

Operationalizing Strategic Foresight to Better Support Governments in Managing Sustainable Development Goal Trade-Offs and Synergies in the Post-COVID Context

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*The challenges and commitments ... are interrelated and call for integrated solutions. To address them effectively, a new approach is needed.*²

As the midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda approaches, the world is changing rapidly, and resources are growing scarce. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have increased uncertainty and budgetary pressures. Policymakers need to make difficult trade-offs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and navigate the technological and environmental transitions ahead. The pressure to deliver on global commitments is ever more intense, and yet global uncertainties are threatening to derail efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Building robust institutions and resilient and effective long-term policies is more important than ever. Strategic foresight can support decision makers in these areas in times of uncertainty, risk, and social and technological innovation.³ Strategic foresight contributes to effective governance for sustainable development in various ways, providing a solid framework for strengthening strategic planning, risk management, innovation, community empowerment and intergenerational equity. Thinking about the future is powerful because, when undertaken strategically, it can help inform technical decisions on policy trade-offs and—even more importantly—can contribute to building a consensus on a shared vision for the future across society.

Over the past few years, the unfolding of the pandemic, the growing urgency surrounding climate change, and the deeply transformative implications of accelerating technology development have kindled a growing interest in the adoption and operationalization of strategic foresight. Governments have stepped up efforts to build strategic foresight capabilities with the help of peer-to-peer networks and United Nations entities such as the accelerator labs and regional offices of the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Global Pulse training programmes,⁴ and United Nations regional commissions. Strategic foresight can help Governments with the following challenges:

- Addressing the urgent need not only to identify risk, but also to institutionalize prevention and to implement contingency plans (the pandemic was an example of a known future risk, and yet countries were globally unprepared for its arrival);

- Responding to wide-scale misinformation and mistrust in scientific data and technocratic policies;
- Bringing together fragmented and siloed policymaking approaches to address the many (often multidisciplinary) aspects of human well-being, including health, education, decent jobs and housing;
- Allaying concerns about the depth of multilateral cooperation and solidarity around any burden-sharing that might lie ahead, given the largely non-collective response to pandemic recovery;
- Mitigating intergenerational tensions and balancing the needs of today's citizens with the needs of future generations.

The present contribution explores recent progress in strategic foresight practice and outlines ideas for accelerating its adoption—particularly by national Governments—to unlock SDG progress and accelerate advancement towards the 2030 Agenda.

Why strategic foresight is needed to successfully implement the 2030 Agenda

There are three imperatives for the continued adoption of strategic foresight as a pillar for effective governance:

- *Supporting trade-offs.* Managing trade-offs is not an objective scientific exercise involving top-down technocratic analysis; it is a political issue that requires principle-driven decision-making. It is critical for communities to come to a consensus on shared problems and the implications of future decisions. This can enable early action and investment in prevention. The systems-thinking logic underpinning foresight can help with the exploration of alternative scenarios and how best to use scarce resources to build resilient policies.
- *Supporting capability-building.* Governments around the world—overwhelmed by major crises and grappling with declining legitimacy and public trust—are struggling with how best to respond to the public administration challenges that lie ahead. An anticipatory policymaking

approach needs to be adopted early enough, fast-tracked, and supported with adequate resources.⁵

- *Supporting the ambitious 2030 Agenda principles of interdependence, universality and leaving no one behind.* During the first half of the implementation period, policymakers have applied the SDG framework as if it is a static vision composed of 17 siloed Goals rather than the interconnected, inclusive and universal framework that it has the potential to be if seen as a dynamic and integrated solution. This has resulted in incremental rather than transformative change. The SDG midterm review can be an inflection point to commit to the widespread adoption of strategic foresight as the basis of the “new approach” called for in the 2030 Agenda and outlined in the vision of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in *Our Common Agenda*.⁶

Towards the new approach: What does good practice look like?

There are a number of recent examples of innovative country-level strategic foresight approaches being implemented at low cost and with the use of minimal resources.⁷ The adaptive nature of foresight and its ability to support emergent strategic planning is helpful for designing and implementing an effective national sustainable development plan that takes into account inherent interdependencies. Some examples below demonstrate the diversity of application and purpose characterizing this approach.⁸

Young people from China, Japan, Mongolia and the Republic of Korea have contributed to the design and facilitation of Futuring Peace in Northeast Asia, an initiative launched by the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, using a risk-management approach to strategic foresight to find new ways to share their vision of a peaceful north-eastern Asia region. The young people have discussed future scenarios to better understand how identifying anticipated challenges and making informed decisions today can support a better future.⁹ In the strategic planning category, foresight has been used in the process of domesticating the SDGs and integrating them into national processes according to each country’s context, capacities and priorities, including South-South collaboration and support. Cambodia, for example, has a long-term development plan to become a middle-income country¹⁰ and achieve net-zero emissions¹¹ by 2050, and similar approaches to foresight and planning are reflected in the Strategic Sustainable Development Plan 2022-2026 in Cabo Verde and the National Development Strategy for North Macedonia.¹² There are inspiring examples of strategic foresight being leveraged for community empowerment and Indigenous stewardship. In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Maori communities are adapting foresight approaches so that

they can be embedded in *rangatahi* (youth) culture and drive *rangatahi*-led change; key aims include developing future-focused skills within communities and providing the tools for self-governance, with the ultimate vision being income, education, and employment equity by 2040.¹³ In the Manguinhos favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, young citizens are coming together as part of the Sementes Manguinhos Favela project to reimagine their desired community.¹⁴ In Barbados, foresight for leadership is being activated, with emerging political leaders using foresight to build consensus to address the ever-more-serious impacts of climate change.¹⁵ In South Africa, the Geekulcha platform, supported by the Government’s Centre for Public Service Innovation, has recently started to use foresight to build intergenerational equity by upskilling young people to encourage a deeper understanding of the future of technology and the impact it will have on societies.¹⁶

Interestingly, there is a growing trend of building strategic foresight capability across different government departments and levels, reflecting the adoption of an ecosystemic approach. Finland and Wales are oft-cited examples, where strategic foresight culture, processes, and institutions are being adopted in a systematic way across public administrations, regional bodies and local municipalities. There are other countries where this journey has started and where capability has survived political transitions. In Colombia, for example, strategic foresight has been steadily integrated into public administration. The adoption of strategic foresight in policymaking can be seen in multiple contexts: at the city level (in the multidisciplinary growth framework for Barranquilla through 2050 and beyond, to 2100, and as a youth engagement approach to respond to the 2021 demonstrations); as part of outreach efforts by the former public prosecutor; integrated into capability-building and reforms at the National Planning Department; and as part of a national dialogue for the National Development Plan 2022-2026.¹⁷

Implications for policymakers

There are two main implications for policymakers looking to apply strategic foresight in the service of achieving sustainable development in their countries.¹⁸

The first implication is the importance of supporting the efforts of public administrations and State institutions to prepare for the future through the adoption of an integrated approach across a nation’s governance ecosystem.¹⁹ Building anticipatory governance structures and processes and a network of strategic foresight champions across different institutions is critical to ensuring a lasting impact. They form an internal infrastructure for connecting signals of the future to decision-making today in a wide range of areas, including policy development, strategic planning, risk assessment, investment, innovation and recruitment. This will require new methods of data scraping, artificial-intelligence adoption signal adjustments and effective

content collection, as future-facing data and information are needed to sustain policy integration and coherence over time.

A recommended first step is to establish a centre of foresight excellence at the heart of government that is charged with ensuring that foresight is connected to policy impact, which can be achieved through building a quality supply of insights, educating senior policymakers on how to use the insights, and coordinating existing capability across government.

Building a governance culture of addressing differences by using strategic foresight approaches consistently over time is ultimately what will drive deep, lasting transformation. Consistency and commitment are needed to navigate the pendulum swing where successive Governments build and then halt the integration of foresight capability.²⁰ Building collective resources and networks to circulate success stories and support movements to document and build evidence of what works is crucial. This is particularly needed in States facing serious long-term challenges or uncertainties, including those that are fragile, undergoing stabilization, or affected by climate change.²¹ This process must be seen as a marathon, not a sprint; institutional change cannot happen overnight.

While digital technologies play an important role in promoting sustainable development and are essential for institution-building to support the integration of strategic foresight, technocratic approaches by themselves are not sufficient to lead to societal transformation on the scale needed to achieve the vision of the 2030 Agenda. The second implication is that harnessing strategic foresight for societal transformation for sustainable development requires two additional components to achieve a fairer future for current and future generations—namely, citizen engagement and leadership support.

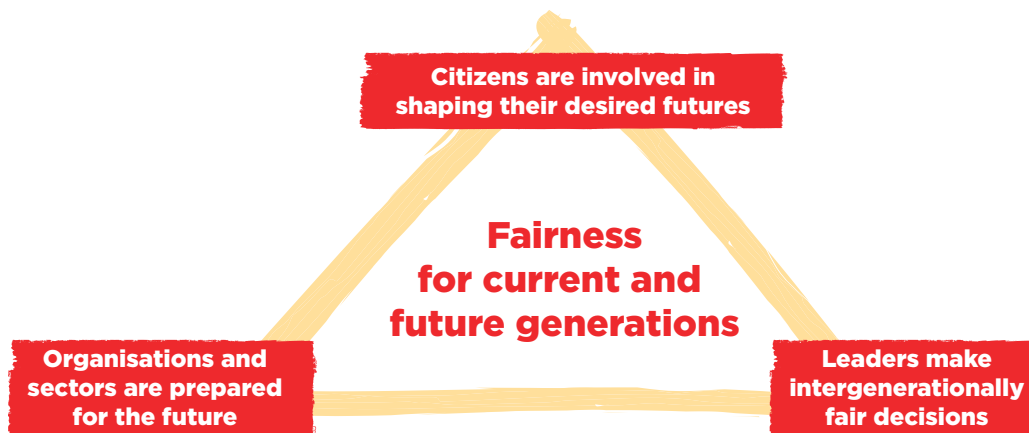
It is essential to engage citizens so that they are involved in shaping their future; participatory foresight processes—including building strategic foresight into the design of participatory

budgeting and citizens' assemblies—are critical. As noted previously, sustainable development trade-offs are driven more by social considerations than technocratic solutions. Foresight strategies can contribute by supporting the efforts of public administration officials to build resilient policies, assess choices, and connect to cross-society voices and innovations. However, it will be critical for communities to develop a consensus on shared problems, activate their imaginations to generate responses, and explore the implications of these decisions for the future (including actively considering the interests of future generations). Activating meaningful participation and validating lived experience and community knowledge and stewardship, including among youth and Indigenous communities, form the basis for profound change.

It is also vital to support the efforts of leaders to make intergenerationally fair decisions and to hold political leaders to account for the intergenerational impact of policies. Public administrations have often been held back from long-term policymaking by the lack of political support for addressing thorny issues beyond politicians' terms of office. The pandemic changed this political calculation; it not only intensified uncertainty about the future but also heightened awareness and political salience around intergenerational impacts. Citizens are now more interested in the distribution of the costs and benefits of measures—relating to priorities such as employment, education, housing and health—that will impact generations alive now and in the future. Some political leaders are explicitly stating they are championing intergenerational fairness and solidarity between all citizens, both present and future.²² One of the most potentially transformative developments is the focus on exploring the incentives of public administrations to support and facilitate the investigation of the long-term, integrated systemic impact of policies and investments made now.

The strategic foresight for societal transformation and effective governance triangle is illustrated in the figure below.

The transformative foresight triangle: an integrated strategic foresight approach to governance for societal transformation



Takeaways for Governments and international stakeholders

For public officials:

- Create a strategic foresight centre of excellence to spearhead a lean and outcome-focused multi-year initiative to build an effective anticipatory governance ecosystem across executive, legislative and audit institutions, government agencies, and municipal bodies.
- Integrate strategic foresight into civil service training and the education of current and next generations of public officials.
- Prioritize the principle of fairness for current and future generations across the public sector and assess policies from the standpoint of intergenerational fairness.
- Support global innovations to protect the rights of current and future generations by, for example, contributing to efforts to develop a declaration of rights of future generations, advocating for a strong multilateral policy scrutiny role for the Special Envoy for Future Generations, and committing to a national listening exercise that connects foresight-enabled intergenerational dialogues about the future to national strategic planning.²³

For multilateral organizations and donors:

- Use the United Nations summits taking place over the next few years (the SDG Summit in 2023, the Summit of the Future in 2024, and the proposed World Social Summit in 2025)²⁴ as an opportunity to commit to the rapid adoption of strategic foresight as the basis for the 2030 Agenda's "new approach" to local, national, and multilateral public administration and anticipatory global governance fit for the twenty-first century.
- Support a high-ambition strategic foresight capability-building programme in government.
- Champion a responsible foresight agenda for societal transformation. This involves recognizing the risk of a performative adoption of strategic foresight, challenging the existing organizational culture and ways of working, and prioritizing transformational values. Specific commitments that address key priorities, such as strengthening intergenerational citizen engagement (especially from the global South) and developing accountability mechanisms to assess the intergenerational distributional impact of policy decisions, should be integrated into international standards, programme design and *Our Common Agenda* proposals.

Endnotes

- 1 Catarina Zuzarte Tully is Founder and Managing Director of the School of International Futures.
- 2 United Nations, General Assembly, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (A/RES/70/1, 21 October 2015), para. 13.
- 3 See Catarina Tully and Lynn Houmri “CEPA strategy guidance note on strategic planning and foresight”, including examples and history up to 2021 on pp. 14-16 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, February 2021).
- 4 For more information, see the relevant UNDP and UNGP web pages at <https://www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs> and <https://www.unglobalpulse.org/2022/09/building-actionable-knowledge-to-make-uns-vision-of-the-future-a-reality/>.
- 5 Catarina Tully and Giulio Quaggiotto, “Public sector innovation has a ‘first mile’ problem”, Apolitical, 18 December 2022, available at <https://apolitical.co/solution-articles/en/public-sector-innovation-has-a-first-mile-problem>.
- 6 United Nations, *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (Sales No. E.21.I.8), available at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf.
- 7 These examples summarize new developments since the publication of the “CEPA strategy guidance note on strategic planning and foresight” in early 2021.
- 8 The examples are organized according to the seven policy objectives where strategic foresight can support emergent strategic planning processes, as listed in the “CEPA strategy guidance note on strategic planning and foresight”; they include risk management, strategic planning for development, organizational purpose/continuity, innovation, sector/community vision and engagement, leadership, and intergenerational equity.
- 9 United Nations, Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, “Policy brief: the future of regional narrative building in northeast Asia—policy recipes by youth peacebuilders (December 2022)”, project brief (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs/Asia and the Pacific Division and Innovation Cell and foraus/Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy), available at <https://dppa.un.org/en/policy-brief-future-of-regional-narrative-building-northeast-asia-policy-recipes-youth-peacebuilders>.
- 10 Kang Sothear, “Cambodia on development path, to become high-middle-income by 2050”, Khmer Times, 24 August 2022, available at <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501137430/cambodia-on-development-path-to-become-high-middle-income-by-2050/>.
- 11 Cambodia, *Long-Term Strategy for Carbon Neutrality* (December 2021), available at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/KHM_LTS_Dec2021.pdf.
- 12 North Macedonia, National Development Strategy, available at <https://www.nrs.mk/>.
- 13 Tokona Te Raki, “We are Tokona Te Raki”, available at <https://www.maorifutures.co.nz/>.
- 14 Sementes, Instagram reel, available at <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CfB3OL-AYyq/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.
- 15 Information on the BlueGreen Initiative is available at <https://bgibb.com/>.
- 16 More information on Geekulcha is available at <https://www.geekulcha.dev/>.
- 17 Ileana Ferrer Fonte, “Regional dialogues begin in Colombia”, *Prensa Latina*, 16 September 2022, available at <https://www.plenglish.com/news/2022/09/16/regional-dialogues-begin-in-colombia/>.
- 18 Catarina Tully, “How can the UN and the High-level Political Forum identify and deal with new and emerging issues to meet the 2030 Agenda?”, chapter 6 of *Governance for Sustainable Development, Volume 4: Challenges and Opportunities for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, produced by Friends of Governance for Sustainable Development (New World Frontiers, February 2020), available at <http://friendsofgovernance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Governance-for-Sustainable-Development-Volume-4-FULL-Final-Manuscript.pdf>.
- 19 More information on the ecosystems approach to foresight can be found in the “CEPA strategy guidance note on strategic planning and foresight” (p. 13) or in the original research by the United Kingdom Government Office of Science (see Bethan Moran and Karen Folkes, “Features of effective systemic foresight in Governments around the world”, blog post, 12 May 2021, available at <https://foresightprojects.blog.gov.uk/2021/05/12/features-of-effective-systemic-foresight-in-governments-around-the-world/>).
- 20 This can happen for a variety of reasons, including shifts between government administrations that can result in the uprooting of prior foresight endeavours; see *Avances y retrocesos de la construcción de capacidades*, a recent book by Javier Medina Vásquez, Rubén Patrouilleau and Javier Vitale highlighting this trend in Latin America, available at <https://www.scribd.com/book/621608660/Avances-y-retrocesos-de-la-construccion-de-capacidades>. As support for strategic foresight in public administration and wider decision-making becomes more mainstream, the risks will not disappear but are likely to metamorphose into two key risks that are already visible and important to address. The first risk relates to the politicization of the future, with specific concerns around the intergenerational distribution of costs and transitions being a source of energy for far-right movements. The second risk, driven by top-down pressure, is the adoption of strategic foresight as a performative rather than transformative endeavour, which does nothing for institutional change.
- 21 Examples of collective futures resources include the RBAP Horizon Scanning Initiative (<https://data.undp.org/rbaphorizonscanning/>), a horizon scanning process across 18 countries looking at risks and uncertainties, coordinated by the UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific; the foresight directory for global practitioners, commissioned by the International Development Research Centre and developed and maintained by the School of International Futures (<https://foresight.directory/>); and the United Nations Global Pulse’s Foresight for Systems Change training programme (<https://www.unglobalpulse.org/2022/09/building-actionable-knowledge-to-make-uns-vision-of-the-future-a-reality/>).
- 22 Announcement made by Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa at an event hosted by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation on 22 March 2022; further information is available at <https://www.fdsd.org/portugal-commits-to-intergenerational-fairness/>.
- 23 For more information on a model and design produced in the United Kingdom, see School of International Futures, *A National Strategy for the Next Generations: Pilot Programme Report* (London, 2020), available at <https://soif.org.uk/leading-thinking/a-national-strategy-for-the-next-generations/>; for a summary of practical steps recommended by the United Nations, see “Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 1: to think and act for future generations”, March 2023, p. 2, available at <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-future-generations-en.pdf>.
- 24 Information on the first two events listed can be found at <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/SDGSummit2023> and <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future>; information on the proposed World Social Summit can be found at https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf, pp. 29-30.