

Solutions Sessions - Second World Summit for Social Development

UN Global Horizon Scanning for Governance and Social Development

Wednesday 5 November 2025

REPORT

Introduction

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), through its Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government (DPIDG), alongside the UN Futures Lab/Global Hub, organised a Solutions Sessions at the Second World Summit for Social Development 2025 entitled UN Global Horizon Scanning for Governance and Social Development. The solutions session aimed to contribute to the Second World Social Summit 2025 by engaging a diverse range of stakeholders to collaborate in:

- Understanding the evolving and complex development landscape through key governance interlinkages from a social lens
- Advancing the discourse on emerging solutions and challenges in shaping development futures through signals, trends, and drivers of change
- Promoting lived experiences and diverse voices to Leave No One Behind through a facilitated participatory foresight process

The session, which was held online, was opened by UN DESA's Assistant Secretary-General, Mr. Navid Hanif. The session showcased the AI tool engineered by UN DESA, which is designed to analyze insights from horizon scanning initiatives across the UN system and support anticipatory planning and decision-making. The session included a live demo of the tool, which will be launched across the UN system in December 2025 and was followed by discussions on emerging



trends from representatives of other UN entities including OHCHR, UNDSS, FAO, UNDP, DPO and RC's offices.

The session was attended by 400 participants from 99 countries, including International Organizations / IFIs: 85 (21,3%), Government: 92 (23,1%), Civil Society / NGOs: 79 (19,8%) and Academia / Think Tanks: 85 (21,3%).

The Critical Role of Strategic Foresight in Shaping the Future

The opening by the UN DESA's ASG, Mr. Hanif Navid, emphasized that in a time of profound and interconnected global transformations—including geopolitical fragmentation, economic uncertainty, climate disruption, and the rapid advance of AI—strategic foresight and horizon scanning are **essential, not optional**. These forces are not separate; they are interconnected and accelerating. They are reshaping how we live, work, and govern. As the world is moving too fast for us to simply react, we must anticipate, adopt, and act early. That is what foresight and horizon scanning are all about.

Strategic foresight helps us spot the trends that drive poverty, shape jobs, and influence inclusion or promote exclusion. It allows governments to prepare, not just respond. Foresight can help us build social protection systems fit for the future. It ensures education and skills match tomorrow's labor markets. It supports policies that truly leave no one behind.

This is what we call Anticipatory Governance: governance that looks ahead, listens to signals, and learns in real time. By using foresight, policymakers can explore alternative futures, test ideas ahead of time, and align strategies with global policy norms, such as the Pact for the Future and the Doha Political Declaration. When institutions anticipate well, trust grows. People see governments that plan, not panic. That is how we build accountability and resilience, the real foundation of inclusive and sustainable societies. As highlighted by the Pact for the Future, embracing foresight in long-term thinking is indispensable to secure a sustainable, inclusive, and peaceful future. Building governance that is anticipatory, inclusive, and resilient, governance that listens to the future and acts for people, today and tomorrow is critical for social progress.

The ASG also introduced the UN Global Horizon Scanning AI tool and mentioned that it is timely, it is innovative, and it is exactly what the UN needs now. The tool supports anticipatory planning and decision-making across the UN system. It was developed under the UN Economist Network's Foresight Initiative, which UN DESA has the privilege to lead. Within this effort, the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government partnered with the UN Futures Lab to design a global foresight process. This collaboration helped shape the UN Economist Network Policy Brief on governance futures, which is available on UN DESA's website.

UN Global Horizon Scanning

Horizon scanning brings together the perspectives and collective intelligence of different stakeholders to map possible changes. These present a wealth of information on signals, trends,



and drivers of change that can be harnessed to inform decision-making, planning, and programming.

To this end, the [UN Futures Lab](#)/Global Hub and the [UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#) (UN DESA) are collaborating on the [UN Global Horizon Scanning](#) initiative to develop an AI tool that can efficiently harness, consolidate, and analyze insights of horizon scanning initiatives from across the UN system. This joint project aims to help users to draw on existing intelligence to deepen analysis, bridge synergies, facilitate cross-fertilization, and motivate collaboration in advancing their work.

Building on the enthusiasm generated during a panel discussion and live demonstration of the AI tool at the [2025 STI Forum side event](#), improvements have been introduced based on feedback from participants representing UN entities, government, non-government organizations, private sector, and academe/think tanks. This is part of an iterative process to ensure that the initiative can meaningfully support the UN's delivery of its mandates to its stakeholders. The UN Global Horizon Scanning AI Tool will thus support more forward-looking and anticipatory planning, programming, and decision-making across the UN's work.

The UN Global Horizon Scanning AI Tool promotes coherence and consolidates horizon scanning insights across the UN system.

- **Key Features:** The prototype includes an AI chatbot, a network visualization, and the ability for contextual deep dives.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** The tool is trained only on UN publications. To address the "black box problem" of AI, it uses an entirely novel approach that allows users to visualize the AI's thought process on a dynamic 3D map, showing the exact path of its reasoning.
- **Project Trajectory:** Development began in January 2025, with an ongoing Phase 2 focused on improvement and adding materials. A future Phase 3 will focus on adaptation, adoption, and diffusion of the tool.

Key Insights from Horizon Scanning for Governance and Social Development

Horizon scanning insights on governance and social development, which were generated by the UN Global Horizon Scanning tool, with a specific focus on the Summit's thematic priorities and the Doha Political Declaration, focused on:

Emerging signals, trends, and drivers of change related to the Summit's three pillars: (i) Poverty eradication, (ii) full employment, and (iii) social integration and their interlinkages with governance

Key interlinkages, convergences, and divergences among cross-cutting issues: (i) Governance; (ii) food security and nutrition, (iii) physical and mental health, (iv) digital



transformation, (v) education, (vi) climate action, (vii) disaster reduction, (viii) gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, (ix) combatting racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance (x) housing, water, and sanitation, (xi) ensuring safe, orderly, and regular migration pathways, and (xii) financing sustainable development

The insights gathered from the tool were guided by five key questions, including:

1. Why is strategic foresight and horizon scanning especially critical for social development?
2. What are the key drivers of change affecting governance?
3. How does horizon scanning support policy coherence across the three pillars of the Second World Summit for Social Development (Poverty Eradication, Full Employment, and Social Integration)?
4. How can horizon scanning support visioning for social development?

Why Foresight and Horizon Scanning are Critical

Strategic foresight is critical for four main reasons:

1. **Anticipating Change:** Being ready by understanding risks and opportunities to build a more resilient and inclusive future.
2. **Strengthening Policy Coherence:** Aligning short-term goals with a long-term perspective using a system-thinking approach where policies reinforce each other.
3. **Building Inclusive and Resilient Institutions:** Engaging a multiplicity of stakeholders and different voices to bring about richer insights.
4. **Fostering Innovation and Learning:** Managing uncertainty and being prepared for shocks, pandemics, digital transformation, and climate change, making government institutions more agile and ready.

Key Social Drivers of Change Affecting Governance

Some of the key social drivers of change affecting governance include:

- **Growing inequalities**, leading to **polarization** and a lack of trust in institutions.
- **Underinvestment in social protection**, which hinders well-being.
- **Demographic shifts**, such as youth bulges or aging populations, creating challenges for economic productivity, jobs, and infrastructure.
- **Global pandemics and health crises**.

Horizon Scanning and Policy Coherence

The three pillars of the World Social Summit—**poverty eradication, full employment, and social integration**—are deeply interconnected, with many points of convergence, common risks, and solutions that offer leverage points for integrated policymaking.



Top Drivers, Trends, and Shared Solutions:

Pillar	Key Drivers/Trends	Common Challenges	Emerging Solutions
Poverty Eradication	Climate-driven poverty; rising informal employment	Military expenditures and resource scarcity diverting funds	Green digital economy investments; Robust social protection; Intergenerational equity
Full Employment	Widespread informal/precarious work; high youth unemployment; climate-driven shifts in labor markets	Military expenditures and resource scarcity diverting funds	Green digital economy investments; Robust social protection; Intergenerational equity
Social Integration	Social isolation; "Waithood" (waiting for milestones like a job or marriage)	Military expenditures and resource scarcity diverting funds	Robust social protection; Intergenerational equity

Cross-Cutting Issues:

Analysis across Climate Change, Demographic Shifts, and Digital Transformation reveals key intersections:

- **Climate Change:** Causes climate change-driven poverty, labor market shifts, and migration. Climate-related disasters fuel mental health challenges like "eco-anxiety" among the youth.
- **Demographic Shifts:** Require inclusive growth policies, decent work creation, and attention to the influence of public debt and military spending on resource allocation.
- **Digital Transformation:** Offers opportunities for public service delivery (healthcare, education) but presents high risks of unequal access, digital divides, and cybersecurity threats.

Visioning and Global Implications

Horizon scanning supports visioning and emphasizes the need to foster a new social contract grounded in shared values, solidarity, and social inclusion to break the vicious cycle of insecurity, inequality, and distrust.

Key insights for visioning:

- **Weak governance and public institutions** are often seen as a root cause of persistent inequalities and climate-driven poverty.
- **Climate Action:** Effective climate adaptation and a just transition are crucial for integrated social development.



- **Intergenerational Equity:** This is vital for achieving social cohesion and requires a new policy consensus that includes economic security for all.
- **Digitalization and AI:** Require regulatory frameworks and multilateral cooperation to ensure equitable access, transparency, and management of risks.

The analysis also linked the development pillars to the UN pillars of Peace and Security and Human Rights:

- **Peace and Security:** Peace is foundational. Escalating geopolitical instability, fueled by military expenditure, climate change, and digitalization misuse (misinformation, AI weaponry), makes future scenarios highly unpredictable.
- **Human Rights:** Persistent inequalities and precarious employment, coupled with unchecked digitalization, can undermine human rights by eroding economic security and access to social protection.

Understanding these interconnections makes foresight analysis extremely useful for a system-thinking approach to chart a better future for all.

Critical considerations and implications

A multistakeholder panel unpacked the implications of the horizon scanning insights on broader issues of governance, security, and human rights, with a specific focus on linking insights with decision-making.

Panelists provided feedback and recommendations for the UN's foresight work. RCO of Mauritius and Seychelles emphasized the value of foresight for the UN and national governments. She highlighted two key insights:

1. **Forward-Looking Direction:** Foresight gives a necessary forward-looking direction to national planning, policymaking, and the operations of UN Country Teams. It helps overcome the challenge of "short-termism," which hinders the transformative changes required for sustainable development.
2. **Systems Thinking:** Foresight encourages thinking "as a whole" and in systems, helping stakeholders understand they are part of a bigger picture. By bringing diverse stakeholders together, it allows for harnessing different types of knowledge (expert and experiential) to build a shared understanding and shared objectives for necessary transformations.

Drawing on experience in Seychelles, it was noted that senior leaders found it crucial to leverage foresight to:

- Think in a longer-term, forward-looking manner.
- Ensure national development strategies support the national vision.
- Align budgeting processes with national development plans.



- Recognize how siloed policies influence others, necessitating a shift in thinking. Methods like causal loop diagrams are used to understand long-term interactions and feedback loops.

UN Country Teams are introducing foresight into their work (part of the UN 2.0 agenda) to:

- Apply these methods to UN Country Analysis.
- Develop a foundation for Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.
- Focus on high-impact, transformative pathways and better internal collaboration.

The Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) commended the Global Horizon Scanning AI tool as an "impressive example of how digital innovation can enhance the UN's ability to plan and act with foresight." The tool transforms dispersed knowledge into collective insight for anticipatory decision-making. The approach resonates deeply with the UNDSS's own work to strengthen foresight, including:

- **Data-Driven Foresight and Early Warning Ecosystem:** UNDSS is building a system that integrates machine learning analytics and an emerging agentic AI framework to anticipate and manage complex risks.
- **Machine Learning-Based Susceptibility Model:** This model detects linkages between non-security data (like food prices, inflation, unemployment, and climate change) and emerging instability risks. By learning from historical patterns (e.g., processing relevant data for the last 10 years), it offers an early analytical signal of disruptions.
- **Multidimensional Security:** UNDSS views security as multidimensional, shaped by social, economic, digital, and environmental dynamics, not just physical threats. AI-enabled foresight helps see these interconnections, making preparedness preventive and adaptive.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stressed that human rights are not just a pillar but the "connective tissue" binding development, peace, and security together through governance. It was noted that the insights from the Horizon Scanning Tool echo OHCHR's foresight work, highlighting interlinked trends that are testing governance systems:

- **Erosion of Trust in Institutions:** Fueled by social exclusion, corruption, and lack of accountability, undermining democratic governance and fueling civil unrest.
- **Shrinking Civic Space:** Restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association, particularly in fragile contexts, weakening peacebuilding efforts.
- **Deepening Inequality and Discrimination:** Based on gender, ethnicity, disability, etc., limiting access to services and participation.
- **Vulnerability Amplification:** Climate and digital transitions reshape societies but amplify vulnerabilities, especially where governance is weak, or rights protections are absent.

OHCHR emphasized that Human Rights-Based Governance is key to navigating this complexity, focusing on:

- **Participation:** Ensuring marginalized groups have a meaningful voice.



- **Transparency and Accountability:** Strengthening oversight institutions (e.g., National Human Rights Institutions, ombudspersons).
- **Non-Discrimination and Equality:** Embedding equity in social protection, education, and health systems.

OHCHR's Innovation Analytics Hub uses foresight, behavioral insights, and data innovation to anticipate risks and design more inclusive policies, ensuring that foresight is people-centered and rights-based.

Gridcorp offered a "devil's advocate" perspective, emphasizing that while strategic foresight is an imperative for anticipation over reaction, it must incorporate crucial methodological depth:

1. **Depth-First Search:** Analysis often relies on a "breadth-first search" for problems and solutions. Instead, a "depth-first search" is needed to identify "rooted problems or rooted traits" that can truly drive change.
2. **Contextual Clarity:** Problems and drivers differ vastly across the world, making contextual clarity essential to identify specific issues. It was noted that past policies with good intentions often have unintended consequences, underscoring the need to understand local context.
3. **System-of-Systems Approach:** For governance, analysis must move beyond systems thinking to a "system-of-systems approach." Different departments are independent systems running in virtuous or vicious cycles. It is critical to determine the best point to intervene (e.g., in health, sanitation, or disaster management) to avoid getting stuck in loops.
4. **Blending Knowledge:** The work must blend traditional knowledge-based wisdom with the modality of science to leverage a "treasure trove of knowledge." The importance of building youth interest in utilizing this combined knowledge was key.

The resilience that the UN seeks to build is very local, making deep diving and contextual clarity essential.

UNDP reflected on what these insights mean for a potential post-2030 development agenda:

- **Systemic Shifts Demand a Rethink:** Development has shifted from a sectoral approach (MDGs) to an integrated one (SDGs). Approaching 2030, systemic shifts—convergence of demographic changes, digital divides, erosion of trust, and the climate crisis—demand a reimagining of the development compact.
- **New Development Compact:** This compact must be not just among nations but within societies, focusing on inclusive digital transformation, social cohesion, and bold climate-resilient strategies. These shifts are current realities.
- **Harnessing Disruption:** The convergence of shifts (digital innovation, demographic transitions, green transition, innovative finance) shows what is possible when disruption is harnessed for development (e.g., India's digital ID, Africa's mobile money, green jobs).



- **Transformative Leap, Not Incremental Adjustment:** The post-2030 agenda cannot be an incremental adjustment to the SDGs. It will require a transformative leap towards:
 - Digital equity and a digital-first development architecture.
 - Intergenerational regenerative economies that balance people and planet.
 - A renewed social contract built on trust.
- **System Transformation:** The goal must be to pivot from managing symptoms to engineering systems transformation, placing digital equity, people and planet in balance, and restoring trust at the heart of the new agenda.

The Department of Peace Operations (DPO), spoke on why horizon scanning is crucial for UN Blue Helmet peacekeeping operations in the context of the global peace and security landscape's significant upheaval.

- **Complexity of Conflict:** Armed conflicts are at record levels, and a variety of trends (political, technological, rights-based, environmental) intersect in complex ways that challenge current tools for comprehension.
- **Need for Adaptation:** DPO needs to understand what will drive organized violence in the future to recommend:
 - Near-term adaptations to colleagues on the ground.
 - Longer-term adjustments for the business of peacemaking and peacekeeping.
- **Addressing Limitations:** Two limitations in DPO's current horizon scanning work that the new tool addresses were highlighted:
 - **Siloed Knowledge:** DPO, as peace and security experts, needs insights from subject matter experts across the system to pick up on weak signals outside their peripheral vision.
 - **Information Overload:** The process of signal scraping generates too much information, making it hard to parse, make sense of, and figure out the influence on their work.
 - **Human in the Loop:** Having a human will remain in the loop for reasoning within the AI tool is deemed crucial.
- **Echoed Signals:** DPO's own horizon scanning echoed the signals flagged by the tool in the social and economic areas, including displacement, migration, deprivation, and digital divides.

Conclusion

Overall, the foresight work suggests a need for a new social contract grounded in shared values, solidarity, and social inclusion. It also calls for enhanced global multilateral cooperation to safeguard climate and manage digital transitions effectively. The key insights on using horizon scanning tools are captured here below.



- **Contextual Clarity:** It is crucial to have contextual clarity, as problems and their drivers differ significantly across regions.
- **Systems Thinking:** When addressing governance, a "system-of-systems" approach is necessary to understand the interaction between different, independent departments.
- **Intergenerational Foresight:** To achieve truly inclusive anticipatory governance, the process must draw on the wisdom and experience of all generations.
- **Traditional Knowledge:** It is essential to blend traditional knowledge-based wisdom with scientific methodology and build youth interest in leveraging this knowledge.

