

COMPASS

SPECIAL EDITION

November 2025

What Makes a Futurist?



منتدى
دبي
FORUM للمستقبل

2025



Global Futures الشبكة العالمية
Society لمؤسسات استشراف المستقبل

مبادرة من مؤسسة دبي للمستقبل
An Initiative by Dubai Future Foundation



ASSOCIATION OF
PROFESSIONAL
FUTURISTS

**The
future we need**
doesn't just happen,
it's something shaped
by those open enough to
imagine **beyond borders,
disciplines,
and certainties.**

H.E. Khalfan Belhoul,
Chief Executive Officer,
Dubai Future Foundation



COMPASS

Special Edition
November 2025

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About Compass

Compass magazine strives to be the global voice of professional futurists and foresight practitioners. As an official publication of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF), our mission is to bring out the voices of foresight professionals of all ages and all backgrounds to create opportunities to advance the foresight profession and enhance the knowledge, wisdom and insight of our members, who serve as ambassadors for the profession wherever they are.

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EDITORS' NOTES



This is a first-ever special edition of Compass magazine. The Association of Professional Futurists (APF) has partnered with the Global Futures Society (GFS) to create a special issue to be circulated during the Dubai Future Forum 2025, which is being conducted on 18-19 November.

With this special issue, I welcome my co-editor, Dr Patrick Noack, who serves as the Executive Director of the Dubai Future Institute within the Dubai Future Foundation.

Working together, we selected the theme of “What Makes A Futurist?” in anticipation of the more than 2,500 futurists expected to attend the Dubai Future Forum. This theme will be explored during a recurring panel at the gathering.

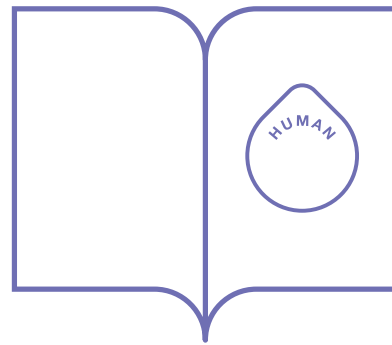
The application of foresight by corporations, governments and non-profits continues to mature and is increasingly addressing the needs of communities within the wider sectors. Hence this cover theme offers an opportunity to explore many varied and diverse perspectives on how the futures community defines a person who proclaims themselves a futurist, their mandate, their role and the challenges they seek to overcome.

To help us explore this theme, we invited 12 futurists, representing North America, Latin America, Europe, MENA, Africa and Asia-Oceania, to write essays touching on the question “What is a Futurist?”. Our contributors come from various backgrounds – from corporate futurists and academics to those representing government agencies, NGOs and associations.

Our contributors offer up a wide range of perspectives on not only what a futurist is but also the role of a futurist in today’s fast-paced world. As a futurist, you may resonate with a number of the essays, or you may not at all. What’s important here is to understand that the futures field resembles a quilt of many types of fabric, which, as a whole, creates a vibrant image of people and ideas united in doing all that they can to navigate our world to a better place. These articles represent the beginning of a conversation about this topic, and you could see them as catalysts for dialogue in your encounters in Dubai during the Dubai Future Forum and beyond.

HUMAN-MACHINE COLLABORATION

You will also note another interesting feature of this special issue: the labeling of each article with the DFF's Human-Machine Collaboration (HMC) icons. We asked each contributor to declare the extent to which (if at all) their writing process used AI, which is summarized at <https://www.dubaifuture.ae/hmc>. Our intention is to carry this forward to future issues of Compass.



Thank You

In addition to all of our contributors to this special issue, we also would like to thank Maryam Yousuf and Eman Ebed Alkadi for helping us oversee this project, as well as Issam Yasin for his design, Amanda Anstee for proofreading, and Jocelyn Cheung with the APF for distributing this issue.

With kind regards,

Stephen Dupont and **Dr Patrick Noack**



A Word from the APF's Chairs: An Invitation to Professionalism in Futures



Collective Imagination in Action: The Work of Futurists



Writing



Visuals



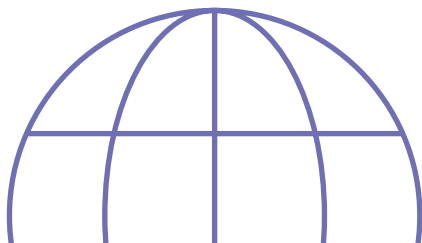
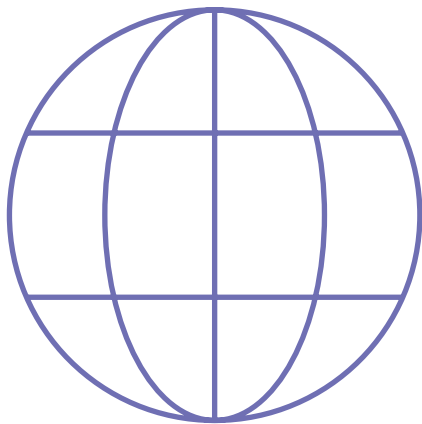
Design

An open letter to the global foresight community and to those attending the Dubai Future Forum from the co-chairs of the APF.

Dear all,

Across history, humanity has looked toward the future with equal measures of fear and hope. But today, in a world defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, looking ahead is no longer optional – it's essential. This is where futurists and organizations such as the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) play a critical role.

Founded in 2002, the APF is a global community of more than 600 members across 40 countries. Its mission is simple yet profound: to set standards of excellence in foresight, to advocate for the value of futures thinking, and to nurture a world transformed by resilience, inclusion, and imagination. Members come from diverse backgrounds – business, government, education, non-profits, consultancies – but they share a commitment to cultivating the capacity to anticipate, imagine, and create better futures.





“Earth Dreams” Exhibition by Refik Anadol, Museum of the Future

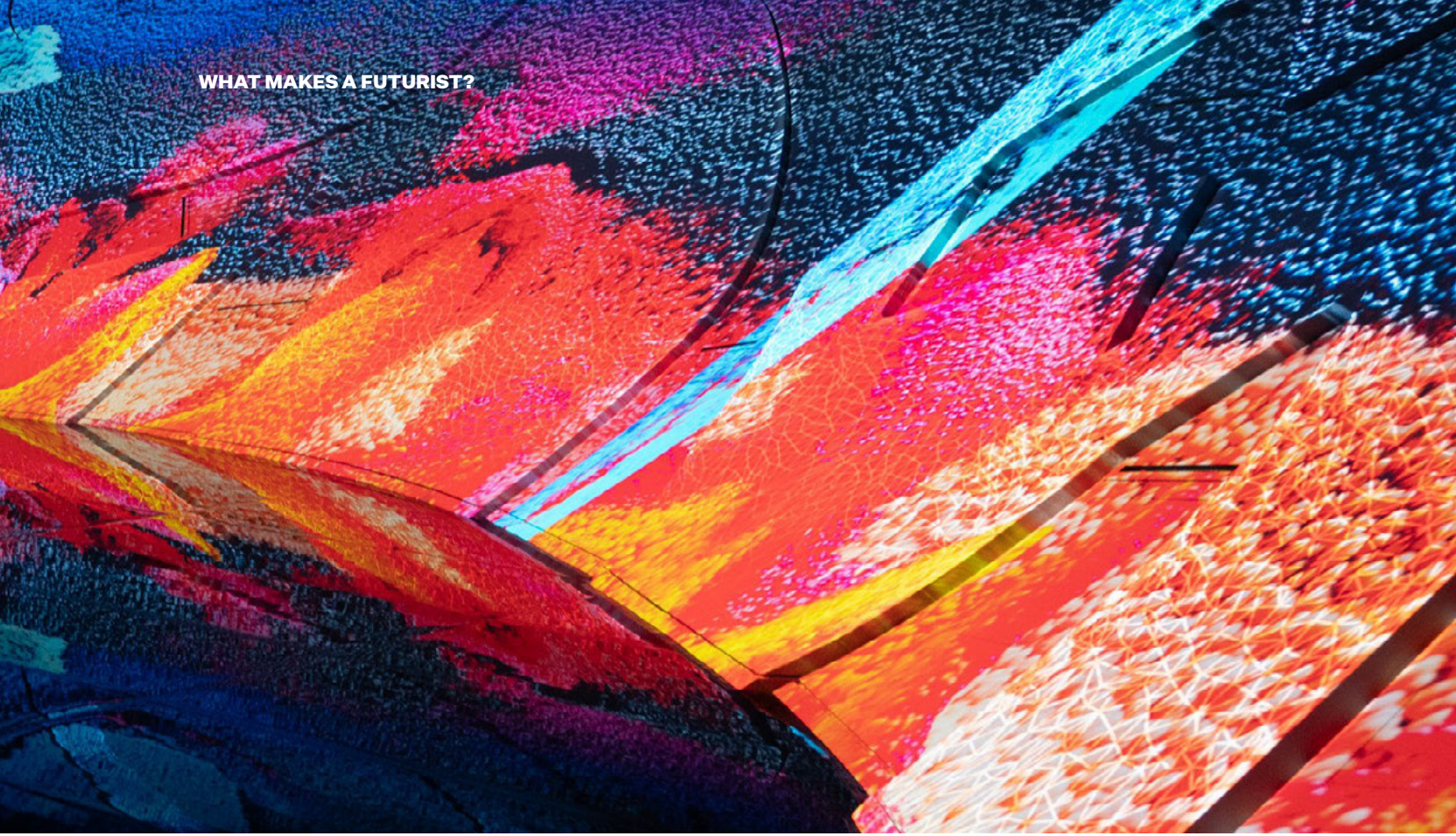
BUT WHAT DOES IT ACTUALLY MEAN TO BE A FUTURIST TODAY?

Contrary to the stereotypes, futurists are not fortune tellers. We are translators, bridge-builders, and facilitators. We help organizations and communities ask better questions, notice signals of change, and expand their imagination of what could be possible. In doing so, we challenge the limits of “business as usual.”

This work is as much about transformation as it is about strategy. While traditional foresight often focuses on scenario planning and risk management, the task of futurists is also to mutate, transform, and take futures a step further. It’s an invitation to examine assumptions, confront “unthought” possibilities, and imagine futures that are more just, inclusive, and regenerative. As Sohail Inayatullah reminds us, the work is not only about designing plans but also about creating the conditions for emergence – enabling people and organizations to give birth to new visions of the future together.

That may sound straightforward, but in practice it means we don’t hold all the answers. Our role is to build the capabilities that allow collective discovery. Institutions like the APF help create the spaces where this can happen – spaces that take many forms, from workshops and research to games and dialogues. Much of this work is quiet but powerful: reframing assumptions, reminding leaders and communities that the path they’re on is neither inevitable nor irreversible, and asking what our actions today say about the futures we are shaping.

The importance of this work cannot be overstated. What we need now goes far beyond predictions – it requires imagination, resilience, and courage. Futurists provide scaffolding for this process. They hold up a mirror to our present choices while also opening windows into futures we might not have dared to consider. They remind us that our perception of the future is inseparable from how we live the present, and that by broadening our sense of alternatives, we can expand collective agency and strengthen resilience. This also means recognizing that humans anticipate the future in many different ways – and that futurists must adapt to multiple anticipatory systems to meet the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve.



The APF embodies this collective spirit. Its members are committed not only to professional excellence but also to fostering a global conversation about how foresight can serve humanity. The vision is clear: a world where decisions are driven not by fear or short-term gain but by care, responsibility, and the belief that better futures are possible.

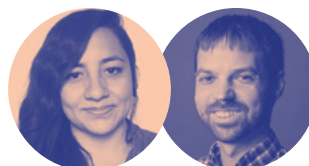
What we need
now goes far
beyond predictions
– it requires
**imagination,
resilience, and
courage.**

Ultimately, the role of futurists today is not to be heroes but to be companions in a larger caravan – a shared journey of discovery, vulnerability, and transformation. By curating spaces for learning and co-creation, futurists invite us to step into the unknown not with despair but with curiosity and agency. In the world we live in, thinking about the future is not a luxury; it is a necessity. What's scarce are the spaces where reflection allows us to truly explore the wide range of possibilities and consider the best paths forward.

With this special issue, developed in collaboration with the Global Futures Society, we invite you into community with the Association of Professional Futurists and the Global Futures Society, to explore your identity and role as a futurist and our collective mission in shaping the future of the world for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Abril Chimal and **Jeremy Wilken**
APF Co-Chairs



The Future Is Ours to Author: How Black African Women Futurists Are Rewriting Tomorrow

By Letitia Jentel

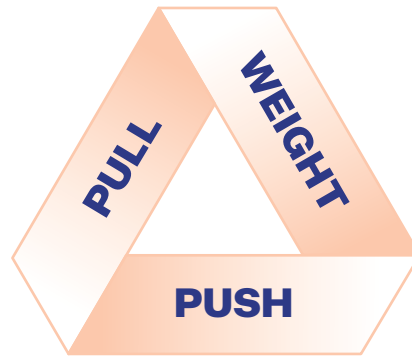


The role of foresight is to enable agency while dwelling in the liminal space between what is and what could be.

At its best, foresight is an act of rebellion: rejecting the linear, the predictable, and the comfortable. While strategists obsess over quarterly gains, futurists scan decades ahead, hunting weak signals, interrogating entrenched assumptions, and uncovering wildcards that could rewrite the trajectory of humanity. A true futurist is both analyst and provocateur: insatiably curious, intellectually humble, and relentless in unsettling complacency.

Yet, the foresight profession itself stands at a precipice. If it is to shape the decades ahead rather than passively observe them, it must become radically more inclusive, collaborative, and disruptive.

Nowhere is this transformation more urgent, or more revealing, than in the experiences of Black African women practising futures work in a world that structurally seeks to exclude them.



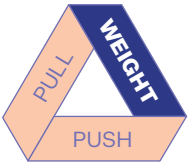
WHEN YOUR FUTURE HAS BEEN DENIED

What does it mean to be a futurist when your own future has been systematically denied? What kind of epistemic courage does it take for a Black African woman to imagine tomorrow when today offers so little security, visibility, or recognition?

Black African female futurists are barely a dozen across the African continent, navigating a field where legitimacy is still mediated through Western epistemologies and linguistic gatekeeping. From the margins, we wield our multidimensional identities as both armour and catalyst. Externally, we claim beauty on our terms: hair worn as a crown, traditional colours and attire steeped in ancestral history, yet equally at ease in any space, from ceremonial gatherings to corporate boardrooms. Internally, we bring agility, tenacity, and resilience, moving fluidly between lecture halls, policy roundtables, and grassroots communities. We confront raw humanity head-on, using foresight to actively co-create better futures.

THE FUTURES TRIANGLE: PULL, PUSH, WEIGHT

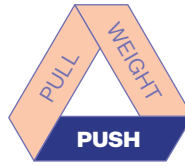
Through in-depth interviews using the Futures Triangle methodology developed by Sohail Inayatullah, we explore three interlinked forces shaping our futures work. The Futures Triangle examines three interlinked forces shaping change: the Pull of the Future, the Push of the Present, and the Weight of the Past. Through this lens, the interviews illuminate how we are navigating systemic exclusion, epistemic injustice, and algorithmic bias. The insights from the interviews aim to better understand how foresight can serve as a tool of liberation for individuals, institutions, and communities on the margins of power.



THE WEIGHT OF THE PAST IS HEAVY

Entrenched economic, political, and technological exclusion; staggering unemployment (41% for Black women in South Africa compared to 8.2% for white women); landlessness despite producing most of sub-Saharan Africa's food; and minimal leadership representation. Poverty, gender-based violence, and algorithmic apartheid in Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems compound the inequities. These are not accidental. They are the deliberate architecture of colonial, patriarchal, and racial hierarchies. Leadership remains in the hands of those who authored exclusion. Representation without dismantling these hierarchies will never be enough.

“Colonial legacies continue to define success, knowledge, and power in ways that exclude and dehumanise Black women. For example, the concept of democracy in many African countries is often a transplant of Western frameworks, poorly contextualised and hampering genuine political and social transformation,” says Karabo Mangena.* Culturally entrenched biases, from beauty standards imposed by colonialism to normalised gendered violence and exclusion, are daily realities that impede bold futures thinking.



THE PUSH OF THE PRESENT OFFERS

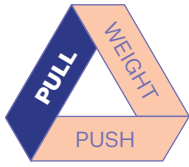
The Push of the Present offers both disruption and resistance. Climate collapse, political fragility, and technological bias converge to threaten African futures daily. These intersecting crises do not operate in isolation but compound each other, shaping the framing and urgency of futures work.

Yet counter currents emerge, such as Afrofuturism reshaping cultural narratives; grassroots education initiatives like Teach the Future that seed futures literacy in children; and cross-border collaborative networks that bypass elitist “clubs” to democratise futures thinking. Black African women futurists are at the forefront of this insurgency, deploying foresight as a liberation technology. As highlighted by Nancy Muigei,* further examples include the “Seeds of the Good Anthropocene,” highlighting innovations on the periphery and exemplifying pockets of the futures in the present.

Sparks of innovation include African movements, informally and formally organised by collectives on the periphery of power. Afrofuturism in arts and culture serves as powerfully imaginative spaces that reassert African agency and creativity, before words are formed to communicate liberated visions. Muigei suggests that examples like Kenya's Vision 2027 scenario planning and the anthropology of multiple pasts and futures underscore how indigenous and diasporic knowledge roots resilience and enable futures plurality.

The practical challenge remains transforming foresight insights into concrete, ethical action. Funding scarcity, political interference, and the short-termism dominant in policymaking obstruct the transition from visionary to transformative futures.

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?




THE PULL OF THE FUTURE

The Pull of the Future is a compelling invitation towards futures that are radically liberatory and authentically African. Interviewees expressed a shared desire to challenge the ingrained assumptions that position Africa and to emphasise, instead, the necessity of defining futures by Africans for Africans, grounded in indigenous knowledge, languages, and lived realities.

This liberation also entails a linguistic revolution: the current dominance of English and French within the futures field alienates many and perpetuates a “coloniser’s standard” that many struggle to access or shape. African futurists recognise the urgent need to co-create and popularise an African futures lexicon that dignifies local innovation, cultural practices, and epistemologies. Such a lexicon would fuel courage and a willingness to assert and negotiate knowledge outside Western norms, transforming how futures are imagined and enacted.

The aspirational pull includes educational transformation, embedding futures literacy within African schooling systems from primary grades to universities, making foresight accessible, meaningful, and actionable for youth and marginalised communities. This democratisation counters elitism and exclusivity, enabling a broader collective to understand, participate in, and shape their futures. This is foresight as cognitive rebellion, imagining futures that resist historical oppression while actively designing systems of justice and self-determination.



The practical challenge remains transforming foresight insights into concrete, ethical action

A BLUEPRINT FOR TRANSFORMATION

For foresight to survive its relevance crisis, it must learn from those working furthest from its centres of power. Black African women futurists are already showing the way, turning foresight from a boutique discipline into a public good, a collective literacy, and an instrument of liberation. That demands systemic reform:



Methodological Innovation and Contextualisation:

Develop foresight tools grounded in African epistemologies, incorporating qualitative and participatory approaches that centre lived experience.



Technology and Data Sovereignty

Govern data on African terms, integrating sources from satellite imagery to oral histories, ensuring context and ownership of the narratives it shapes. Such practices ensure that data is not stripped of its cultural meaning or exported for external agendas but instead serves as a strategic asset for African-led decision-making, innovation, and foresight.



Political and Institutional Reform

Laws reflect justice, while the role of foresight is the ability to anticipate new forms of injustice. From digital surveillance to misinformation warfare, foresight in law means acting before harm becomes irreversible. Embed foresight in governance to anticipate injustice, increase representation, and insulate futures work from political capture. Applying foresight to justice systems and governance ensures that in legal voids, decisions remain guided by integrity, equity, and shared responsibility.



Educational Transformation

Embedding futures literacy into schooling and public discourse to democratise access and build intergenerational resilience. Specifically, infrastructure for decision-making should include systems-level diagnosis, governance foresight tools, regenerative economic models, nonlinear response frameworks, future-responsible leadership capabilities, and ensuring continuity beyond political or funding cycles.

The global foresight community must take decisive steps to dismantle structural inequities and democratise futures thinking. For the Global North, this means funding African-led foresight initiatives by ensuring that outcomes are co-designed and accountable to varying power dynamics, recognising and citing African foresight scholarship as authoritative knowledge, and replacing extractive partnerships with co-authored, equitable collaborations. It also requires confronting algorithmic bias by ensuring African voices, governance, and data are at the centre of AI futures, preventing technology from reinforcing historical injustices.

For the Global South, the imperative is to strengthen and invest in cross-border African foresight networks, embed futures literacy into public education at all levels, and develop African methodologies rooted in local languages and cultural frameworks. Foresight must be harnessed to reimagine long-term transformation and to directly address urgent socio-economic challenges, ensuring that futures work is both visionary and immediately relevant.



Letitia Jentel is the Senior Programme Manager and Researcher in the Futures Programme at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). She holds two Master's degrees, including an MBA and an MPhil in Futures Studies (cum laude), and has advanced expertise in energy technology futures. Letitia has a background in the energy generation, petroleum, and financial services sectors in South Africa. She is an accredited member of the Association for Professional Futurists and applies strategic foresight to systemic change, focusing on sustainable transitions and innovation in energy and governance.

THE FINAL WORD

To be a Black African woman futurist is to embody resilience and intellectual insurgency to reclaim the future from colonial shadows. We are futures architects; designing new vocabularies, methodologies, and collectives that democratise foresight and catalyse just, flourishing futures.

The foresight gap will not be closed by better futures software, nor by more polished keynote presentations. It will be closed when foresight becomes a public good, a collective literacy, and a weapon in the hands of those whom history has tried to silence. The future is not something to be anticipated; it is something to be authored. And Black African women are writing chapters the world cannot afford to ignore.

*By design, Black women are referenced in the essay and not as footnotes. Not all interviewees have been quoted in the text





The “Good” Futurist: Challenges of Scale, Seeding and Subjectivity

By **Tobias Revell, Dr Bree Trevena**
and **Charlie Warwick**

“Futurists” come in all flavours; the conscious construction and use of futures is fast becoming mainstream across sectors and the methodological and ideological landscape is diversifying, quickly.

But what makes a “good” futurist?

We authored this article sitting in Arup offices on three different continents, working amongst technical experts and design partners who are actively shaping the places and spaces that will outlive us, and likely the next few generations, too. In our world of built environment design and engineering, knotty questions of scale and growth surface daily and “good” foresight is difficult to define. So, we offer a perspective on characteristics common to the “good” futurists we encounter – and aspire to be.



Writing



Visuals



Design

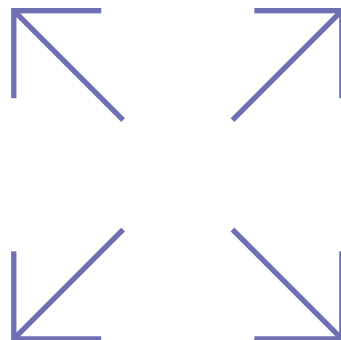
THE CRITICAL FUTURIST

We are all swimming in assumptions about how things “should” or “could” be, all the time. Innovation and change are often framed as inevitable or autonomous, as forces of history waiting to be substantiated by the right time and context.¹ But a good futurist knows that everything is a choice, framed by political, social and commercial motivations. Bringing to light the unseen forces (sociopolitical, cultural, coercive, systemic influences) that shape expectations and crystallise assumptions in social groups is a ‘good’ futurist’s day job.

Now, our image of the future is more fractious than ever,² so the ability to critically deconstruct the futures offered by others – especially those with the most power to realise those futures – is a capability sorely needed. Tools and frameworks like Sohail Inayatullah’s Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)³ or Stuart Brand’s Pace Layers⁴ are often cited as helpful aids for avoiding the “extended present” fallacy, and for scratching below the surface to see drivers and motivations. But beyond expressing a healthy scepticism for linear projections and simply asking “why?”, a critical futurist can entertain the opposite.⁵ What if what we think will happen, doesn’t? What if the unthinkable *actually happens*?

“What if that building isn’t used the way you’re imagining it? Or by the users you have in mind?” or “What if you can’t insure this thing? Is it still an ‘asset’?” are the kinds of questions asked in the context of our practice in the built environment.

A good futurist knows that **everything is a choice**, framed by political, social and commercial motivations



THE DESIGNERLY FUTURIST

...is less concerned with what things say they are than what they *actually* are. The material (often trivial) minutiae of mundane, everyday living define our experiences of the present; it will be no different in our futures. Glassy objects accented by an electrical glow, or polished and glossy consultancy trend reports, full of projections, are not our lived experience. They cannot express how we will truly connect, create, relate, destroy, define or consume things in the future (to use the Verge ethnographic framework).⁶ That detail is all in the smoke alarms, door handles and baby food shortages – the prosaic “stuff” that speaks to our everyday context and how we live change.

So, the speculative design of a perhaps trivial, material “thing”⁷ in a future [city / concert venue / bus stop] can be the entry point for a more nuanced and honest reimagining of the systems, spaces and lives in which those things feature. Designerly futurists can resist the tendency towards sweeping statements of scale, in favour of “high resolution” worldbuilding that starts with the small stuff – a theory of “nonscalability”.⁸

Every utopia necessitates a dystopia and even dystopia can be a utopia for those that imagine their survival

THE SELF-REFLEXIVE FUTURIST

There is a blurry but real line between describing and prescribing⁹ futures. Requests for “20xx visions”, “best- and/or worst-case scenarios” and “preferred futures” might be approached with caution, as implicit in all those types of commissions is the assumption that values, hopes and fears of stakeholders are automatically aligned.¹⁰

The labelling of “worst case” Covid-19 infection rate scenarios was a striking example of value judgments applied before any evaluation of the multi-species health benefits of reduced industrial activity and depolluted air. Conversely, the green transition to a Net Zero future intuitively feels generous and prosperous but can be perceived as economic warfare for others.¹¹ Of course, you could argue that futures work is only made actionable by alignment on “good” or “better” outcomes, and then the collective mapping of the necessary or optional steps to achieve them. But a sufficiently honest and thorough exploration of the *possible* conditions under which we might be operating requires a suspension of value judgment.

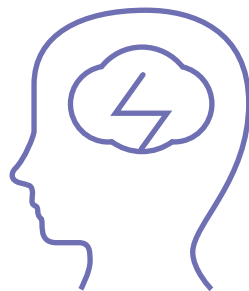
Systems can expect perverse actors to disrupt and destabilise. Counter-cultures always feature in societies. Different knowledge systems and world views exist side by side. Every imagined scenario would (and should) contain imagined hierarchies, underworlds, tension and compromise. Every utopia necessitates a dystopia and even dystopia can be a utopia for those that imagine their survival.¹² If it’s easy to “select-the-scenario” that’s most desirable, we may not have done our job well enough; consistent self-reflexiveness and surrounding oneself with contrary perspectives are antidotes.

THE RESPONSIBLE FUTURIST

Now we get deeper into ethical territory. We noted the importance of material “things” in futures, but futures are also “things” in and of themselves. “Frame analysis”¹³ and social construction¹⁴ both argue that futures (and stories more generally) are “substantial artefacts”, and that the perception or idea of change is enough to drive actual change, a phenomena more recently called “hyperstition”.¹⁵

Futurists whose practice is participatory are in the privileged position of guiding others in the construction of these substantial, change-making artefacts – they may get to choose the methods, the stimulus, the parameters, and what makes it into a world and what is left out. Despite the best attempts at neutrality, futurists’ fingerprints are all over the products of their engagements, and their facilitation choices shape participant experience. Recognising that the “seeds” of stories grow and take unexpected shape in others’ imaginations, and that describing them in the first place makes them more likely to come about, is core to responsible futures practice.

Ensuring psychological safety in futures engagements is higher on our agenda than ever before – being confronted by an emotive or extreme future can be as triggering as recalling a traumatic memory (we use the same part of our brain to imagine as we do to remember, after all).¹⁶



THE FUTURIST AS A COLLECTIVE

Intelligence is the currency of any futurist; might how they assemble, shape and share that intelligence might distinguish them as a “good” futurist? Too often, futurism gets bogged down in “signal hoarding” – the idea that the value lies in having the most trend reports, the hottest takes, or the deepest research library. In reality, quality trumps quantity every time and no one person has the answers. Intelligence is collective, it emerges at the intersection of people, organisations and ideas¹⁷ through the “messy exchange” of metaphors and stories¹⁸ and rarely from computers dressed up as brains in jars.

The real value, then, is in collective sensemaking. It is in understanding groups of people as a sophisticated computation mechanism collectively capable of turning a pile of data points into insight, principles, narrative and lore through a deep understating of time, place, relations and feeling.¹⁹

This requires humility, openness to challenge, and a willingness to admit you don’t have all the answers. In the Futurist Collective, debate is a feature, not a bug.

Despite the best attempts at neutrality, **futurists’ fingerprints are all over the products of their engagements.**

DEFINING WHAT A FUTURIST IS

In this exercise of asking what a futurist really is, and in trying to define a “good” one, a clear set of achievable criteria ultimately evades us. Large-scale impact is desirable, yet it requires impossibly deep engagement with small scale, material future “things”. Seeds of future stories are planted and can sprout in unexpected, unsavoury ways. Objectivity would be ideal, but it’s unrealistic for any human. And beyond those issues of scale, seeding and subjectivity an even more challenging question looms around the very notions of foresight, which reinforce dominant Euro-centric worldviews, precluding and foreclosing the emergence of alternative futures, their economies and societies.²⁰

In this context, the “good futurist” might step back from the construction and use of futures altogether.

Rather than aspiring to be “good”, might we aspire to be useful? And what could “usefulness” look like?

Matthew Fuller describes “seamfulness”: acts of analysis focused not on the smooth conjunction of practices, concepts and materials but on the perceptible seams and spaces, or tensions, between. He argues identification of seams – where one typology, dynamic or paradigm butts up against another – can generatively decentre power by intentionally luminating fissures, flaws, omission and leaks between boundaries.²¹

More recently, artist and futures practitioner Jevon Chandra evoked Indonesian dance scholar and curator Helly Minarti in wondering if a valuable futurist is perhaps akin to a good dramaturg – an “invested traveller” and “critical friend” able to take on the dual role of pendamping (companion) and pengganggu (provocateur)²². Might the useful futurist be one able to constructively pull at seams, walking side by side with communities, surfacing and unpacking contradictions, overlaps, interactions and complexities?

As humans are confronted by fractious, homogenous futures, all the while struggling to navigate their increasingly complex presents, futurists that play with frictions between sociological and ecological systems can surface generative combinations and possibilities, rather than reductive predictions. Playing in the messy, liminal space between agendas, norms and systems is how futures can remain open for those who don’t choose foreclosure.

Note from the authors:

Our thanks to Luke Sturgeon for proofing

Playing in the messy, liminal space between agendas, norms and systems **is how futures can remain open** for those who don’t choose foreclosure.

Rather than aspiring to be “good,” might we aspire to be useful?



Tobias Revell is an artist, designer, researcher and educator from London specialising in futures and technology through critical practice. Alongside leading Design Futures at Arup Foresight he is completing his PhD in Design and the Construction of AI at Goldsmiths.



Dr Bree Trevena is an Australian-based foresight practitioner with a decidedly interdisciplinary background mixing complexity theory, arts policy and practice, service design and infrastructure delivery.



Charlie Warwick has designed and delivered participatory foresight processes in public and private sector contexts, most recently leading on Futures Advice in UK government before joining Arup's global Foresight leadership.



Absurd Beings

By Mila Fonrouge &



Writing



Visuals



Design

“Why not conjure a rhizomatic way of being in policy design and evaluation?”

A (a) futurist(S) once dared to propose. As in a rhizome, we become-with other existences (human and more-than-human) and, in each encounter, we co-create alternative presents. In each encounter linear time s h a t t e r s. When these encounters happen, our pasts transform themselves and futures that could be, emerge. The rhizome, the design, the evaluation, everyday life; all reconfiguring. A futurist(S) can't help but think critically and ask: How do those encounters take place? Then, I We have created a deck of cards that inhabits a living lab; an artifact to provoke and imagine evaluation otherwise.

“Eliminate that one. That card could be trouble.”

- Reflexivity,
- Self and collective care,
- Interspecies collaboration,
- Acknowledging power relations,
- Accessibility,
- Interconnectedness,
- Temporality (spiral time)




Reflexivity



Self and collective care



Acknowledging power relations



Interspecies collaboration



Accessibility



Interconnectedness



Temporality
(spiral time)

“If you want to survive in this organization, you shouldn’t use those words...”

Cards to reflect our ways of responding in encounters. Cards as movements to shift practices. Cards to cause trouble and transform our ways of being. An absurdity that takes what it intends to be a full stop and turn it into a ;

And then... those encounters in which it is possible to listen to the **pasts stepping in to protect what is known and what is intended to stay as it is**. Suddenly, the painful cuts. Blunt words. Words targeting other words. Words targeting other worlds. More-than-human worlds. IWe feel saudade for those words that could help us thrive to live together in difference. A difference that is quake by the request (?) of holding on to borrow words. Despair hits. Despair fades. IWe invoke a rhizomatic swerve to become each other’s possibilities. An exception in public policy evaluation, research or design. Actually, an exception in our everyday life.

MISSING PARAGRAPHS

What does it look like? Everyday liveS, IWe mean. Well, there is an illusion of an individual. There is an illusion of human needs being at the center. Futurists blow. Sirocco. Sudestada. Tonga. We blow for borders to fade, merge, become-with, transform, blend, embrace shifting into something else. Futurists walk, echolocate, crawl, sway, cry, resist, hiss, sleep, imagine...

“The thing is those are the words of an activist. That’s pure advocacy. That’s not what a specialist would do.”

Sometimes blowing turns into an anomaly. This futurist is critical of actor mapping. We blow when we counter map, instead. **Why can’t we include Rivers or Forests as agents of life in the evaluation design?**

I felt the heat. I felt the blaze. We hold ground. We keep moving and notice the different ways of movement. We are out of rhythm in the great narrative (which can be a liberatory practice). A(→) futurist(S) care about how Terms of Reference or emails & are written. What words are/aren’t chosen, erased, silenced or chirped. Who made it into this space? Who gets to imagine a possible future here? (...) IWe keep moving into absurdity. Absurdity and futurist(S).

MISSING LINES

**Futurists
blow.**
Sirocco.
Sudestada.
Tonga.

Human exceptionalism shatters.
Institutions tremble.
Egos too.

MISSING PARAGRAPHS

200km. Probably. I'm not sure. One night. A moth. Can't tell how many plants were visited or how many plants were yet to grow. Dandelions. Dispersal. Seeds. Change. A researcher. Project (s). A year to do research which can never be a year since we are spiralling. A year containing infinite years, rhizomes of relations, all trying to be smashed into a system full of dead lines.]. An absurdity. futurist(S) reimagining how we correspond and become-with when writing a methodology, for instance. Let's try speculation. Creative ethnography so we can practice deep listening with more-than-humans. What matters to all existences that are and are not in a design process?

"It's a lot to take in. Anyways, I cannot see how this is scalable."

IWe keep moving. Not to be concealed but dispersed. Multiple nodes. A pluriverse to decentrate. Multiple design processes. Infinite forces imagining otherwise. Scale up? IWe rhizome to transform how we correspond to each other in each encounter, acknowledging that we are part and not the center of ecologies of relations, and celebrating diversity. Human and more-than-human.

Human exceptionalism shatters.
Institutions tremble.
Egos too.

MORE MISSING PARAGRAPHS

Human
exceptionalism
shatters

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

This cannot be published because of the political nature of these ideas.

“(…) feminism (….) revolution in service of every living thing”- carved Lola Olufemi into one of my favorite artifacts. A revolution as in asking **who gets to imagine futures?** Or how different ways of knowing are being heard and shared? How do we acknowledge more-than-humans as partners in design? A micropractice can be part of a revolution. Mocha, the cat I live with, and their ““cr cr cr cr cr,””, messing up with the couch or cat-art. Coe rewilding spaces for and with fireflies. Caring. A futurist(S) (maybe an evaluator or a gardener?) reflecting on where ideas come from and acknowledging those beings/co-designers of possible worlds. Reading something we wouldn't read. Pollinating. Conducting photosynthesis. Moving differently and not writing in an academic way. Diving deep into experimental methods or noticing interspecies relations in everyday spaces. Publishing anyways. Diffracting dead lines.].

...
weaving rays of light when drifting out the veil of fear while breathing in and out, or through, so sputtering words and washing out control over existences, either quivering or roaring, yet 200 kHz can be heard if only electrical flows carrying the pace and language of a caterpillar which resembles how we collectively cultivate to otherwise what once was but it is not anymore, but there could be, so, there is. All entangled non-stop movements endosymbiotically living; shapeshifters shapeshifting...

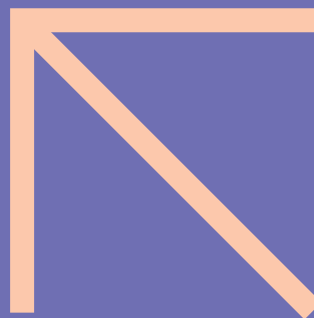
Could futurists be shapeshifters? Absurd beings to whom human exceptionalism is a form of inequality. Absurd beings to whom futures are interspecies.

The space in-between is for you to shapeshift a movement. What makes you an absurd being?

ENDLESS MISSING PARAGRAPHS



Mila Fonrouge is a more-than-human designer, feminist, and pataphysician from Argentina. I co-founded shapeshifters, an experimental space multi-situated in spaces and times. I create participatory methodologies that rely on creative ethnography to understand, reimagine, and transform how we inhabit the worlds we are part of. I run experiments and non-workshops on spiral time, pataphysics, and interspecies collaboration. I designed and implemented public policies and conducted impact analysis in Latin America and the Caribbean, Nigeria, and Cambodia. I worked at the Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank, and as an external consultant with the United Nations.



How We See Ourselves in the World: **Being a Pacific Futurist**

**A bird needs
two wings to fly.**

By **Sarah Mecartney, Valery Wichman, Emily Sharp, Kristel Griffiths**, in collaboration with **the Pacific Community (SPC) Futures community of practice**

People of the Pacific are ancient futurists. We have embraced the unknown by navigating wide ocean spaces, bravely embarking on journeys of exploration shaped by values and framed through an intimate relationship with the environment and spiritual world.

Courage in times of uncertainty stems from ancestral knowledge and a deliberate sense of stewardship for future generations. We read the stars. We hear the wind. We feel the ties to the land, our ancestors, our descendants, and the yet-to-be-born.

To be a Pacific futurist is to bring authenticity, connection, intentionality, and reciprocity in engagement with communities. At SPC, applied futures across policy and strategy spaces and institutional change is transforming behaviours, renewing curiosities, and catalysing innovations.



Design



Visuals



Writing

This essay will reference the Pacific One Maritime Framework (POMF), the Growing the Pacific Strategy (Agriculture and Forestry), and the Pacific Youth Development Framework (PYDFII) storytelling, adding depth and generational connections to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. It will provide anecdotal insights on how a renewal of cultural ways of knowing and serving embed futures in daily practice and behaviours that set us firmly on the path to the futures we need and want.

We are not just preparing for the future. We are remembering it. We are reclaiming it. We are creating it – together.



Pacific futures
are being
shaped by the
**choices we
make today.**

SETTING THE SCENE

Pacific futures are being shaped by the choices we make today. Guided by the 2050 Strategy – we’re intentionally working toward a future that is peaceful, resilient, and grounded in Pacific wisdom. This strategy helps our communities take meaningful steps to protect our ocean, strengthen cultural identity, and build a shared vision for generations to come.

Pacific futures is helping us reaffirm our place as the world’s greatest navigators. Our ancestors were futurists and planned and acted in the interests of seven generations to come (see Cook Islands 100-year National Sustainable Development Agenda). Ancient languages capture the vividness of the multiple blues and hues of the ocean, colours that are being lost in the impact of climate change. Futures is helping to slow the fading of living life in full colour.

Cultural renewal and traditional knowledge are strategic foundations for thriving Pacific futures. These living systems of wisdom offer practical guidance for climate resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Through intentional action and inclusive engagement, people of the Pacific are revitalising cultural knowledge, championing innovation, and forging pathways toward a peaceful and regenerative Blue Pacific Continent. Futuring alongside our Pacific public servants, civil society, scientists, and technical experts, we are bringing global foresight approaches, hand in hand with Pacific futures, to big challenges (such as maritime transport, regenerative agriculture, and forestry) and engaging Pacific youth in all that we do.

THE PACIFIC ONE MARITIME FRAMEWORK

PATHWAYS ACROSS THE BLUE CONTINENT

The co-development of the POMF is focused on the vision, values, and thematic areas of the POMF to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific. A futures approach enabled insights from Pacific early-career ocean professionals, who are today's partners and tomorrow's leaders for healthy and sustainable oceans. It reinforces our kaitiakitanga (stewardship) to ensure a safe, clean, and gender- and generational-just maritime sector.

It was created by weaving through the futures triangles exercise, collective histories, causal layered analysis, and backcasting, which provided a great backdrop to the immense work undertaken and the treasures of our past to inform a collective vision for the future and ambition.

It has built on Pacific identity by bringing our values and knowledge into a very scientific space and charting the course forward, with one participant saying that “failing to prepare is preparing to fail” and so it is in that spirit that the members set sail on a journey towards a Pacific One Maritime Framework.

The Pacific Ocean is a significant carbon sink and a priority in geopolitical and security interests.



GROWING THE PACIFIC REGENERATIVE FUTURES ROOTED IN LAND AND CULTURE

Rooted in Pacific values of kinship, custodianship, and deep ecological connection to land and sea, this strategy envisions a healthy, regenerative, and secure Pacific. Central to this approach was the innovative development of a futures game – a culturally grounded tool for engagement, knowledge exchange, and co-creation of a collective Pacific vision for ecological and community resilience.

The “gaming” of futures was also tested at the Asia Pacific Futures Network 2023 meeting, which drew out the criticality of planetary health for the future we want (and that the world needs). This also was highlighted in the 2025 Dubai Futures Horizons podcast, which highlighted stewardship of nature for the future we need. It was further grounded at the Pacific Heads of Agriculture and Forestry Services 2025 convening, which acknowledged the futures (intergenerational) approach utility in the regional research agenda to create the future we want.



Rooted in Pacific values of kinship, custodianship, and deep ecological connection to land and sea, **this strategy envisions a healthy, regenerative, and secure Pacific**

STORYTELLING AND THE PACIFIC YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

The PYDFII is a compass and call to action – cementing a commitment to Pacific youth as co-authors of the future, rather than the silent recipients of someone else’s legacy. It reaffirms the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy and articulates a mechanism for sustaining meaningful youth engagement.

By framing intergenerational conversations using causal layered analysis, a motif design process provided the space to unpack and transform key issues in youth development. The multitude of futures coalesce in a red wave, simultaneously evoking details of a fishing net and eye, embodying the vision of regional Pacific youth leaders who sought to “cast the net anew” in the youth development sector, symbolic of not only letting go of outdated approaches but also embracing new and meaningful ways of inclusion, collaboration, and support, a vision that was echoed by the outgoing Pacific Youth Council, “Toe Timata le Ūpega,” and repeated by Fiji (host country of the ministerial meeting) as “Balata Vou Tale Na Lawa.”

These words were far from hollow. For the first time, youth representatives sat alongside heads of ministerial delegations with equal voice in the ministerial meeting. Certainly, there is usually some form of “space” provided to represent the voices of youth but, in this instance, their voices carried the same weight throughout the process from an intergenerational talanoa (traditional dialogue) to broker the space and balance power, to the finalisation of the ministerial outcomes.

CONCLUSION

We are not just preparing for the future.

We are **remembering it** – calling forward the ancestral wisdom and cultural practices that have always guided our wayfinding;

We are **reclaiming it** – restoring Pacific agency to shape narratives and systems rooted in our identity; and

We are **creating it** – through daily acts of service, storytelling, innovation, and solidarity.

The future isn’t distant. It is already taking shape in how we honour the past, challenge the present, and journey together, hand in hand, toward the Blue Pacific we need and deserve.

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?



Sarah Mecartney is the Regional Director, Melanesia at SPC, effective 19 February 2024 and is stationed at SPC's Regional Office in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Prior to this she worked for the United Nations in Afghanistan and in the Pacific. Sarah has had over 20 years in international development, public policy, programming, planning, and strategic analysis. She has a keen appreciation for incorporating diverse perspectives for vibrant and robust strategic planning and policy development processes. She is an advocate of participatory approaches in futures thinking informed by Pacific cultures and practice. Sarah holds a Master of Science from the University of Sydney.



Kristel Griffiths is the Strategy and Foresight Adviser at SPC, where she leads efforts to cultivate a Pacific futures community of practice. Her work involves designing and delivering strategic foresight workshops that inform regional and national strategy development and support organisational change processes. A lead author of the Pacific Pathfinder Toolkit, Kristel champions futures thinking as a tool to shape collective visions, shift mindsets and conversations, and inspire agency and optimism for the future.



Valery Wichman is the Lead of Strategy and Innovation at SPC, taking up the post in August 2024. She is a lawyer by trade but has worked in the public policy space for the last 12 years, with her previous role as Director of Central Policy and Planning Office, Cook Islands Office of the Prime Minister. Her most recent project was the development of the Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui 2020+, or the Cook Islands National Sustainable development Agenda 2020+, which gives a 100-year vision towards Turanga Memeitaki (wellbeing) and puts values at the forefront and people at its core.

She has held various roles in civil society, including as previous president of Te Tiare Association (the Cook Islands' founding Rainbow organisation as lead advocate for equality). Valery enjoys researching Cook Islands history and knowledge, wellbeing, and marginalised populations, having written her Master's thesis on the wellbeing of the Anuanua (rainbow) Community of the Cook Islands. She is delving into different futures, and foresight tools and spaces, and sees opportunity for Pacific people to incorporate their knowledge and wisdom into the futures and foresight space. Valery focuses on the wellbeing of Pacific people: a Cook Islands perspective and ways in which wellbeing, inclusiveness, and futures interact and provide for a preferred future.



Emily Sharp is the Director of Strategy, Performance and Learning at SPC. Emily is a committed evaluator and futurist, applied scientist, and regional public servant, who thrives on transdisciplinary collaborations and transgenerational conversations. A passionate advocate for culturally grounded and equity-focused approaches, she inspires organisations to navigate dynamic challenges and work collectively towards national, regional, and global impact. Celebrations she is grateful to have contributed to include the Pacific's first qualification in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, the Pacific MEL Capacity Strengthening Rebbilib, and the Pacific Pathfinder Toolkit, promoting participatory foresight grounded in Pacific ways of knowing and doing. Ms Sharp thrives in co-developing transformative, values-led strategies that bridge disciplines, spark innovation, and foster inclusivity.



The Urgent Need for Long-Term Thinking and Action: Countering the Futures Thieves

By **Jost Wagner**



Visuals



Design



Writing

Since I became a father to a beautiful daughter some ten years ago, I have realized even more that whatever our current generations in power will do, there will be consequences for our children and their offspring. I am sure many people will share this insight once they become a parent.

My sentiment was even more enforced reading a 2019 article by the BBC journalist Richard Fisher, pre-Covid, who wrote that our inability to look beyond the latest news cycle could be one of the most dangerous traits of our generation.²³ He used the word **short-termism** – a fixation on the immediate – that blinds decision-makers to the long-term consequences of their actions or inactions. In this climate, crucial decisions such as climate resilience, peacebuilding, education, and social protection are delayed or derailed.²⁴

Another reason for short-termism can be probably connected to sociologist Elise Boulding, who arguably developed the idea of “temporal exhaustion,” the loss of future-oriented thinking due to being overwhelmed by the present. As Stewart Brand (1999) quotes sociologist Elise Boulding (1978): “If one is mentally out of breath all the time from dealing with the present, there is no energy left for imaging the future.”²⁵

And while we are navigating the challenges facing humanity (some of us use the term polycrisis), we appear to be living in a world rattled by political polarization, resurgent authoritarianism, fake news, and widespread disinformation. As humanity stumbles through overlapping crises – from climate breakdown and global conflict to AI disruption and democratic backsliding – we need people whose job is to look beyond the noise, beyond the next election cycle, and into the long view.

If we look around, some – if not many – of the most influential leaders in politics and society appear ignorant or indifferent to these challenges. Many are consciously or unconsciously stuck in the present, victims of temporal exhaustion. Worse, some actively limit our imagination, suppress critical thinking, and hijack the future for narrow political or economic gain. They tell us there is no alternative. That the future is fixed. That nothing can change.

I have developed my own personal term for these people: I call them **Futures Thieves**. Let me attempt to define this term:

Futures thieves are individuals creating or strengthening systems, or narratives, that rob others – especially future generations or marginalized groups – of the opportunity to shape or benefit from desirable futures. They limit imagination, concentrate decision-making power, and promote short-term gains at the expense of long-term well-being. By doing so, they make certain futures inaccessible, unjust, or unsustainable.

I am sure I am preaching to the converted: The future isn't a luxury. It's a necessity. Futures literacy, which I define as the ability to understand, imagine, and navigate alternative futures, is no longer optional. It is a fundamental capability for survival and sustainability.²⁶

Therefore, I believe the role of futurists is more essential than ever. We must play a pivotal role in creating futures that are inclusive and sustainable. Every futures thinking workshop we facilitate, every scenario process we support, every youth futures dialogue we hold is an important action. It is asserting our agency – our ability to shape what comes next.

The future
isn't
a luxury.
**It's
a necessity.**

So, what can we do in this world of volatility, populism, and polycrisis? We have to counteract the doing of **Futures Thieves**.

Let me share four possible roles for futurists – though the list could be much longer.



FUTURISTS AS FACILITATORS AND CATALYSTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE


Futurists should not only help to predict what might happen – they should work on what should happen. Futurists can facilitate creative thinking, scenarios, and imagination to explore multiple possible futures. They can help decision-makers as well as communities reflect on their own values, develop preferred alternatives, and plan actions that make these preferred futures more likely. Rather than waiting passively, communities can act intentionally.

FUTURISTS AS VISION-BUILDERS

Guiding images are shared visions of what a better future could look like. Futurists help societies imagine and articulate these visions, giving people direction and purpose. Futurist Andy Hines, head of the University of Houston’s foresight program, explains in recent interviews that societies today are often missing compelling positive visions, and futurists play a critical role in filling that gap by crafting narratives that provide direction, clarity, and hope.²⁷ Sohail Inayatullah, the architect of Narrative Foresight and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), places immense emphasis on the power of metaphors and new stories to open up the future, challenge assumptions, and catalyze transformative action.²⁸

FUTURISTS AS RESILIENCE DEVELOPERS

I have just come across a term in an article by Sirkka Heinonen, who introduced the concept of “futures consciousness” as the ability to think critically and ethically about the future. It means being aware of different possible futures, reflecting on one’s role in shaping them, and building resilience. This awareness protects us from being misled by misleading, narrow, or dangerous future narratives – what she calls “misplaced futures.” Futurists can help to develop this capacity in individuals and communities through their work.²⁹



**Futures
consciousness**
is the ability to
think critically
and ethically
about the future

FUTURISTS AS EXPERIENTIAL DESIGNERS

Futurists help create spaces and processes where people can “act as if” a certain future is already happening. These performances, such as simulations, games, or so-called future labs, allow individuals, organizations, and communities to explore what possible new systems, values, or behaviors might look like. Some colleagues have asserted when many people start behaving based on a vision of the future, that vision begins to shape reality. Futures become self-fulfilling, not because they are inevitable, but because they are enacted. Futurists can prototype and test ideas. I call it personally the “Look, Feel and Smell” approach.

In her book *Imaginable* (2022), futurist Jane McGonigal outlines how games and simulations help build “urgent optimism” – a mindset combining urgency with belief in one’s agency. She underlined that simulations help bridge abstract futures into felt experiences, equipping people emotionally and cognitively to navigate uncertainty and take proactive steps today.³⁰



WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

Another futurist, Stuart Candy, is known for his “Artifacts from the Future” work.³¹ This is part of his broader Experiential Futures practice, which uses material design, play, and storytelling to bring future scenarios into the present in tangible and thought-provoking ways. Futurists also can make use of simple roleplaying in their workshops or invite creative people to collaborate in their workshops and projects.³²

As futurists, I believe we have a calling to go beyond futures thinking to future-making. We need foresight everywhere: in parliaments, in organizations and community halls, and even in classrooms. We need futurists who are not just strategists but stewards of hope, defenders of possibility, and champions of long-term thinking.

We must become facilitators of change, who help society navigate uncertainty, break path dependencies, and forge collective aspirations into real-world transformations. In the futures world, as we are mostly consultants, many of us try to stay apolitical because of the belief that we need to remain neutral.

In our workshops, we try to get participants to understand each other’s worldviews not considering our own, even though we are active participants in the work we are facilitating and guiding. And we need to be transparent about our values. Our clients need to know with whom they are co-creating futures. And likewise, we need to know with whom we are collaborating. I write this at a time as more and more futurists start to speak up about ongoing violent conflicts in the world.

Let us democratize futures thinking. Let us counter those who say the future is fixed, technocratic, or already lost. Each foresight dialogue, each scenario, each dream is an act of countering the Futures Thieves. Let’s make it a movement. Expand the future. And help ensure it remains a space we all can shape – together.

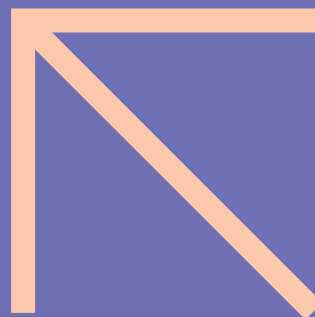
At the Asia-Pacific Futures Network, our mission is “planting a forest of foresight around the world and explore and envision diverse futures of Asian and Pacific nations, disruptions, and create alternative scenarios”.³³ Let’s counter the Futures Thieves and be strong facilitators for participatory, sustainable and just futures.



Jost Wagner is the Managing Director of The Change Initiative, a facilitation company located in Bangkok, and the Chief Navigator (aka Executive Director) of the Asia-Pacific Futures Network – Asia’s largest informal network of futurists in the region.

In the last 20 years he has advised and facilitated more than 600 workshops and conferences worldwide for organizations such as the United Nations, Asian Development Bank, The German Development Cooperation (GIZ), the World Bank, and USAID, as well as various governments, NGOs, and the private sector onsite and remotely. He is a Certified Professional Facilitator - Master by the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) and a full member of the Association of Professional Futurists.

Prior to working as a facilitator and futurist, he worked for the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) in New Delhi and the German Embassy in Bangkok.





From the Self to the Commons: Science Fiction as Micropolitical Practice

By César Santivañez

A futurist is someone **who works with the present as raw material**, asking who gets to shape what lies ahead, and who gets left behind.

For me, as someone working in science fiction from the Global South, a futurist isn't primarily a clairvoyant or a corporate consultant. While there are many valuable approaches within foresight and innovation, I see the futurist as someone who works with the present as raw material, asking who gets to shape what lies ahead, and who gets left behind. That's why I understand their role as exposing the narratives that keep power in place and lighting small, strategic fires under everything we've been told can't change.

And that work begins by recognizing the political architecture of the present. One of its most polished disguises is technology, especially when it's framed as neutral and apolitical, which it is not. Technology is engineered to serve comfort and productivity, ideals that seem benign but are rooted in a capitalist conception of progress. This model places the isolated individual, not the community or the ecosystem, at the center of meaning.



It is no coincidence that science fiction, our cultural laboratory for the future, has often internalized this logic. Even when warning us of dystopias, many stories remain captivated by collapse, control, and catastrophe. They mask fascination as critique, pulling us into fantasies of surveillance and isolation we come to accept not only as plausible but inevitable.

When I was a teenager, I often skipped class. It wasn't rebellion, just that nothing the university offered matched the intensity of reading in solitude. I'd disappear into a hidden park in Lima, burying myself in books that contained the kinds of questions no one dared ask in the lecture hall. One afternoon, on my way home, I tripped over a root that had cracked the concrete sidewalk.

Annoyed, I muttered: Who planted this tree so close to the path? But the irritation quickly gave way to something else. That tree, once a quiet sprout, had over time broken through the solid pavement. No one had expected it. No one had celebrated it. It just grew, slowly, insistently, until the structure gave way. That image never left me. It taught me that what takes roots underground can still crack foundations we thought unshakable.

To imagine the future is to take a political stance. But not all politics arrive with slogans or manifestos. As Guattari and Deleuze argued, power flows through micropolitics: the diffuse, daily practices that shape relationships, perception, and desire. Reading or writing science fiction, then, is never a neutral act. It is a way of interfering with the default settings of the possible.

As an editor and writer, I've learned to see every story I publish as a micropolitical gesture. The moment I reach for a book outside the usual canon, like a story from Latin America, the Middle East, West Africa, or Southeast Asia, I'm not just seeking diversity. I'm aligning myself with a different vision of the future: one that asks whose voices matter, whose worlds deserve attention, and what ways of living are still possible.

Science fiction is often framed as a genre obsessed with technology. But what if we shifted focus from devices to systems? Not just AI and biotech, but debt, kinship, migration, ritual. A post-capitalist commune, a grassroots network of mutual aid, even a city that learns to forget money—these all count as speculative technologies. They may not shine like chrome, but they pulse with other logics of care, resistance, and world-building.



Against Narrative Orthodoxy. Much of the genre still follows the Aristotelian structure: beginning, conflict, resolution. That structure isn't just a storytelling formula; it hides a deeper idea of time, one that favors what's ahead over what came before, and neat endings over ongoing struggles. A different kind of story might resist that clarity. It might loop, drift, echo. It might focus on rituals, on detours, on the politics of recurrence. Not all change is forward. Not all futures come in a straight line.

Likewise, the idea of the hero is also ready to be questioned. Too often, it repeats the familiar tale of the charismatic leader, the brilliant founder, the lone savior. But what if protagonists were no longer individuals at the center? Real change, however, tends to emerge from practices such as cooperation, listening, or mutual aid.



Material Futures. Neon, metal, plastic, rare earths. These are the materials that dominate how we picture tomorrow. But each of them carries a legacy of extraction, displacement, and environmental collapse. What would it mean to reclaim other textures? Wood, stone, clay. Futures built not on speed, but on repair. Not on effortless consumption, but on grounded, low-impact tools. This is not nostalgia. It's a shift in direction.

As a result, rethinking materials is also a chance to challenge the assumptions that tell us technology must always be electric or digital. It's time to break our science-fiction imagination free from the grip of the high-tech dystopian aesthetic, to move beyond its hyper-artificial legacy and bring it back to something more organic and tangible. This does not mean embracing primitivism, but rather rethinking our notion of progress and ceasing to see the past as something obsolete.

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?



Open Systems. Most technological futures are still imagined as ownership-based. They tend to be controlled either by governments or by corporations. The interface is polished, but the infrastructure is sealed. We need fiction that breaks that mold. Stories where tools are open-source, replicable, shared. Where knowledge is common and invention circulates laterally. Real-world movements like DIY labs, open hardware groups, and permatech communities are already prototyping these alternatives. Science fiction should meet them halfway.

This implies a reclaiming of hacking, as practiced masterfully today by many communities around the world, especially when most gadgets are designed with complete disregard for their needs. In this light, hackers in new science fiction go beyond the romantic image of the digital pirate. They become bridges between the device's original, detached function and the lived realities of marginalized populations.



Fiction as Prototype. Stories can be more than metaphors. They are blueprints, rehearsals, and field notes. Fiction is not a prediction engine; it is a design tool. When we tell stories that center collaboration over conquest, care over control, we are not just imagining new futures. We are practicing them.

This is why language matters. A speculative story in Quechua, Yoruba, or Bengali does more than shift the setting. It disrupts the dominant worldview. Each tongue encodes a different rhythm of time, body, and community. To read across these languages is to loosen our grip on what counts as real. It is to unlearn the future we've been sold.

It is essential to support publications that translate authors writing in their native languages. In doing so, we break the illusion of a single future and open ourselves to new interpretations of reality, even new ways of accessing knowledge.



Beyond the Page. But the work must go beyond content. Distribution is also political. The traditional publishing system still privileges certain cities, currencies, and audiences. Why not think of science fiction as something that travels by voice, by fragment, by code? Stories can be told aloud, passed hand to hand, shared in networks that don't rely on ISBNs or Amazon rankings. This too is speculative infrastructure.

Another key shift must take place in how the author sees themselves. We need to move beyond the image of the writer as mastermind or universe-maker, and toward the idea of the writer as a vessel, someone who amplifies voices the market ignores. In letting go of ego and placing the story above the storyteller, we shed centuries of vanity and offer our vocation a truly human purpose.

To tell the future is to choose where we stand. With every narrative, we reveal what we believe about change: who enacts it, who benefits, and what must be left behind. For me, science fiction has become a practice of strategic storytelling. It is a way to prototype systems not yet here. It is where I choose to garden. Not with blueprints for utopia, but with soil, seeds, and stubborn patience.

And maybe that's what a futurist is. Not a prophet or a trendwatcher, but someone who notices the quiet saplings at the margins. Someone who keeps tending to them, knowing they may crack concrete one day not because they shouted, but because they grew.



César Santivañez is a science fiction writer and editor with a background in Political Science, focused on speculative narratives, political imagination, and post-capitalist futures from the Global South. Editor-in-Chief of Future Fiction Magazine en Español. Screenwriter of Panóptica, a science fiction graphic novel with cult following, published in Peru, Chile, Italy, and India. Panelist in discussions on South American science fiction in Finland, Brazil, Estonia, Chile, Italy, and the United States. International guest at Lucca Comics & Games 2022 (Italy), the Engaged Pedagogies project 2023 (Michigan State University, USA), and the Science Fiction Academic Forum 2023 (China).

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

To tell the
future is
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Foresight is Dead. Long Live Foresight. How Can Futurists Shape a Future Already Colliding with the Present?

By **Roger Spitz**



Writing



Visuals



Design



THE ROLE OF A FUTURIST IN OUR EXPANDING LIMINAL PRESENT

The future is a mosaic of what endures, what fades, and what emerges... it's not a blank slate. Futurist Jim Dator identifies three forces that shape tomorrow: continuing elements from the present, breakaways that dissolve into history, and novelties that redefine reality.

A futurist is a guide who helps individuals and organizations make better, more deliberate choices about the future. They highlight our agency in shaping possible futures – near and far – while expanding our foresight by challenging assumptions and clarifying uncertainties. By identifying emerging patterns, inflection points, enduring constants, and evolving dynamics, futurists connect shifting dots and explore the next-order implications of change. Their work builds futures intelligence: a systemic capacity to explore possible futures, understand the drivers of change, and apply those insights to more anticipatory decision-making.

Yet in a world of warp-speed change – where artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes elections, autocracies rise and fall, and computing power surges – identifying what remains constant is no simple task. From Moore's Law to global governance, understanding what is "constant" is the key to navigating unpredictable futures.

Consider governance systems: If autocracies reemerge with force in new regions, yet have existed globally for centuries, is that evidence of constancy, or novelty?

What about technology? AI itself is not new – so what might represent novelty? Artificial General Intelligence, Singularity? Or the higher-order impacts as humans delegate more decisions to machines? Computers are already performing complex human functions. Does that make them constant, even though their development will exponentiate?

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

So, how much of our world is a continuation of the past? What qualifies as “continuous”? Is it something that has persisted for years, decades, centuries, or millennia?

According to Zen Buddhism, neither the past nor the future exist – there is only the present moment. But these days, technology is blurring yesterday, today, and tomorrow. With AI-powered court rulings, bio-printed organs, and flying cars, the present feels like it’s spilling into the future. Or, the future is invading the present – through Orwellian surveillance, brologarchs steering politics, climate-fueled wildfires, and bad actors hacking military infrastructure.

WHEN RARE BECOMES LESS RARE

Futurists should not be seeking to predict. In the oft-quoted words of Toffler, *“No serious futurist deals in prediction. These are left for television oracles and newspaper astrologers.”* Today, we may need to update that line to include the data-driven “experts” who extrapolate the past with the help of AI.

Yet, even the predictive power of AI is limited. It thrives under relatively stable conditions – where patterns are consistent and outcomes clearly defined. AI may offer no meaningful predictive advantage over humans in complex systems.³⁴ For foresight practitioners, Alan Kay’s insight remains as true as ever: *“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”* The future, ultimately, is not something we forecast – it’s something we invent.

To respond effectively to interconnected global challenges (and to capture their opportunities) we must understand that **rarity itself is becoming less rare**. Events considered “historic” or “unprecedented” are occurring with greater frequency. Has unprecedented become the new normal?

The contemporary era marks a departure from the relative stability of the post-World War II global economic order, which was underpinned by international institutions and agreements aimed at enabling predictability and cooperation.³⁵

Today, the world faces concomitant, instantaneous, multilayered, and contradictory challenges emerging across AI, geoeconomics, climate, and more. These are driven by technological advancement, multipolarization, climate crises, unpredictable trade policies, and digital hyperconnectivity. These forces create uncertainty at a scale and velocity that arguably surpasses historical transitions, which were often limited to confined domains and timeframes.

In 2025, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* set the Doomsday Clock to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been, to reflect the unprecedented convergence of existential risks that threaten humanity. With the exception of the past 80 years, threats like nuclear war, climate change, biotechnology, and AI were largely absent throughout human history.

Multipolarization is increasingly associated with unpredictability about which actors will lead and what rules will prevail. As more players vie for influence, each advancing their own often incompatible visions of international order, it becomes harder to reach consensus on urgent global issues. Together, these dynamics now heighten the risk of disorder and conflict.³⁶

SYSTEMIC DISRUPTION DRIVES METARUPTIONS

In his 1982 book *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt defined megatrends as large, global, transformative processes with dramatic impact. Megatrends drive broad changes to society, perceived as relatively certain and fixed. However, megatrends (or metatrends) are presented as interacting predictably with each other, and do not account for higher-order cascading consequences.

The accelerating interplay of technological breakthroughs, ecological instability, and geopolitical fragmentation is creating cascading risks that are global in scope, exponential in impact, and simultaneous in emergence.^{37, 38} This may require moving beyond megatrends and even questioning the foresight community’s holy grail: relying on scenario planning.

Perhaps it’s time to accept systemic disruption not as discontinuity but as baseline and, with it, embrace the implications of structural unpredictability.

To capture this idea, “metaruptions” combines “disruption” with the prefix meta, signaling a higher-order phenomenon³⁹. A metaruption is a multidimensional constellation of systemic disruptions, including shifts in the very concept of disruption itself.

Shaped by interactions among subordinate drivers of change, metaruptions acknowledge constantly emerging paradigms that evolve in unexpected ways. Their effects ripple through systems, obscuring true impacts until much later.

CONTRASTING TRENDS & DISRUPTIONS

TRENDS	METARUPTIONS	
Known, complicated but understood	Unknown, complex so not fully understandable	
Assumptions, determinate	Uncertainties, indeterminate	
Exist, analysis, research, observed data, past	Novel, synthesis, investigation, exploration, futures	
Prediction of specific outcomes given trends	Multiple future possibilities	
Continuous, stable, first-order consequences	Discontinuous, surprise, second- & third-order impacts	
Observing by analogy, extrapolation, fixed	Counter-intuitive, new, emergent	
Isolated, combined, grouped as a family	Systemic, intersect, converge, collide, emerge	
PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE

Contrasting Trends & Disruptions; Disruptive Futures Institute

**Perhaps it's
time to accept
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unpredictability

Metaruptions themselves are deeply uncertain.
The interplay of unfolding scenarios are unpredictable

BEYOND UNCERTAINTY: METARUPTIONS ARE DEEPLY UNCERTAIN

Deep uncertainty describes a state in which future events, the possibility of their occurrence, and their probabilities are all unknown⁴⁰. Here stakeholders cannot agree on the nature of potential future states⁴¹.

Metaruptions themselves are deeply uncertain. The interplay of unfolding scenarios are unpredictable. If such events occur, how might they interact and what cascading impacts could follow? What happens if systems built for peace and cooperation falter under the strain of converging forces: advanced AI, rising security threats, and global trade wars?



PACE LAYERS: TIMESCALE INTERPLAY

To gain strength from metaruptions, a system must operate across different rates of change. Thinking in multiple timeframes allows for a dynamic balance between continuity and adaptation, which enables us to withstand shocks.

Stewart Brand developed the Pace Layer model to provide different levels of corrective feedback ⁴². Brand proposed six layers, from slowest to fastest: **Nature** (planet), **Culture** (norms), **Governance** (laws), **Infrastructure** (transport, education, science), **Commerce** (industry), **Fashion** (media, art, trends):



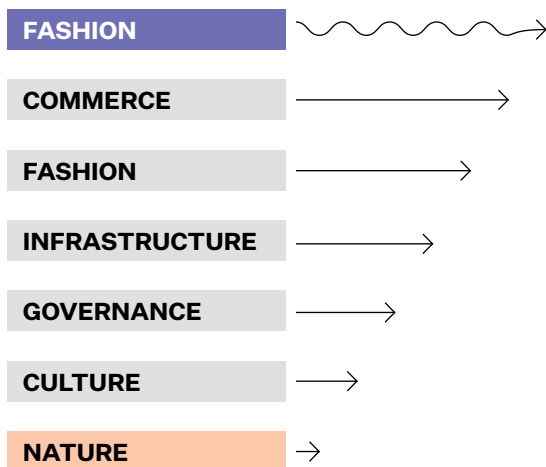
Fast layers learn;
slow layers remember



Fast absorb shocks;
slow integrate lessons



Fast innovate;
slow constrain



Innovation is a dialog between layers. The 1969 moon landing – a governance-led effort – coincided with infrastructure-level innovation (microprocessors). It was a powerful moment when governance, infrastructure, and commerce aligned.

Fast-moving initiatives feel efficient, but without slower layers to integrate change, they risk instability. When governance is forced to change abruptly rather than evolve, the result can be systemic shock (think the Russian and French Revolutions).

What happens when slower layers are repeatedly destabilized? When governance no longer functions as memory or constraint? When everything overlaps, accelerates, and untethers?

A society that runs only at the speed of its fastest layers (commerce, tech, fashion) risks disintegration. Withstanding systemic disruption requires effectiveness over efficiency.

PACE LAYERS

SLOW LAYERS	FAST LAYERS
Remember	Learn
Dispose	Propose
Integrate shocks	Absorb shocks
Continuous	Discontinuous
Constrain	Innovate

Pace Layers; Disruptive Futures Institute

ENHANCED FORESIGHT: AAA FRAMEWORK FOR METARUPTIONS

With metaruptions, we must move beyond future-preparedness and cultivate resilience. The AAA Framework offers tools and mindsets to build *Antifragile* foundations, develop Anticipatory capabilities, and apply *Agility*.⁴³

1. Antifragile: Laying the Foundations

Coined by Taleb, “antifragile” describes things beyond resilience or robustness⁴⁴. The antifragile benefit and improve from stressors, randomness, and volatility. To remain relevant in the age of metaruptions, we need antifragile foundations that strengthen with shocks.

2. Anticipatory: Preparing the Futures

“Anticipatory” is deeply connected to the field of foresight. While trends provide a baseline for scenario planning, metaruptions demand strategies that go beyond traditional foresight. Scenarios, in this context, are just one tool among many – not an end in itself.

The goal of scenario development is preparation, not prediction. And yet how prepared can we be if the line between present and future is dissolving? In this liminal world, we need more than preparation; we need rehearsal and improvisation in emergence.

3. Agility: Emerging in the Present

Laying antifragile foundations and developing anticipatory mindsets are essential. But boxer Mike Tyson said it best: “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

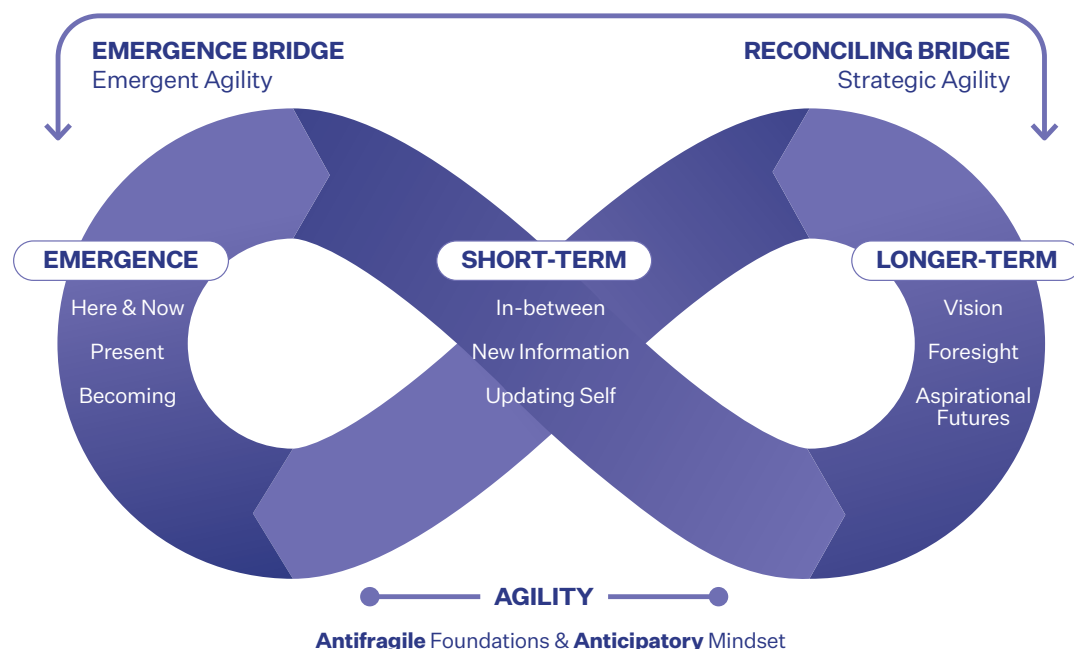
In the age of metaruptions, agility is indispensable. A defining feature of metaruptions is emergence by which novel phenomena arise from interactions.

Metaruptions demand three-dimensional agility:

Emergent agility engage adaptively with whatever futures arise	Strategic agility reconcile preferred visions with today’s unpredictability	Cognitive agility solve challenges and unlock possibilities ⁴⁵
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Cognitive agility is transversal: fluid thinking enables us to experiment with the unfamiliar and flow across disciplines. In a world where patterns are hard to interpret, this ability to synthesize and adapt is vital.

EMERGENT & STRATEGIC AGILITY Infinite Loop Bridges



FORESIGHT IS DEAD. LONG LIVE FORESIGHT.

So how can futurists shape a future already colliding with the present? We need the humility to acknowledge the end of trends, the constancy of change, and the convergence of multiple futures.

Would the landmark longitudinal study led by René Rohrbeck and Ménès Kum, which links corporate foresight maturity (2008) to improved performance (2015) ⁴⁶, still hold from 2020 to 2030? Can foresight alone withstand an era in which linear time, stable baselines, and isolated disruptions unravel?

As the space between present and future collapses, foresight, which once distanced us from tomorrow, must evolve. We need to enhance our tools and our imagination to navigate metaruptions. The tidy taxonomy of Possible, Plausible, Probable, and Preferable futures is blurring as the impossible manifests with growing frequency.

Foresight must go beyond anticipation. It's creating, emerging, deciding, and responding dynamically within living systems. Perhaps the future of foresight lies in cultivating actionable urgency: the ability to experience the present with agency and informed optimism. But agency, like an unexercised option, holds no value without action.⁴⁷

As our understanding deepens, our focus must shift to engendering agency – developing superpowers for sense-making, decision-making, and intuiting the consequences of our choices, all in service of building aspirational futures within real-world constraints.

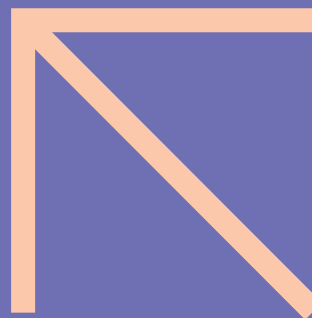


Roger Spitz (B.Sc. Econ, M.Sc., FCA, APF) is President of Techistential (Climate & Foresight Strategy), and Chair of the Disruptive Futures Institute in San Francisco, advising CEOs, boards, and investors on sustainable value creation.

Roger is a bestselling author of award-winning books: *Disrupt With Impact: Achieve Business Success in an Unpredictable World* and *The Definitive Guide to Thriving on Disruption*. His frameworks are adopted by organizations worldwide and feature in leading publications, including Global Peter Drucker Forum, Institute of Directors, Journal of Futures Studies, and MIT Technology Review.

An expert advisor to the World Economic Forum's Global Foresight Network, Roger also serves on multiple boards focused on anticipatory governance, sustainability, venture capital, and academia. He teaches and publishes extensively on systemic change, unpredictability, and the future of decision-making. A renowned expert on artificial intelligence, Roger coined the term "Techistentialism."

Roger is also a partner of Vektor (Palo Alto, London), a venture capital fund and an advisor to Berkeley SkyDeck's fund. As former Global Head of Technology M&A with BNP Paribas, Roger advised on over 50 transactions with deal value of \$25bn.



Beyond Institutional Horizons: **The Case for Participatory Futures Across Diverse Contexts**

What it Means to be a Futurist - an Arab Perspective

By **Elias Mouawad**



Visuals



Design



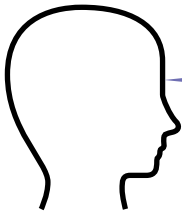
Writing

“Uh...Munajjim?!” followed with a nervous, timid laugh, the response I usually get when I tell someone I don’t know what I do.

While this is a reaction that all futurists in the world are familiar with (and want to avoid at all costs), for some reason Munajjim (a fortune teller) lands differently.

In my part of the world, this is either taken too seriously or utterly brushed off. People are either taken aback by the mystique or are conspicuously skeptical, and neither is necessarily a good sign.

If anything, it is an indicator that the practice and discipline of futures still has a long way to go to reach people. In the Arab world, where institutional foresight is flourishing, participatory futures remain largely untapped.



The question is whether we're doing enough to **unlock our imagination** to broaden and deepen our shared collective capacity for long-term thinking.

Across the region, foresight has gained significant institutional momentum. From national and local government ministries, units, and departments, to international organisations, think tanks, and research institutes. Scenarios, visions, and strategies on economic growth and diversification, employment, education, green transition, and food security emerge regularly from capitals across the region. Academic centers produce research on the impacts of AI and geopolitical shifts that shape policy conversations. This work is valuable and necessary, with a visible effect on exploring strategic options and policy frameworks.

Yet something essential is missing: another part of futures. The participatory approaches that engage communities, harness local wisdom, and create space for imagination from the grassroots.

The question isn't whether institutional foresight is working; it is. The question is whether we're doing enough to explore and taking the appropriate action to power complementary approaches that could unlock our imagination to broaden and deepen our shared collective capacity for long-term thinking.

This reflection opens a deeper question about what it means to be a futurist in our region, and what opportunities we might be overlooking.

It is essential to remember that the Arab world is not monolithic. Its countries vary greatly in terms of political systems, economic structures, cultural and social contexts, and development trajectories. This diversity means that foresight work, both institutional and participatory, carries different weights and possibilities depending on location and circumstance.

Strategic planning in the UAE and development-oriented foresight⁴⁸ in Morocco, for example, differ fundamentally and operate within entirely different parameters than crisis-responsive and stabilization efforts in Lebanon and Syria. Each context shapes not only what futures work is possible but also what forms the time horizon should take.

Different political and social environments create varying possibilities for futures work, ranging from government-led participatory planning⁴⁹ and strategies to grassroots initiatives that inform reconstruction, development transitions, or social change.

Acknowledging the different challenges the region faces and the opportunities it has yet to grasp, whether shared across countries or more contextually bound, the horizon for putting futures to purposeful use seems endless.

Despite this potential, participatory futures work remains limited across the region, especially in countries with an active civil society. The landscape reveals isolated bright spots rather than systematic practice. Some examples include the Institute for the Future's Sudan 2030 project, which stands out as a community-driven initiative that engaged citizens in envisioning their country's future. More recent work in Lebanon⁵⁰ exploring grassroots energy transition imaginaries demonstrates another approach, connecting communities to long-term sustainability planning.


These examples hint at what's possible, but they remain exceptions rather than the rule. I am certain many other experiences and examples remain to be discovered.

This is an invitation for fellow practitioners from, or working in, the region to share and help bring to light this hidden work, so we can all celebrate it and learn from it.

Several countries across the region are navigating compounded crises and require more engaged futures work; the type that involves individuals and communities in imagining and envisioning recovery, healing, and renewal.

Recognizing that this kind of work is taxing, and that its conditions, both individual and contextual, are not always conducive or even permissible, prompts us to explore alternative means to center it in more culturally attuned ways.

The region possesses cultural practices that could naturally support participatory futures thinking. What if we anchor this work in existing social structures and traditional knowledge systems that remain socially relevant in our contexts?



What if participatory futures were rooted in our own **social structures and traditional knowledge systems?**

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

Consider the *majlis*⁵¹ tradition, the recurrent and open-to-all gatherings where communities come together to share events, discuss affairs and concerns, and make decisions. The *shura* principle of collective consultation and decision-making operates in various forms across different contexts. Family and tribal structures that embed responsibility and accountability for collective wellbeing, sometimes in ways that Western individualistic frameworks do not capture.

This traditional knowledge extends further, encompassing practical knowledge found in Bedouin and rural communities. It includes water management systems that have sustained settlements for centuries, seasonal farming practices that respect and promote soil regeneration, self-organization for mutual aid and coordination of collective action, and food conservation practices to ensure year-round food availability. These represent sophisticated knowledge forms of resilience and long-term thinking that could inform how communities approach future challenges.

Here too, there's plenty to uncover. This is another invitation for us to find, codify, and conserve these structures and practices by directly or creatively applying them in our work.

So, what does it mean to be a futurist in our region? The role emerges as that of a context-reader and cultural translator, someone who recognizes the diversity of our realities and adapts their approach accordingly.

Sometimes, this means working within government frameworks to develop visions. Other times, it means creating participatory spaces where communities can engage with their own futures. It always means being constantly aware of contextual possibilities and constraints.



In the region, a futurist becomes a bridge-builder between institutional and grassroots-centered approaches. Someone who helps connect existing long-established structures with contemporary challenges, and local insights with global trends. Someone who understands that in some contexts, the work begins with building technical capacity. In others, it starts with community dialogue. In crisis contexts, it might focus on healing and reconciliation. In development contexts, it could emphasize opportunity creation and social cohesion.

This is ultimately an invitation to experiment with how we think about, and practice, futures work in our region. Not to replace what exists, but to explore whether more inclusive, culturally grounded approaches could complement our institutional capacity.

Imagine, if you would, expanding our toolkit beyond strategic planning to include community visioning that grounds local realities in national strategies. Storytelling that surfaces grassroots innovations and adaptive practices. Neighborhood-level futures work that builds social cohesion and equitable urban development. Intergenerational dialogue that connects traditional wisdom with youth aspirations. Cultural exploration that weaves traditional knowledge with contemporary challenges.

What if some of our greatest challenges – from climate adaptation to the impact of AI on youth employment to post-conflict recovery – could benefit not just from technical solutions but from more social imagination? What if participatory futures work offered a pathway to harness our communities' cultural ways of knowing and learning, as well as collective creativity, in service of that imagination?

The institutional infrastructure for foresight is already strong across much of the region. What if we experimented with building a larger participatory infrastructure to match it?

The cultural foundations are there. The need is urgent. The opportunity is real.



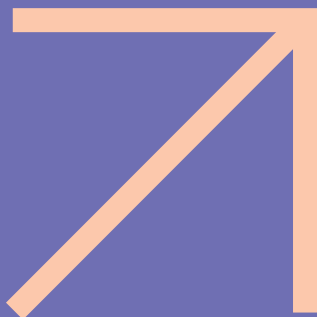
Elias Mouawad is a public value innovation and foresight strategist with more than 10 years of experience working with governments, the private sector, civil society, philanthropies and think tanks.

He has led research, strategy development, signal scanning, sensemaking, scenario building, and program design for leading organizations, including the United Nations, global grantmaking organisations, and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

He specializes in designing strategies, innovation programs, partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives to support organizations in navigating uncertainty and driving meaningful transformation.

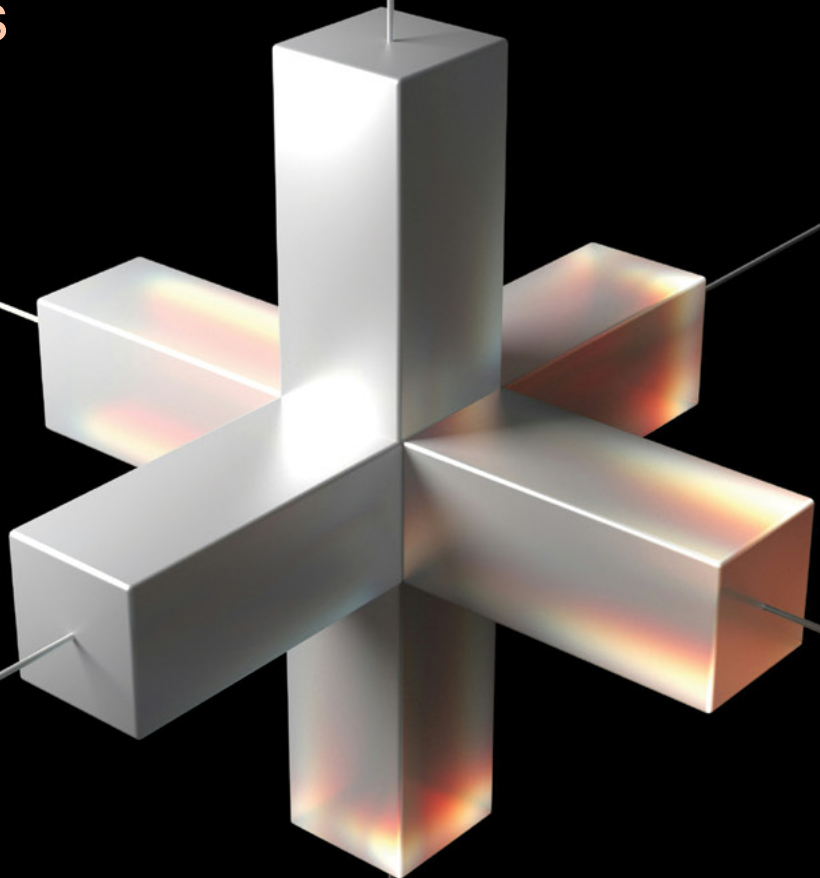
Elias is a 2021 Next Generation Foresight Practitioner awardee for the MENA region.

He is associated with Reos Partners and the School of International Futures.



**In the region,
a futurist becomes
a bridge-builder**

— connecting
long-established
structures with
contemporary
challenges, and
local insights with
global trends



The Pragmatic Futurist

By **Bryan King**

The word futurist can conjure up visions of crystal balls or ivory tower prognostications. Yet as a foresight practitioner, I've come to believe that a futurist isn't a soothsayer at all, but rather a pragmatic navigator. Our core purpose is to take that expansive, "over-the-horizon" thinking and distill it into tangible, actionable outcomes, empowering leaders to chart a course toward their preferred future.



Visuals



Design



Writing

WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?



FROM “WHAT IF” TO “WHAT NOW:” MAKING FORESIGHT ACTIONABLE

The essence of pragmatic foresight is closing the illusory gap between a far future and urgent tactical imperatives. It’s not just about describing a menu of possible futures – it’s about casting light on what those possibilities mean for action in the present. For leaders in any industry, this translates into transcending airy ideas of disruption toward a specific awareness of both risk and opportunity in shifting terrain.

Organizations are forever responding to intricate, intertwined pressures. Think about the underlying transformations in consumer demographics, the changing dynamic of global supply chains, and ongoing difficulties in recruiting and retaining talent. Also, advances in AI and automation are starting to reinvent workflows and roles across industries. These are not separate trends; these are linked forces that will fundamentally transform how products get delivered, who does the work, and how value is generated.

A pragmatic futurist offers a structure for leaders to internalize these complicated signals. For example, the emergence of remote work services or the adoption of predictive analytics isn’t merely the addition of new technology. It transforms customer access, facility usage, and how workers are deployed. We assist organizations in breaking down these disruptions, posing the questions: “What abilities do we need to develop?” and “How could this transform our connection with customers and partners?” The goal is to ignite forward-thinking that immediately informs strategy, so foresight isn’t an academic pursuit but a catalyst for concrete, quantifiable momentum.

THE FUTURE IS “YES, AND...,” NOT “EITHER/OR”

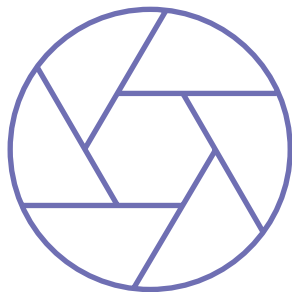
One of the most crucial lessons a pragmatic futurist can share is that the future is seldom a binary proposition. It’s almost never an “either/or” decision. Rather, it’s a rich mosaic of “Yes, and...” This became obvious following a trend forecast presentation I delivered. One leader said, “This is all very interesting, but when I walk into my office each day, I don’t see any of the things you’re talking about. How do I reconcile what I need to do today with the future you’re presenting?” My response was something along these lines: “Excellent point. It’s crucial to have one foot firmly planted in today and the other planted in tomorrow. While we absolutely must deliver on today’s demands, failing to evolve risks disintermediation at best, or becoming obsolete at worst.” I don’t know if, at the time, that leader was sold on that, but for me, it sealed the deal on embracing a “yes, and...” mindset when framing the implications of the future.

For example, think about how healthcare delivery models are continuously changing. Will care still mostly be delivered in hospitals, or will it shift dramatically to outpatient settings and homes?

The pragmatic futurist says: “Yes, hospitals will still be crucial for acute care and complex procedures, and yes, a large piece of the routine, preventive, and chronic disease management will shift to virtual and at-home services.” This “yes, and...” mindset encourages organizations to invest in robust inpatient capabilities while simultaneously building out comprehensive digital health infrastructure and home-based care solutions. It prevents the trap of rigid, single-point predictions that can blind an organization to the breadth of possibilities and ultimately hinder its ability to adapt.

Similarly, the impact of emerging technologies often presents a “yes, and...”

Will AI significantly impact healthcare professionals? The pragmatic futurist asserts: “Yes, AI will automate many routine, repetitive, and administrative tasks, significantly enhancing efficiency and freeing up clinical time, and yes, human empathy, critical thinking, complex decision-making, and interpersonal communication will become even more central to the human clinician’s role.” This perspective encourages investment in AI tools to augment the workforce, not just to reduce costs, while also emphasizing professional development that doubles down on uniquely human skills.



A pragmatic futurist acts as a neutral lens, scanning the environment for signals of change.

THE UNBIASED NAVIGATOR: STEERING, NOT COMMANDING

A bedrock principle of pragmatic foresight is unwavering objectivity. Our job isn't to push a particular political viewpoint, social stance, or even our own ego onto an organization's strategic path. We understand that businesses operate within incredibly complex societal and political ecosystems, and disruptions from these areas are simply part of the landscape.

Instead of trying to convince people how they should feel about a specific social movement or geopolitical shift, we provide unbiased frameworks that empower organizations to navigate uncertainty. We act as a neutral lens, scanning the environment for signals of change. When we present these insights, especially on sensitive topics such as shifts in public trust or evolving expectations around ethical practices, the pragmatic futurist focuses squarely on illuminating the potential impacts on the organization's mission, stakeholders, and daily operations.

For instance, a surge in prioritizing ethical sourcing in society could generate new requirements for clear supply chains and conscientious business conduct. The futurist's job is to emphasize this changing cultural value, investigate what it might mean for products and processes, and assist leaders in thinking through possible strategies. We don't prescribe the "correct" answer, we enable the organization to decide what is right for its mission and longevity. This detached – yet deeply engaged – approach builds credibility, fostering an environment where uncomfortable truths can be openly discussed, leading to more resilient strategies.



PATIENCE, CREDIBILITY, AND PRODUCTIVE DEBATE

The path from unconstrained thought to action is seldom immediate. It takes patience. A pragmatic futurist knows that organizational change is a marathon, not a sprint. We plant seeds of insight throughout the organization, introducing ideas about emerging trends and potential disruptions, allowing them to take root and grow within the collective consciousness. This subtle, persistent cultivation builds credibility – as those early signals evolve into clear trends, our initial insights resonate, building trust in the real value of foresight.

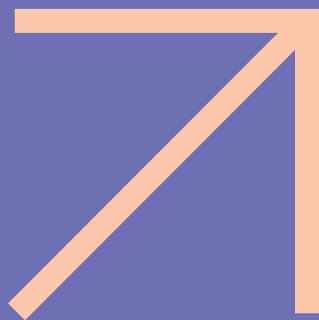
This trust, in turn, fuels productive debate and discussion. It's through robust dialogue, where assumptions are challenged and diverse perspectives are explored, that a preferred future truly begins to take shape. Foresight should be a collaborative process that empowers an organization to collectively define its strategic path. This means creating a safe space to grapple with uncomfortable truths, exploring radical possibilities, and collectively committing to a shared vision for the future.

When all is said and done, the foresight professional is the organization's navigator.

We light the way, exposing not only a destination but a world of potential, both risk and opportunity. We don't just point to where an organization's leaders could go; we help them draw the map to get there, marking the strategic waypoints, identifying necessary adaptations, and highlighting critical choices along the way. By linking the future to today, promoting unbiased inquiry and advocating actionable insight, the pragmatic futurist turns ambiguity into agency, making sure organizations aren't just observers of transformation but active designers of their own destiny.



Bryan King is a foresight professional in the strategy department at Mayo Clinic. Bryan spends a majority of his time embedded in enterprise strategy projects where he brings the external, long-term perspective. In addition, he and other intelligence colleagues produce an annual trend landscape report which is shared across the organization and used in long-term strategic planning. Prior to Mayo Clinic, Bryan spent 13 years at Target Corporation in a variety of intelligence roles, with the last 6 years in enterprise risk management, where he managed a portfolio of dynamic enterprise risks and owned the emerging risk program. Bryan has also spent time working in the government sector focusing on intel and investigations.



**Organizational
change is
a marathon,
not
a sprint**

Foresight, Public Policy, and Spirituality: **Bridging Inner and Outer Worlds**



By **Dr Ora-orn Poocharoen**

I work at the intersection of public policy and foresight. My journey has been shaped by a conviction that sound policymaking requires more than technical analysis or bureaucratic procedure. It requires the ability to see beyond immediate issues, to anticipate risks and opportunities, and to create space for deeper human connection. This is where foresight methods have transformed my practice as a policy scholar and foresight practitioner.

Foresight tools allow participants to step out of the “tyranny of the urgent.” Instead of reacting to the immediate crisis, they invite us to imagine possible, plausible, and even preferred futures. In public policy contexts, this shift in perspective is invaluable. It enables decision-makers to weigh long-term consequences, consider alternative pathways, and design policies that are resilient, adaptive, and inclusive.



A futurist plays an important role in guiding and facilitating conversations about the future.

However, I believe foresight can do even more. When combined with participatory and deliberative processes, it can invite people not only to think differently but also to be differently in the policy space.

A futurist plays an important role in guiding and facilitating conversations about the future, often uncomfortable ones. In truth, these dialogues are rarely only about what lies ahead; they are more often about the problems, discomforts, fears, and disappointments embedded in the present state of public issues.

A futurist carries the responsibility of helping people navigate these negatives and transform them into positives, seeking ways to manage risks while also uncovering opportunities that serve the wider public good. In doing so, a futurist is well positioned to help groups recalibrate their differing perspectives through the creation of shared visions. Thus, a futurist not only enables communities and organizations to think more creatively and design solutions, but also plays a vital role in bridging divides, fostering understanding, and building common goals that contribute to the well-being of all.

BLENDING SPIRITUALITY AND FORESIGHT

The unique approach to build common goals that I take is to weave spirituality into foresight analysis. For me, spirituality is not about doctrine or religion. It is about cultivating awareness of the inner dimensions of human experience, which includes values, emotions, identity, and meaning, and connecting these inner dimensions to the outer world of structures, institutions, and tangible policies.

One method I use is Sohail Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), which explores four levels: the litany (surface problems), systemic causes, worldviews, and myths/metaphors. Typically, foresight practitioners focus on these analytical layers. My contribution has been to infuse CLA with an invitation for participants to pause, reflect, and connect with their *inner selves* while moving across the layers.

For example, when examining worldviews, I ask participants to notice not only what they think, but how they feel. When exploring myths and metaphors, I encourage them to draw from personal experiences, spiritual insights, or moments of connection with nature.

This blending allows participants to enter the deliberative process as their whole selves – not only as professionals, officials, or citizens, but as complete human beings. When people bring their authentic selves into policy dialogue, something powerful happens. They begin to see interconnectedness more clearly: how policies link to people's lives, how human choices shape the environment, how culture influences governance, and how the personal and collective dimensions are inseparable.



AUTHENTICITY AND THE POLICY PROCESS

In my experience, inviting participants to connect with their authentic selves enriches both the process and the outcomes of policy design. The authentic self is not constrained by rigid institutional rules or narrow political interests. Instead, it is guided by a sense of interconnectedness and responsibility.

When participants reach this level of engagement, the quality of deliberation changes. They are more present, more empathetic, and more willing to listen. They think less about defending positions and more about co-creating solutions. The result is not only better conversations but also more grounded and forward-looking policies.

I believe that policies emerging from this space are more likely to withstand uncertainty. They are rooted in values, not only in data. They are informed by compassion, not only by efficiency. And they embody respect for human dignity and ecological balance.

The **authentic self** is not constrained by rigid institutional rules or narrow political interests.





CASE STUDY

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AT THE THAI-MYANMAR BORDER

One example of this approach in practice was a foresight and strategic planning exercise with the Thai military, focusing on the Thai-Myanmar border. This border is not just a geographical line. It is a complex space shaped by migration, conflict, trade, and cultural exchange. Designing strategies for this space requires balancing national security with humanitarian concerns and navigating sensitive relationships between state, military, and civilian actors.

We used foresight methods to bring multiple stakeholders into dialogue. Participants were guided to move beyond the immediate challenges of border control and to explore long-term scenarios. Through spiritual reflection exercises, we asked them to connect with their deeper values and with the collective cultural narratives that shape Thai approaches to borders.

The results were remarkable. Instead of framing migrants primarily as threats, participants began to envision futures where inclusivity and cooperation were central. They proposed policies that balanced protection with hospitality, and security with humanity. The exercise demonstrated that foresight, when infused with spirituality, can unlock progressive and inclusive thinking, even in traditionally conservative institutions.



Foresight, when infused with spirituality, can unlock progressive and inclusive thinking.



CASE STUDY

**CLIMATE POLICY
IN THE FOREST**

Another example comes from a three-day foresight workshop we conducted with representatives of Thailand’s Department of Climate Change. Instead of holding the workshop in a conference room, we gathered in the forest. The setting itself was intentional: by being immersed in nature, participants could reconnect with the very ecosystems that climate policies seek to protect.

Over three days, we experimented with integrating foresight tools, deliberative dialogue, and spiritual practices. One highlight was the “Nature Wisdom Council,” a role-play exercise where participants spoke as if they were elements of the forest – trees, rivers, animals, and soil. By embodying non-human perspectives, participants opened themselves to empathy, humility, and respect for nature.

The policies designed in this workshop were profoundly different from conventional outputs. Instead of focusing only on targets and mechanisms, participants articulated principles of care, boundaries, and balance. They asked: What can humans do, and what should we refrain from doing? What does it mean to surrender to ecological limits? How can policy embody not only ambition but also restraint?

At the end of the workshop, many participants reported feeling more spiritual, more connected, and more whole. They said the experience allowed them to think about the future holistically, not just technically.

LESSONS LEARNED

From these and other experiences, I draw three key lessons:

1 —→ Inner work strengthens outer action.

When participants connect to their authentic selves, they bring deeper wisdom into policy conversations.

2 —→ Spaces matter. The physical and symbolic environment of a foresight exercise influences the quality of engagement. A forest can be a better meeting room than a hotel ballroom.

3 —→ Wholeness fosters resilience. Policies rooted in both rational analysis and spiritual awareness are more likely to endure, because they speak to the human heart as well as the human mind.

LOOKING AHEAD

As I continue my work in the nexus of foresight and public policy, I am convinced that spirituality must play a larger role. We live in a time of polycrisis: climate change, inequality, conflict, and technological disruption. These challenges are not only technical – they are existential. They force us to ask: Who are we? What do we value? How do we relate to each other and to the Earth?

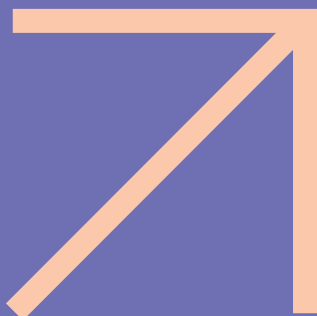
Foresight provides tools to explore alternative futures. Spirituality provides the grounding to navigate those futures with authenticity and compassion. Together, they offer a pathway for policymaking that is not only smart and strategic but also wise and humane.

In this work, I see myself less as an expert who delivers answers and more as a facilitator who holds space. My role is to invite participants into deeper reflection, to encourage them to bring their whole selves into policy dialogue, and to co-create futures that are inclusive, resilient, and life-affirming.

This is, I believe, the future of foresight in public policy – not merely forecasting trends or analyzing risks but cultivating the wisdom to make choices that honor both people and planet.



Dr Ora-orn Poocharoen has been the Founding Director of the School of Public Policy at Chiang Mai University, Thailand, since 2017. She holds a PhD in Public Administration from Syracuse University's Maxwell School and previously served for eight years on the faculty of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. From 2018 to 2021, she was a member of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA). She is co-editor of the Handbook of Public Policy in Asia (2025) and has published widely on public administration, governance, foresight, and sustainability in international journals. She has over a decade of experience providing policy advice and government consultation using foresight tools.



Spirituality provides
the grounding to
**navigate futures
with authenticity
and compassion**

Exploring the In-Between Spaces

By **Dr Nisreen Lahham**

Futurists are often mistaken for fortune tellers, yet in truth, we are the very opposite of that oversimplification. I see myself as a storyteller of infinite alternatives, weaving narratives that explore possible worlds. My role is not only to listen to what exists today, but also to sense the “in-between spaces” – those faint whispers of change known in foresight as weak signals. These murmurs have the potential to become powerful currents that influence the future if they are perceived correctly.



In a world marked by uncertainty, it's the task of futurists to ask questions everyone else is afraid to: What if oil is no longer a source of wealth? What if water instead of territory is the true measure of safety? What if the next wave of entrepreneurs emanates not from Silicon Valley but from refugee camps across the MENA region?

Futurists do not predict the future; rather, they prepare people for it. We help leaders, communities, and young people expand their imagination of what could be, so they may act more wisely in the present. In this sense, a futurist is like a compass in a sandstorm – offering orientation when everything seems chaotic and unclear.



With rising popularity for artificial intelligence (AI), are futurists still needed? A valid question, and an exciting contradiction holds the reply. An AI will generate hundreds of things quicker than one human would do, yet it's unable to feel cultural tides or comprehend human emotion such as optimism and fear.

The future is about living experiences, not just algorithms. While machines can determine the precise amount of sea level rise, they are unable to assist a fisherman in envisioning a new life for his daughter inland. We will require more human interpreters to understand the implications of AI's increasingly effective replies for human life. While machines provide us with data, futurists provide us with the important questions.

Will futurists be able to help society deal with disruption? Yes, in my opinion, without a doubt.

I think of a little date-palm cooperative in North Africa that went through a terrible drought in 2019. They made the decision to act rather than wait for assistance.

Together with practitioners of foresight, they mapped out several potential futures, including one in which trade routes changed, one in which young people were forced to migrate, and one in which water scarcity grew worse. They made the bold decision to invest in solar-powered irrigation and develop digital platforms in order to sell their dates directly to Gulf markets as a result of this exercise. That cooperative is doing very well today. While the drought continued to persist, it paved the way for creativity.

FORESIGHT HAS THE ABILITY TO TRANSFORM ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY.

I had a very personal motivation for working in foresight. Growing up in the MENA region influenced my perspective on the future. I knew how a single drop of water may mean the difference between life and death. My early life had shaped my outlook on the future, which was based on strength, knowledge, and survival rather than ideals.

What really inspires me is the resilience I witness on a daily basis: Bedouin women reviving ancient seeds, young Cairo coders developing AI applications for farmers, and communities envisioning a brighter future despite the challenges of the present.



WE VIEW FORESIGHT AS SURVIVAL WISDOM, NOT A LUXURY.

Businesses often ask me why they should invest in foresight when they already have so many urgent problems to handle. I keep reminding them of this simple fact: what was unimaginable yesterday is now an emergency. If we had invested in foresight earlier, we would have been better prepared to deal with crises such as pandemics, water scarcity, and digital disruption.

Effective foresight does not aim to produce flashy papers or abstract models. It involves incorporating future-focused thought into routine choices made by the government, business, or community organization.

If we do not create our own future, others will create it for us – and always according to their own agenda.

THE ABILITY OF FORESIGHT TO TRANSLATE IMAGINATION INTO ACTION IS WHAT REALLY MAKES IT VALUABLE.

However, the discipline of foresight must change. It has been restricted to scholarly publications and business workshops for far too long. The next stage must be more inclusive and democratic. There should be scenario games in parliaments, foresight laboratories in schools, and even “futures cafés” in rural areas.

Experts shouldn’t make all the decisions about the future; everyone should contribute to its creation. This process can be aided by digital tools, but it must always be grounded in the diversity of voices and human imagination.

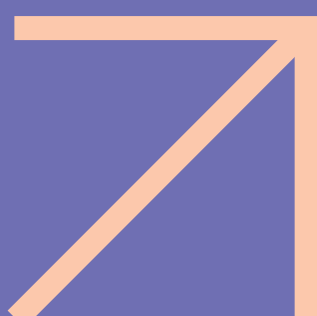
Perhaps the most pressing issue we confront is exposing young people to futures thinking. Imagine a society in which all teenagers are equipped to investigate potential futures in addition to learning about history. They would be raised with a firm grasp of our history and, more significantly, the bravery to influence our future.

In the MENA region, where youth make up the majority of the population, this is not optional – it is a necessity. What some call a “youth bulge” can, if empowered, become a powerful source of resilience, creativity, and renewal. Futures literacy is not about predicting tomorrow but about giving young people the courage and the tools to shape it themselves. For it to be truly effective, just like reading, writing, or mathematics, this work should begin early.

Children should be encouraged to imagine boldly, to explore possibilities, and to use simple futures methods that help them see beyond the present. When imagination is nurtured, it grows into agency. I often say: if we do not create our own future, others will create it for us – and always according to their own agenda.



“That is why I initiated a forum to connect the MENA region with Africa through foresight.”



Dr Nisreen Lahham is a recognized futurist and founder of the Futures Studies Forum for Africa and the Middle East, an NGO supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. She has several publications on foresight including an Arabic glossary for foresight terminology. With over 20 years of experience, she specializes in climate change adaptation, green and circular economy, and foresight, focusing on the water and agricultural sectors and gender. She previously led Egypt’s Vision 2030 development as Executive Manager of the Center for Futures Studies at the Egyptian Cabinet. Nisreen has worked with international and regional development agencies such as FAO, CGIAR, GIZ, and the League of Arab States.

A New Metaphor for the Futurist

By **Fisayo Oyewale**



Visuals



Design



Writing

“The Calabash does not break, it only **changes** shape.”

This analogy is coined from the Yoruba culture, a tribe in the south-west of Nigeria. Calabashes are made from gourds, plants that are cultivated and used in various forms for domestic tasks, musical instruments, and decorative purposes, depending on their shape.

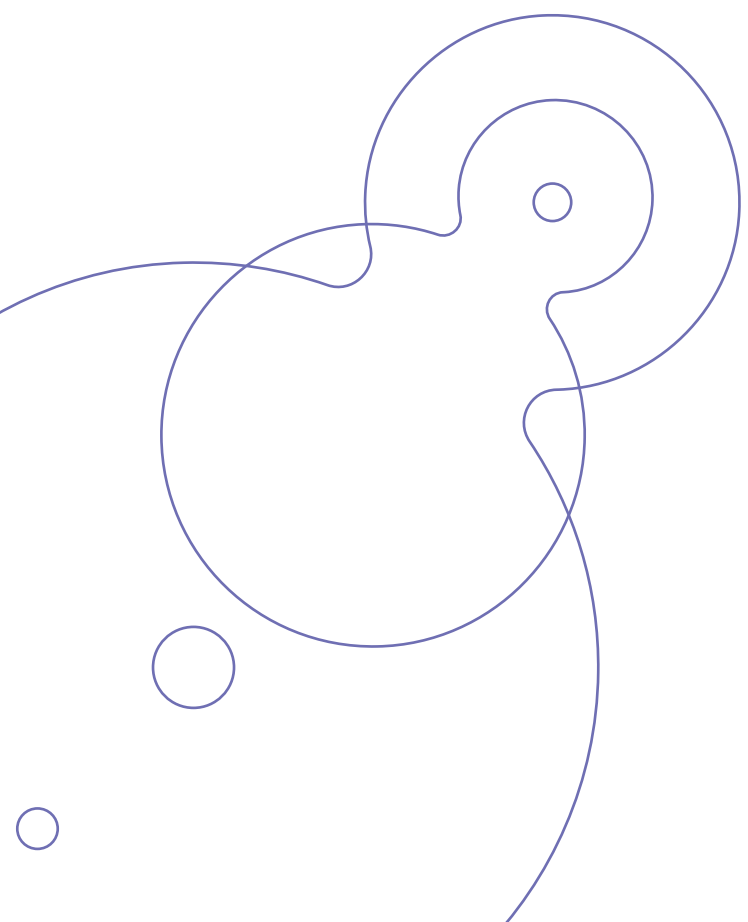
FUTURISTS HAVE ALWAYS EXISTED; WE JUST DIDN'T CALL THEM THAT.

Growing up, the word futurist wasn't part of my vocabulary and never made its way into my childhood conversations or family moonlit evenings. It wasn't something we called anyone, even though, as I now understand, futures thinking was all around me.

The essence of futures thinking was ever-present, embedded in how my grandparents preserved seeds for planting seasons to come, in how market women adjusted their prices ahead of the rains, and in the wisdom our elders passed down through stories of the past to guide the young ones.

There was a rhythm to our readiness, shaped by both lived reality and inherited wisdom. We planned, adapted, and imagined new possibilities, but we just never called it foresight.

While I didn't set out to become a futurist, looking back, I realize that the mindset was already there...quietly shaping the way we lived, responded, and hoped.



SEED OF CURIOSITY; STUMBLING ON FORESIGHT

My journey into foresight, often called futures thinking, began out of curiosity. In my early twenties, while working as a farmer alongside rural communities, I encountered futures thinking not by design but by necessity.

At the time, I had just carried out a mapping and needs-based research exercise across several farming communities. The stories I heard were heavy, marked by struggle, uncertainty, and a sense of resignation. Many of the farmers I met were caught in short-term survival cycles. They weren't thinking beyond the next harvest or the next rainfall. Long-term planning, future possibilities, or alternative strategies rarely entered the conversation.

I asked myself,

What if these farmers could shape what comes next, not just adapt?

What if their children could learn to imagine what could be, and have the tools to bring it to life?

Without the ability to think long-term, many in these communities lacked a critical form of agency.

The absence of long-term thinking among these communities was both a gap and a spark for my journey into foresight. I began to see that without the ability to think long-term, many in these communities lacked a critical form of agency. Their lives were shaped almost entirely by external forces, weather, markets, and politics, with little room to imagine, let alone build, alternative futures. Without a vision beyond today, it was difficult to develop strategies for lasting change.

This is where strategic foresight and its tools became powerful. But beyond the frameworks and methodologies, I realized something deeper: for foresight to truly empower people, especially in rural and under-resourced settings, it must be made accessible. Complex ideas need to be translated into forms that feel familiar and useful, grounded in peoples' lived experiences.

I learned to guide communities from the known to the unknown. Take farming, for instance: while the future is uncertain, farmers have always observed the skies, read the soil, and watched animal behavior. These are intuitive forms of foresight, ways of anticipating what's to come, based on rhythm and repetition. The potential, then, was not to teach something entirely new but to build on what they already knew, giving it language, structure, and strategic direction.

By making foresight relatable, we move beyond simply surviving the present; we begin to imagine and shape futures that reflect our hopes, not just our fears.

A NEW METAPHOR FOR THE FUTURIST

futurist (noun) - /'fyoo-chə-rist/

A person who walks alongside others to reveal that the future is not predetermined, but shaped by our hopes, choices, and the possibilities we dare to imagine.

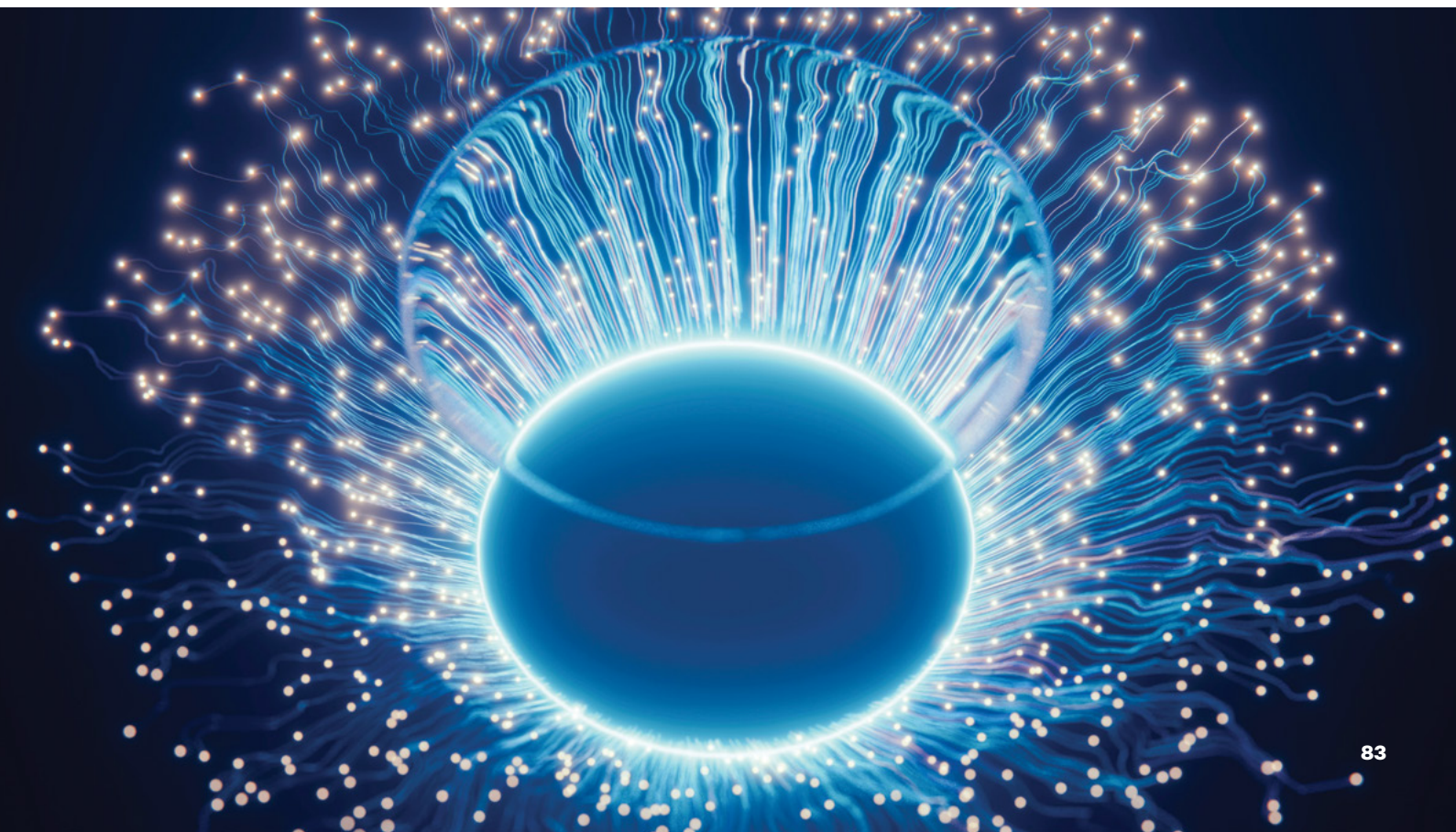
Too often, futurists are seen as distant predictors, as people who drop trend reports and walk away. But foresight is not a broadcast or one-way; it is a dialogue, and it should be participatory. The need for futurists who teach, collaborate across disciplines, and bridge data with daily life becomes more imperative. They must move from navigating boardrooms to grassroots community halls, translating complex ideas into actionable steps.

The futurist must be armed with intentionality: using structured methods (scenarios, signals scanning, participatory foresight) to help people move from reacting to shaping their futures. But these tools must be wielded with care.

The same hammer that drives nails can also dismantle structures. We must ask:

Are we using our tools to build futures with people, or for them?

What we need is not just more tools; we need more translation. We need to sharpen the lens through which futurists operate: not as experts above, but as facilitators beside, guiding people.





RETHINKING THE FUTURIST: HUMAN, AI, OR BOTH?

With the rise of technology, especially artificial intelligence (AI), there's a growing trend of delegating even complex tasks, such as futures thinking, to machines. While AI excels at processing data, identifying patterns, and making predictions with precision, it often seeks definitive answers based on existing datasets.

But the future isn't a single, fixed destination; it holds multiple possibilities.

That's why foresight demands more than analytical power. It requires intellectual rigor and emotional intelligence: the ability to listen deeply, to understand lived experiences, and to remain grounded in justice and empathy. AI can detect trends, but it cannot feel the uncertainty a farmer faces when the rains don't come. It cannot inherit or carry forward intergenerational memory.

This is where human futurists remain essential, able to connect data with dignity and foresight with feeling.

Futurists don't give answers; we help people ask better questions:



What if the next crisis is also an opportunity?

Who is being left out of these futures?

In this dance between the status quo and innovation, between AI and human futurist, both can coexist. But we must be clear about roles.



HUMAN VS. AI:
WHAT IS THE FUTURIST NOW,
AND WHAT ARE THEIR ROLES?

Roles/Ability	 Human Futurist	 AI as a Futurist
Anticipatory Capacity	Spiced by lived realities, intuition, and personal values.	Data-driven pattern recognition, predictive algorithms with inherited bias
Empathy & Nuance	Understands human emotions, cultural contexts, and societal complexities	Processes vast amounts of text for sentiment analysis, but lacks true empathy
Questions	Ask why and what if	Ask what and when
Creativity & Imagination	Generates novel ideas, challenges assumptions, and envisions radical possibilities.	Combines existing data points in new ways, but is limited by training data
Visioning & Aspiration	Driven by values, hopes, and fears	Lacks personal desire or value frameworks
Facilitation & Co-creation	Expert in building trust and dialogue	Unable to engage interpersonally

If the future belongs
to everyone, then
**everyone must
have a say in
shaping it**



SENSEMAKERS, STORYTELLERS, AND SOIL-TILLERS: THE FUTURE OF FUTURISTS

We must rethink what and who is a futurist by formal description and reimagine both the roles and our approach. In my youth foresight work today, working with children and young people day in, day out, I have seen these groups of visionaries light up at the realization that they can question the status quo, imagine alternatives, and act today. I have also seen how exclusion breeds apathy and how inclusion sparks agency; bringing up yet another important discussion to democratize foresight more. If the future belongs to everyone, then everyone must have a say in shaping it. Sadly, foresight is still often framed as an elite practice. The language can be technical. The platforms, exclusionary.

We must move beyond siloed conversations, deepening our connection with the people whose futures are at stake.

Futurists of tomorrow will be:

- Sensemakers, not just trend-spotters,
- Translators of complexity into stories people can act on, and
- Keepers of indigenous knowledge and technological innovation in equal measure.

The role would entail blending data with proverbs and algorithms with ancestral wisdom. It's about fostering a collective intelligence, a shared capacity to anticipate, adapt, and innovate. Just as a farmer nurtures the soil for a bountiful harvest, futurists cultivate the ground for preferred futures to blossom.

Futurists should:

- Embrace hybrid thinking (merging tech with tradition),
- Practice humility (the future is not ours to dictate, but to co-create),
- Stay rooted (futures work must serve real people, not just theories),
- Use local metaphors (calabashes, not dashboards),
- Center lived experiences over jargon. Simplify the language to make it more accessible, and
- Make tools flexible (a storytelling circle can be as powerful as a scenario workshop).

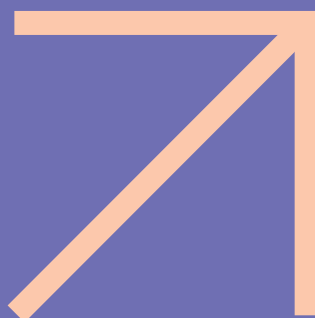
AI can assist, but it cannot replace the human element, because the future is not just about data; it's about desire, fear, hope, and agency.

We will need futurists who listen before they speak, who collaborate across boundaries, and who help entire communities see themselves as shapers of what's to come without any form of exclusion or bias.

**The sky keeps changing again,
and someone must look up, not
just to predict the rain, but to
prepare the field for planting.**



Fisayo Oyewale is a futurist and a facilitator focused on youth engagement, food systems, and technology. As the Youth Foresight Community and Partnerships Consultant at UNICEF Innocenti, she supports the Youth Foresight fellowship and manages the youth network of more than 13,000 young people in 146 countries interested in child rights, research, and foresight. Formerly, Fisayo was a 2022 UNICEF Youth Foresight Fellow herself and has led youth foresight workshops for over 200 young people, facilitating meaningful conversations and contributions to local and global initiatives. Her work reflects a commitment to building inclusive, future-ready systems through collaboration and foresight.



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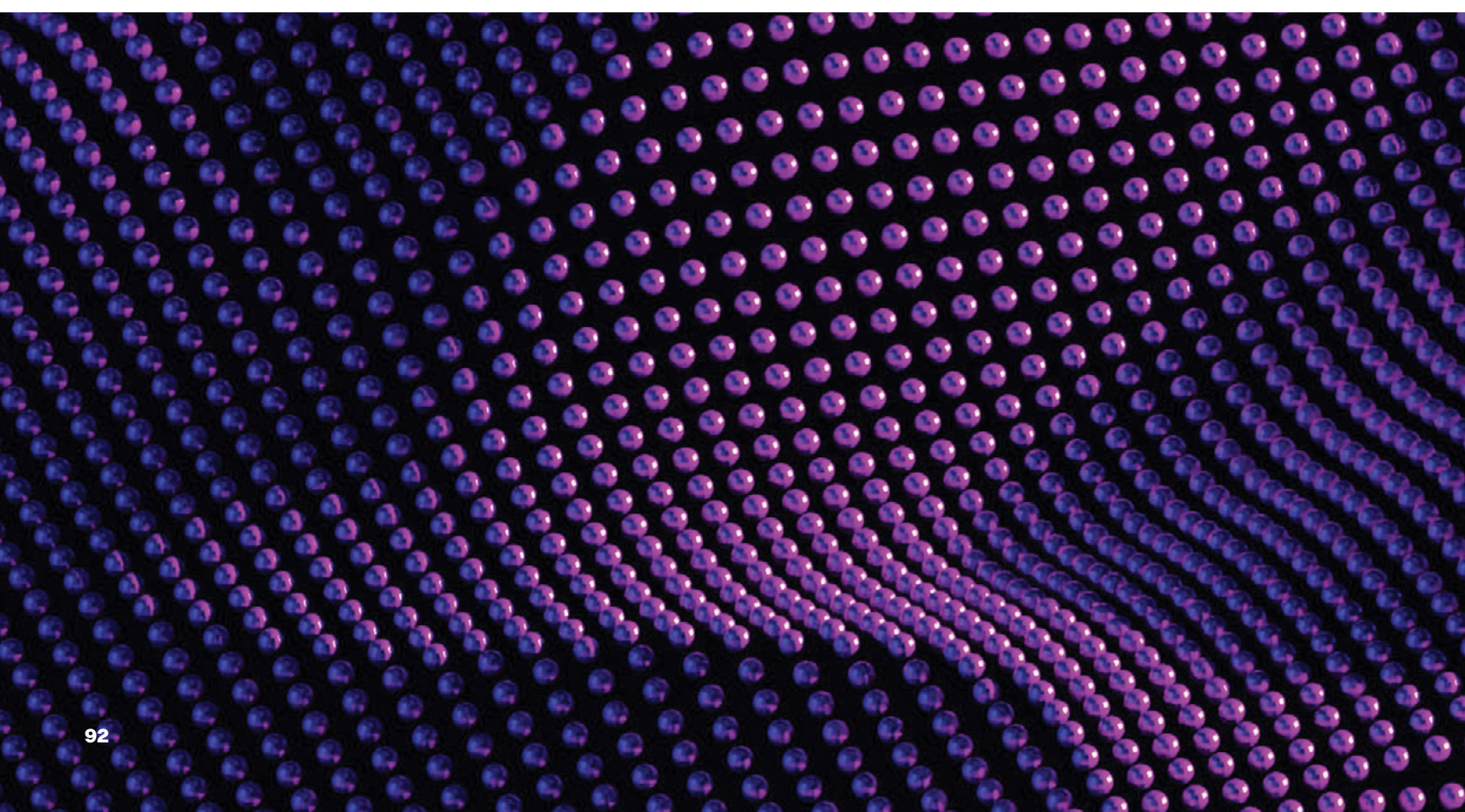
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WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

ABOUT THE APF



WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

The Association of Professional Futurists (APF) is a global community of futurists, dedicated to promoting professional excellence and demonstrating the value of strategic foresight and futures thinking for their clients and/or employers. The APF equips professionals to anticipate and shape alternative futures in the face of technological breakthroughs, environmental challenges, geopolitical shifts, and societal transformations. Through advocacy, education, research, and community building, the APF not only promotes the integration of futures thinking into various sectors but also sets professional and ethical standards for the practice of foresight. Founded more than 20 years ago, the APF includes more than 600 members from 54 countries. Members include futurists from businesses, governments, non-profits, consulting futurists, educators, and students in future studies.

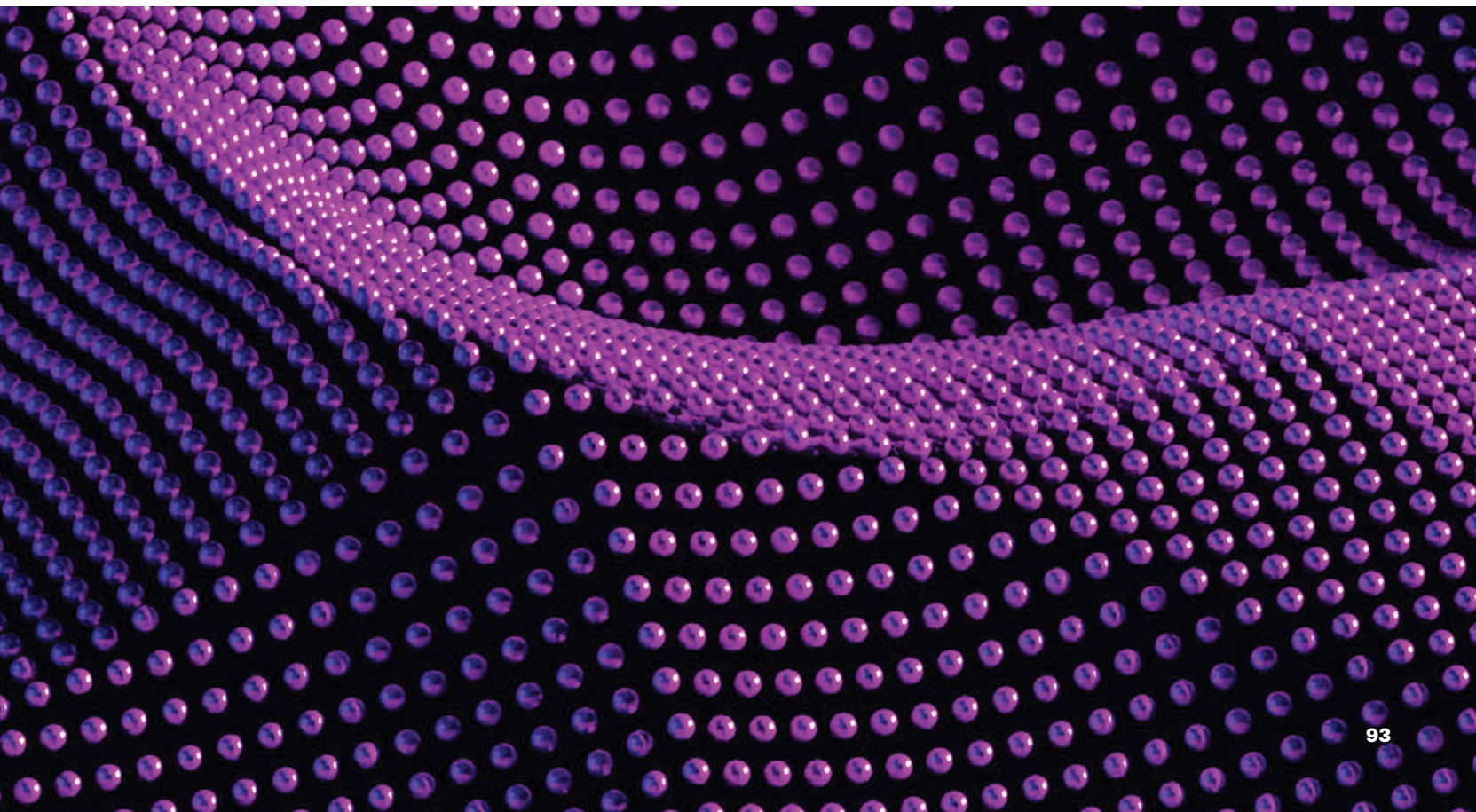
OUR VISION

A world transformed by foresight and futures thinking, where human actions and decision-making nurture a resilient, inclusive, and thriving planetary futures.

OUR MISSION

Advocate the value of foresight and futures thinking to ignite positive global change, and enhance the skills, global standing, and impact of our members as professional futurists.

The Association of Professional Futurists (APF) holds a membership with the **Global Futures Society (GFS)**, an initiative by the Dubai Future Foundation. Through this membership, APF Professional Members are also considered part of the GFS network.



ABOUT THE GFS



الشبكة العالمية لمؤسسات استشراف المستقبل Global Futures Society

مبادرة من مؤسسة دبي للمستقبل
An Initiative by Dubai Future Foundation



WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

The Global Futures Society (GFS) seeks to foster global collaboration among foresight practitioners, thinkers, and innovators to shape a sustainable and inclusive future. GFS connects futurists individuals and organizations across sectors, regions, and disciplines, offering a platform for knowledge exchange, partnership building, and the co-creation of innovative foresight initiatives.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

GFS is grounded in inclusive, collaborative and future-focused foresight. Embodying collaboration across boundaries, inclusive participation, shared learning and mutual support, and agility and adaptability - these principles ensure diverse voices are heard, knowledge is shared, and practices evolve to shape resilient, just, and sustainable futures across communities and systems.

OUR FOCUS AREAS

GFS cultivates a forward-looking global community through meaningful dialogue and the integration of futures thinking across sectors. Focus areas include building a global foresight community, accelerating foresight integration, elevating diverse voices, and co-developing research initiatives, strengthening collective capacity to anticipate change and drive long-term systemic impact.

To learn more about the GFS, visit
<https://www.dubaifuture.ae/global-futures-society>

To know more about our membership, email us
gfs@dubaifuture.gov.ae

ABOUT THE DUBAI FUTURE FORUM



WHAT MAKES A FUTURIST?

The Dubai Future Forum is the flagship gathering of the Dubai Future Foundation, the agency of the government of Dubai mandated to think “10 years ahead” for Dubai and to inspire the world. Dubbed as the world’s largest gathering of futurists, it attracts 2,500 individuals from 100 countries and is held annually since 2022 at the Museum of the Future in Dubai. Since its inception, its goal has been to be a gathering that resonates with the urgency of today’s challenges and the promise of tomorrow. Its target, for both participants and speakers, are people involved in imagining and shaping the future, conceptually and materially.

From discussions on the future of philanthropy to activations on the future of play to panels addressing longevity, AI for nature and the power of traditions, it aims to spark conversations that inspire action. The Dubai Future Forum amplifies insights from foresight practitioners and thought leaders across sectors, geographies and industries to embed futures thinking universally, thus contributing to the growth, prosperity and well-being of societies and our shared humanity.

To learn more about the Dubai Future Forum, visit
<https://www.dubaifuture.ae/dubai-future-forum-2025>




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Global Futures Society
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