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THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

FORECASTING STARTER KIT:
A toolkit to understand the outcome of policy through systems thinking

Developed by:

TRACES DREAMS

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About this document

This Forecasting Starter Kit has been developed within the AllonBoard project to support the replication of the AI Civic Foresight Lab in different local and educational contexts. It provides practical guidance, templates and simplified resources for using systems thinking, Loopy and AI-supported reflection to explore the possible long-term effects of policy decisions.

The resource is intended for use by schools, youth centres, municipalities, NGOs, project partners and other organisations working with young people, migrant communities and civic participation.

Disclaimer

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Learning goals

By the end of the lab, participants should be able to:

- Explain policy foresight in simple terms and name at least 3 features of complex systems (e.g. feedback, delays, unintended effects).
- Build a small causal model (nodes + arrows) with Loopy for one thematic area (digital access, rural development, migrant's integration).
- Use AI as a thinking partner: question the prompts, challenge assumptions, and improve the model.

Systems thinking is a holistic, "big picture" approach to analysis that focuses on how different parts of a system interact, influence, and depend on one another, rather than examining parts in isolation. In policy foresight we use it to be clearer about our assumptions and get a better understanding of how systems may react to policy changes.

Introduction to Systems Thinking

Grounded in Donella Meadows' *Thinking in Systems* (2008)

> "A system is a set of elements interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time." — Donella Meadows

Interconnectedness

Everything is connected; actions ripple through the system.

Feedback

Systems respond to their own outputs through reinforcing and balancing loops.

Emergence

The whole behaves differently than the sum of its parts.

Delays

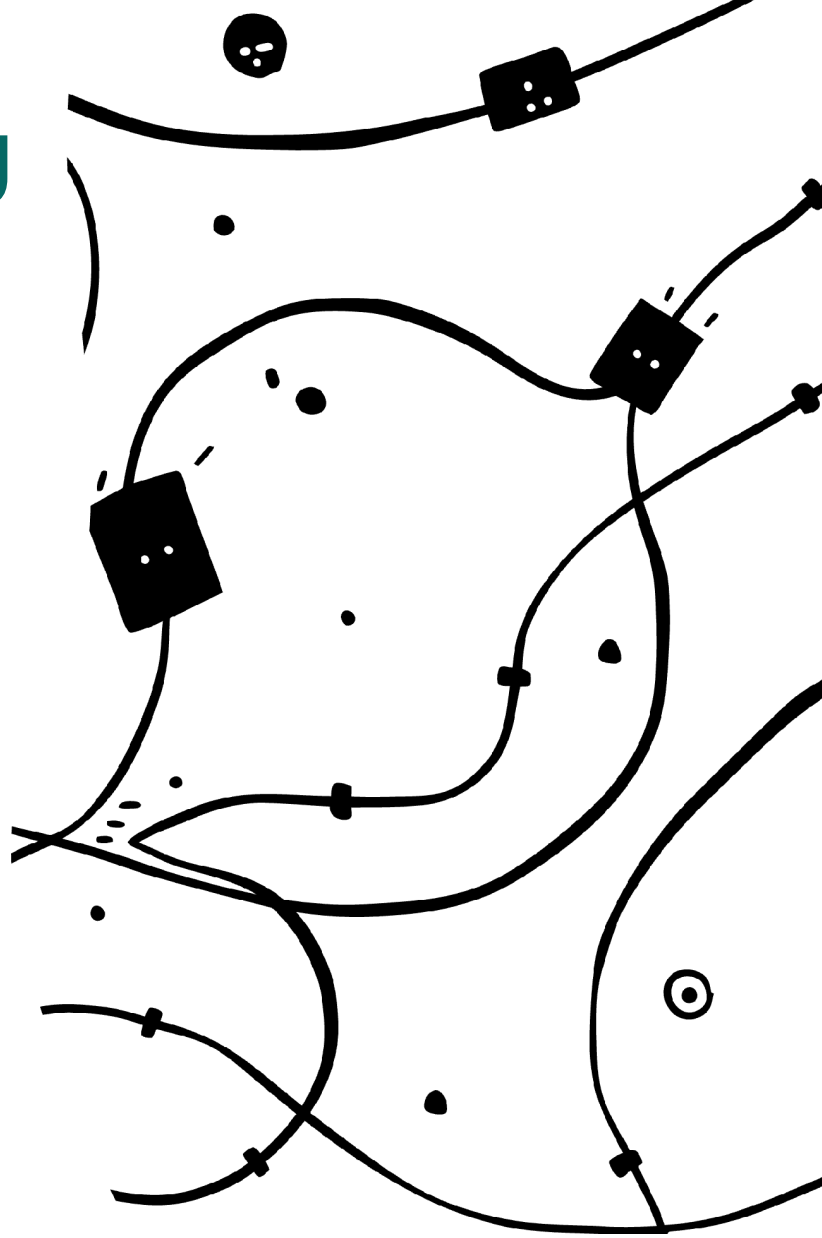
Effects often appear long after causes.

Leverage Points

Small changes in the right place can shift entire systems.

Context

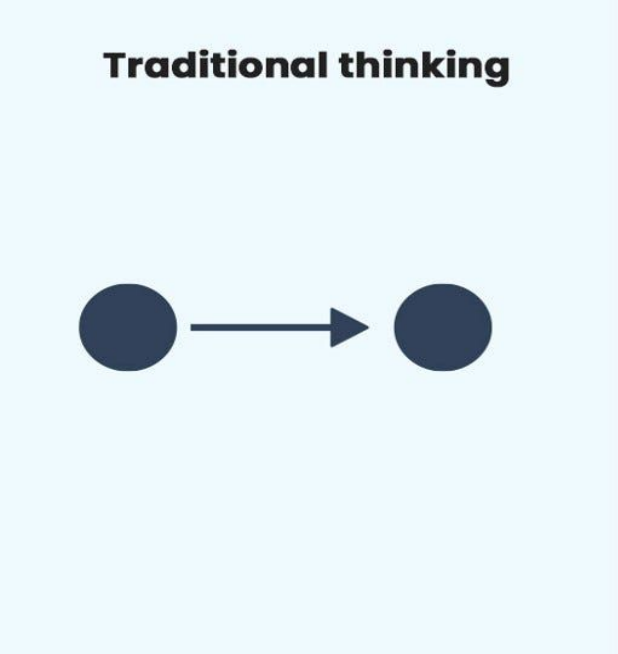
The space and time where something plays out.



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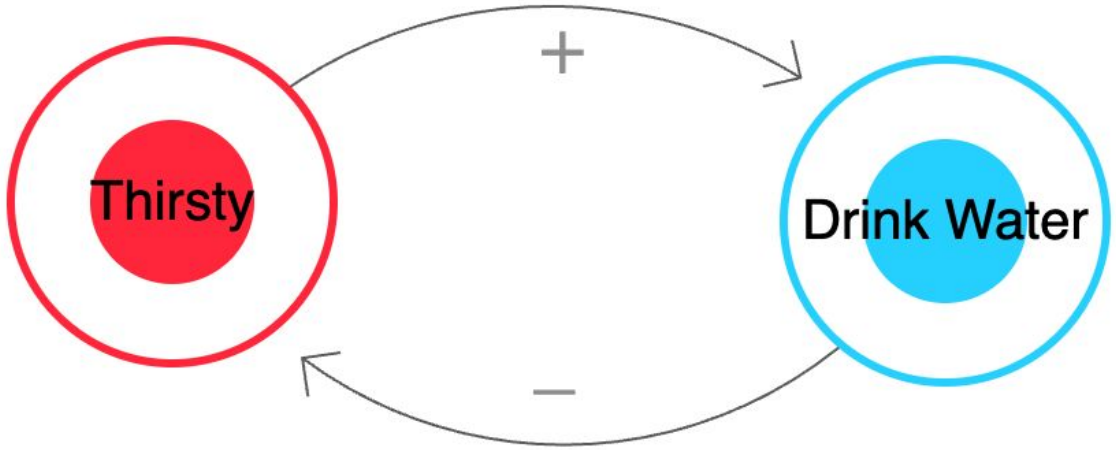
Why thinking in systems?



- Systems thinking matches the structure of the problems, while linear thinking matches the structure of the bureaucracy.
- Policy foresight is about exploring alternative futures under uncertainty, not predicting a single outcome.
- Most EU and OECD guidance on foresight now explicitly couples it with systems thinking for this reason.

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Most things can be seen as a System



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Causal Loop Diagrams Captures Four Things:

1

Nodes (things that change or matter)

Examples: "flood risk," "property values," "migration," "ecosystem health".
These are variables, they go up and down.

2

Arrows (relationships between things)

Does flood risk affect property values? Draw an arrow. Does it increase it or decrease it? Label: **+** or **−**

3

Feedback Loops (when effects circle back)

More people move to an area → housing prices rise → people can't afford it → fewer people move to that area. These loops can a stabilise (balancing loops) or amplify (reinforcing loops).

4

Delays (time lags between cause and effect)

Plant trees → takes 5–10 years → shade reduces urban heat. Many policy disasters happen because we ignore delays. Illustrate by making the arrows longer.

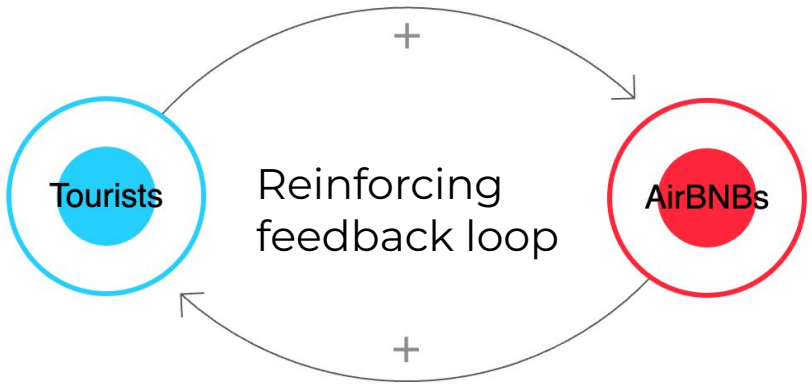
Feedback Loops - Balancing or Reinforcing

more rabbits means MORE foxes:
it's a positive (+) relationship



more foxes means FEWER rabbits:
it's a negative (–) relationship

more tourists means MORE AirBnBs:
it is a postive (+) relationship



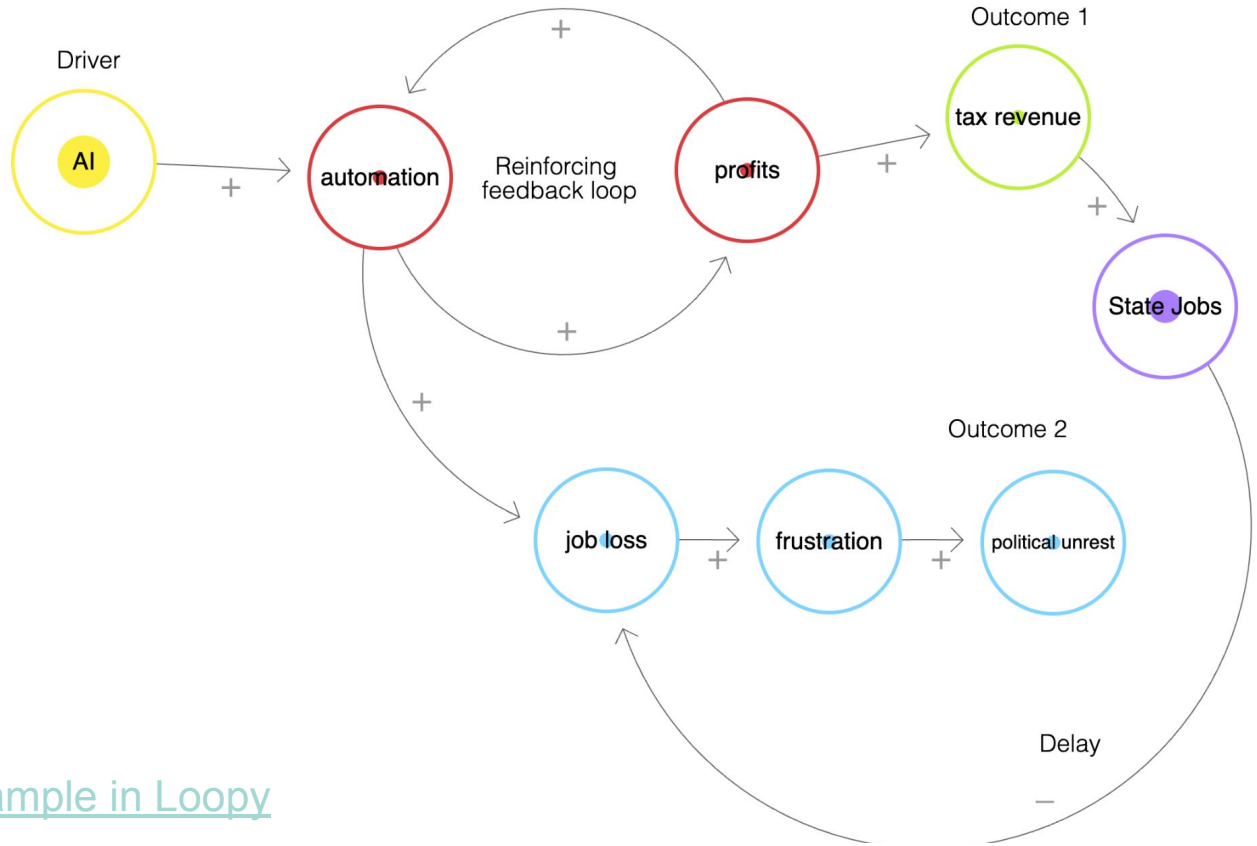
more AirBnBs means MORE tourists:
it is a positive (+) relationship

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Causal loop diagrams in Loopy

In Loopy you can...

- build a visual map of any system using nodes and arrows
- give your nods colours and “start amount”
- several arrows to set "strength" for each relationship
- shows delays by making the arrows longer or shorter
- Runs a simulation of your system



Example in Loopy

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Activity Description

Break into groups

Approximately 10 people per group and set roles

Specify your topic

10 minutes discussion, the point is to learn the tool, not have the perfect topic

Find your Nodes

20 Minutes, brainstorm and use AI to find what matters

Build in Loopy

20 minutes, map the relationship between your nods in Loopy

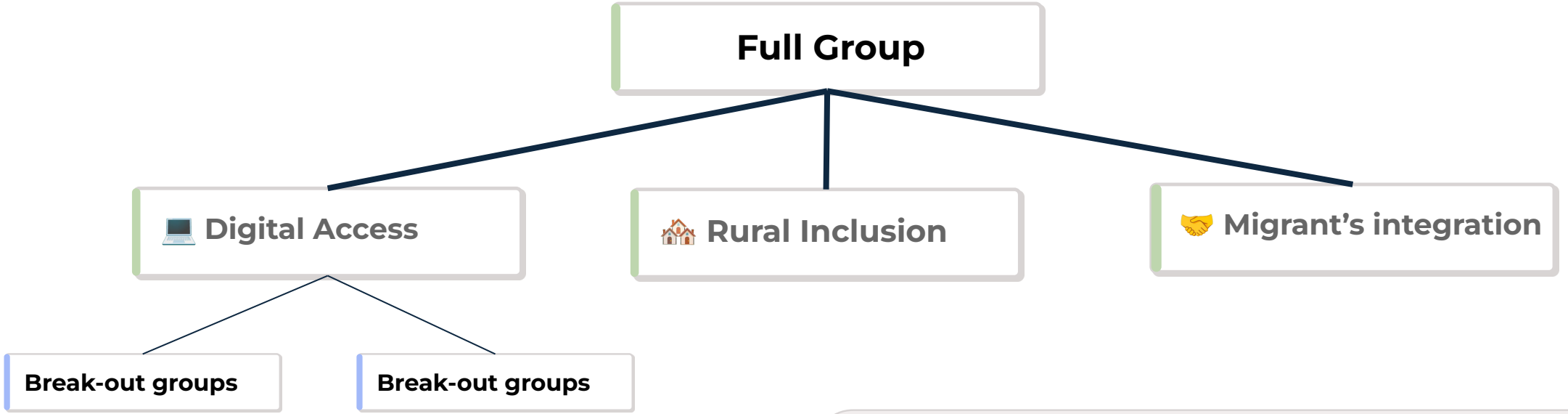
Finalise your model

10 min, make your final model

Remember: The goal isn't a perfect model. It's clearer thinking about how systems actually work.

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Step 1: Chose a thematic area and divide into groups (use 5 minutes)



1. Start in full group and chose a thematic area you are interested in
2. Break out in groups of maximum 10 people interested in the same area
3. Present yourselves and give everyone a role

Roles:

1. **Facilitator** (guides the group process and keeps track on time)
2. **AI prompter** (asks the AI questions)
3. **Loopy builder** (manages Loopy and share screen)

Adaptations for different thematic areas

Digital Access

- What stops people from going online and using digital tools confidently?
- Map access in layers: devices, connectivity, affordability, skills, confidence, accessibility, and trust.
- Map which barriers matter most in your context and how to overcome them.
- It is not about constant connectivity, it is about accessing meaningful services and information.

Rural Inclusion

- Why do some young people leave the countryside, and what conditions make local life feel viable or unviable?
- Explore the opportunity structure: jobs, education, broadband, transport, services, and social life, as well as the relationship between younger and older generations.
- Trace the feedback loops between migration, local vitality, and the capacity of a place to remain attractive over time.

Migrant's integration

- What prevents migrants from taking part in civic, social, or community life?
- Map who holds decision-making power, whose voices are heard, and how stigma or stereotypes shape access to opportunity.
- Treat exclusion as a system (structure), not a personal failing.
- Look for reinforcing loops where inclusion in one area opens the door to further participation.

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Step 2: Specify your topic (use 10 minutes)

Examples of topics in each thematic area

💻 Digital Access

"In Sweden it is hard to find a job if you lack digital skills. We propose 1 million Euros yearly to NGOs working on digital skills training for the next 4 years"

🏘️ Rural inclusion

"Young people are leaving Italian villages. We propose 1 million Euros in subsidies for rural entrepreneurship starting next year."

🤝 Migrant's integration

Migrants in Spain are facing discrimination based on religion. We propose an awareness raising project spanning 5 years with a budget of 500 000 Euros.

- START from your thematic area and decide a specific topic the group is interested in.
- Identify a problem.
- Where is it happening?
- When is it happening?
- What policy do you propose to solve the problem?

❌ "Climate change" is too broad
✅ "Extreme heat days in Vienna the year 2030" is precise
❌ "Economic growth" is vague
✅ "Local jobs in renewable energy next year" is testable

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Step 3: Find your nodes (key factors) - (use 10 minutes)

01

Start by **brainstorming** what key factors (nodes) may affect your topic

02

Try asking one or more **LLMs (AI)** for help inserting the prompt below adapted to your topic

AI prompt: “You are a policy systems expert. List x key factors (nodes) that influence [our policy question] in [our country/region, year] fit for a causal loop diagram and using B1 level English. Use short phrases, no explanations.”

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Step 4: Map your system (use up to 25 minutes)

01

Add your nods in Loopy https://ncase.me/loopy/

02

Map how they're connected (arrows with + or −) in Loopy ✅ "More green spaces → Less Flood risk" is clear. ❌ "Green spaces → Flood risk" leaves you guessing

03

Test the outcome of your system in Loopy

04

Propose a policy. Think critically about your model. Ask “what did we miss?” Propose a policy (and add it to your model) so that the outcome is better. Play around with the model.

Make Arrows Clear

Each arrow needs a label: **+** (increases) or **−** (decreases). Note that minus (-) and minus (-) makes plus (+).

Look-out for Loops

If a node affects itself (even indirectly), you've found a feedback loop. These are often where the real action in any system is.

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Step 5: Finalise your model (use up to 5 minutes)

1. Final Check

Make the final adjustments to your model and make sure everyone in the group understands the model. Even if you do not fully agree on all the relationships you should be able to explain why they are

2. Share your work

Take a screenshot of your model, name it with your group number and upload it here.

3. Reflect

- What did you learn through this exercise?
- What was an unexpected outcome of your model?
- What did you as a group disagree about and why is that?
- How does this systems thinking approach change the way you think about politics?

Practical Resources & Links

🔧 Loopy Tool

Free, browser-based, no account needed

Tool Tutorial

📖 Systems Thinker

Article on Causal Loop Basics

thesystemsthinker.com

🎓 Edutopia

Guide to teaching systems thinking

edutopia.org

Real-world examples you might study:

- Climate-resilient city strategies: Houston, San Francisco, Los Angeles (community engagement models)
- Rural youth employment initiatives: EU Rural Youth Future programme

Optional reading:

Donella Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*

Jennifer Graves' work on unintended policy consequences