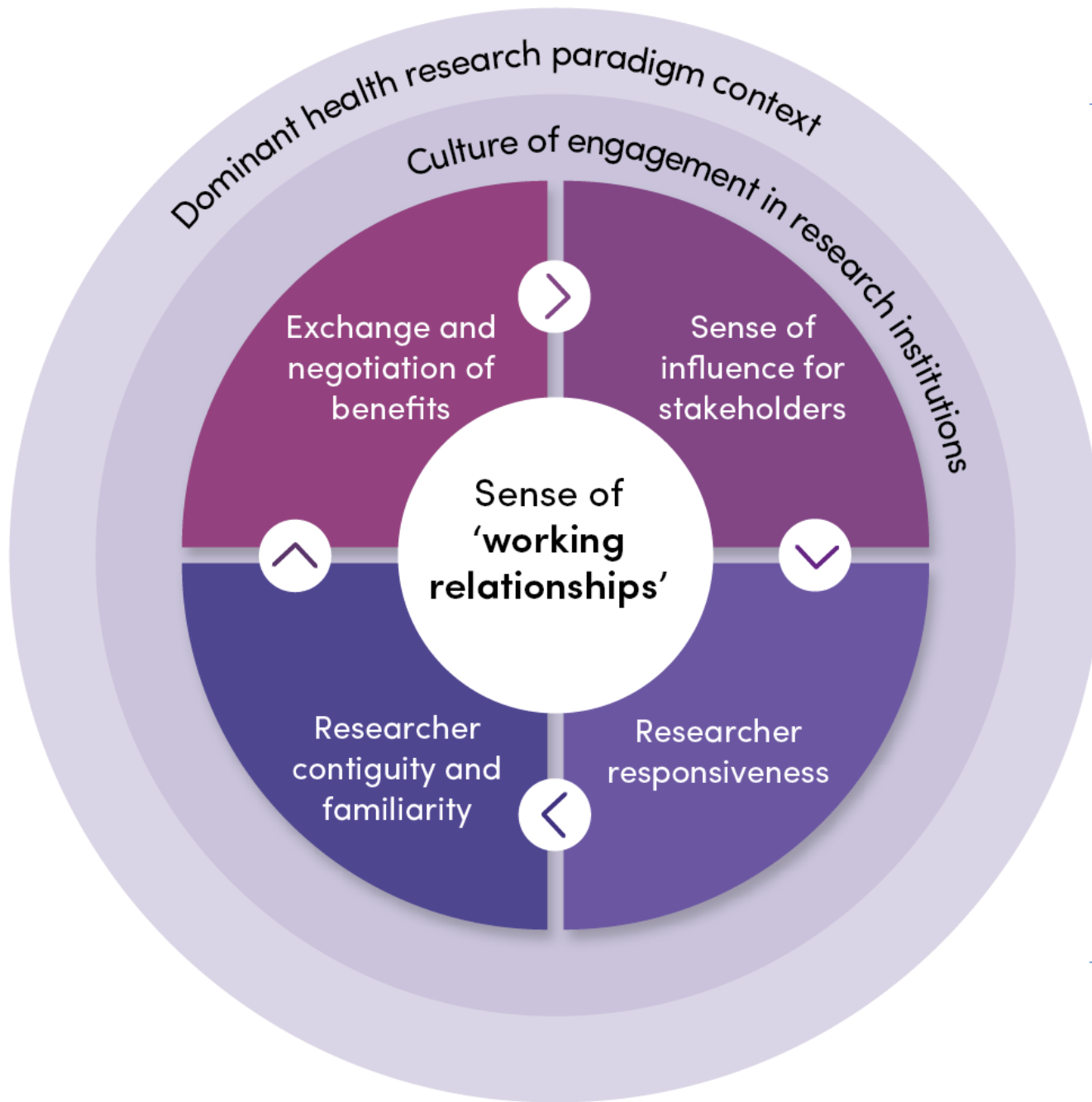Contribute to **acceptance of research** and participation

Findings shared through an [animation](#)

Conclusions

- CE more about developing **working relationships than any particular technique**, tool or method

- CE strategies need to be informed by an **understanding of the relational dynamics** of engagement and influences of context

- Developing working relationships across difference tends to 'accommodate' **and reproduce the dominant paradigm**

- The very relationships that help get research done **rest on ethically problematic aspects** of global health research

- The analysis hints at an **alternative dynamic of 'collaborative partnership'** not systematically explored in the current review

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Recommendations

- Focus CE on **building relationships**, including beyond particular research studies and over the longer term

- Ensuring **listening and responding** to stakeholder concerns as well as 'accurate' information

- Better planning and evaluation of CE with more explicit '**theory of change**'

- Tracking and changing **power**

- Building in **regular reflection/debriefs**

- Being proportionate, meaningful

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Review outputs

- **Full paper** in Wellcome Open

- **Commentary paper** in BMJ Global Health

- **Briefing paper** for funders and research institutions

- **Briefing paper** for engagement practitioners and researchers

- **Animation** of review findings

- Materials **hosted on Mesh** Community Engagement Hub: https://mesh.tghn.org/programme-hubs/real/

- Dissemination through networks, webinars, meetings

With thanks