UN Futures Lab
UN Strategic Foresight Guide

December 2023

Hi!

Thanks for picking up this Strategic Foresight Guide. This is a practical guide meant to support you in your journey of applying foresight. It is informed by the experiences of people across the UN system in making use of foresight.

This Guide has three goals

1 Explain the **key concepts of strategic foresight and their relevance** in the context of the UN's work.

2 Provide an overview of **foresight tools and how they might be used** so you can decide which tools might be appropriate for you - and when.

3 Show how to **frame and design** your first foresight initiative or engagement.

In this Guide...

Get Introduced

Let's dive into:

- **Key concepts** of foresight
- Why Governments and UN agencies are **adopting foresight**
- How it **differs from other planning** approaches

A little guide on a big topic

Foresight is no longer optional

Wherever you are at the UN, **your work will come face-to-face with changes and disruptions** that we might otherwise have thought unimaginable.

The crises of the past five years have made it clear that **the future is not an extrapolation of the past.**

It is also about the imperative to foresee and seize the opportunities offered by new business models, new technologies, and much more to accelerate our impact.

Foresight is our collective effort to answer a question: how do we create lasting and significant impact in a context of uncertainty?

Foresight is an approach and a set of tools specifically designed to deal with uncertainty.

The UN's work in the 21st Century demands a new kind of approach

A leadership that meets our obligations to future generations by setting up our work to be agile and adaptable. A leadership that drives the UN 2.0 needed to meet the challenges of the 21st Century with stronger capabilities for data, digital, innovation, strategic foresight and behavioural science.

There is no one right way to do foresight

Foresight exercises can be highly structured, or they can be informal. Each application of foresight should be adapted to local circumstances and contexts.

- The UN Country Team in **Cabo Verde** spent one day to engage the Government and key national stakeholders in imagining what the country could look like in 2030.
- UNFPA in **Colombia** spent months on an inclusive national exercise, including consultations with youth on their desired future.
- UNDP's **Europe and Central Asia Governance and Peacebuilding Policy Network** invested 90 minutes in a regional meeting to scan the horizon for emerging signals of change, risks, and opportunities.

Foresight approaches can be adapted to different situations and needs.

This Guide contains practical information grounded in the context of the UN

This includes how to **frame a foresight initiative** and

a set of **tools adapted to your circumstances**, whether

you are planning on facilitating an exercise yourself

or working with consultants.

Why use foresight?
What is different about it?

Supporting Governments in shifting social norms around gender, setting up universal healthcare, or reshaping social protection systems are all examples of work that go beyond our traditional five-year planning cycle.

As we implement programmes, the goal posts continue to move. We cannot transform the healthcare system of today; we need to transform the healthcare system we will have in five or six years down the road – and that system must stay relevant for the next 10 years.

Foresight is an approach for systematically thinking and acting in a long-term and anticipatory way under conditions of uncertainty.

Foresight approaches are specifically designed to deal with uncertainty.

Instead of forecasting, which makes predictions based on historical data, **foresight scans the horizon for emerging changes** that may not show up in official datasets for some time.

Instead of building strategies that are based on a single vision of the future, foresight builds strategy based on very different scenarios for the future that capture the uncertainty we face.

Who is using foresight?

Nearly every UN agency has made use of foresight in their work. Here are just a few examples:

UNDP in New York used foresight in developing the UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025, including by assessing the organization's readiness to cope with different future scenarios.

ILO in Geneva used foresight as part of its Future of Work Initiative to explore technological innovation, demographic shifts, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion through national dialogue, a global commission, and follow-up action for implementation.

UNESCO organized a global initiative to reimagine how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet. It involved a broad consultation process with diverse stakeholders, including youth, educators, civil society, Governments, and experts. It aims to produce a report in 2023 that will provide a vision and recommendations for education policies and practices in a changing world.

UNHCR used foresight to support the development of the North Macedonia National Migration Policy 2021–2025.

ESCAP used foresight to develop an approach to achieving disaster-related SDGs through artificial intelligence and geospatial data.

UNDP supported the Mexican government in creating a 20-year development plan through dynamic simulations of the country's energy, emissions, and water use to assess the environmental impacts of development scenarios and minimize trade-offs.

FAO used foresight to support the Tunisian Government develop a forward-looking strategy for the long-term sustainability of the olive oil industry.

RCO Egypt, UNIDO, and UNDP collaborated with the Egyptian Government and private sector to develop scenarios for manufacturing in Egypt during the COVID-19 pandemic to inform policies for recovery.

RCO Cambodia and DPPA conducted participatory scenario exercises and developed an early warning approach ahead of sensitive elections.

UNFPA and UN Global Pulse supported the Colombian Government in conducting participatory foresight exercises with Indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations as part of the national development planning process.

UNCT Rwanda used foresight to support the Government in its national development planning process by examining the future of urbanization, the future of rural sector development and large-scale public investment projects.

UN Global Pulse worked with the Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning to identify various signals and drivers that could impact the futures of MSMEs in Indonesia, which will feed into the long-term development plan of Indonesia.

Explore the tools

In the next few pages, we share key foresight tools and where they might be used. There are plenty of great tools and resources online to support foresight work – far more than can be showcased in this guide. **Think of this as a starter set of tools for your foresight work.**

Before we begin:
a few notes on foresight tools

They sound a little bit weird, and a little bit scary.

If we want foresight to be accessible as possible (we do), people from a whole range of backgrounds need to be able to understand and interact with tools, guidelines, and approaches. We've tried to give as much context to the tools as possible, but they may still feel out of the ordinary.

The tools are standard tools to help us do three things: **1) understand change, 2) reimagine what is possible, and to then 3) act.**

They do have names and language that at this point may be a little unfamiliar. As you move forward, try to focus on what the tools can bring to you and your colleagues (and start by working through the next page).

All of the tools have practical, real-world uses, and often link directly to our existing processes and system so they may also feel familiar. "Backcasting", for example, shows us how to work backwards from the result(s) we want/need, then moving forward towards that result often using existing planning processes and practices.
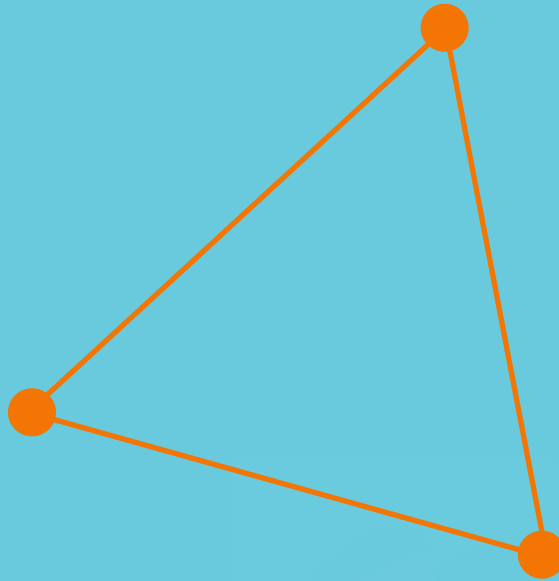
If something still isn't clear, reach out using our email address and we'll happily help you out: **futureslab@un.org.**

Explore the tools through three areas of application

Imagine possible futures

These are the tools for identifying new possibilities for the future, building scenarios, and identifying what a desired future might look like.

- **Scenario Development**
- **Desired Future**
- **Matrix Policy Gaming**
- **Causal Layered Analysis**

Make sense of change

These are the tools that help us make sense of what is happening: they help us to observe the world and to look out for signals of change–things that might be small today but could become big in the future, or vice-versa.

- **Horizon Scanning**
- **Three Horizons**
- **Futures Triangle**
- **Futures Wheel**

Take action

These are the tools that have to do with bringing the future back to the present. What transformations need to happen to bring about our desired future? What do we need to start doing now to move towards that future?

- **Back Casting**
- **Change Agenda**
- **Wind Tunnel Testing**

Each of these tools are defined on pages 13 – 15!

You can also click on them on this page for step-by-step "how to" guides.

Make sense of change

Horizon Scanning

Identify emerging changes that could have a big impact on a country or a specific sector.

When you might use it:

- Episodically - **Making sense of a disruption** or **new changes** in society

Three Horizons

A horizon scanning approach to understand societal transitions.

When you might use it:

- Situation analysis or strategy - **Identify drivers of change** - which ones might be holding back change and which ones might be advancing it.

Futures Triangle

An approach to engage people in conversation about broad forces that may shape the future.

When you might use it:

- Strategy - Inform the **development of scenarios**
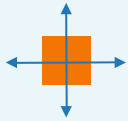
Futures Wheel

A foresight tool that helps to explore direct and indirect consequences of trends, events, and emerging issues.

When you might use it:

- Stakeholder engagement - Engage people in thinking through **what implications trends might have** for their community or industry

Imagine possible futures

Scenario Development

An approach to broaden our understanding of how the future may evolve.

When you might use it:

- Strategy - **Identify risks and opportunities**, particularly those that might emerge from interactions between drivers of change identified in your horizon scanning

Desired Future

A tool that helps us to identify characteristics of the future. It helps us to think about a range of outcomes rather than one scenario only.

When you might use it:

- Stakeholder engagement - Work with diverse voices to **identify the key characteristics of a preferred future**.

Matrix Policy Gaming

A simulation exercise based on role-playing.

When you might use it:

- Episodic - **Develop scenarios and strategies** following a key event or disruption

Causal Layered Analysis

A theory and methodology to explore the layers of change needed to truly transform and achieve the future that we want.

When you might use it:

- Strategy - **Envision a different future and develop a strategy** that is focused on transformational change

Take action

Back Casting

A tool to develop pathways to the future starting not from the present but from what we need to achieve.

When you might use it:

- Roadmapping – **Develop an action plan**
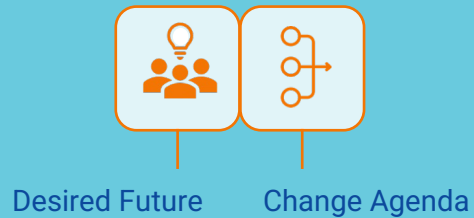
Change Agenda

Identify the transformations required to achieve the desired future.

When you might use it:

- Strategy - **Identify key transformations** or outcomes to be delivered

Wind Tunnel Testing

A process to stress-test policies, plans and strategies.

When you might use it:

- Midterm review - Test whether the **strategy or theory of change may need to be updated**

Combine the tools too…

Engage community. Work with community members, youth, or other groups in foresight. **Develop a vision** for the future and **identify changes to make it happen**.
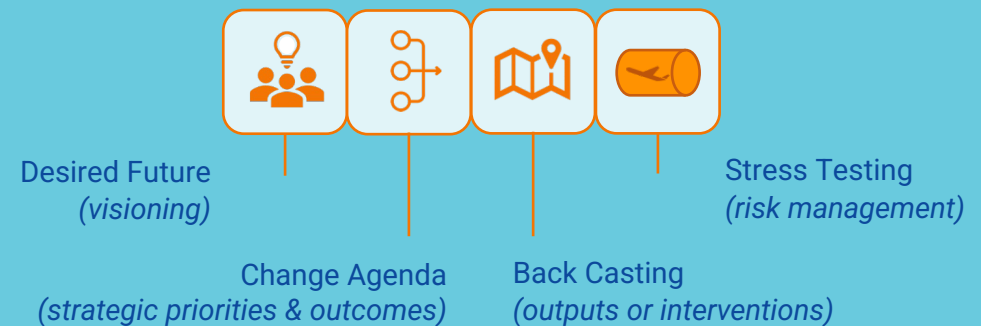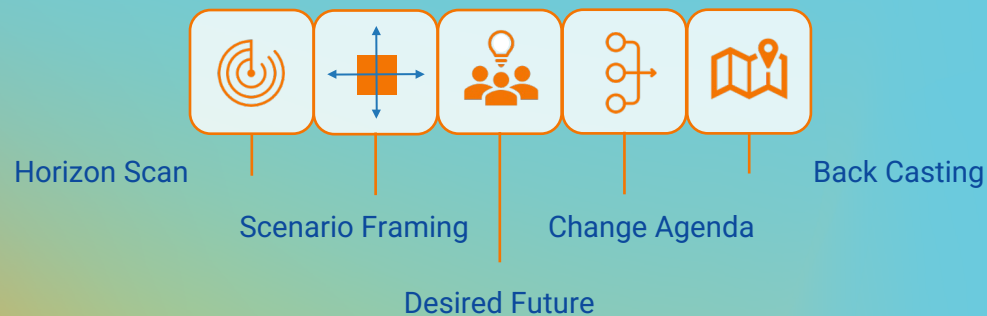
Desired Future   Change Agenda

Build coalitions for change. Work with government, civil society, or prospective joint programme partners. **Explore futures, identify pathways for change**, and build a coalition.

Horizon Scan

Scenario Framing   Change Agenda   Back Casting

Desired Future

Make sense of a crisis or turning point. Work with a small group of experts or a management team to **inform strategy or preparedness**; how a crisis might unfold, how different actors might act or react to inform programming or policy.
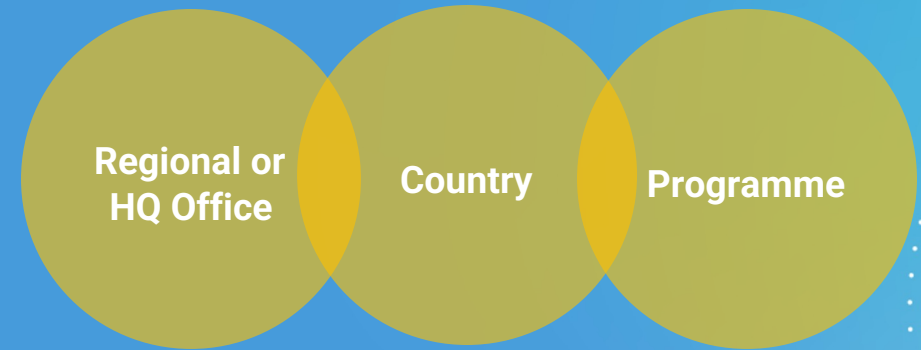
Horizon Scan   Policy Game

Scenario Framing

Build a strategy. Use foresight tools in place of some traditional strategy tools. **Develop a strategy** that is more forward-looking and **conscious of uncertainty**.

Desired Future
(visioning)   Stress Testing
(risk management)

Change Agenda
(strategic priorities & outcomes)   Back Casting
(outputs or interventions)

Connect foresight with your work

Regional or HQ Office

Country

Programme

Explore common use cases for foresight at the HQ, regional, country, and programme level. **Find opportunities to use foresight in making your work more impactful and future-informed**, whether you oversee projects, act as a regional advisor, or on the ground.

Regional or HQ Level

Thought leadership and generating demand

This involves producing forward-looking analyses and reports with the intent of influencing decision-makers or generating interest from Governments and donors to work with the UN on new kinds of challenges.

For example, the WHO regularly produces global horizon scans on emerging technologies and scientific advances that may affect global health to inform policymakers and stakeholders about potential benefits and risks and ultimately promote anticipatory policy.

"Future-proofing" the UN

This involves looking at areas such as operations, workforce planning, and ways of working to ensure the organization is ready for different future possibilities - whether it be changes in talent needs or another global pandemic. It elevates back-off functions to a more strategic level.

For example, the UN Department of Management Strategy, Policy, and Compliance uses foresight to inform workforce planning across the UN system such as identifying emerging skills and competencies required in the future, and developing policies that attract and retain a diverse and skilled workforce.

Identifying the consequences of global disruptions or shocks

In an interconnected world, local events increasingly have global ripple effects. This involves anticipating the possible second- and third-order effects of a disruption and planning responses.

For example, at the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, a number of UN agencies conducted foresight exercises to identify possible scenarios for how the conflict would unfold and the impacts of those scenarios on global security, food systems, and more.

Country Level

Strategic planning

This involves identifying priorities and identifying approaches to addressing those priorities in a way that is anticipatory and adaptable. This can include the development of country-wide strategies, such as the country programming framework, or thematic strategies, such as a gender strategy.

For example, UNICEF Malaysia used strategic foresight as part of its strategic planning process to complement its situation analysis and inform priorities in its 5-year Country Programme Document.

Making sense of disruptions and shocks

This can include considering the direct and indirect implications of elections, a typhoon, a major pandemic, or other disruption.

For example, the RCO in the Philippines used foresight post-elections to develop scenarios for the future of human rights and identify opportunities for progress

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Programme Level

Anticipatory decision-making and policy

This includes identifying novel risks and opportunities from climate change, social change, or change in other areas and implementing actions or developing contingency plans to address them.

For example, the Humanitarian Response Forum in Cambodia brought together UN and civil society stakeholders in humanitarian response to scan the horizon for novel humanitarian threats — particularly threats outside the climate space — to prepare in its contingency planning.

Support Government in making anticipatory decisions and creating anticipatory policies

This includes supporting Governments in developing policies that address future challenges.

For example, UNDP Mongolia supported the Mongolian Government in drafting its national AI policy, which includes an ethical framework for AI.

Support Government in strategic planning

The Government in long-term strategic planning and societal transformation efforts by facilitating inclusive consultation processes to collectively imagine possible futures, supporting the crafting of long-term development visions and plans, and identifying strategic interventions.

For example, the UNCT in Rwanda used foresight to support the Government in its national development planning process by examining the future of urbanization, the future of rural sector development and large-scale public investment projects.

Programme Level

Community engagement

This involves the inclusive engagement of communities to jointly imagine futures, identify risks and opportunities, and/or develop plans for change.

For example, UNFPA supported the Colombian Government in conducting participatory foresight exercises as part of the national development planning process.

Building foresight capabilities in Government

This includes providing capacity-building assistance to Government officials and teams. In a number of cases, the UN has supported the government in setting up foresight units as part of key ministries or the government's central planning function

For example, UNDP supported the Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning to set up a horizon scanning unit.

Early warning, including early warning for conflict

These are systems that alert decision-makers to the potential outbreak or escalation of an issue and provide an understanding of its nature and impacts.

For example, DPPA and the RCO in Cambodia developed an early warning system by monitoring press and social media sources for issues that have escalation potential.

Your turn!

Apply the foresight tools

Now that you have explored the tools and seen possible use cases for foresight in the UN context, it's time to **start planning your own foresight application.**

Following are four key components.

1   Decisions

Connecting foresight work to decisions is often the hardest part—and a great starting point for scoping. **What decisions will your foresight initiative feed into?** What will it take to influence those decisions?

These are a few ways foresight might translate into decisions:

- Setting strategic priorities
- Identifying contingencies and risk mitigation *("if x happens, this is how we will adjust our work")*
- Defining a resource mobilization agenda or a pipeline of future programmes
- Designing principles for future programming *("This is how we design our next interventions so they are anticipatory.")*
- Defining areas for learning or experimentation

2   Focal topic(s)

What is the future topic you are exploring? Is there a turning point, disruption, or trend that needs to be explored? While some applications cast a wide net *("the future of country X")*, **narrower focal topics can yield stronger results** *("the future of food security in the country Y")*.

Try to avoid making assumptions about what the future will look like: Consider impacts from a variety of sectors:

❌ *"The future of hospitals and healthcare"* reflects a single-mandate lens and assumes hospitals will be central to health in the future.

✅ *"The future of health and wellbeing"* allows you to explore how technology, climate, and other sectors might impact health.

3 Timeframe

The timeframe of your foresight application often depends on the objective underpinning your foresight application: are you looking to **control** a situation, **grow**, or **transform**?

What is the mindset are you approaching foresight from?

Choose a timeframe based on how long the necessary changes or transformations might take.

Short time frames (1–3 years) can make sense for foresight applications such as risk management or in a rapidly changing crisis, but they will often preclude conversations about creating transformative change.

Control
Foresight is used primarily to anticipate and deal with risks. It is a complement to traditional management approaches that seek stability and control.
(1 - 3 year timeframe)

Growth
Foresight is used to identify and capitalize on opportunities for growth and to accelerate impact within our current systems.
(2 - 10 year timeframe)

Transformation
Foresight is used to primarily explore how and in which directions deeper socio-economic systems might be transformed.
**(5 - 20 year timeframe)**

4 Participation

Who will take part in your foresight initiative and in which segments? Your choice of stakeholders influences who buys into the results, who your champions might be, and what kinds of conversations you may have.

Some foresight initiatives have an explicit focus on public and community inclusion. Others are used as a platform to create new conversations between different parts of Government.

Some deal with topics too sensitive to discuss with certain actors – but they still might share out a selection of risks or opportunities with the Government or other stakeholders. Foresight exercises that avoid echo chambers and include "unusual suspects" often yield the richest results.
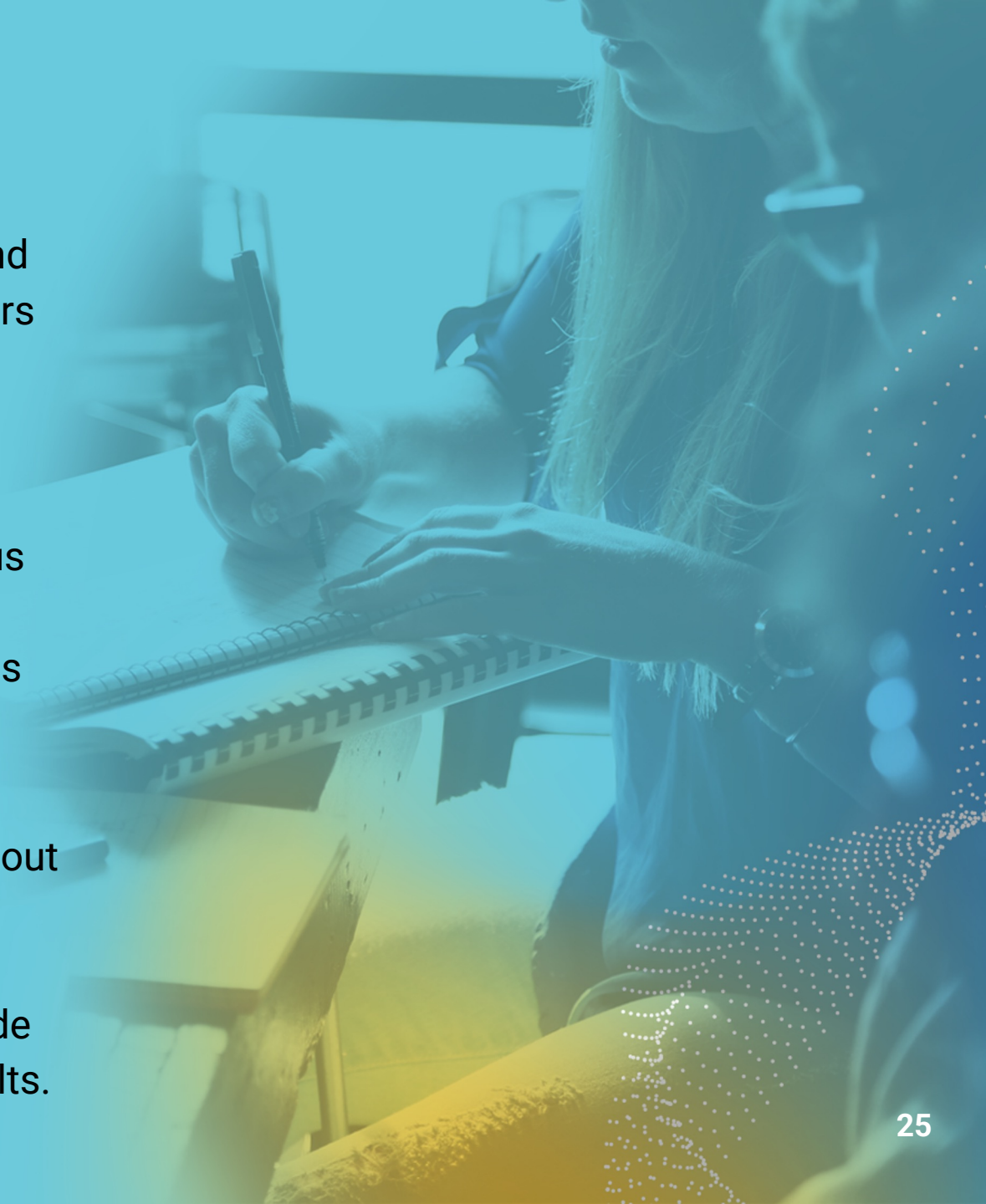
Guiding principles

As you adapt the foresight approach and tools to circumstances, it can be helpful to have some principles to guide your work.

These are a few pointers to look for in the design of a foresight initiative to help ensure it is impactful.

1 Alternative futures

Good foresight informs decisions by considering alternative scenarios for the future, including futures that might be challenging or provocative. Good foresight practice often challenges us to consider how we might tackle situations we don't usually consider.

2 Decisions that work across multiple futures

Good foresight practice doesn't only pick one scenario and plan for it. It promotes decisions that are effective under multiple scenarios and decisions that open up different options for action as circumstances change. The decision and the rationale behind it are carried forward so that decision-makers are well positioned to adapt as circumstances change. (See text box on "Building an agile UN" on p.30).

3 Orientation towards opportunity and transformation

Some of the most impactful foresight efforts consider risk but also go beyond them to understand how we can be ready for windows of opportunity as they open or imagine what a deeper transformation of systems, including socio-economic systems, might look like and how our collective work might add up to that.

4 Diverse voices and data sources

Many of the changes you least expect will come from your peripheral vision – not your usual interlocutors and partners. Good foresight is informed by what is happening in the streets, by people from different socio-economic classes, and by "unusual suspects." Get diverse data sources; if a change is significant enough to show up in official "statistics", the time to anticipate it has probably passed.

5 Embedding new capabilities

Good foresight practice is inclusive and participatory in a way that builds capacity and embeds new ways of thinking with our colleagues and partners so **they can carry forward these approaches.**

Building an agile UN: no-regret and low-regret decisions

No-regret and low-regret decisions are those that provide a benefit under all or many future scenarios. They are also known as robust or resilient decisions because they can withstand uncertainty and change.

These decisions often involve making investments that can have multiple uses and create more options for action, such as building networks, capacity, or digital platforms.

UNDP's investment in the Mongolia Sustainable Cashmere Platform to promote collaboration between stakeholders across the value chain for sustainable cashmere is an example of a no-regrets decision. Regardless of how the cashmere industry evolves post-COVID, greater collaboration between stakeholders across the value chain leads to an industry that is more resilient to challenges and better able to take advantage of growth opportunities.

Effective strategies usually involve making some bets; therefore, they can't be built solely from regretless decisions. However, no-regret decisions are often a cornerstone of strategies that deal with uncertainty and enable the UN to be agile.

Foresight as a way of thinking

The tools and activities shared in this guide enable you to better reflect and have a conversation about the future.

Foresight is ultimately a way of approaching the future—**thinking about multiple futures and translating that thinking into action.**

These are four mindsets that can help bring foresight work, workshops and conversations… from good to great!

Look for possibilities, not just probabilities

If recent history has made anything clear, it's that the world has plenty of surprises in store for us. A pandemic paralyzing the global economy seemed unlikely just a few years ago—and yet because we focused on what we thought was probable at the time, we were underprepared.

Shift from problem-solving to imagination

Shift our everyday conversations about today's problems and solutions. Doing foresight well requires that we resist those conversational reflexes, step away from problem-solving, and imagine new worlds.

Shed light on blind spots and assumptions

Effective horizon scanning and scenario development help participants shift attention from immediate risks and opportunities toward future risks and opportunities, hazards that have little historical precedence, and what-ifs that challenge our assumptions about what the future might look like.

Use foresight collectively and frequently

Collective, because what makes foresight stick are the conversations that people have with each other about the future—not the documents and reports. It needs to happen frequently because your context is changing and the people in your office will change over the course of your strategy cycle. Systematizing foresight is crucial to achieving UN 2.0 and effectively supporting Member States by building capacity to connect short-term political cycles with longer-term impact on people.

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Common Agenda

Get in touch

Contact the UN Futures Lab at **futureslab@un.org**

For more information visit **www.un-futureslab.org**