



# How to Use Counterfactuals in Adaptive Policymaking

## UK Policy Profession Presentation



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Policy Community Partnerships Office (PCPO)





# Why are we here today?

1

## **Build Adaptive Policymaking Capacity with Counterfactual Thinking**

Describe adaptive policymaking and practical use of counterfactuals in their contexts.

2

## **Launch a Strategic Discussion on Adaptive Policy Work**

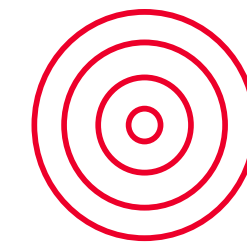
Explore operational shifts and patterns across the existing policy infrastructure to surface counterfactuals that inform decision-making, not just validate it.



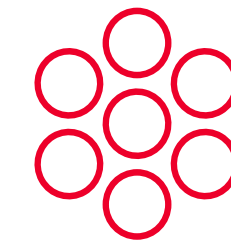


# Why The Policy Community Partnerships Office (PCPO) Exists

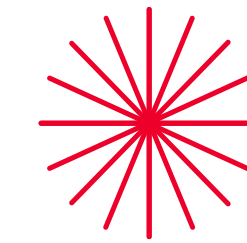
Our mandate is to bring all policy functions of the policy community together to create a united, equipped, inclusive, and adaptable environment, ensuring excellence in policy development and implementation, now and in the future.



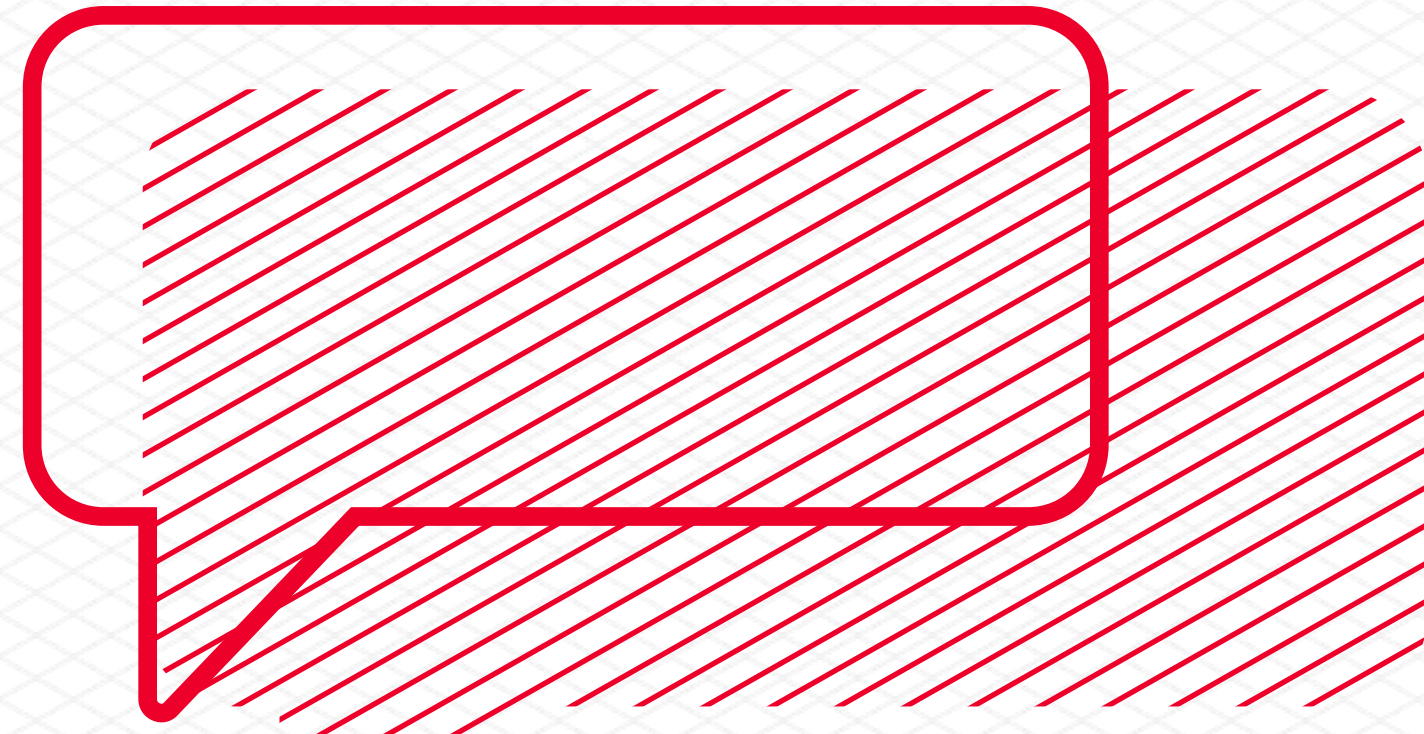
**Evolve**  
Policy Practice



**Enable**  
Collective Learning



**Convene**  
All Policy Functions



# PCPO Hosts a Virtual Village of Policy Practitioners

**The Policy Community Partnerships Office (PCPO) is a small, dynamic organization acting as an integrator for the Policy Community.**

11,690 public servants consider the Policy Community their primary community of practice (2024 PSES)

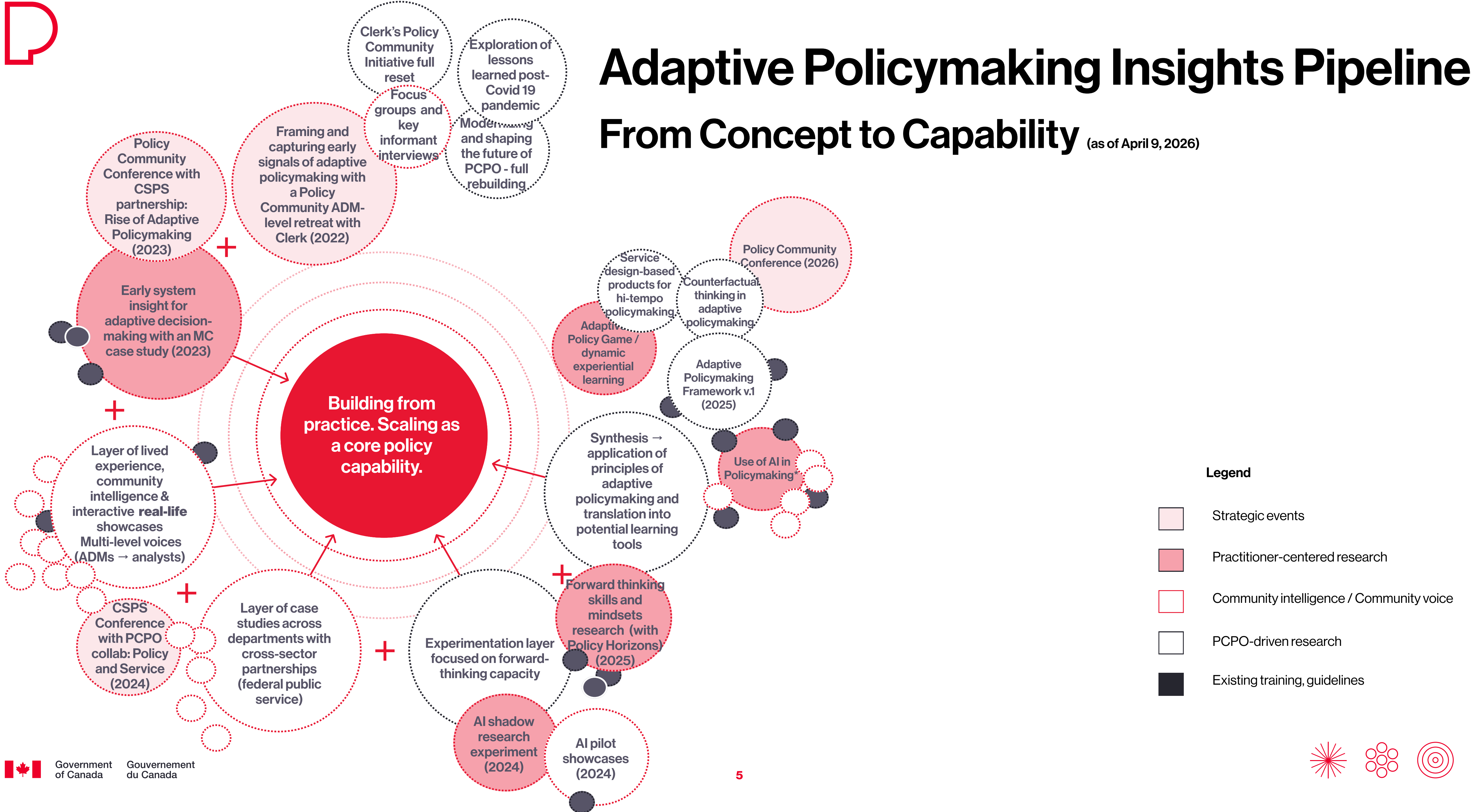
**Core activities:**

- Manage and nurture a vast network of stakeholders relations within the public service and abroad.
- Conduct research projects surfacing insights grounded in practitioners' lived experience producing tangible evidence for learning and capacity building.
- Host and facilitate learning events to showcase best practices, policy innovations, and lessons learned.
- Manage day-to-day office operations and governance secretariat functions.



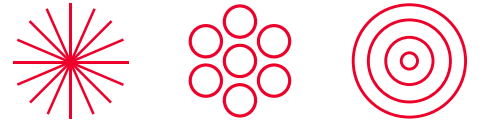
# Adaptive Policymaking Insights Pipeline

## From Concept to Capability (as of April 9, 2026)



**Legend**

- Strategic events
- Practitioner-centered research
- Community intelligence / Community voice
- PCPO-driven research
- Existing training, guidelines





**Adaptive policymaking is the collective and organized ability to respond in real time to both expected and unexpected opportunities - adjusting systems, operations, governance, and decisions emphasizing rapid learning and iteration across typical “silos” while continuing to deliver on policy goals, working coherently across governments and sectors, and maintaining public trust over time.**

*(This wording is evergreen as we continue to research patterns.)*

The adaptive policymaking context is ripe for counterfactual thinking, for example:

- Complex and emergent crisis response need rapid alternatives and operational alignment for action
- Immediate responses to unanticipated announcements need rapid deployment of capacity
- Unforeseen international developments can have national ramifications that need rapid scenario assessments
- Intense public pressure on a policy issue need strategic communications





# Your voice



**Mentimeter.com**





# We are doing adaptive policymaking... we're just not structuring it.

When everything is moving, counterfactuals **ground** adaptive policy work and **structure** insights in feedback loops while navigating evolving and continuous constraints.





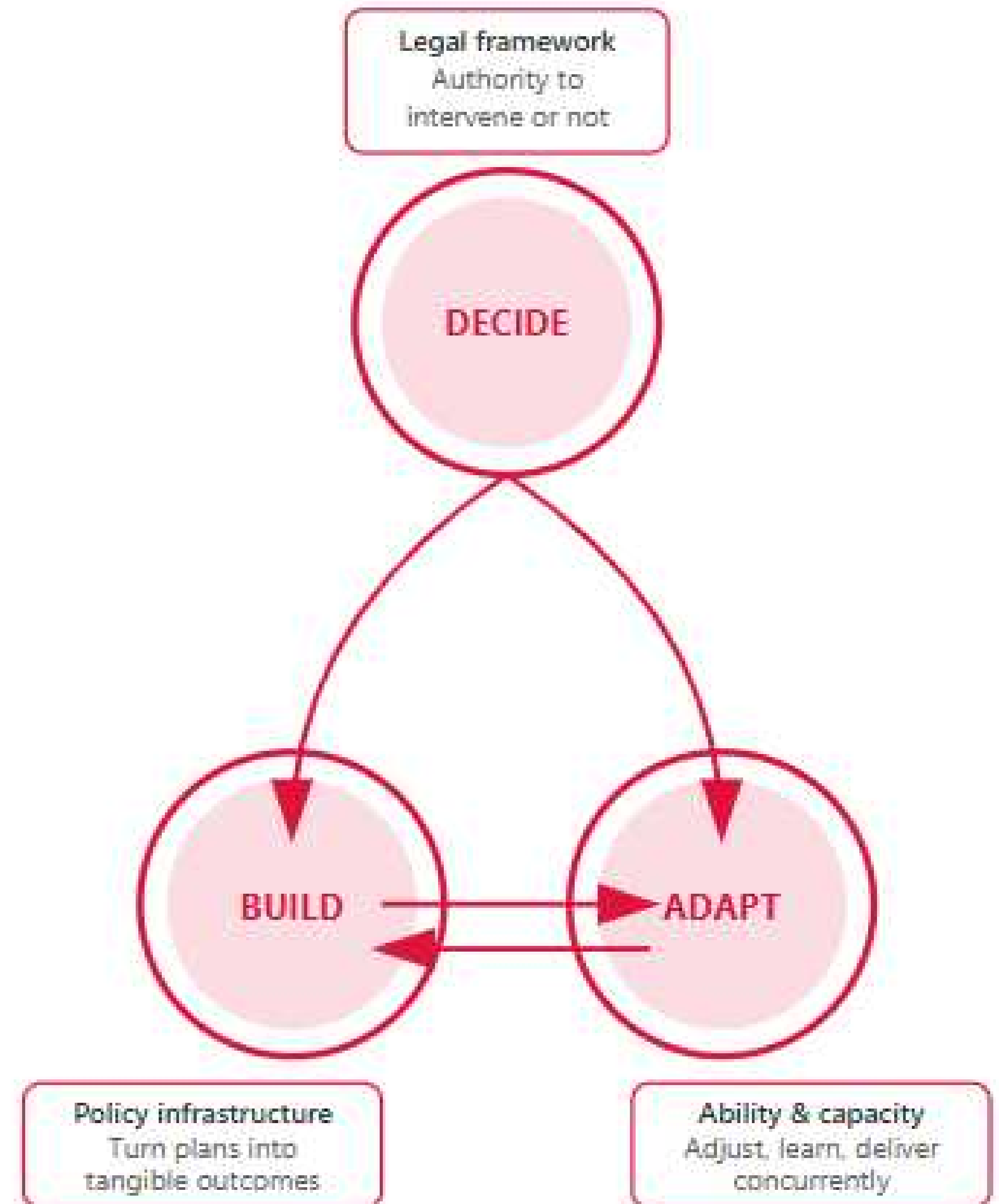
# Counterfactual Thinking

“**What if... then**” questioning and exploration **reveal** alternatives of what's already happening on the ground from lived experience across decisions, policy systems, and people involved **comparing** *what actually happened vs. what could have happened vs. what else is concurrently happening that is not on our radar*



# Compound Learning

- Counterfactuals structurally connect how we **decide**, how we **build**, and how we **adapt**.
- When counterfactuals are tangible, they help make the **invisible** in complexity **visible**. Decisions to dismiss or integrate them compound over time to create **learning patterns** that continue to nurture the adaptive policy work.
- Support learning by comparing actual outcomes or actual operations with **plausible alternatives** to improve decision-making under uncertainty.
- **Expedite** policy integration across policy functions in the policy cycle.





# Examples of Practical Counterfactual Questions

To surface alternative **pathways:**

What else could reasonably have happened if different stories, evidence, scale or signals were used ?

To identify **causal levers:**

What would have changed the outcome - and why?

To convert hindsight into **forward thinking:**

What does this tell us about how we should act next time - and what future should we anticipate?





# You need

- A curious, critical, creative and inquisitive mind that is focused on measuring impacts
- A current state description (e.g. theory of change, dashboard, policy diagnostic, evaluation plan, journey map, service blueprint, etc.)
- Scenarios (mock-ups, alternatives, possible variables) to current state
- Scales (linear numeric, Likert, value slider, forced ranking, etc.) to convert qualitative input into quantitative data to facilitate comparative analysis
- Different views: legal/technical advisors (e.g IT), end users, administrators/owners, external SMEs
- A list of non-negotiable requirements (e.g. legality, scope, actors involved, technology)
- Measurable targets
- Facilitator skills

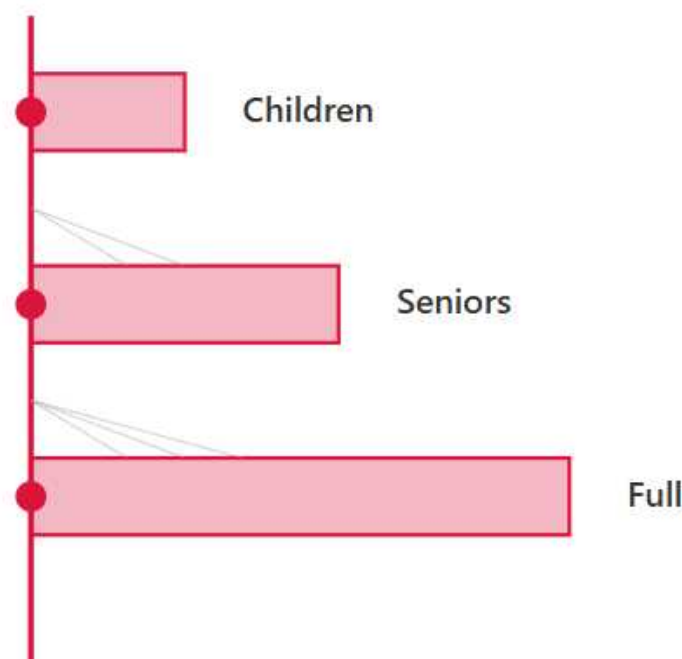




# Counterfactual opportunities hide in plain sight - Scales help assess divergent variables

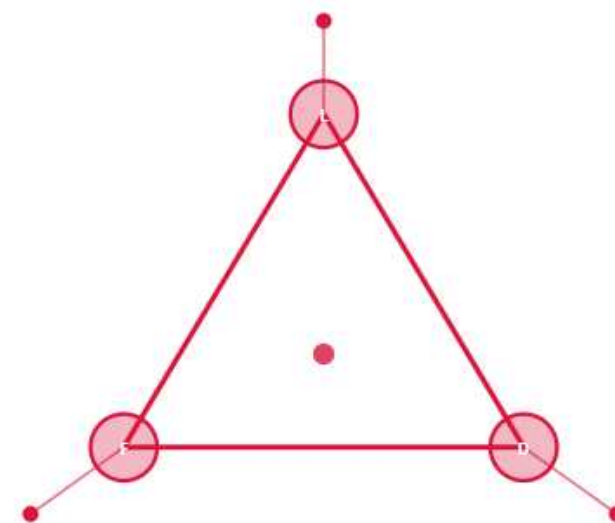
## In sequence and scale up

- How do you enable learning at each structured alternative phase?
- What happens before/after targets?
- Where are capacity or capability strains, especially surges (high pressure).



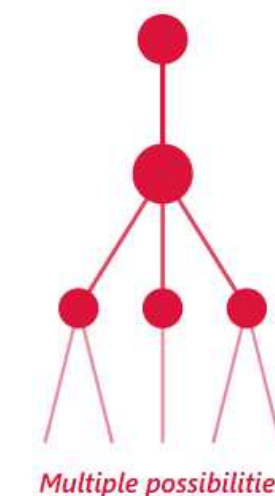
## When reconciling competing realities

- Are their leaps of logic between policy objectives in alignment with evidence, partners and policy products?
- Are trade-offs continuous and evolving, or constant?
- Which tensions do you solve?
- Are requirements final?
- Which user stories anchor the work?



## In redesign, reassigning resources, repurposing

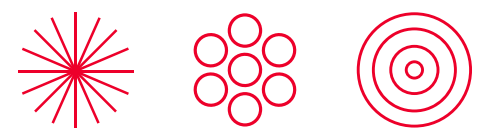
- How to you plan revisions to meet long-term goals despite emergent/unforeseen developments?
- What impacts the workflow across actors and technology integration (including agentic AI connections)?
- Are constraints fixed, limitations
- What are potential disruptions and future aspirations?

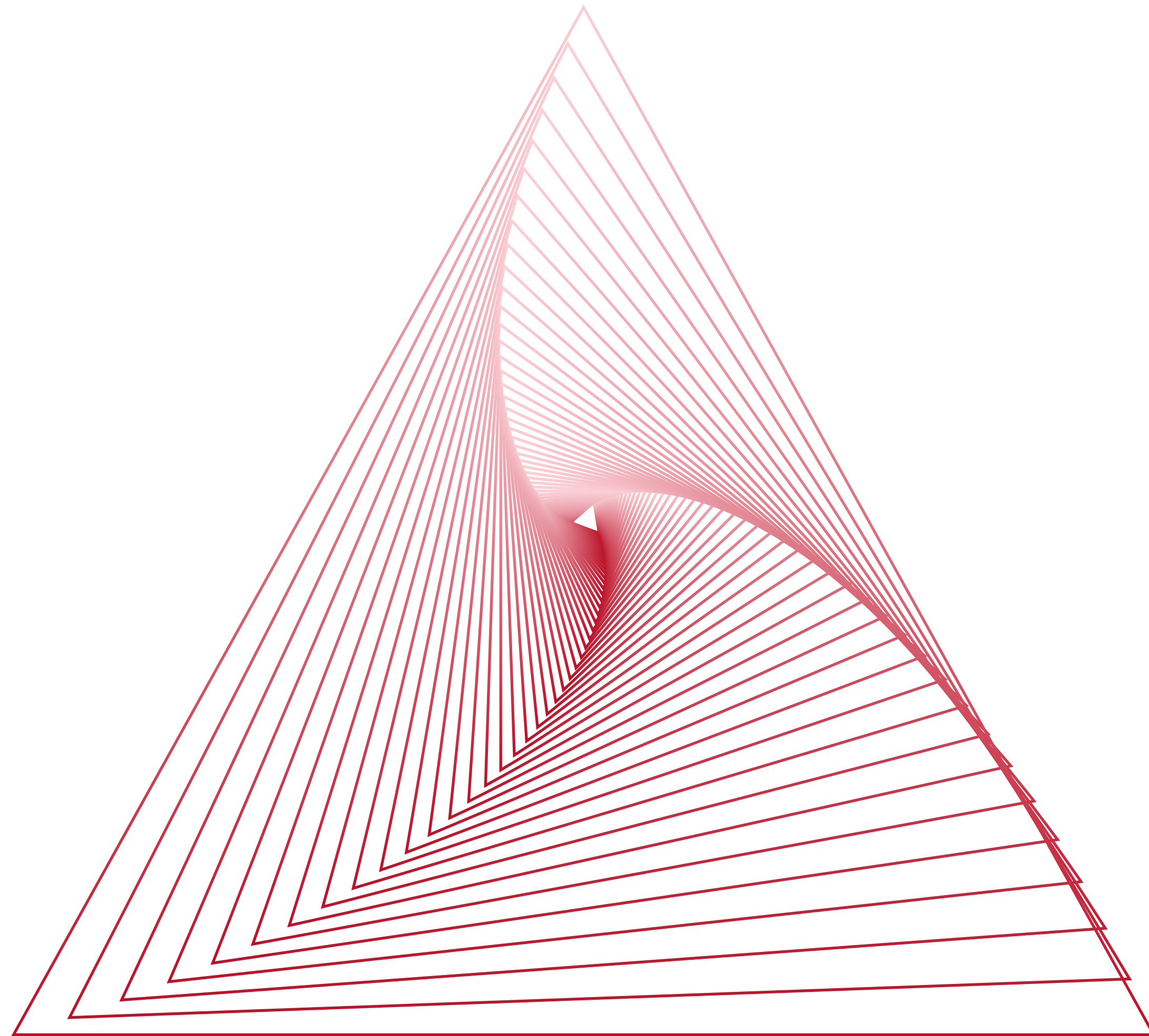




# Start with these resources

- 1. Case Study Library - Design Thinking and Rapid Impact Evaluation for Public Sector Innovation**
- 2. TBS Guide to Rapid Impact Evaluation: Guide to Rapid Impact Evaluation - Canada.ca**
- 3. The professional work of Andy Rowe - several resources for Rapid Impact Evaluation**
- 4. Darren Swanson and Suruchi Bhadwal - Creating Adaptive Policies: A Guide for Policy-making in an Uncertain World (2009)**





## Conclusion

Policy is lived - it is an organic, open system so design with iterations... limit or replace static hand-offs.

What you produce shapes what gets decided - use counterfactuals across policy products with intent to guide implementation.

Counterfactual thinking is a **non-intrusive, nimble** practice. It makes alternative futures and their impact on implementation explicit - not implicit.





**Thank you!**

Reach us at:

**PCPO-BPCP@tc.gc.ca**

Website:

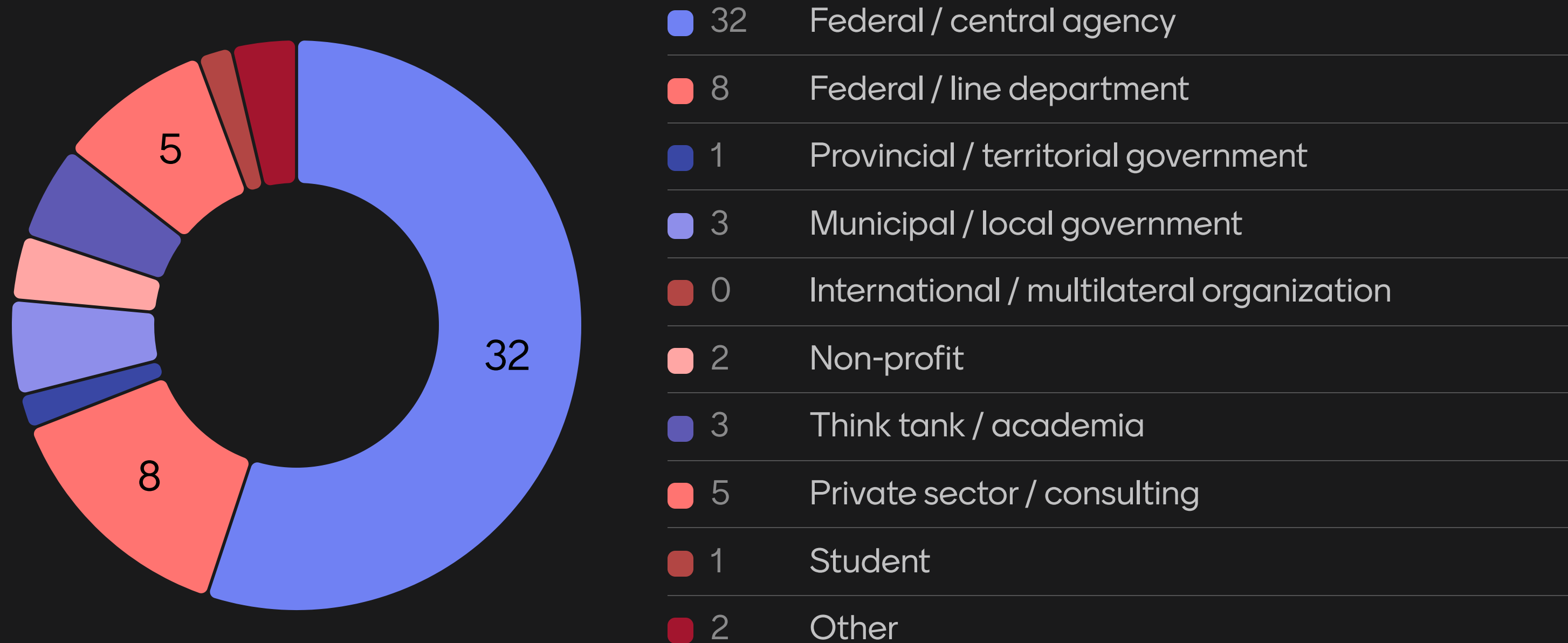
**policy-community.canada.ca**



# Instructions



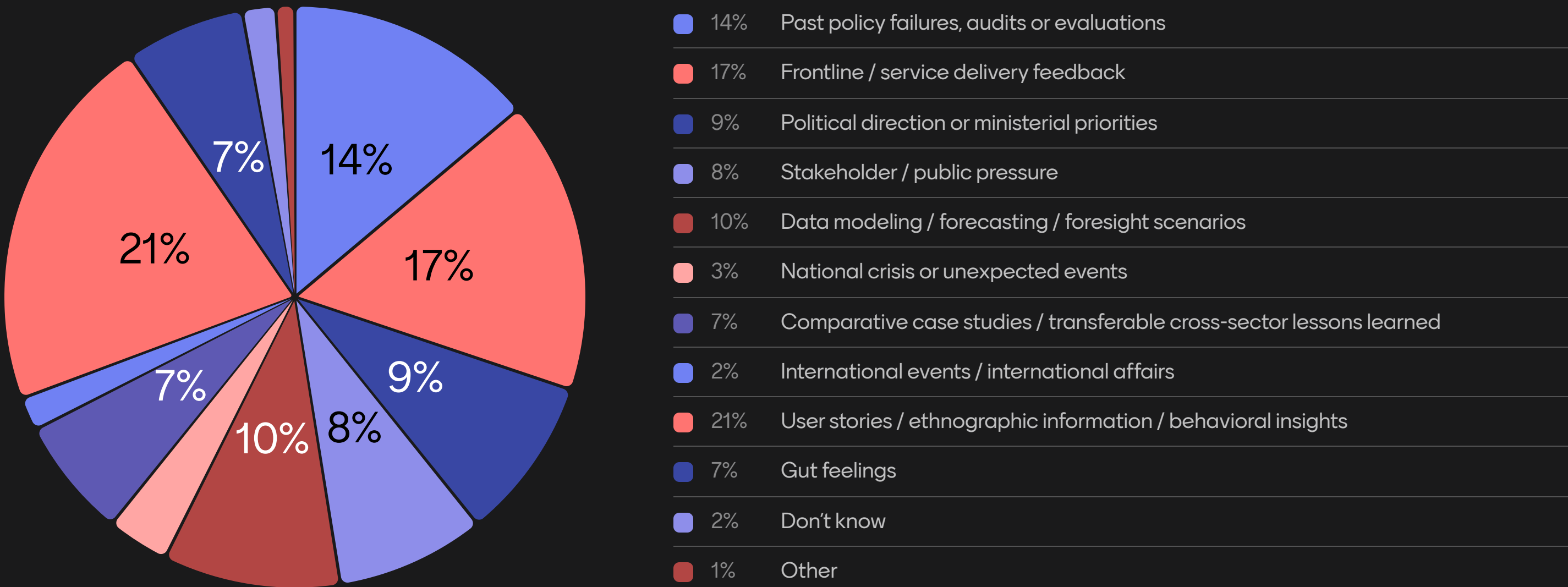
# 1. What best describes your current policymaking work context? *(Select one that applies)*



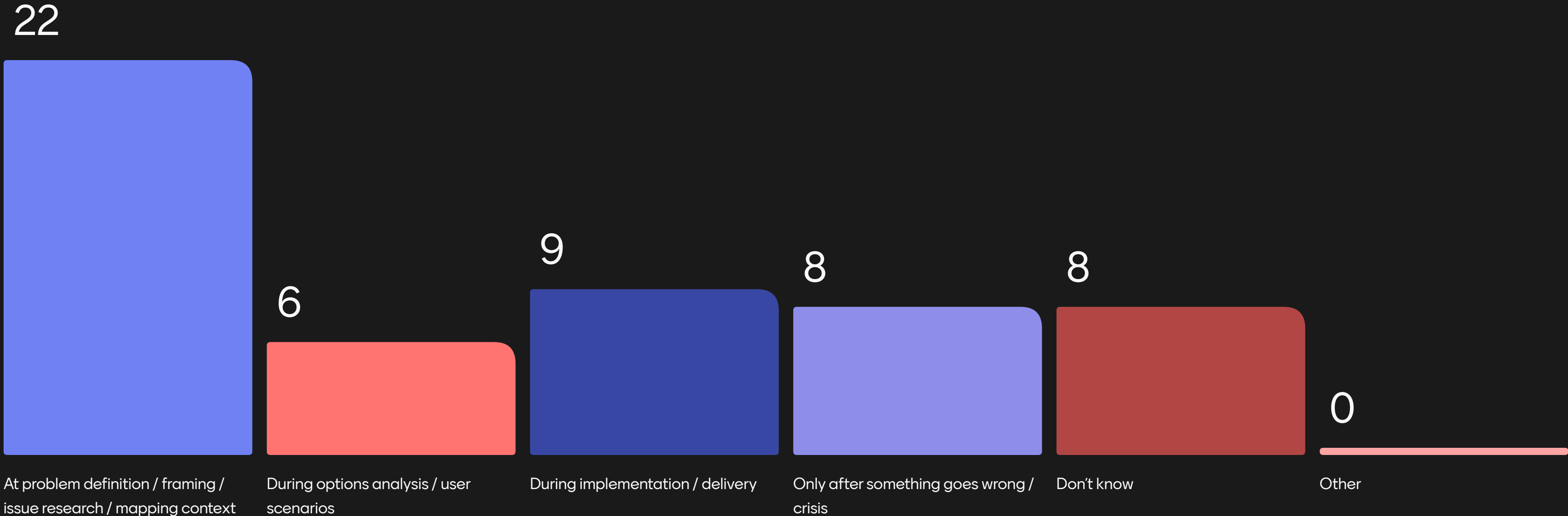
## 2. Where in the policy cycle have you spent most of your career? (Select one that applies)



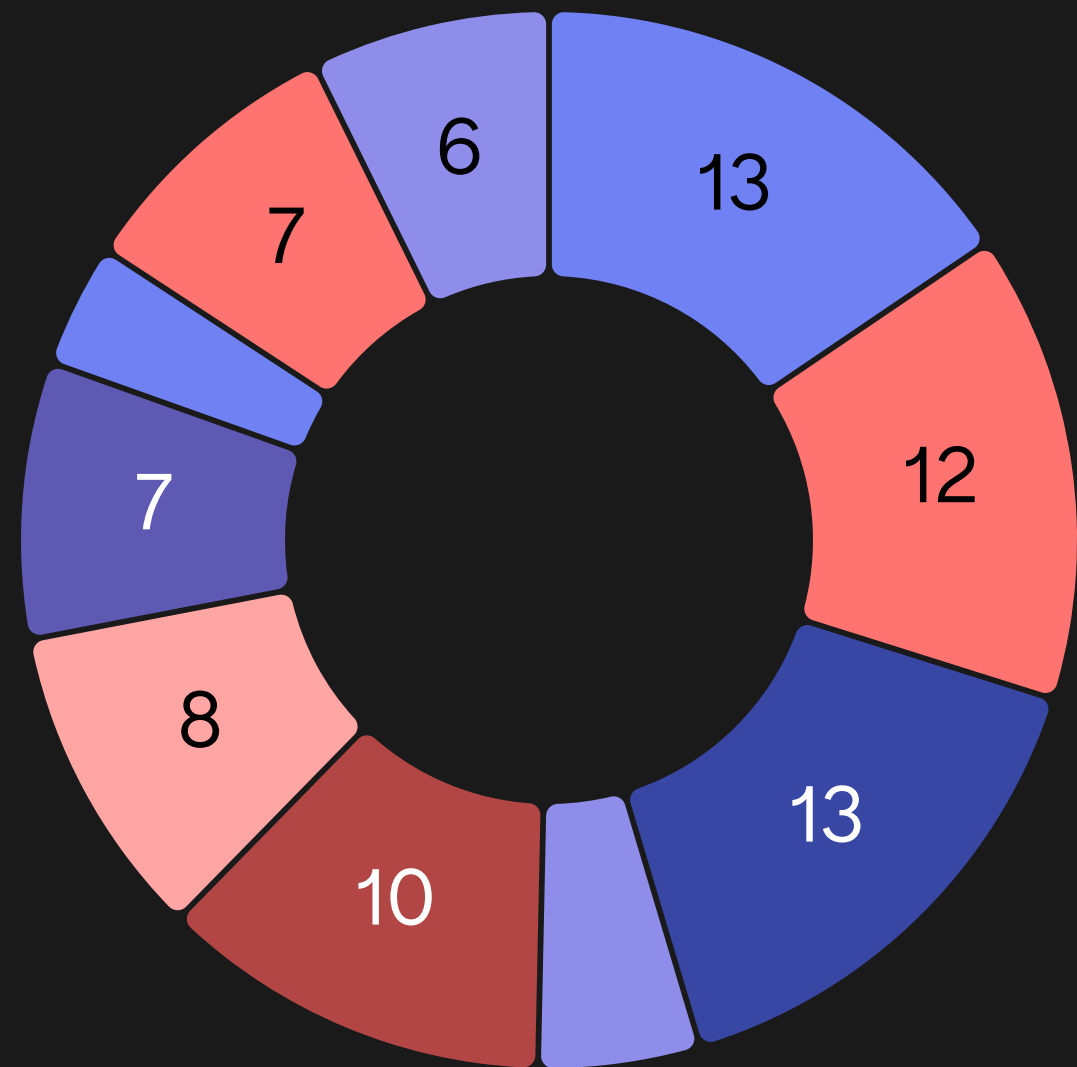
### 3. Where do your most valuable 'what if' insights usually come from? (Select up to 3 that apply)



# 4. At what point does policy work actually become adaptive in your context? *(Select one that applies)*

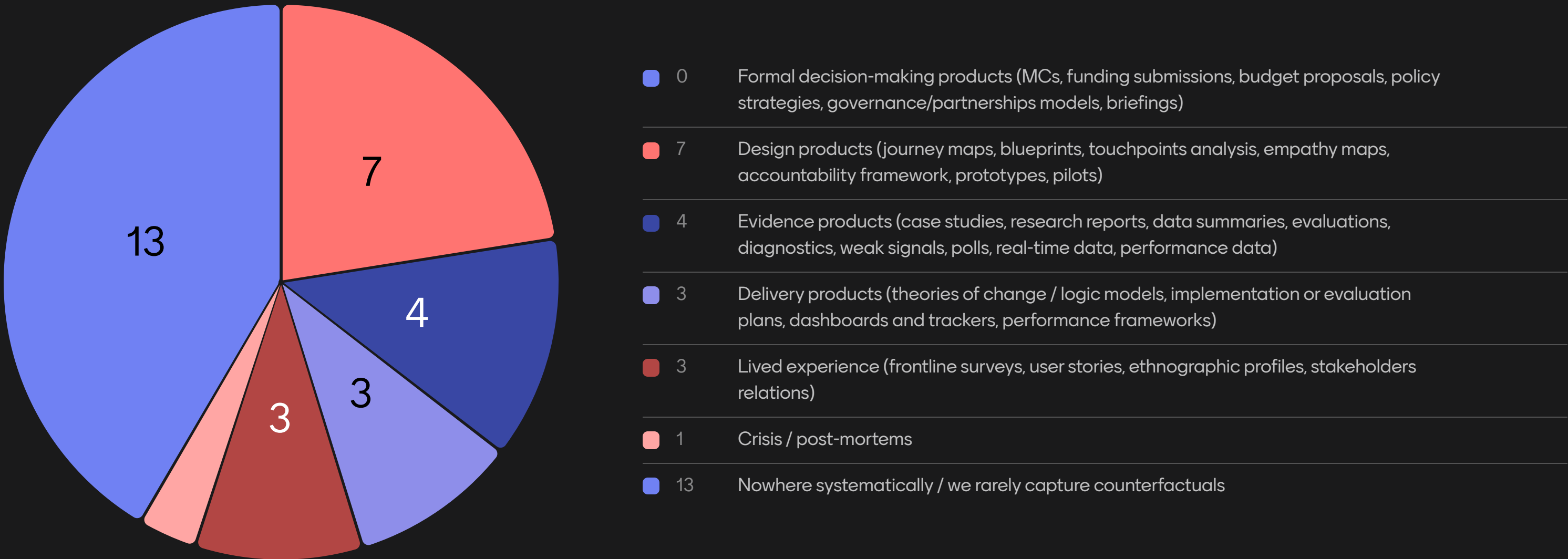


# 5. What is the biggest barrier to applying counterfactuals in your context? (Select up to 3 in your context)



- 13 Lack of time
- 12 Lack of capacity / technical skills
- 13 Risk aversion / culture / attachment to current ways
- 4 Lack of political or leadership support
- 10 Siloed structures / closed systems / "turf wars"
- 8 Lack of data / insufficient evidence / lack of access to data or evidence
- 7 Not sure where to start / overwhelming
- 3 Not sure how to operationalize insights
- 7 "Locked in" solutions / premature "right fit" to problem(s)
- 0 Change saturation
- 6 First time I hear about this / never tried
- 0 Other

# 6. Where are counterfactual insights most often hiding in your policy work? (Select one that applies)



## 7. Is there feedback you would like to share about the presentation today that may not have been discussed? (open)

Agree this has been about naming something that's typically implicit and rushed through in our thinking. Really helpful to have words for it!

Case studies and examples would help with bringing abstract concepts to life and show the positive difference this approach makes to policy making

I haven't worked in the policy context directly just via academic research have touched on elements. So wasn't able to participate in some of the questions but awesome to hear. Examples would help

lot's to ponder. would have liked a step by step concrete example to make it more understandable for newbies

Make it more relateable to the audience. There were a lot of terms used that were not used in context of UK government.

References to papers on counterfactuals in the follow up with slides would be helpful

As context changes quite rapidly, how do you plan counter factuals into the design and implementation process?

When citing third party work (e.g. Rapid Impact Evaluation) it'd be helpful to have more info e.g. in the chat or on the slide.

Thank you for participating.

