

# Towards a Comprehensive Stakeholders and Hotspots Categorisation: A Delphi Method Contribution to Post-Productivist SLCA

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## Introduction

**Social Life Cycle Assessment** is increasingly used to inform sustainability, yet social impacts remain difficult to define, structure, and compare. **Diverse stakeholder perspectives, fragmented frameworks, and inconsistent subcategories can weaken assessments, obscure key hotspots, and overlook less visible groups.** Because subcategories shape how social issues are identified and prioritised, improving their categorisation is critical for a more robust and useful S-LCA.

## Objectives

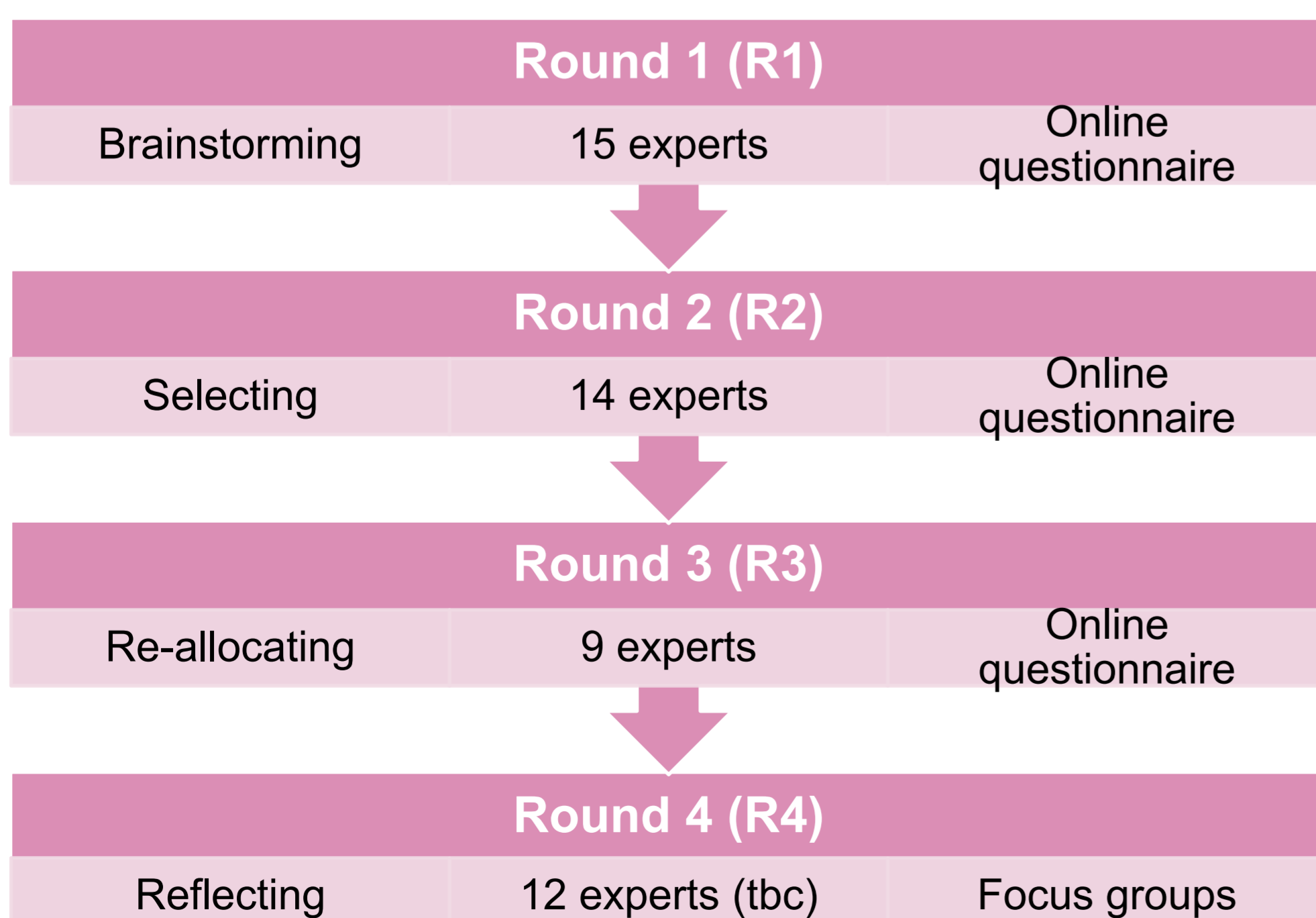
This study uses a Delphi approach to explore whether stronger expert convergence can be achieved on stakeholder groups and hotspot categories.

1. Determine stakeholder groups to ensure comprehensive coverage of social impacts.
2. Develop a robust and universal categorisation of hotspots that should always be investigated in SLCA.

*“Without a coherent framework of the theoretical roots of SLCA, each researcher is working on small pieces of the puzzle without a clear understanding of the place and importance of this piece in the global design.” (Arcese et al., 2018)*

## Methodology

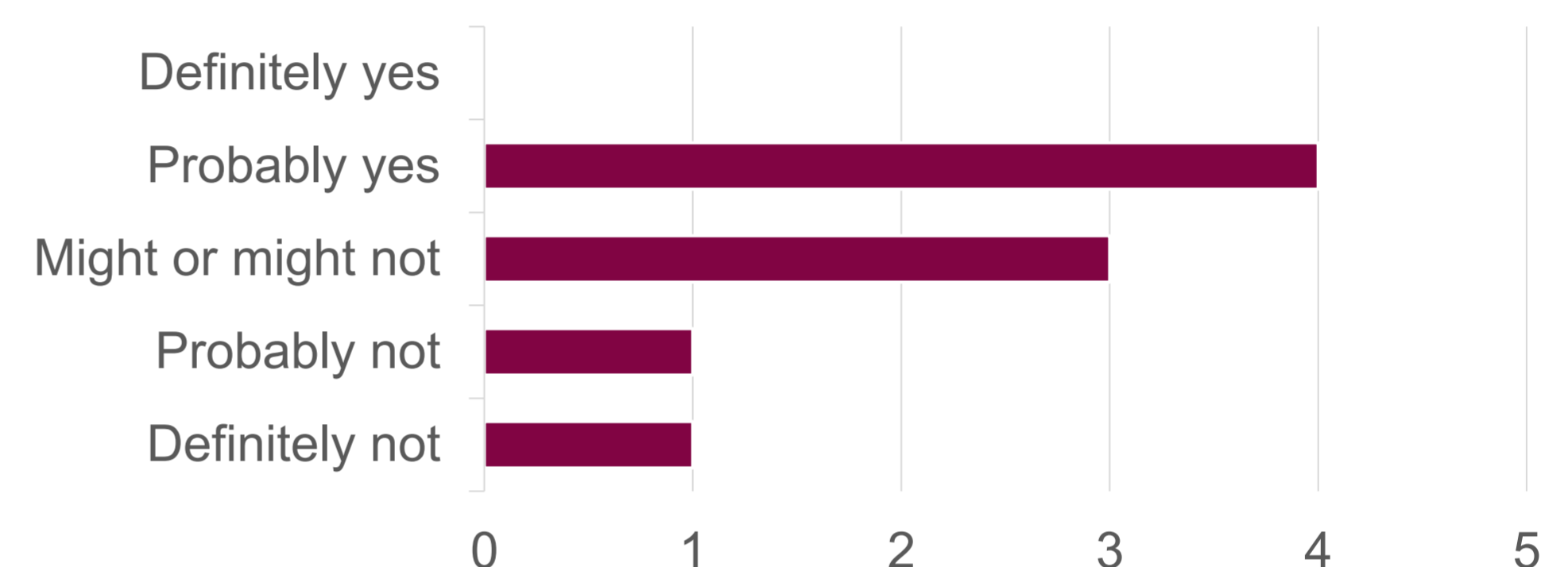
This study used a **four-round Delphi design with an SLCA expert panel**. The same participants were involved in Rounds 1–3 through online questionnaires, while Round 4 broadened the discussion by including additional participants in focus groups to reflect on and validate the categorisation.



**Graph 1.** Overview of the four-round Delphi design, including data collection format and participant numbers.

## Preliminary results

R1 showed broad convergence across most stakeholder groups and subcategories, despite a few clear outliers. In R2, only very limited changes followed the review of average scores and suggestions from R1, indicating stable judgements. However, continued divergence on new items and stakeholder definitions in R3 led to a reorganisation of stakeholder groups and a reassessment of subcategory allocation.



**Graph 2.** R3 Response to the question “Do you believe that it is possible to reach consensus on a unified structure for SLCA to categorise meta-hotspots?”

This process introduced the terms **meta-stakeholders** and **meta-categories** as higher-level elements of a more systematic SLCA skeleton. Uncertainty in R3 then informed the design of R4 as a focus group round to clarify and refine this structure with experts, and to explore whether SLCA is seen as an *essentially contested concept*.

## Discussion and perspectives

This study explores whether SLCA can support a more systematic approach to stakeholder and hotspot categorisation. Such a structure could improve consistency in data collection and strengthen comparability across sectors, countries, and time periods, increasing the usefulness of SLCA for public policy. However, the findings also suggest that categorisation remains partly contested, particularly regarding stakeholder boundaries and the organisation of social issues. This underlines the value of mixed methods and the need for further methodological reflection in SLCA.

### References

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2. de Villiers, M. R., de Villiers, P. J. T., & Kent, A. P. (2005). The Delphi technique in health sciences education research. *Medical Teacher*, 27(7), 639–643.

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