Creative Policy Dialogues through Serious Fun:

Climate Centre

Humour and Acrobatics to Confront Climate and Mental Health

Table of Contents

LIFE

> Images in this report were taken by Climate Centre staff with the exception of:
> Anticipation Hub: photos № 3, 25
> Circocan International School of Circus: photos № 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 26, 30
> Eastern Acrobatics & Circus: photo № 12
> Gravity & Other Myths: photos № 13, 14, 19
> Hamishibai: photos № 1, 6, 7, 20, 21
> Museum of Science, Boston: photos № 2, 29

Images with this icon ◢ are animated
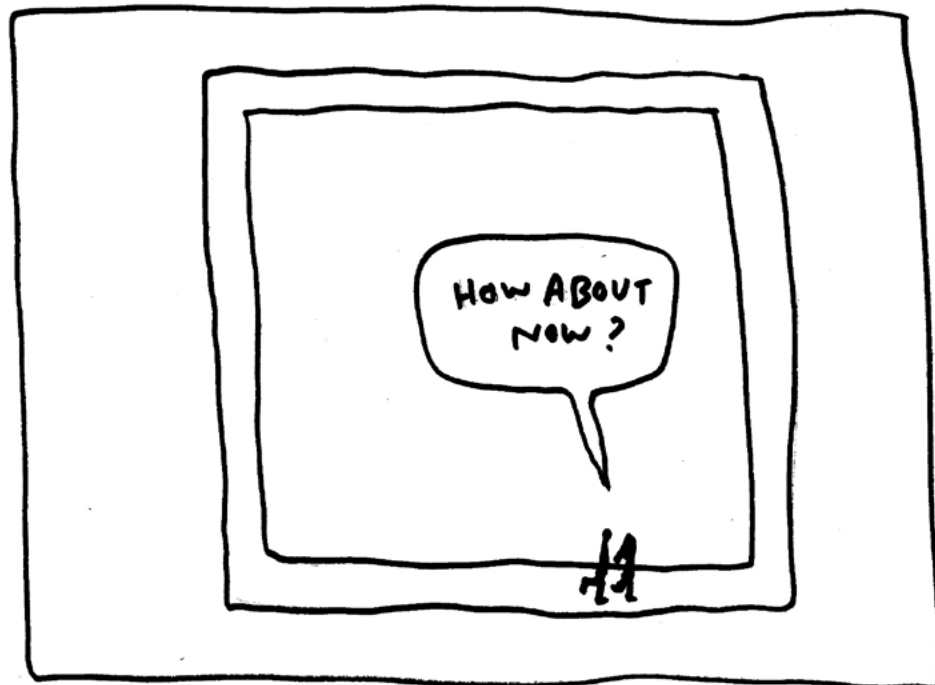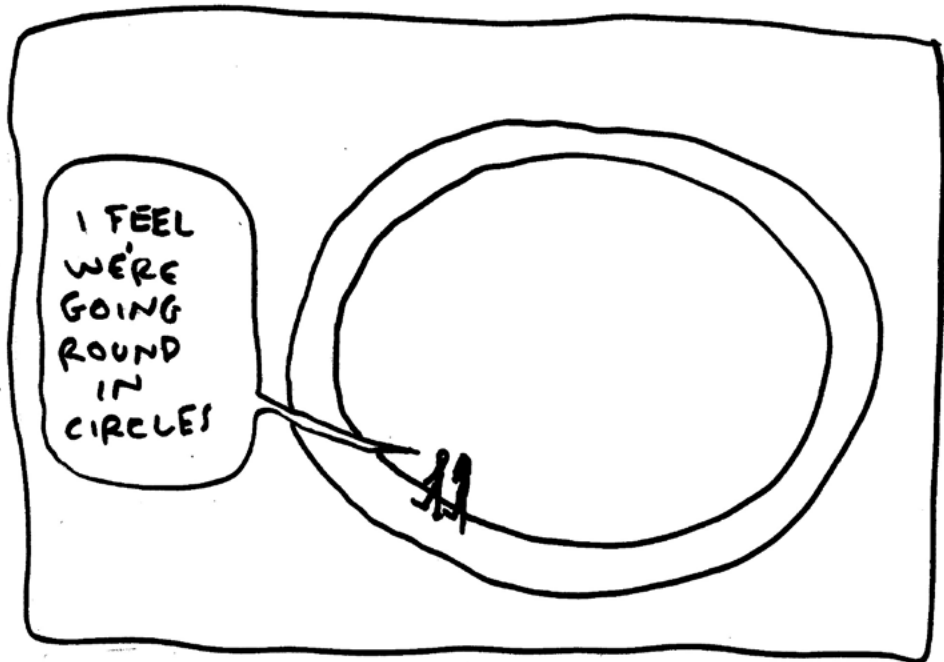
Executive summary

As part of Wellcome Policy Lab's innovation pilots, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre explored how to enrich policy dialogues through two innovative approaches: humour and acrobatics. From July to December 2023, we experimented with helping people think and feel differently through serious fun, working with creative partners (professional cartoonists and circus artists). Throughout this project, we trialled these methods in policy-relevant events, focusing on climate change and mental health.

1a

1b

1c

1d

1e

We pursued unconventional uses of cartoons: visual depictions of analogy and metaphor that amusingly communicate complex concepts almost instantaneously. By lightly capturing absurdities, tensions and dangers pertaining to policy processes, we posited that humour could deepen engagement, reframe thinking, help notice difficult truths, build trust between people and inspire new ideas. We developed and deployed nine humour-based approaches, ranging from cartoon co-creation workshops to 'pocket theatre' vignettes that quickly and compellingly convey key issues and invite conversation.

We also examined acrobatics and circus arts: activities involving human feats of balance, agility and motor coordination. Acrobatics can resonate with people, including policymakers, through themes of collaboration, trust, responsibility, creativity, safety and awe. We developed and built on eight acrobatics-based approaches that can be utilised in presentations, workshops and policy spaces. Methods ranged from tailor-made performances that convey a key issue to juggling and falling activities that accelerate interaction and ideation about risk management.
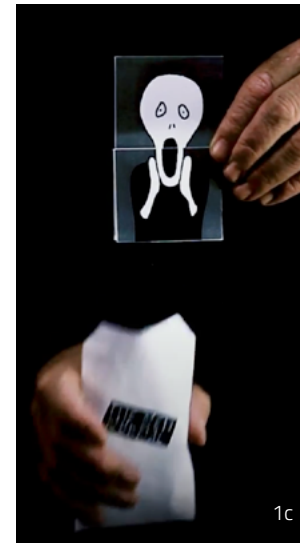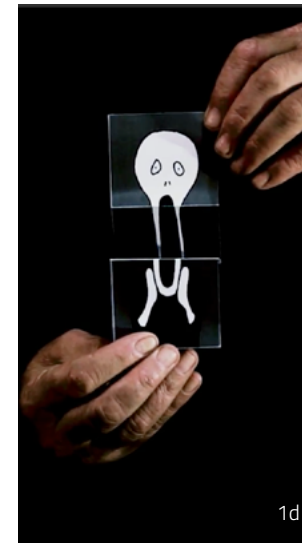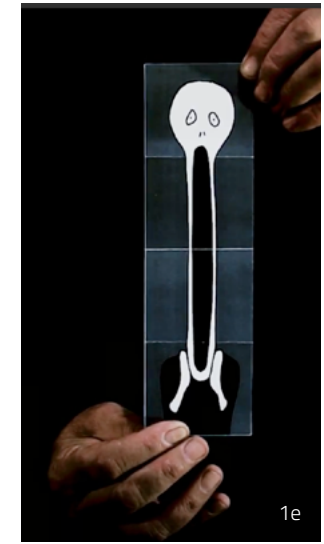
2

3

Over six months, we tested and refined these approaches in 38 different sessions (in person, online and hybrid), reaching at least 1500 participants in five continents. Participants and partners included leadership at humanitarian and development organisations, academic researchers across disciplines, Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers, people with lived experience and mental health professionals. Sessions ranged from small policy workshops to large performances with interactive portions.

The work offered opportunities for learning. Assessing results from these experimental sessions is particularly challenging as links to crucial measurable changes, 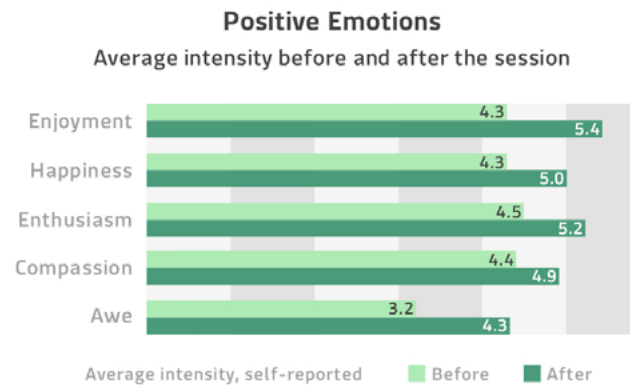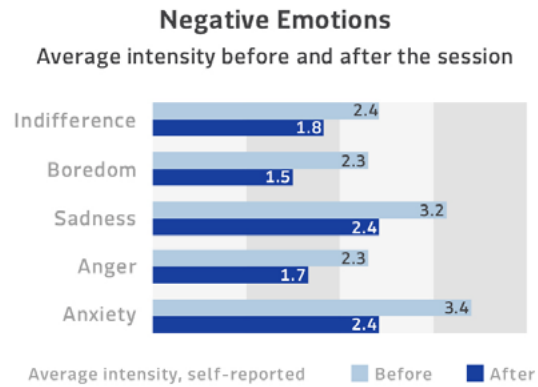such as policy, are indirect. Thus, we assessed learning via process indicators (reach and fidelity) and qualitative input from participants. We deployed a pre- and post-survey to over 100 participants. We found that sessions using humour and acrobatic approaches led to positive emotional change for participants: a decrease in negative emotions like anxiety and boredom, and an increase in positive emotions like joy and awe. We posit that such emotional shifts can play a key role in nurturing engagement, insight and creativity for policy processes.

Negative Emotions
Average intensity before and after the session

Emotion	Before	After
Indifference	2.4	1.8
Boredom	2.3	1.5
Sadness	3.2	2.4
Anger	2.3	1.7
Anxiety	3.4	2.4

Average intensity, self-reported   ■ Before ■ After

Positive Emotions
Average intensity before and after the session

Emotion	Before	After
Enjoyment	4.3	5.4
Happiness	4.3	5.0
Enthusiasm	4.5	5.2
Compassion	4.4	4.9
Awe	3.2	4.3

Average intensity, self-reported   ■ Before ■ After

Our learning shows that the sessions helped respondents to understand and discuss complex issues by presenting complex topics simply. We used ChatGPT to help synthesise the qualitative feedback and identified the following themes for how humour and acrobatics can meaningfully contribute to policy discussions:

1. **Enhancing engagement:** our creative methods can break down barriers and encourage open dialogue, making complex issues relatable and can offer safe spaces for candour and courage.

2. **Stimulating new thinking:** our creative approaches can disrupt conventional thinking patterns and invite new and innovative solutions.

3. **Connecting human cognition and emotion:** creativity in policy discussions can help bring humanity into the conversation, allowing people to connect on a deeper level.

4. **Trusting and bonding:** our methods helped build trust and foster a sense of unity, a crucial element for effective policy making and breaking through the monotony of traditional formats.

More evaluation is needed to properly assess the merits of the proposed approaches. For now, we can comfortably say that humour and acrobatics have radically opened up a space to spark candour, creativity and courage. We intend to further explore these meaningful, memorable and motivating innovations.

Acknowledgements

About the Climate Centre

The Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre is a technical reference centre to the world's largest humanitarian organisation, linking science, policy, practice and innovation to reduce the impacts of climate change and extreme-weather events on vulnerable people. Given climate trends, we believe it is a humanitarian necessity for policy making to go well.

For the past two decades, we have been developing innovative approaches to enrich learning and dialogue. We are leaders in virtual and in person participatory events convening diverse stakeholders shaping local to global policy. We have prototyped radically creative ways to hold difficult conversations, such as playing games from rural Kenya to the White House. We even brought Hip Hop to a high-level session with the UN General Assembly president and a former head of state. Every COP since 2004 has included at least one unconventional approach co-crafted by our team and creative partners, with sessions including tasting insects, lighter-than-air solar sculptures and a fitness dance class to communicate the IPCC report on the science of climate impacts. We must go beyond our comfort zones, caringly but decisively challenging ourselves and others, and together encourage new ways of working. To go beyond the status quo, we need to actively pursue breakthroughs.

Our team would be happy to answer questions about potential deployment of our methods given specific opportunities, needs and constraints—those interested are welcome to reach out to Dr. Pablo Suarez, Innovation Lead (suarez@climatecentre.org).

Images and Intellectual Property

All the cartoons featured in this report were created during this project. The artists, Eugenia Rojo, Hameed "Ham" Khan, retain the intellectual property of the cartoons. Similarly, all the materials about acrobatics are from our partners from Circocan (Brazil) and Gravity & Other Myths (Australia), who retain all copyright. They may license use of those assets to interested parties—please feel free to send your enquiry via virtually@climatecentre.org.

This publication can be referenced as follows: Suarez, P., O'Donnell, D., Alcayna, T., and Gros, C. (2024). *Creative Policy Dialogues through Serious Fun: Humour and Acrobatics to Confront Climate and Mental Health.* Report to the Wellcome Policy Lab. Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre Working Paper Series, The Hague.

1. Introduction

Wellcome Policy Lab is looking for innovative tools and approaches to help generate new insights in policy processes. We, at the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre believe that serious but fun approaches can support these aims, chiefly by reimagining how learning and dialogue processes are designed and delivered in policy settings.

Like Wellcome Policy Lab, we looked for ways to revamp policy dialogues and have different, richer conversations on important issues, especially involving climate risks. This document reports on a project that we carried out over the past six months with support from and active engagement with our colleagues at Wellcome. Creative Policy Dialogues through Serious Fun offers to expand the space of possibility in the policy realm. Because it helps to have a clearly defined thematic focus for policy experimentation, we focused on an area of humanitarian work with substantial gaps between knowledge, practice and policy: climate and mental health.

In our proposal submission to Wellcome Policy Lab we argued that we would step into new ground, reconfiguring how multi-stakeholder processes and events are crafted and deployed. Our task: chart new methods to enrich policy development by harnessing the power of darkness to spark candour, courage, creativity and illumination.
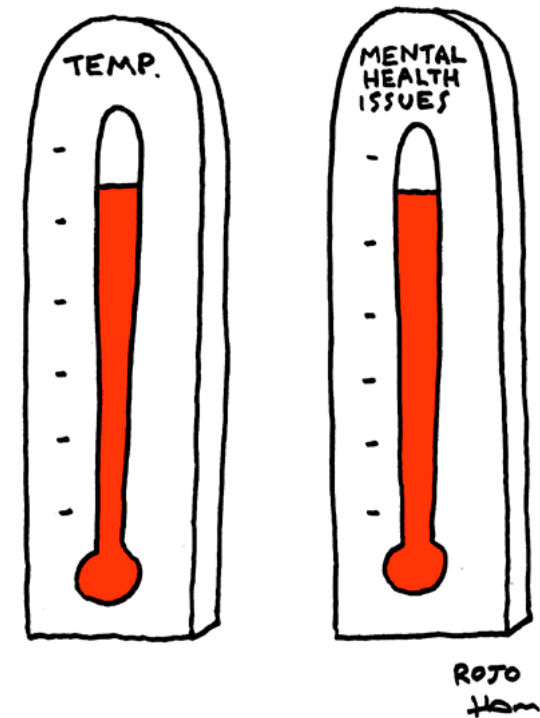
We proposed two distinctly creative methods for enriching policy development:

Humour and Acrobatics.

2. Humour

Harnessing cartoons to notice, engage and inspire

Fun is FUNctional, especially when confronting what is absurd but real—what is unacceptable yet accepted. It is possible for serious conversations to be enriched through approaches that include an element of fun. Research shows that humour works (see Tarvin 2019, pp 204-206). Well-designed humour creates a safe space to be candid and think outside the box. We have learnt from renowned cartoonist Bob Mankoff (former cartoon editor at The New Yorker magazine and a Climate Centre collaborator) that humour helps us deal with what is wrong—not by distracting us from it, but by spotlighting it. Humour can reinforce a message in the most pleasant way possible, with laughter. When someone uses laughter to underscore a serious point, it can be compelling, persuasive and memorable. Humour can help our message break through denial.

Communicating with humour engenders trust. Humour isn't merely entertainment: it's smart, strategic communication. Humour is an essential element in every culture and yet we don't understand it—or take it seriously—as a powerful communication tool.

Rather than jokes, stand-up comedy and other tools in the humourist's toolbox, in this project, we favoured cartoons as our humourist tool of choice: visual depictions of analogy and metaphor that amusingly distil and communicate complex concepts and emotions almost instantaneously. Through cartoons, we do not aim to provoke laughter, instead we seek to inspire reflection and dialogue about serious matters (though of course smiles and laughs are welcome, should they emerge).

We have found cartoons can support delicate discussions and posit that they might aid in the pursuit of breakthroughs in policy dialogues. They can visually depict absurdities, tensions, dangers and 'elephants in the room'. When policymakers glance at well-crafted cartoons, they can at first be curious or confused ('Huh?'), then smile or even burst out in laughter ('Ha ha') and finally come to an abrupt, useful realisation ('A-ha!') that primes the pump for richer explorations.

OK, WE CAN SEE IT - BUT WHAT THE HECK CAN WE DO ABOUT IT ?

ROJO Ham
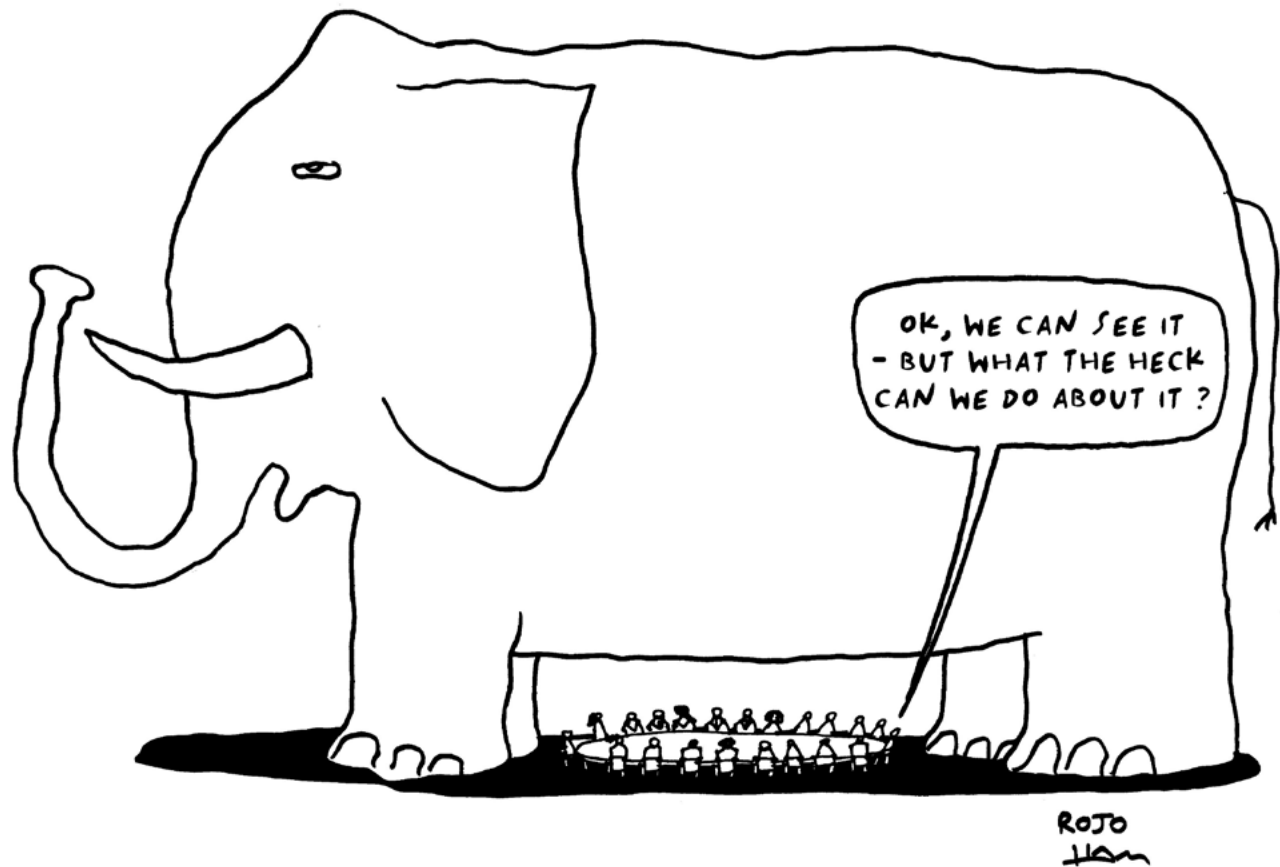
'Huh?'

'Ha-ha'

'A-ha!'

> *Humour is most important in getting at truth, getting people to understand and often to rise above the despair which can surround them.*
>
> *(Martin Luther King)*

We identified the following six themes for why **humour** can be an effective tool for policy:

1. Reframing

Humour invites us to open our minds and change our perspective on contentious issues, especially ones we have learnt to ignore. Sometimes, with well-chosen cartoons, shift happens.

2. Engaging

By inviting us to see through a new perspective, humour refreshes our senses and helps us become more communicative, collaborative and present.

3. Enabling

Humour can create a safe space to acknowledge tough truths and open conversations with those holding different views about what a cartoon depicts or implies.

4. Bonding

When someone nearby smiles or laughs at something that we also find funny, we know we have something in common—a comfortable starting point for working together.

5. Inspiring

Humour engenders imagination. By portraying counterfactuals, cartoons can be our tool to ask 'what if' and imagine alternate realities. Carefully chosen cartoons can bring positive emotions—and when we feel joy or awe, we are more open to creative problem-solving.

6. Noticing

Cartoons can gently nudge us into uncomfortable realisations. Humour helps others see our message with fresh eyes.

In this project, we scaled up our cartoonathon method for co-creation of communication tools in support of climate and mental health endeavours. Our co-creation methods actively engage participants through game platforms and other virtual engagement tools to crowdsource text and visual metaphors that are then turned into cartoons in real time. We also developed new modalities of humour-infused engagement for policy development by partnering with professional cartoonists Hameed 'Ham' Khan and Eugenia Rojo (from Hamishibai), and Pat Byrnes (from The Drawing Board).

The 'pocket theatre' and 'pop-up book' methods will be illustrated in section 4, whereas the 'cardboard theatre' method is explained in *Box 1.* below. To learn about other methods, follow the hyperlinks available or contact virtually@climatecentre.org.

Table 1. Humour-based approaches tested for climate, mental health and related policy issues.

Approach	Description	Main themes	Duration (min)	Total participants	Budget required	Ease of Delivery
Cartoon gallery	Relevant cartoons are displayed physically in the venue or digitally in the Gallery game. Participants are invited to enjoy and annotate the cartoons, then view the annotations of peers and discuss links to policy.	Noticing Reframing Inspiring	10 to 20	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	$	Easy
Cartoon wall	A large print (up to eight meters long) of relevant cartoons is displayed at a policy event. People interact with the content and each other in their own time or via facilitated interaction.	Noticing Reframing Inspiring	5 to 15	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	$$	Easy
Cartoon-infused dialogue	Selected cartoons are used as a communication tool in presentations and dialogues, ideally with light invitation to improvisational interactions between participants or panellists.	Reframing Engaging Enabling	10 to 45	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	Mostly free	Easy
Pocket theatre	Short performative vignettes that bring humour to life via unfolding, unrolling and otherwise manipulating the paper on which a cartoon is printed, opening space for policy-related explorations.	Engaging Bonding Inspiring	1 to 3 each (total 1 to 15 minutes)	Intimate (2 to 15), or more via video	$	Moderate
Pop-up book	Using a narrative approach, a topic is explained in a pop-up book using 3D cartoons and data visualisation.	Noticing Reframing Enabling	5 to 10	Intimate (2 to 15), or more via video	$$	Moderate
Cartoonathon	Cartoonists develop cartoons in real time inspired by presentations, discussion in workshops or playful activities to elicit absurdities in policy. Policymakers view rough cartoon ideas and suggest ways to improve them. Artists deliver final cartoons, which can then be used by all.	Engaging Inspiring	90 or more	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	$$$	Advanced
Visual metaphors	Using the All Caps RANT game, participants turn submitted rants into visual metaphors and discussion prompts which can later be integrated into a cartoonathon to turn those metaphors into cartoons in real time.	Reframing	15 to 20	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	$	Moderate
Cartoon co-creation	Following the Build-a-Metaphor game created by The Drawing Board, groups use pre-cut images and markers through a facilitated process to co-create cartoons on specific issues of concern.	Reframing Bonding	90 or more	5 to 30	$$$	Advanced
Cardboard theatre co-creation	Participants create cardboard theatre by conceiving, then drawing absurdist narratives on cardboard panels, and finally performing to their peers.	Reframing Bonding Inspiring	90 or more	5 to 20	$$	Advanced

Budget required: "$" = under GBP 500; "$$" = GBP 500 to 3000; "$$$" = over GBP 3000.

BOX1

Cardboard theatre workshop

Duration:
3 hours
(90-minute option)

Participants:
5-25

Developed by:
Hameed Khan
and
Eugenia Rojo

Inspired by the traditional Kamishibai theatre art form, groups of 3-5 participants are given three cardboard panels to illustrate a story. The workshop invites participants to use humour and absurdity in their narratives to encourage out-of-the-box thinking, problem-solving and communication.

1. Introduction to cardboard theatre and Kamishibai (20 minutes)
2. Group co-creation (50 minutes): participants brainstorm what story they want to tell and how to represent it on three panels. Draw the panels.
3. Performance practice (30 minutes)
4. Revision (30 minutes)
5. Final performance (30 minutes)
6. Debrief and closing (20 minutes)

KAMISHIBAI THEATRE

Safely and creatively engaging with risk via embodied experiences

3. Acrobatics

Understanding and managing risks is at the core of difficult decisions discussed at events that link science, policy and practice. We posit that much can be gained by engaging policymakers in sessions that involve acrobatics; either through embodied, safe participatory activities or by watching professionals perform via video or in person and then reflecting on what was noticed.

In the context of this project, we examined acrobatics—and more broadly circus arts—as activities involving human feats of balance, agility and motor coordination. This can include components of controlled falling, juggling or balancing with one or more partners in ways that embody interdependence, safely confronting fear and communicating in new ways.

A note on running acrobatics-infused sessions in policy contexts

BOX2

Before any physical activity begins, all participatory workshops have to be prepared and delivered by an experienced and responsible facilitator, and overseen by people certified in teaching acrobatics. The sessions should be introduced as an embodied experience for learning and dialogue in ways that enrich policy processes, conveying that the activities involve basic tasks such as balancing, falling and catching.

Safety is paramount.
Due to the nature of the workshop, there will likely be some instances with some physical risk. We must all be part of the risk management team, in charge of our own safety and supporting the safety of everybody involved. There will be some level of physical contact that many participants will find perfectly acceptable but may make some other people uncomfortable. Time should be allocated to reviewing consent, saying 'no' and ensuring participants are comfortable, and can opt out of activities at any time. All must encourage respectful interaction and graceful mutual support. The facilitator must ensure that all who participate feel comfortable touching and connecting (physically and mentally) with each other. Those who would rather not engage in physicality can be invited to be active observers and at the end share insights on what they noticed, and how it connects to various dimensions of humanitarian and policy work.
If the facilitators and organisers feel they are unable to provide a safe and inclusive experience given the circumstances and the profile of participants, then we recommend not pursuing these methods.

Acrobatics can help bring to the fore several key themes that are important in policy spaces. Does a session need participants to view a challenge from a different perspective? Do representatives from different parties need to experience the value of collaboration between historically siloed teams or areas of policy? Carefully crafted activities (or videos) can remind people in policy spaces that everything they do is related to other fellow humans and their wellbeing, opening space for creative thinking.

We identified the following six themes for the applicability of **acrobatics** to policy dialogues:

1. Trust
Building trust is paramount to successful acrobatic activities. Through embodied tasks, giving and earning trust can then translate to professional and personal relationships.

2. Creativity
Much of acrobatics is creatively solving problems to minimise risk. Many parallels can be drawn from rethinking a problem with an unconventional approach.

3. Awe
Watching an acrobatic performance live (or via video) creates feelings of awe, a blend of fascination and comfort in the unknown that allows us to step into new experiences.

4. Collaboration
Paired and group acrobatic activities offer sensorially rich instances of interdependence between partners. Many show the power of working together, as counterbalance can only work with collaboration and agile communication.

5. Anticipation
Many activities involve foreseeing and reacting to how things and people change over space and time, offering rich and vivid analogies to policy processes.

6. Responsibility
Whether catching balls passed during juggling or catching fellow policy makers in a 'falling' activity, participants experience responsibility differently as one's actions are responsible for the performance and safety of others.

Examples of potential policy applications include crafting conversations about responsibility when supporting and being supported by others; building trust in yourself, in the team and in new counterparts; minimising and managing risk; safely expanding risk tolerance; understanding changing limitations and possibilities; dealing with high-risk situations; caring for mental health of oneself and others; and establishing a non-competitive atmosphere.

Through collaboration with partners, chiefly Circocan, Eastern Acrobatics and Circus, and Gravity & Other Myths, we developed eight approaches for enriching policy spaces. Some of these approaches build on common acrobatic warm-up and team building activities. While they may have been commonplace in experiential learning and acrobatic spaces long before this project, we innovated by exploring their use in policy, climate and mental health settings.

Three examples of circus arts sessions are explained in the following boxes.

Table 2. Acrobatics-based approaches tested for climate, mental health and related policy issues.

Approach	Description	Main themes	Duration (min)	Total participants	Budget estimate	Ease of delivery
Live performance	Professional acrobats perform a show tailor-designed to elicit insights and emotions about a specific policy issue. The audience then discusses the connections between the performance and the issue, and shares any new ideas inspired by the show.	Awe	5 to 15 (show) + 5 to 15 (debrief)	Flexible (20 to 1000+)	$$$	Advanced
Tailor-made video	Acrobats collaborate with subject matter experts to create a video crafted deliberately to draw specific parallels between what is seen and the policy challenges ahead. Like with the performance, acrobatics videos can be projected and then followed by audience discussion about insights and new ideas.	Awe	5 to 10 (video) + 5 to 15 (debrief)	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	$$$$ for editing, free for showing	Easy
Acrobatic gallery	After a live performance or video, participants join the Gallery game featuring 3-second acrobatic video clips or GIFs. Participants view, enjoy and annotate the short clips sharing how what they see relates to the theme of the event. Next, they create and share with peers any metaphors related to the event theme: '[video] is like…'.	Awe Creativity	5 to 10 (gallery) + 5 to 15 (debrief)	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	$	Easy
Falling *	A popular acrobatics workshop activity, designated fallers and catchers have been trained how to do so safely. Fallers announce 'falling' and then freefall as someone comes to catch them. Start with only one person falling at a time and then slowly increase the frequency of people falling.	Responsibility Collaboration Trust	20 to 40	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	$$	Advanced
Partner connections & balance *	In pairs, participants are instructed on how to safely take positions that require the other person to balance their weight—both participants must actively engage in the position for it to work. Partnered and group acrobatics can sensorially show the importance of failure points and redundancy in complex systems.	Collaboration Responsibility Trust	15 to 30	8 to 40	$$	Advanced
Juggling	Participants are invited to juggle multiple balls. Slowly, other components are integrated. Participants can represent different types of people or institutions. Introduce additional elements that represent hazards.	Anticipation Collaboration	15 to 30	4 to 30	$	Advanced
"Snap!" meets juggling	A modified version of the energising game 'Snap!', where duos of players trade juggling balls while saying words pertaining to a given topic. If both say the same word, the first player to say 'Snap! wins a point.	Anticipation Collaboration Creativity	10 to 20	Flexible (2 to 1000+)	Mostly free	Moderate
Snap judgement	Participants walk around the room. When facilitator calls out directions you must form a group following the instructions with only X feet and X hands on the ground as quickly as possible (e.g. groups of 4, only 3 feet and 2 hands allowed on the ground).	Creativity Anticipation Collaboration	5 to 10	4 to 100	Mostly free	Easy

* "*Falling*" and "*Partner connections & balance*" require attention to safety and experienced facilitators, see Box 2.
Budget estimate: "$" = under GBP 500; "$$" = GBP 500 to 3000; "$$$" = over GBP 3000.

BOX 3

Partner connections and balance

Duration: 15-30 minutes
Participants: 8-40
Developed by:
Circocan International School of Circus

In this participatory and dynamic activity, participants will need to develop a fast and intuitive connection between each other to find balance, and be able to accomplish the proposed poses and movements together.

In a large room, participants move around a limited space following an algorithm established by the facilitator. The facilitator will set a specific task for a given number (1 = sitting face-to-face holding arms, 2 = sitting back-to-back, and 3 = pushing partner up) and, every time the participants hear that number, they need to complete the task with a random partner that is nearby in the play area.

1. Make sure there is a safe empty space. Explain the activity and ensure participants are okay touching and supporting each other's weight. Those who opt out or are unable to participate can observe and participate in the debrief.
2. Practice round where only the first task is introduced and called. After the number is called once, participants return to walking until it is called again.
3. Introduce the second task and play by calling 1 or 2.
4. If well-adjusted, introduce the third task and play by calling out 1, 2, and 3 in different orders.
5. You can increase the difficulty by increasing the speed in which the numbers are called (shorter breaks between calls or multiple numbers called at one time).
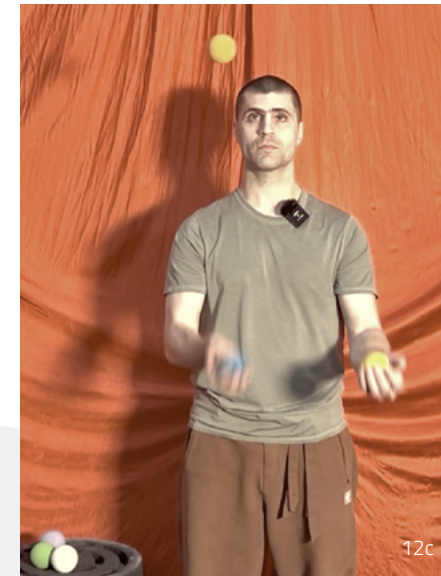6. Debrief with adequate time to discuss participant and observer insights.

Juggling

to enrich events

12a

12b

12c

Duration: 15-30 minutes
Participants: 4-30
Developed by:
Jacob Skeffington, Eastern Acrobatics and Circus

Juggling fosters cognitive adaptability, creativity and cooperation, and can be used to illustrated cascading impacts in events.

1. Demonstration and explanation of the relevance of juggling to the topic.
2. Begin with one ball and then slowly add additional balls as participants adapt.
3. Options to integrate:
   a. Continue with a passing drill between partners starting with two balls, then four, then six.
   b. Have participants play 'roles' while passing in order to complete a metaphor.
   c. Incorporate disruptions to add complexity to the system. This could include blindfolders, a 'marauder' slapping balls to the ground, a 'thief' stealing the balls, a 'hazard' occurs disrupting patterns (fan, added object falling etc), or having to share words that relate to the event's theme or policy issue.

Falling:

An acrobatics workshop to address anticipatory action

Box 5

Duration: 20-40 minutes
Participants: up to 20
Developed by:
Gravity & Other Myths (with support from the Anticipation Hub)

The experience of almost falling helps explore *boundaries*, *interdependencies* and the value of *tuning into* changing conditions in complex systems. Ideally, all participants try both falling and catching.

1. Participants stand in a circle of about 10 people with one person standing in the centre can tip in any direction. Those standing on the outside of the circle must gently catch the falling person and place them back onto their feet.

2. All participants begin walking throughout the space. At any time, one participant can stop, raise their hand and call 'Falling', then wait, standing for a few seconds before slowly falling backwards. When 'Falling' is called, the other participants must move quickly behind the falling person, ready to catch. The group lets the person fall for a moment before gently catching them and lowering them all the way to the ground. Everyone participating in the exercise is responsible for keeping each other safe. To ensure no-one is dropped, participants work as a team and start off slowly.

13a

13b

13c

13d

13e

4. Testing the innovative methods

Shaping the creative process

With co-financing support, we crafted and helped deliver a four-day gathering on risk, humour and acrobatics, which served as a brainstorming workshop for the inception phase of our project. About thirty participants joined, including eight acrobats and three humourists to guide the immersive experience, along with a policy analyst from the World Bank, an emergency management specialist from NASA's Disasters Program, neuroscientists from MIT, risk managers and scholars from the American Red Cross and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, and advocates for mental health and disabilities. In a truly immersive, collaborative and joyful atmosphere, we experienced circus arts (including the flying trapeze), and co-crafted ideas for policy engagement that were later refined and tested, both during the gathering and in subsequent events around the world.

In combination with preliminary research, the inception gathering enabled the gestation, adaptation and tailoring of many of the methods that came to fruition throughout this project.

14

15

16

17

18

Developing and testing the approaches

Throughout the six-month pilot project, we iteratively designed, evaluated and tested the 17 activities listed in Table 1 and Table 2 (many more concepts were ideated during the project but remain to be refined and tested). Dozens of organisations invited us to enrich their policy-relevant events and processes with our Wellcome-funded innovations, often with their own funding to cover the creative partners working under our guidance.

The approaches were piloted both in person, remotely and in hybrid environments across 38 sessions on five continents, reaching at least 1500 participants. Sessions addressed policy, climate and mental health issues, and ranged from small workshops to large performances. They included a diverse spectrum of international stakeholders such as academic researchers across disciplines, leadership at humanitarian and development organisations, mental health professionals, Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers and people with lived experience.

Many of these applications were stress-tested for potential use in various stages of policy processes, from diagnosing problems to ideating solutions to negotiating implementation. We contributed humour-infused innovations to sessions at the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the UN Climate Conference (COP28 in the United Arab Emirates). Our acrobatics-infused sessions were featured at events hosted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, CERN IdeaSquare, the 'Creating Early Warnings for All' global conference and Cambridge University. A full list of sessions is included in the Appendix.

Sharing products and crafting more iterations

A total of 32 original cartoons pertaining to policy, mental health and climate change were created with funding from this project, and dozens more were funded by other organisations that embraced our humour-infused approach for policy dialogue under our guidance. Products that will continue to have reach and showcase humour and acrobatics after the conclusion of this project include cartoons, facilitation guidelines, tailor-made performances, inspiring videos and a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) module on creative risk communication.

Importantly, this project led to our methods being valued by conveners of policy dialogues. For example, colleagues from the Anticipation Hub in charge of the 11th Global Dialogue Platform on Anticipatory Action learnt about our innovative approaches and commissioned an acrobatic performance and workshop by Gravity & Other Myths, known for its shows with a focus on human connection and acrobatic virtuosity. The success of that collaboration led to further products including a tailor-made video.

This project contributed to the creation of two new approaches that were tested in various sessions listed in the Appendix and will be further developed outside the scope of this project with additional funding from partners.

20a

20b

20c

20d
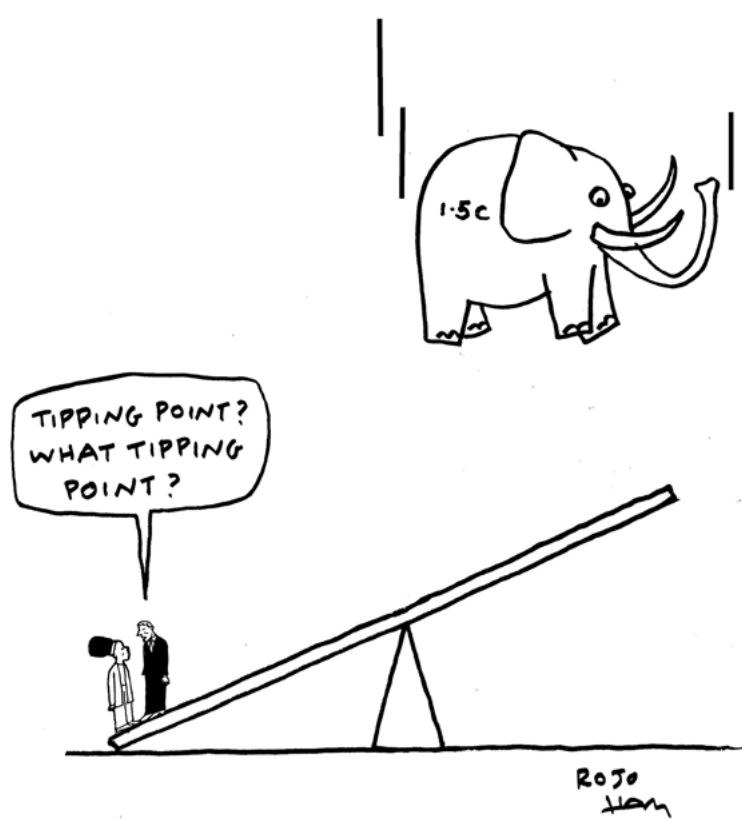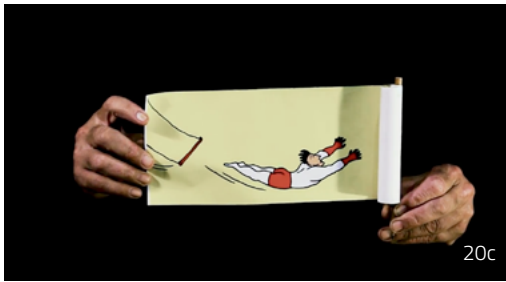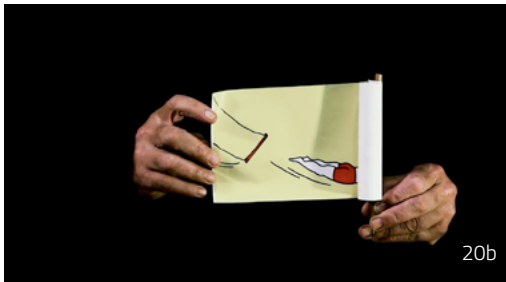
Pocket theatre is a simple communication tool that harnesses the flexibility of printed paper as an artistic medium. Via folding, unrolling and other forms of movement, a presenter can animate cartoons and get a laugh out of policymakers as a precursor to interesting policy conversations. See [video on six pocket theatre vignettes](#) for anticipatory action.
< An example is shown here: "Back in 5".

Pop-up books offer a well-known art-infused medium for communication often associated with children or whimsy. For delicate issues, this medium can engage audiences from a place of emotional warmth. With mental health experts, humanitarians and cartoonists, we co-created a tailor-made pop-up book that uses three-dimensional pages to offer complex visualisation of quantitative information in an accessible way, along with cartoon-style visuals that 'pop up' and move in the hands of a performer to build an emotionally resonant narrative on climate and mental health. >

When confronting the abyss, will we jump into action at the right time and place to avoid catastrophic delays?

21a

21b

21c

21d

21e

21f

21g

21h

21i

21j
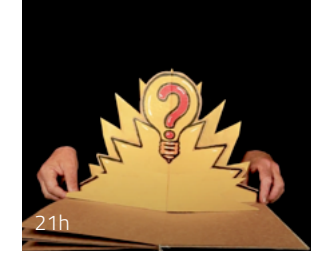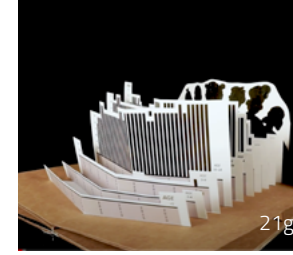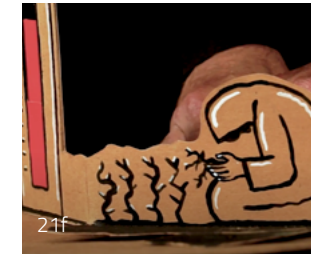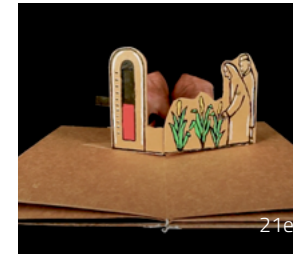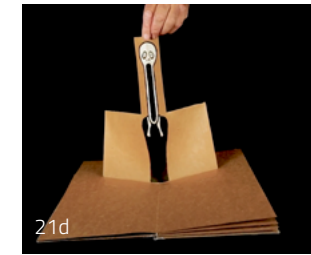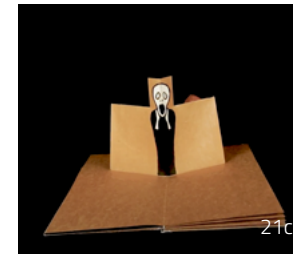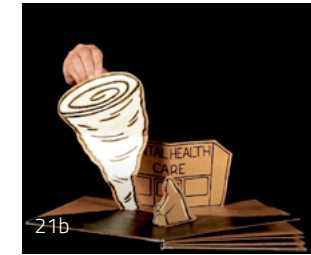
5. Learning and implications for creative policy dialogues

The unconventional nature of the proposed work offered substantial opportunities for learning. Assessing results from experimental interventions based on humour and acrobatics is particularly challenging, chiefly because links to crucial measurable changes, such as policy, are indirect. At the practical level we aimed for evaluation and learning via common process indicators such as reach (i.e. attendance) and fidelity (implemented as intended). For deeper insight, we gathered qualitative feedback and quantitatively measured emotional change from session participants. Our key learnings are summarised below, organised by theme.

Pre- and post-evaluation setup

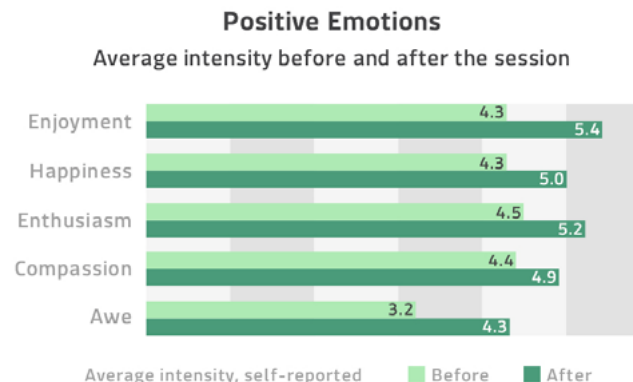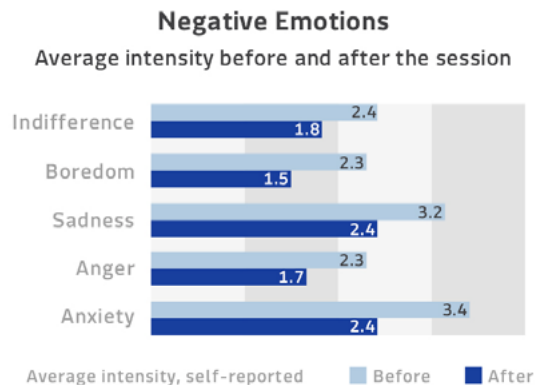At six of the sessions, we conducted a pre- and post-survey to gather feedback on the successes and failures of the approaches offered (humour, acrobatics or both). A total of 118 participants completed both the pre- and post-survey. The survey asked respondents to self-assess on a seven-point scale to what extent they were experiencing 10 emotions (5 positive emotions and 5 negative emotions). The post-session survey also asked questions on the usefulness of the innovative approaches to policy settings. Data was analysed in R. To help identify common themes in the open-ended responses, we gave ChatGPT 4 the prompt to 'summarise up to five main, common themes'. Therefore, some of the following synthesis was produced with the assistance of ChatGPT.

The role of emotions

We found statistically significant change (p < 0.01) across all 10 emotions and always in the desirable direction of change. Sessions decreased negative emotions such as boredom and anxiety (34% and 29% respectively) and increased positive emotions like enthusiasm (16%).

For positive emotions, the biggest increase observed (35%) was awe (a wondrous state of comfort in not knowing). It is worth noting that awe—which had the lowest pre-session value among the positive emotions elicited in the survey—can be uniquely helpful in innovative policy formulation and adoption. In a study that engaged *Cirque du Soleil* audiences via surveys and EEG caps, neuroscientists found evidence of awe, as well as neurological responses involving imaginative thought and 'the desire to step forward' (see McGrath 2023, pp 14). Similarly, enjoyment and happiness increased 26% and 17% respectively, pointing to the potential value of our methods for the entire policy cycle: when we enjoy what we do, we do it better.

Negative Emotions
Average intensity before and after the session

Emotion	Before	After
Indifference	2.4	1.8
Boredom	2.3	1.5
Sadness	3.2	2.4
Anger	2.3	1.7
Anxiety	3.4	2.4

Average intensity, self-reported   ■ Before ■ After

Positive Emotions
Average intensity before and after the session

Emotion	Before	After
Enjoyment	4.3	5.4
Happiness	4.3	5.0
Enthusiasm	4.5	5.2
Compassion	4.4	4.9
Awe	3.2	4.3

Average intensity, self-reported   ■ Before ■ After

> Pre- and post-event surveys (N = 118)
All before–after differences show desirable change, and are statistically highly significant (p < 0.01).

Table 3. Comparison of intensity of emotions (scale 1-7) experienced before and after the session

	Emotion	Mean before	Mean after	Difference (absolute)	Change (%)	p-value	Significance
Negative emotions	Indifference	2.43	1.83	0.6	−24.6	0.00068	***
	Boredom	2.30	1.51	0.79	−34.3	0.00000	***
	Sadness	3.17	2.36	0.8	−25.4	0.00042	***
	Anger	2.32	1.67	0.65	−28.1	0.00007	***
	Anxiety	3.42	2.42	1	−29.4	0.00000	***
Positive emotions	Enjoyment	4.31	5.44	−1.13	26.1	0.00000	***
	Happiness	4.27	5.01	−0.73	17.2	0.00001	***
	Enthusiasm	4.52	5.25	−0.73	16.1	0.00006	***
	Compassion	4.41	4.93	−0.52	11.8	0.00782	**
	Awe	3.22	4.34	−1.12	34.7	0.00000	***

N=118
Significance: *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

In the qualitative feedback, participants highlighted the fundamental role emotions played in the sessions they attended. A recurring theme was the importance of acknowledging personal emotions and experiences when addressing how climate change impacts mental health and society.

A great new perspective on how to help people engage with difficult topics without turning away.

> *The power of play!*
> *Bringing joy in as a*
> *tool for healing."*

> *Seeing isn't believing;*
> *feeling is believing."*

Enhanced connection and communication

Sessions resonated with participants for their ability to communicate simply and effectively and to increase connection among participants. A few common themes included:

Further, emotions can be a tool for engagement:

- Several responses highlighted the effective use of humour, art and play as innovative tools to engage people in discussions about climate change and mental health.

- Many responses highlighted a desire to move away from formal presentations towards more interactive, fun and hands-on activities.

- Respondents felt that creativity in policy discussions can help bring humanity into the conversation, allowing people to connect on a deeper level and see beyond bureaucratic roles or personas.

Lastly, participants noted how emotional presence changed their intent to engage in the future. Participants expressed a desire to focus on emotion and compassion in their work, indicating a shift towards recognising the emotional aspects of climate change and its impact on mental health.

- **Ease of discussion:** There was a common recognition that conversations around climate change and mental health can be straightforward and accessible, challenging the notion that these topics are inherently complicated.

- **Integrating personal and professional backgrounds:** Some participants were inspired to bring aspects of their personal interests and professional backgrounds, such as drama therapy and visual arts, to make their climate change work more relatable and effective.

- **Trust and togetherness:** There was an emphasis on the role of creativity in building trust among stakeholders and fostering a sense of unity, which is considered crucial for effective policy making and breaking through the monotony of traditional policy discussions.

> *Humour allows us to grapple with*
> *the reality of our situation and find*
> *the stamina to keep going."*

> *[The approaches] brought in our humanness*
> *– allowing us to truly connect with each*
> *other, ourselves and the content."*

Creative thinking

Participants stated that unconventional methods can lead to creative problem-solving including:

- **Stimulating new thinking:** there was a belief that creative approaches can disrupt conventional thinking patterns and stimulate innovative solutions by helping participants think outside the box and break away from the same old solutions.

- **Cognitive and learning benefits:** creative strategies were thought to energise the brain, enhance spontaneity, flexibility and somatic learning, and activate different neuropathways, leading to more intense engagement and the generation of new ideas.

It can change how people view concepts which is crucial for policy work!"

The same ways of thinking result in the same old solutions. New approaches might trigger something different!"

It awakens creativity."

> Cambridge University Centre for the Study of Existential Risk hosted a workshop on acrobatics for risk communication. A CSER colleague who works on nuclear weapon policy exudes joy while supported by Tilly Alcayna, a certified partner acrobatics instructor who is also Senior Technical Adviser at the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre—and a coauthor of this report.

Yes, but:
What can go wrong and what must go right

Naturally, our innovations are no panacea. Humour and acrobatics, like screwdrivers, are potentially effective tools that work with a twist. In the right context, they can help build or dismantle—responsibly or otherwise. We advise careful consideration of risks:

- **Humour-based methods**, if not responsibly crafted and delivered, can (a) distract people from what matters, creating the perception of inappropriate or unacceptable allocation of time and resources; (b) divide people by creating 'in' and 'out' groups and accentuating power differences; and (c) disparage people, especially if candour, left unchecked, leads to unacceptable words or behaviour. For details on how to anticipate and manage these and other risks, plus ideas on how to tailor this tool to professional contexts (see Tarvin 2019, pp 35-38).

- **Acrobatics-based methods**, if not responsibly designed and executed, can also lead to distraction, division and disparagement—as well as physical injury. Having said that, it is crucial to highlight that professional circus arts trainers and facilitators, just like pilots in the civil aviation sector, know how to anticipate and manage the risks they confront (see Box 2).

25

When integrating these innovations into sensitive issues, it is crucial to include comprehensive warning statements. It is also key to design all sessions with different levels of participation and accessibility for people with different levels of mobility. In addition, it is possible to work with session organisers to create workshops tailored to people with disabilities. In one example, several of the contributors to our brainstorming workshops were people with disabilities, including blindness and prosthetic limbs. With adequate and careful tailoring of instruction by our partner Jacob Skeffington (a former *Cirque du Soleil* acrobat), all participants were able to fully engage, experience and enjoy the basics of juggling as well as offer insights on how these embodied activities can be harnessed to enrich participatory processes on serious matters such as inclusive disaster preparedness. Inclusive design of workshops should be central to all sessions, and specific to the needs and make-up of the participants.

Relevance to the policy cycle

We found that, when confronting what is unacceptable yet accepted, humour can break down barriers fast, awaken bonding and trust, and unlock imagination for the change that might be possible. For example, during a cartoon co-creation session on climate and mental health with World Bank staff and professional humourists, policymakers expressed surprising comfort in dealing with issues often considered taboo, as well as feeling heard and understood. They expressed surprise and gratitude for the imaginative thinking unleashed (see the 'meet my mental health' cartoon co-created then, also featured in the COP28 Cartoon Wall). Concrete, actionable ideas emerged during the session for improving how a large development organisation relates to the mental health dimensions of climate risks.

26

27

28
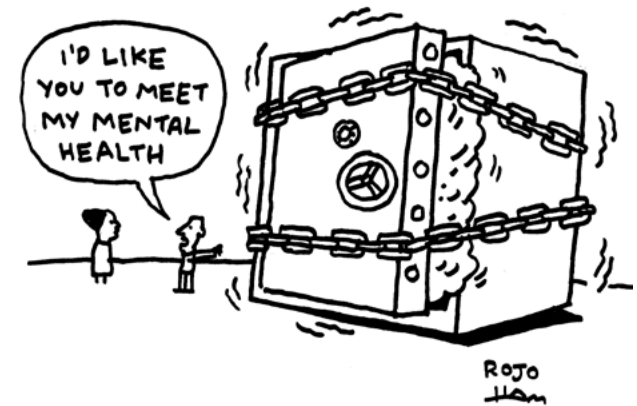
Importantly, we learnt that the proposed methods are so generative as to allow for rich cross-fertilisation and hybridisation in support of policy events. For example, during our inception workshop, a juggling session led to an insight about the role of uncertainty. In turn, this insight re-emerged during a cartoon-creation process about managing complex systems: a 'juggling uncertainty' cartoon emerged (see below).

These results subsequently inspired the crafting of narrative flow for a live performance on acrobatics for climate adaptation performed just a few days later at the Museum of Science in Boston. A video of that performance is now available for supporting events worldwide. Additional cartoons inspired by acrobatics became pocket theatre vignettes, which later supported policy dialogue at COP28.

29

30

Scholars and practitioners have long embraced the idea of a **policy cycle**. There are many versions, usually involving the following six stages: (1) Identify problem; (2) Set policy agenda; (3) Formulate policy; (4) Adopt policy; (5) Implement policy; and (6) Evaluate policy—feeding back into the first stage. We hypothesise that there is a most promising alignment between the policy cycle and the six themes identified above for **humour** (reframing, inspiring, enabling, bonding, engaging, noticing) and for **acrobatics** (responsibility, trust, creativity, awe, collaboration, anticipation).

With appropriate tailoring, each of these themes from humour and acrobatics may offer valuable contributions to most, if not all, of the policy cycle stages. For example, bonding and collaboration are likely to be appreciated in all phases. We offer a proposed suggestion on which themes are best suited to the different stages of the policy cycle. The following figures, created as a result of this project, distil our current thinking on key instances for infusing humour and acrobatics in the policy cycle:
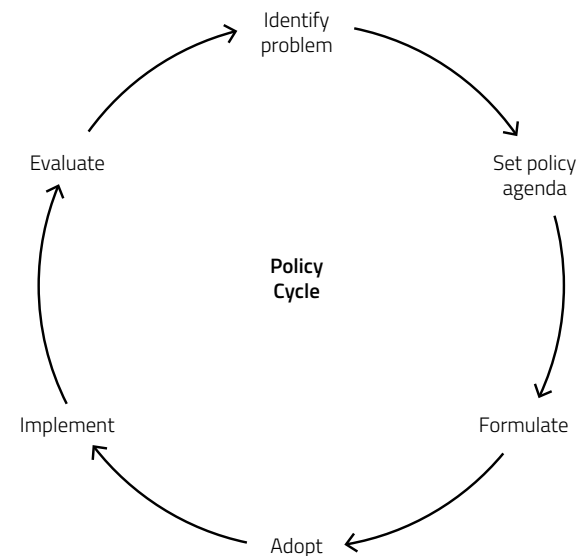
For example, bonding via humour may accelerate policy formulation and adoption; collaboration via acrobatics may enrich progress from policy adoption to policy implementation. Tables 1 and 2 offer activities with themes that we deem most prominent for each humour- and acrobatics-infused approach. With the figures above, those interested in exploring our methods can identify which activities might be potential tools for enriching ongoing or upcoming policy processes, based on which policy cycle phase needs support—or more imagination, experimentation and ambition. What we offer here is a hypothesis: if tested, it should be tested responsibly.
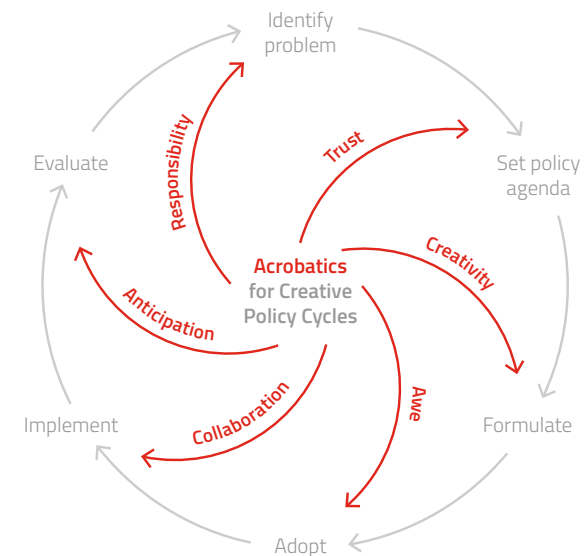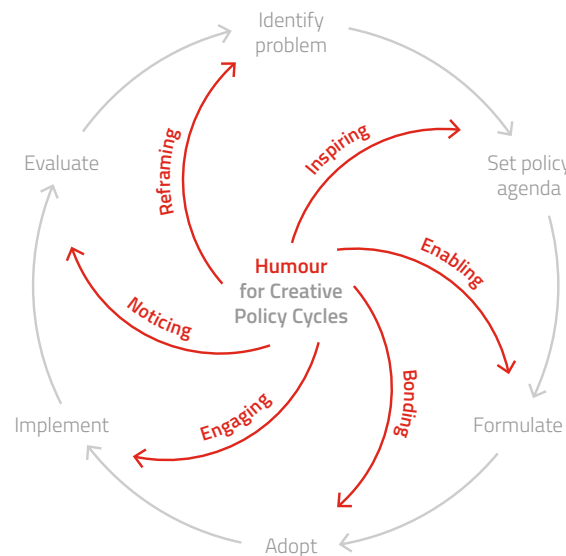
Moving forward

Encouragingly, many people and teams that experienced our innovations wanted more humour and acrobatics in their future engagements. One example is our new humour-infused pop-up book. Its 3D data visualisation will feature in upcoming policy events in Geneva, New York, and the upcoming Planetary Health Summit 2024 in Kuala Lumpur. The pocket theatre vignettes will feature at a global forum on development in conflict areas hosted by the World Bank.

Can serious fun help develop better policy? Much more evaluation is needed to properly assess the merits of our innovations and their impact on policy dialogues. Nonetheless, the data and anecdotal evidence depicted above enables us to think that if the goal is to seek breakthroughs, enjoyment and awe may help and thus, acrobatics may be worth including in policy-relevant sessions. Similarly, well-designed activities involving humour may create a safe space to acknowledge difficult truths and think outside the box, engaging participants in breaking through resistance, boredom and darkness.

Our methods, refined and scaled up, could help policymakers to work together in new ways. For now, we can comfortably say that humour and acrobatics have radically opened up space to spark candour, creativity and courage.

We are grateful to Wellcome Policy Lab for enabling us to trial imaginative, experimental and ambitious methods aimed at pushing the boundaries of how policy is usually done, and to all the partners who embraced the experimental approaches emerging from this work.
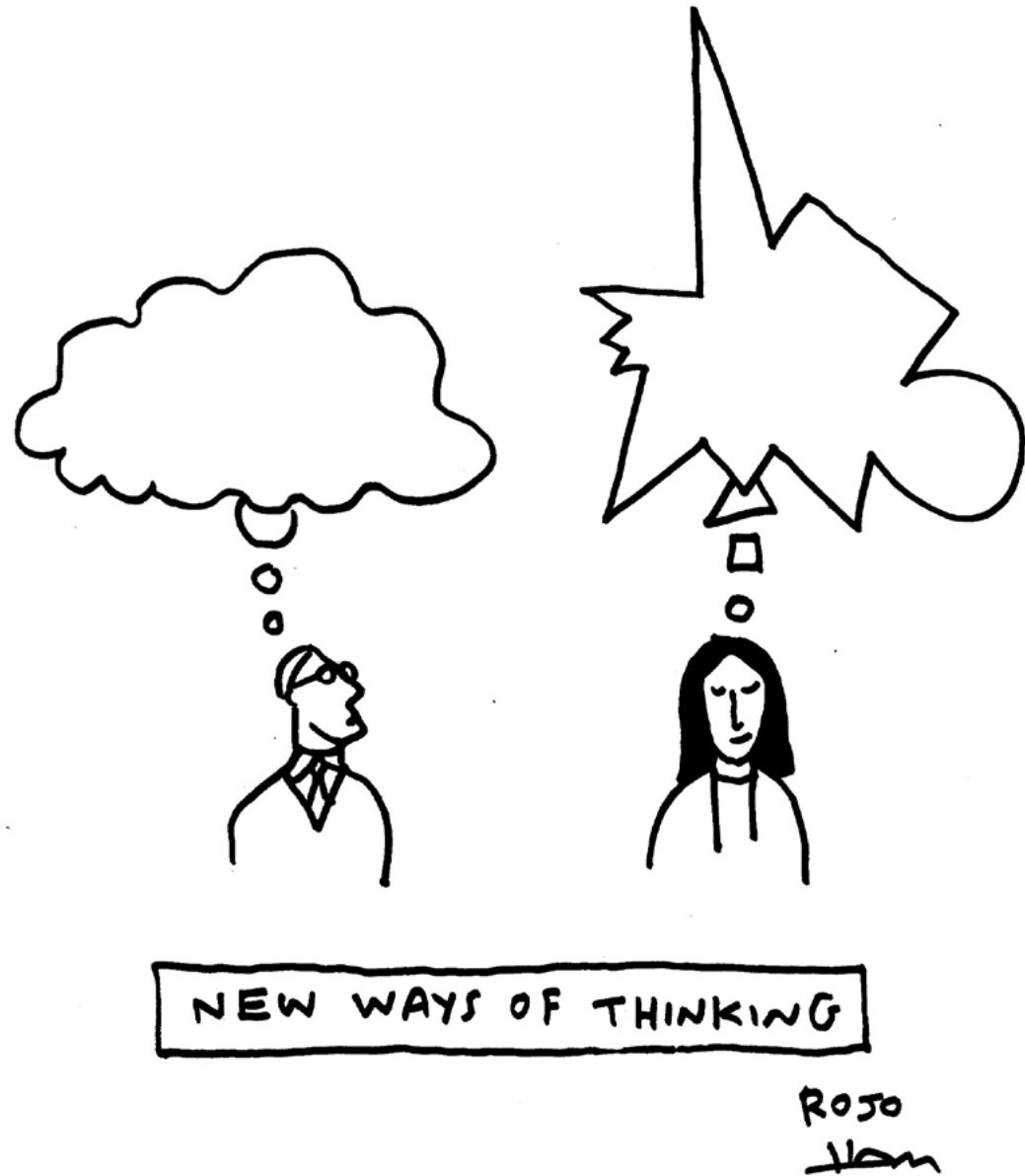
Appendix

Full list of 38 completed sessions

Sessions that included activities that involved our innovative approaches tested during this project, during events about climate change (CC), mental health (MH), and related policy issues. They involved humour (see Table 1), acrobatics and circus arts (see Table 2) or both.

	Session	Date	Description	Mode	Method
	Red Cross Global Innovation Summit: Innovation Games		60-minute sessions run four times in different regions. Illustrated how humour and games can be used communicate on MH and CC and be used by National Societies to create new ways to advance humanitarian programming	Remote	Humour
1	**Middle East & North Africa**	June 25			
2	**Asia Pacific**	June 26			
3	**Americas**	June 26			
4	**Europe and Africa**	June 28			
5	**Africa Dialogue Platform**	July 6	Plenary session on mental health in anticipatory action, with cardboard theatre and a juggling activity	Hybrid	Both
6	**CERN IdeaSquare**	July 17/18	Workshop with 30+ partners exploring the potential for embodiment techniques (including circus arts) to promote policy innovation and ideation	In person	Acrobatics
7-8	**Child Mind Institute**	Aug 15/16	Two sessions on innovative communication and climate change awareness with mental health professionals	In person	Both
9	**World Bank**	Aug 17	90-minute session on mental health and climate change using co-creation of cartoons	In person	Humour
10	**CHANCE Network Conference**	Aug 25	Presentation on climate and mental health at CHANCE conference promoting climate and health research in Africa	Remote	Humour

	Session	Date	Description	Mode	Method
	Connecting Climate Minds: Regional Dialogues		Cartoonathon sessions ran seven times during regional dialogues on mental health and climate change	Remote	Humour
11	**East and Southeast Asia**	Aug 23			
12	**Latin America and the Caribbean**	Aug 23			
13	**Oceania**	Aug 29			
14	**Middle East and North Africa**	Aug 30			
15	**Sub-Saharan Africa**	Sept 11			
16	**Europe and North America**	Sept 12			
17	**Central and Southern Asia**	Sept 13			
18	**Wellcome Trust**	Sept 6	Interactive workshop highlighting both acrobatic and humour methods to prime policy discussions	In person	Both
19	**Cambridge University**	Sept 7	Workshop on humour and embodiment techniques to explore issues of mental health and global climate change	In person	Both
20	**'Creating Effective Warnings for All'** Conference at UCL **Session 4A – Juggling**	Sept 12	Juggling session for addressing compound events	In person	Acrobatics
21	**'Creating Effective Warnings for All'** Conference at UCL **Session 6B – Gravity Play**	Sept 12	Joint session with Wellcome Trust on using innovative communication techniques on climate change and mental health	Hybrid	Both
22	**European Conference on Mental Health**	Sept 12	15-minute presentation on how learning from circus arts can help us better communicate climate change induced mental health risks to spur action	Remote	Acrobatics
23	**British Red Cross Presentation**	Sept 13	60-minute presentation with leadership of BRC on mental health and climate change	In person	Humour
24	**British Red Cross Workshop**	Sept 13	Workshop on mental health and climate change on acrobatics	In person	Acrobatics
25	**CERN IdeaSquare Workshop**	Sept 20/21	[Workshop on changing risks and policy innovation, via juggling and acrobatics](#)	In person	Acrobatics
	ICRC Workshop	Sept 22	Workshop on doughnut economics for compound risks, via juggling	In person	Acrobatics
26-27	**German Red Cross and the Anticipation Hub** (2 sessions)	Sept 26	Session using humour and juggling to talk about risk, mental health and climate change	In person	Both
28	**Global Dialogue Platform on Anticipatory Action**	Oct 11/12	Gravity & Other Myths acrobatic performance and 'Falling' activity	In person	Acrobatics

	Session	Date	Description	Mode	Method
29	**SNF Global Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health at the Child Mind Institute**	Oct 25	Cartoonation and pop-up book presentation during a session for mental health professionals	In person	Humour
30	**EIB Know Your Hazard Conference**	Oct 26	Cartoonathon session on climate risk	In person	Humour
31	**Climate Psychology certificate program at California Institute of Integral Studies**	Oct 28	"Storytelling for Impact: Key Techniques for Risk Communication" using good games gallery of acrobatic GIFs and prompt "you are in the cartoon"	Remote	Both
32	**National University Singapore (MOOC) Teaching Session**	Filmed Nov 11	"Storytelling for Impact: Key Techniques for Risk Communication" module in an online course. The 20–35-minute module used DataSculptures, acrobatics and humour. Supported by the Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk	Remote	Both
33	**National Institute of Mental Health Research Conference**	Oct 31-Nov 1	Pre-recorded two-minute video on approaches shared during plenary session: Plenary 2: Climate Change and Mental Health; *Climate Change and Mental Health Research: Evidence, Gaps, and Future Directions*	Remote	Both
34	**Harvard School of Public Health**	Nov 3	"Comedy Evening" hosted by the Harvard School of Public Health and led by Drew Tarvin, included cartoon-infused dialogue on CC and MH.	Hybrid	Humour
35	**MassEnergize**	Nov 16	45-minute session titled "From darkness to illumination: Creatively addressing climate through serious fun"	Remote	Both
36	**American Geophysical Union Workshop**	Dec 13	Workshop titled "From Darkness to Illumination: Climate Grief & Resilience in a world of warning signals" with cartoon-enabled discussions and featuring a humour-infused pop-up book	In person	Humour
37	**COP 28 Cartoon Wall**	Nov 30-Dec 12	4-meter cartoon wall featured at COP28 with cartoons from Policy Lab sessions and on mental health and climate change	In person	Humour
38	**COP 28 Development & Climate Days**	Dec 7	Session on innovative partnerships and creative communications included a cartoon gallery and pocket theatre demonstrations	In person	Humour