

# *STRATEGIC FORESIGHT GLOSSARY*



Find here a list of the most commonly used foresight words compiled by the UNGP team. The definitions are not formal nor fixed and developed to support aspiring foresight practitioners.

## # *2x2 Matrix*

A scenario-building methodology to draft four different scenarios based on two key uncertainties. The methodology involves plotting these uncertainties on a two-dimensional grid, resulting in four distinct quadrants, each quadrant representing a different possible scenario.

## A *Anticipation*

The ability of organizations to explore, understand and prepare for many plausible futures which can be enhanced through the use of future and foresight approaches.

### *Anticipatory governance*

The systematic adoption and application of strategic foresight throughout the strategy and policy-making process. By anticipating the future, decision makers can make informed decisions and take actions that will help mitigate negative impacts or take advantage of positive developments.

### *Archetype scenarios*

A scenario-building tool developed by futurist, Jim Dator, based on four generic futures: continued growth, collapse, discipline, and transformation. By using archetype scenarios, individuals and organizations can gain a better understanding of the range of possible futures that might emerge from current trends and conditions.

## B *Backcasting*

A method to determine the various pathways of actions and decisions that need to be taken to achieve a preferred future.

**B** *Black swan events*

Rare and unexpected events with a significant impact that are difficult to predict. These events are characterised by their extreme rarity, their unpredictable nature, and their significant impact on individuals or systems.

**C** *Capability matrix*

A tool used to identify which aspects of an organization can be leveraged to enable success in different futures. This tool helps organizations to identify and prioritise the capabilities needed to adapt to different possible futures, and to invest in building these capabilities over time.

**Casual Layered Analysis (CLA)**

A four-level scenario-building tool designed by futurist, Sohail Inayatullah, used to analyse and explore the deeper layers of meaning and causality underlying a particular issue or topic. The CLA has four levels: *litany* (an official description of events backed by data); *systemic causes* (social, economic, political structures and policies supporting the issue); *worldview* (deeper cultural assumptions and perspectives behind an issue); and *myth or metaphor* (narratives and inner stories).

**D** *Decolonial futures*

An approach centred on the perspectives and experiences of historically marginalised communities to create a more equitable and inclusive future. Decolonial futures aim to challenge dominant ways of thinking about the future by recognising and undoing the legacy of colonialism.

**Driver Mapping**

A tool used to identify the most influential forces of change, or “drivers,” in a system. It helps increase understanding of how the drivers interact and how likely they are to influence the future direction of a system.

**Driver of change**

Forces or signals of change that have the potential to shape the future, policy or strategy area. For example, climate change is a driver in the context of urban development. Drivers may have an immediate and direct effect or may have a more diffuse and indirect impact through a number of other drivers.

**E** *Event*

A notable occurrence in the policy or strategy space that often indicates a discernible shift or movement in the trajectory of the future. Events can have implications for individuals, organizations and societies requiring adaptation or adjustment to effectively navigate the changing landscape.

**Experiment(ation)**

For UNGP, it is a way to purposefully test and validate different value propositions around foresight. UNGP combines foresight with data, behavioural and innovation approaches. Our experiments-driven approach recognises that foresight is a rapidly-evolving discipline and not a one-size-fits-all solution.

**F** *Forecasting*

Predicting or estimating the likelihood of a future event or trend based on quantitative analysis and modelling.

**Foresight**

A collaborative process to explore futures in a structured and systematic way to anticipate, prepare and affect the course of change. It involves using a range of methods and tools to, for instance, analyse trends, identify potential disruptions or opportunities, and consider multiple possible scenarios for the future.

**Foresight maturity**

The different levels in an organization or team at which foresight approaches are executed and implemented.

**Future options**

A ranking of possible policies or strategies according to their effectiveness in various future scenarios. The options are categorised as “no regrets,” which are effective in all scenarios; “opt-out” options, which are effective in most scenarios but may need to be opted-out of in some situations; “opt-in” options, which are effective in a minority of scenarios, requiring investment in capabilities in case they need to be opted-in at a later date; and “abandon” options, which are ineffective in all scenarios.

## **F** *Futures cone*

A tool designed by futurist, Joseph Voros, that helps to visualise and explore a range of different futures. These include: *projected future* (the default “business as usual” future); *probable futures* (likely based on current trends); *plausible futures* (credible based on current knowledge); *possible futures* (potential but uncertain); *preferred futures* (desired) and *preposterous futures* (unlikely or improbable). It is a helpful tool to demonstrate that the future is not linear.

## *Futures dialogues*

Discussions or conversations that explore potential futures and the opportunities and challenges that they present. They involve stakeholders from various sectors, backgrounds, gender, age and parts of society and aim to build consensus and cooperation toward a shared vision of the future.

## *Futures literacy*

A capability and a skill that allows people to better understand the role that the future plays in what they see and do.

## *Futures studies*

Academic discipline, research methods and tools used to develop knowledge about the future. It includes foresight, forecasting and strategic planning. Following recent developments shifting the focus from futures studies to anticipation, futures studies now capture Indigenous futurity and non-dominant conceptions of time.

## *Futures triangle*

A tool to map the future through the three dimensions that are shaping it: the pull of the future, the push of the present, and the weight of history. It is a simple and quick instrument for understanding plausible futures based on the interactions and movements of the three forces.

## *Futures wheel*

A tool for visualising the direct and indirect future consequences of a particular driver, event or issue. It is a structured brainstorming on chains of “if, then” statements and helps move from isolated signals and possibilities to more complex forecasts about possible futures.

**H** *Horizon scanning*

A method to identify potential early signals of change and its challenges and opportunities. It is a structured evidence-gathering process that explores the external strategic environment and brings together perspectives from different sources. Horizon scanning is the foundation of a strategic foresight process and is often found at the beginning of the forward-looking activity.

**I** *Intergenerational equity (IGE)*

A key principle that promotes intergenerational solidarity and recognises responsibilities towards future generations. The principle has deep roots in cultural and religious traditions and is reflected in the Charter of the United Nations. It involves making decisions that consider the long-term consequences and impacts on future generations and the planet.

**M** *Megatrends*

Long-term trends that are expected to have a major impact on the future. They are often global in scope and may include demographic, social, economic, technological, and environmental changes.

**P** *Participatory futures*

An approach involving the active participation of stakeholders in the exploration and development of potential futures. It aims to build consensus and cooperation towards a shared vision of the future to ensure that the voices and perspectives of all stakeholders are represented and invested in the development of accessible and participant-led foresight processes.

**Pathways**

A set of possible steps or courses of action that can be taken to achieve a particular goal or future outcome.

**PESTLE**

An acronym standing for Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental. It provides a framework to analyse factors that may impact an organization, country or strategy.

**P** *Plausible futures*

Scenarios or possibilities that fall within the bounds of what is considered possible, given the current state of knowledge and the level of uncertainty involved.

**Portfolio**

A set of experiments composed around a specific future-learning question that can be run in parallel to accelerate evidence-based learning.

**Portfolio analysis**

A method to examine a set of experiments or policies to determine their potential value and risks. It is used to generate a range of policy or project options, or future-learning questions, that can help organizations or individuals accelerate learning on specific future-learning questions and achieve both aspirational goals and resilience to different possible futures.

**Possible futures**

The broadest range of scenarios, encompassing all potential outcomes that could arise, regardless of likelihood or feasibility.

**Preferred future**

A vision of the future that is desirable and reflects the aspirations and goals of a particular individual or organization.

**Preposterous futures**

A vision of the future that is considered impossible or unlikely to happen.

**Probable futures**

Scenarios and possibilities that are likely to occur based on current trends, known factors, and other indicators. These are the futures that have a higher likelihood of occurring compared to other potential futures.

**Projected future**

The default future that will happen if nothing changes.

**Q** *Quintet of change*

A set of cross-cutting capabilities indicated in 'Our Common Agenda' to accelerate the UN system transformation. It includes data and digital, innovation, strategic foresight and behavioural science.

**R** *Risk management*

The process of identifying, assessing and evaluating risks that could potentially impact an organization or strategy. It involves developing and implementing actions to minimise the negative impact and capitalise on opportunities.

*Roadmapping*

A structured process for creating a visual representation of a strategic plan or pathway to achieve a desired future. It includes identifying key actions, strategies, policies and changes, as well as mapping interconnections and interdependencies between different components.

**S** *Scanner*

An individual or team that scans for potential signals of a changing environment, often part of a structured horizon scanning process.

*Scenarios*

Descriptions of plausible alternative futures, not to be treated as predictions. Scenarios are not predictive but help explore a broad scope of potential outcomes. They can be developed using diverse tools, such as Archetype Scenarios or the 2x2 matrix.

*Scoping*

A first step in the foresight process to outline the project goals and objectives and define methods, tools and processes that best suit the challenge.

*Sense-making*

The process of creating awareness and understanding in situations of high complexity or uncertainty in order to make informed decisions. This also relates to understanding and contextualising insights generated throughout the foresight process.



## **S** *Signals (of change)*

Forces that have the potential to shape the future, policy or strategy area. For example, climate change is a signal of change in the context of urban development.

### *Stakeholder mapping*

A process to identify and analyse the various individuals and groups who have a stake in a particular issue or decision. This process involves identifying key stakeholders, assessing their interests, influence and power and mapping their relationship with one another. In foresight, it can be used to help understand possible futures based on stakeholders' interests and/or to identify key participants in foresight activities.

### *Strategic foresight*

A systematic approach to embedding foresight into processes and programmes to inform strategies and policies in order to actively shape the future. It involves a collaborative process that brings together diverse stakeholders to consider different assumptions and points of view. It is often used as an umbrella term that includes future-oriented methods and approaches.

### *System Mapping*

A method used in foresight to visually represent and understand complex systems and their interconnections with the goal of identifying potential drivers of change and their likely impacts on the system.

### *System Thinking*

The skill or ability to understand complex systems and their interconnections, and how to shape them.

## **T** *Trend*

A general pattern or direction of change that has been observed over time, which may continue or shift in the future. Trends can be strong or weak, increasing, decreasing, or stable, and are used in foresight to understand the trajectory of developments.

**T** *Trend analysis*

A systematic method to identify and interpret patterns of change to map potential future developments. It involves analysing data and signals from various sources to identify emerging trends and understand how they may evolve over time, allowing organizations to anticipate and adapt to future changes.

**U** *Uncertainty*

A degree of variability, lack of predictability, or state of doubt about the future or about what is the right thing to do.

**V** *Vision*

A description of a preferred future state. It articulates what the world could look like if certain aspirations were realised. A vision provides a clear and compelling image of the desired future, serving as a guiding star to help individuals and organizations navigate toward that future. It is often grounded in a deep understanding of current trends and emerging developments, and provides a positive and inspiring view of what could be achieved.

**W** *Weak signals*

These are subtle and early indicators of potential future developments that may not yet be widely recognised. Identifying and monitoring these signals can help in detecting emerging trends and potential disruptions before they become obvious to everyone.

**Wild card**

An unforeseen or uncertain factor that could potentially disrupt or significantly impact a situation or scenario. This term can encompass various types of unexpected events, including black swans (low-probability, high-impact events), as well as other emerging trends or developments that were previously unforeseen.

**Wind-tunnelling**

A method to stress-test objectives and strategies against alternative future scenarios. It can also be used to understand how different contexts modify needs and how to adapt our strategies to changing contexts.