Why Good Health Policies Fail: Fixing the Hidden Evidence Gap

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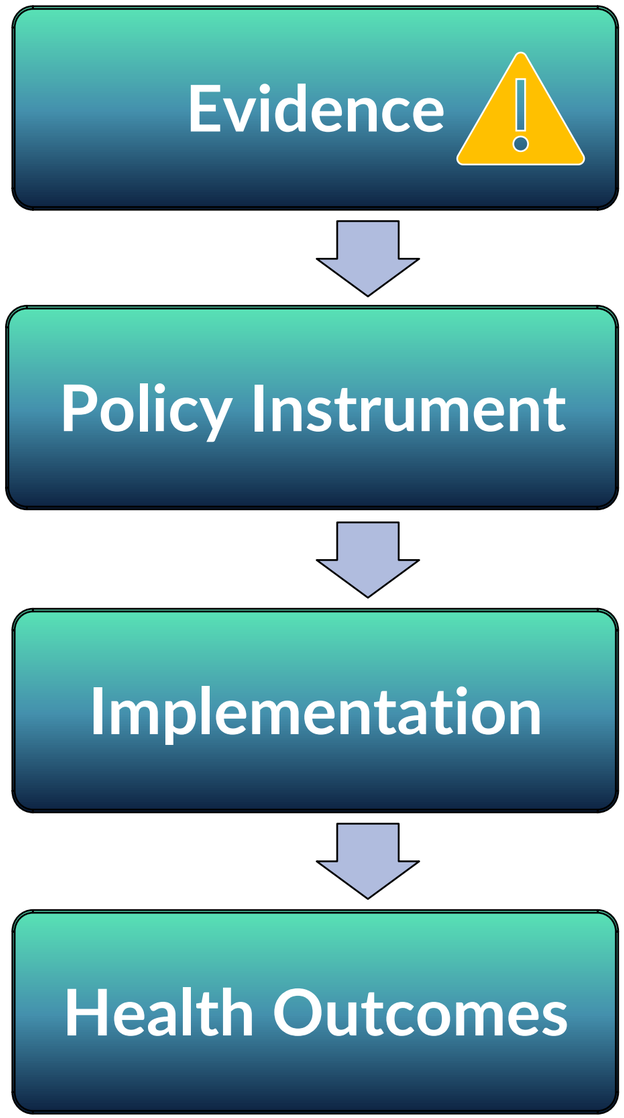
Good Policy Instrument Under Performs

- E.g., Nepal's National Health Insurance Program – What went wrong?
  - Targeting Failure: Voluntary enrollment → misses the most vulnerable for catastrophic payment (e.g., Ghimire et al., 2019).
  - Calibration Failure: Benefit cap + under resources facility → weak financial protection (e.g., Shah et al., 2022).
- The policy instrument is well intended, but its design is built on fragile evidence

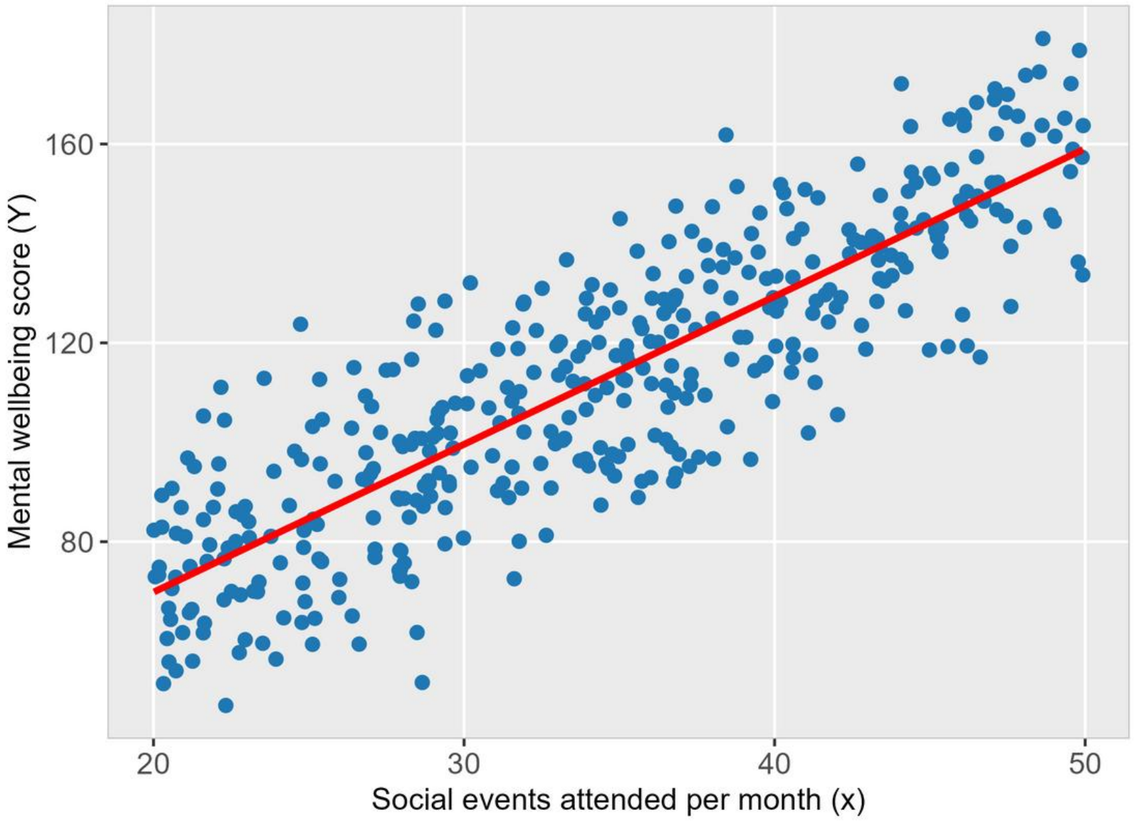
The Policy Chain: Evidence Under Pressure



- When evidence is weak the rest of the chain breaks – despite the strong instrument (e.g. Haber et al., 2022; Mitchel & Font, 2017)
- The Root Causes – evidence shortcuts. Why (e.g., Bandola-Gill et al., 2024)?
  - Policy Urgency
  - Data Quality
  - Deadlines
  - Short donor or project cycle
  - Analytic capacity
  - Publication incentives (effective results)
  - Political pressure (for actionable proof)

#1: Correlation Masquerading Causation

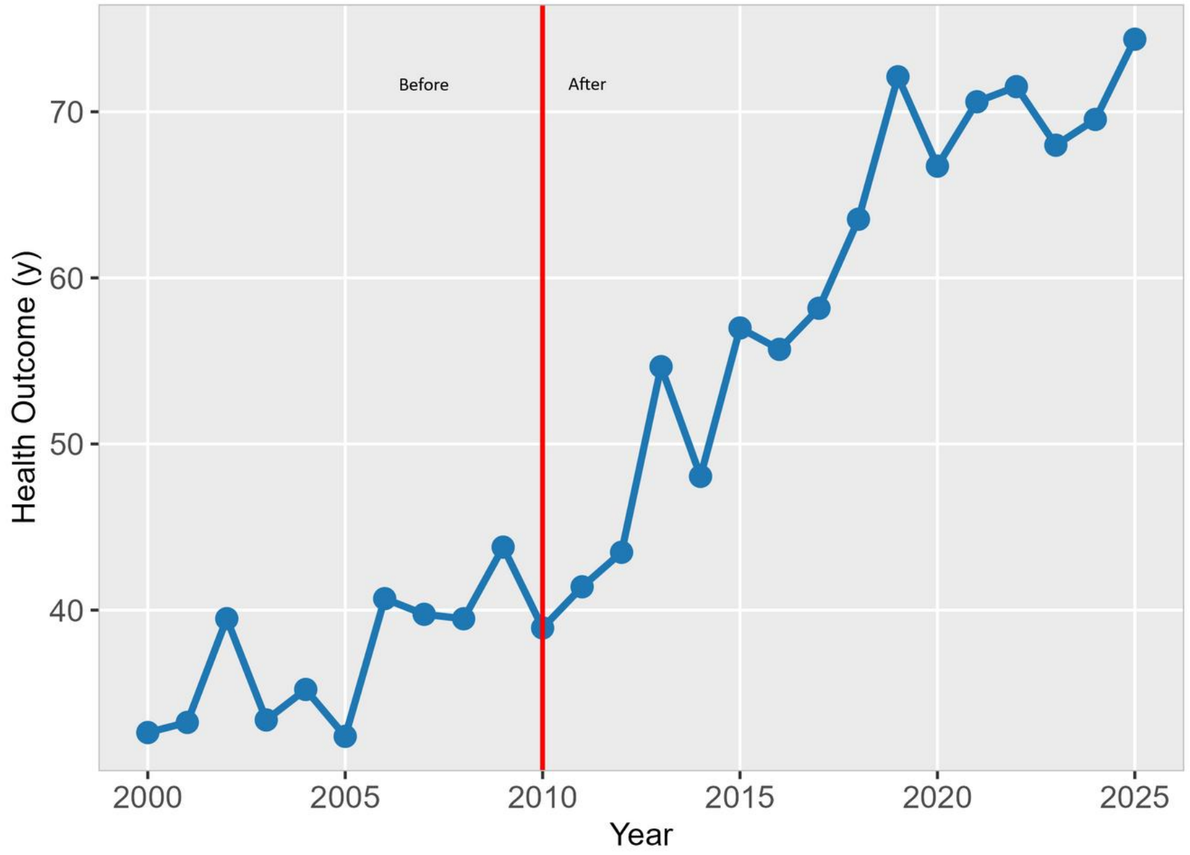
- **How it appears in Policy?**
  - Seeing a pattern in routine data
  - Designing instrument based on “what correlates”
- **Why it’s tempting?**
  - Correlations is easy analysis
  - Fits timeline pressure
  - Looks convincing in dashboard
- **Why it fails?**
  - Correlation confounding and selection



The Dashboard Illusion: A strong correlation can hide the real driver

#2: Measuring the Change NOT Impact

- **How it appears in Policy?**
  - Nationwide rollouts
  - A few “pilot districts” selected purposively
  - Pre-post comparison
- **Why it’s tempting?**
  - Politically expedient and easy to communicate
  - Fits short donor reporting cycles.
- **Why it fails?**
  - Correlation vs causation confusion
  - False confidence for scale-up



Everything else changed too; without a comparison group this is an illusion

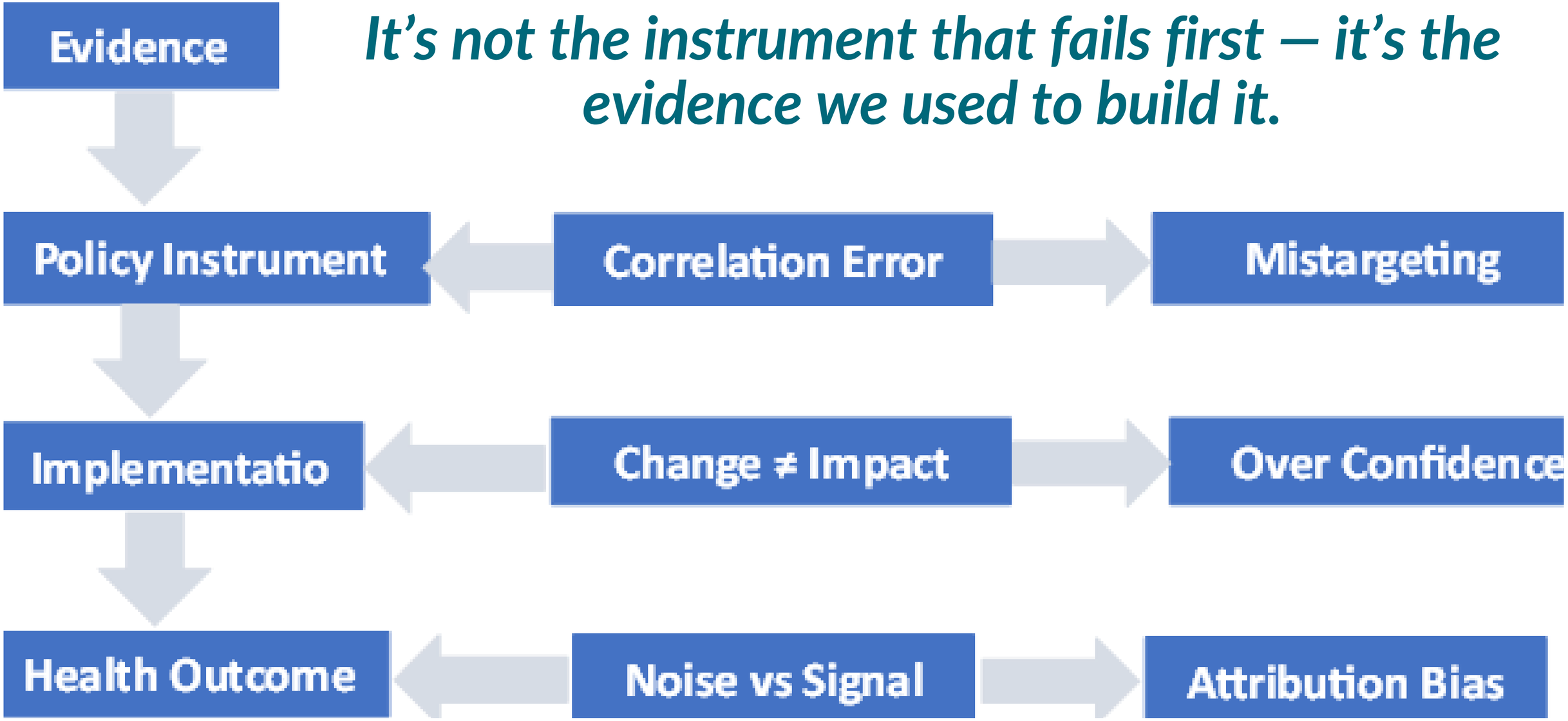
#3: Treating Weak Data as Precise Signals

- **How it appears in Policy?**
  - Instruments based on volatile routine data
  - Ranking based on indicators with random noise
  - Ignoring uncertainty in model prediction
- **Why it's tempting?**
  - Pressure to use data
  - Numbers appear precise complex results feel scientific
- **Why it fails?**
  - Mistakes noise for a signal
  - Mis-calibrate policy instrument

Noisy data → confident decisions → fragile instrument

How Fragile Evidence Breaks Good Policy?

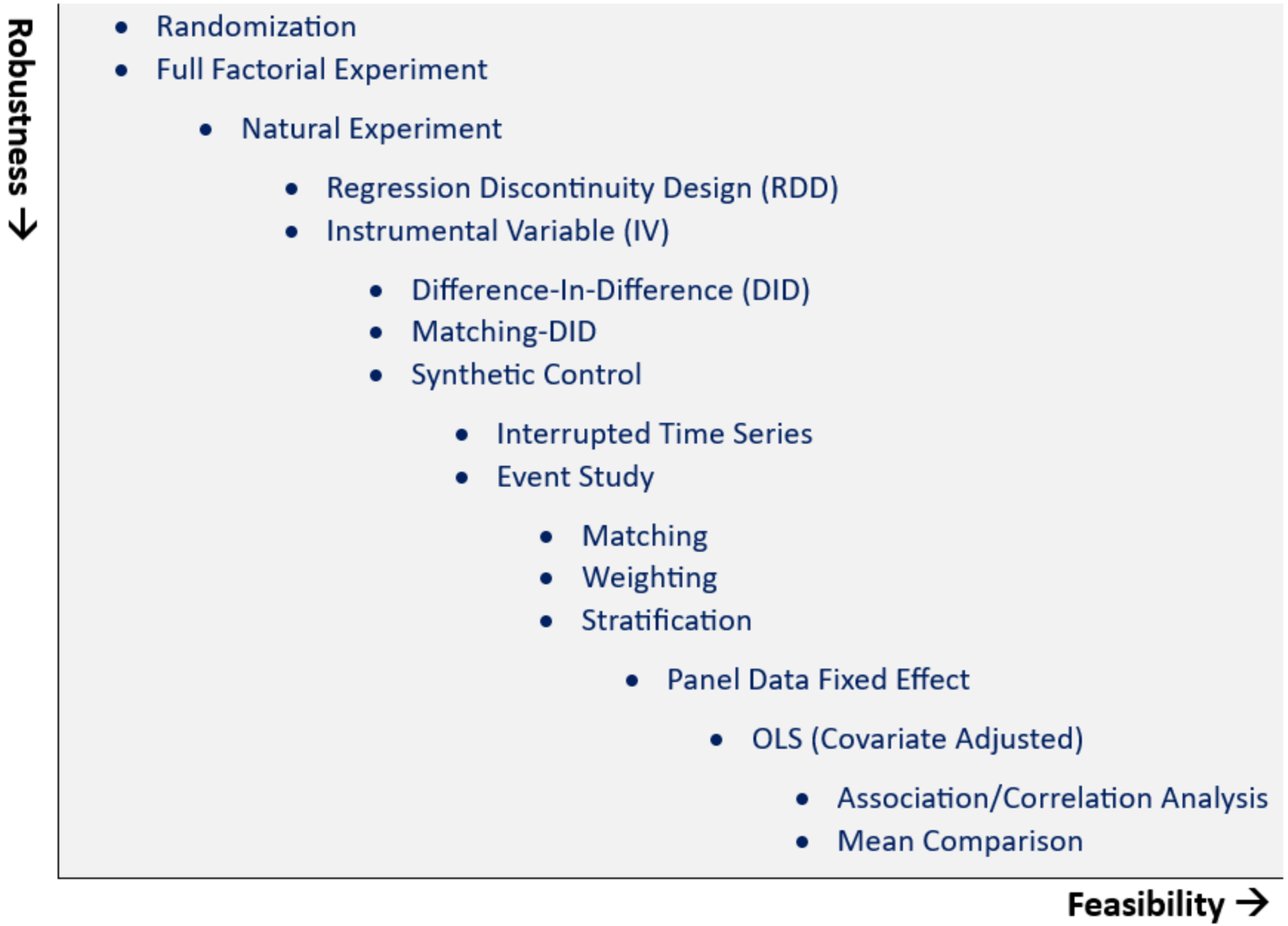
It's not the instrument that fails first — it's the evidence we used to build it.



A Toolkit: Data & Analysis are Within Reach

- **Unlock Value from Open Data: Constraints ≠ data absence.**
  - In Afghanistan, researchers combined mobile phone usage data with surveys to target cash transfers to the ultra-poor more accurately than traditional methods (Aiken et al., 2023).
  - In China, open GIS data was used to diagnose stark inequalities in health and education service (Hu et al., 2023).
- **Adopt a "Smart Analysis" Mindset.**
  - In Senegal, a study on sanitation privatization combined routine administrative data with DHS surveys in a quasi-experimental design to evaluate health outcomes (Deutschmann et al., 2023).
  - Across Africa, integrating conflict data with sequential DHS/MICS surveys has allowed for more dynamic forecasting of malnutrition, turning scattered data into an early-warning system (Baker & Billing, 2024).

The Key Shift: A Mindset for Causal Rigor



The goal is not perfection, but direction: relentlessly moving up the ladder toward more credible causal evidence

The One Question that Changes Everything

- **The Mantra - What is the counterfactual?**
- **What it means**: "*What would have happened without the policy?*"
- **Why it matters:** You can't know if a policy worked unless you know what would have happened anyway.
- **What it demands:** Evidence that compares outcomes to a credible baseline scenario—not just a before-and-after snapshot.
- ***"The quality of your policy instrument depends on the quality of the counterfactual that designed it."***

A New Pact for Better Policy Instruments

- **For Researchers (Us)**
  - Design for Causality: Plan the comparison first.
  - Communicate Uncertainty: Report what we don’t know, clearly.
- **For Policymakers (MoH)**
  - Demand the Counterfactual: Make “Compared to what?” your standard question.
  - Invest in Open Data: Treat data infrastructure as core policy capacity.
- **For Donors & INGOs**
  - Fund Evidence Quality, not just intervention delivery.
  - Protect Time for Rigor in project timelines.

Better evidence is our most powerful policy instrument. Let's build it together.

Thank You !

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