SCANNING THE HORIZON

Sector Guide #2:

"Strategic Decision-Making in a Whirly World"

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PREFACE

This civil society sector Guide has been produced in the context of a global pandemic, coupled with strong international anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and feminist movements, and in the middle of the climate emergency. In a relatively short time span, old certainties around the future of the social impact sector have been shaken, while complexities of the tasks for international civil society organisations (ICSOs) have skyrocketed.

Leaders in the sector, committed staff, volunteers and their allies, as courageous and smart they may be, can easily become overwhelmed by these current challenges. Yet an incredible amount of learning, adaptability and innovativeness has characterised the past year or so, and continues to show the immense value of a resilient civil society, fighting for a more just, equal and healthy world. Vicky Tongue, the author, and the ICS Centre's 'Scanning the Horizon' community have compiled such invaluable experiences and good ideas, best practices and uncomfortable challenges.

The following pages show new approaches to deal with our 'whirly world' in an explorative way. Rather than providing recipes, we look at good (enough) practices to make sense of current complexities, support strategic decision-making, and stay on course without losing nimbleness. ICSOs (and their partners) may have to reinvent the way they plan and strategise, but shall not compromise on their values and ultimate mandates. They will have to become more committed to mega-collaborations, prioritise discovery over delivery, embrace true diversity, and depart from the thought that there will be a 'new' (lest old) normal – to mention just a few good ideas explored in this Guide.

The urgency and importance of having more impact and relevance through today's turbulences does not just derive from the need for organisational survival. It comes from the deteriorating circumstances for millions of marginalised and disempowered groups – an additional 150 million people who have slid into poverty in the wake of the pandemic, the abuse of state power to restrict human rights and civic freedoms, scandalous corruption and bad governance along with the ruthless exploitation of nature - all over the globe.

Civil society is needed badly to fight this, but has to reboot its capacity to strategise, plan, act and make a lasting difference. The Centre hopes this Guide will help to a certain, or rather uncertain, extent. We want to thank everyone who has contributed and Direct Impact Group and the Ford Foundation for their kind support, and hope readers will take away many ideas and even more encouragement for their organisations and the wider civil society sector.

Wolfgang Jamann
Executive Director,
International Civil Society Centre

OPENING
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

On strategy and uncertainty:

"In times of great uncertainty…Hope is a terrible strategy."
Rohit Talwar (2020) [1]

"There were circular conversations for a while: you can't adopt the long-term strategy until you understand the full impact, but with this uncertainty you can't make long-term decisions. There was nervousness about working with a 'wrong' understanding of what the crisis was, but you have to accept you can't do detailed analysis of what it is, while it is happening. We may notunderstand the full impact even ten years from now."
Danny Vannuchi (2021)

On leadership and turbulence:

"The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence itself, but to act with yesterday's logic."
Peter F. Drucker (1980) [2]

"Unprecedented crises demand unprecedented actions. Lessons from past crises suggest that leaders are more likely to underreact. What is necessary is to take the bold and rapid actions that would feel too risky in normal times."
Andrea Alexander et al (2020) [3]

1   Talwar, R. (2020) Fast Future Keynote Theatre - Navigating Deep Disruption, Webinar, 12 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_UVAJAWtV4&feature=youtu.be
2   Drucker, P. F. (1980) Managing in Turbulent Times, Harper and Rowe, New York
3   Alexander, A., De Smet, A. and Weiss, L. (2020), How to Make Smart Decisions Quickly in Uncertain Times, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-organization-blog/how-to-make-smart-decisions-quickly-in-uncertain-times

On futures and freedom:

"When literally systems are breaking down...futures literacy is an empowering freedom that gives you agency."
Tanja Hichert (2020)[4]

"The futures space is...less about creating comfort with radical uncertainty and more about facing up to discomfort...using the discomfort to produce energy, to expand horizons, to imagine things that you didn't need to otherwise."
Dr Geci Karuri-Sebina (2020)[5]

On rethinking and reimagining:

"We need 'blue-sky thinking' for the kind of world we want to leave behind - COVID will get defeated and our strategic thinking needs to go beyond its 'short memory'."
Ismayil Tahmazov, Islamic Relief Worldwide (2021)

"This is a time to both rethink - drawing on observed strategic risks - and strategically reimagine - drawing on perceived risks - our institutions core value offering."
Aarathi Krishnan (2020)

On challenge and opportunity:

We are now living not just in the Anthropocene, but in a 'Coronacene'. Our challenge is to respond at appropriately large scale (of geography and time) and to adapt everything: structures, ways of working, and relationships."
UNDP (2020)[6]

"The pandemic has reopened the debate about what is necessary and what is possible. It has put us in a position where we can decide what is useful and what is not. That choice disappeared before. Everything seemed relentless like a tsunami. Now we realise it was not. We can see things are reversible."
Bruno Latour (2020)[7]

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4   Karuri-Sebina, G. and Hichert, T. (2020) Resilient Futures in the Making: Applying Futures Literacy for Responding to Radical Uncertainty, University of Stellenbosch's Centre for Complex System in Transition (CCT) Webinar, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcPXmVLEGHE

5   *Ibid.*

6   UNDP (2020) UNDP Future of Development High Level Strategy Lab: Futures and Complexity, https://futureofdevelopment.undp.org/content/fod/en/home/our-products/undp-future-of-development-high-level-strategy-lab-futures-and-complexity.html

7   Watts, J. (2020) Bruno Latour: 'This is a global catastrophe that has come from within', The Observer, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/bruno-latour-coronavirus-gaia-hypothesis-climate-crisis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Global events in 2020 meant it felt like one of the 'whirliest', disruptive and turbulent years the world and the civil society sector have ever experienced. A multitude of interconnected tensions and risks have come together to spark a tipping point of change.

This Sector Guide aims to inspire and support civil society strategic thinking and preparedness for future uncertain times. It is based on the Scanning the Horizon civil society futures community's collective experiences and broader management insights from the past 12 months.

For many organisations, it may feel like the most momentous things have already happened. But actually what comes next and the types of strategic decisions organisations make now will be critical to whether they can remain resilient and effective agents of equity in a complex, interconnected and uncertain world.

There is clearly no way of getting strategy-making in uncertain times 'right', but this Guide does strongly suggest many ways in which organisations could get it very wrong.

Lessons from the 'whirliness' of the past year suggest five key strategic pointers for organisations to follow:

1. Focus on the values-driven 'how', rather than the uncertain 'what'

2. Increase diversity to build collective intelligence to 'look around and look ahead'

3. Use this opportunity to innovate, learn, unlearn and set the precedent for the possible

4. Use scenarios (cautiously) across multiple timescales and with the whole organisation

5. Rethink adaptable strategies to embrace emergent change within a long-term view

The **overall message** from this Sector Guide is that the world's 'new normals' are 'never normals' - with always-imperfect information - and what got organisations 'here' won't get them 'there'. The fatal mistake of today's leaders would be responding to tomorrow's problems with yesterday's logic – which includes efficiency and cost-reduction mindsets.

So the **call to action** from this Sector Guide is that **now is exactly the time to invest** in genuine models of inclusion and collaboration, new types of innovation, exploration and discovery skills. We need to rethink strategy to better anticipate and prepare for the uncertainty and 'whirliness' which will continue to emerge in future.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals bringing a longer-term shared ambition and sense of stability to the work of international civil society organisations (ICSOs) and other development actors, global events in 2020 meant it felt like one of the 'whirliest', disruptive and turbulent years ever experienced. This was perhaps a newer sensation in some parts of the world but the latest, more intense version of a turbulent, uncertain, novel and ambiguous (TUNA) 'normal' elsewhere.[8] This wider, new normalisation of experiencing TUNA conditions long felt by many around the world has been called the 'democratization of shocks' by UNESCO foresighters.[9] At the same time, repeated lockdowns and the 'long pandemic' have also messed with perceptions of the passing of time and experience of events.

Among these strange sensations, a multitude of interconnected tensions and risks have also come together to harshly illuminate the systemic nature of inequality, poverty and injustice. They have exposed the sector's limitations in addressing this complexity and sparked a tipping point of change. COVID-19 disruptions and their consequences, along with dynamic racial justice movements, have accelerated calls for long-overdue redress to the power, equity and influence imbalances in the whole post-colonial, 'north-south' interventionist aid system.

8   For this publication, we have adopted this term from the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School, rather than the more commonly used term VUCA – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – which came out of the US Army, as a considered decision to move away from language with military roots.

9   Miller, R. and Kwamou, E. (2020) Shocks, Improvisation and Complexity: An Anticipatory Systems Perspective on Using-the-Future, UNESCO Webinar, Global Foresight Summit, 9 April 2020, https://www.globalforesightsummit.com/talks/riel-miller-kwamou-eva-feukeu-shocks-improvisation-and-complexity-an-anticipatory-systems-perspective-on-using-the-future

ICSOs have had to simultaneously balance:
▸ significant operational shifts for both COVID-19 response and wider resilience of mission,
▸ uncertainty about future resourcing,
▸ demands to change structures and ways of working, and
▸ making sense of their place in any number of TUNA future world scenarios.
However, along with all the challenges of this maelstrom of 'whirliness', significant opportunity to learn from and within it is also emerging. This Guide aims to capture some common insights for and from the international civil society sector.

HOW TO READ THIS SECTOR GUIDE

This Guide shares strategic pointers, wisdom and common threads to inspire, support and strengthen civil society strategic thinking and preparedness for future uncertain times, based on lessons and organisational experiences from the first year of the global pandemic.

This Guide is not telling organisations exactly 'how to', let alone what, strategic decisions to make during TUNA times. There is no 'handbook' or 'manual' for this, as these decisions can only ever be highly contextual, based on both the external influences and an organisation's nature and position.

It is instead a collection of ideas and insights from ICSO collective experiences and broader management insights from the past 12 months. Content is curated from interviews with strategy leads from 14 ICSOs and global movements from the Scanning the Horizon community, and a review of more than 60 management and academic literature resources on complexity and uncertainty, strategy and systems thinking from 2020-21. This literature was identified through a regular online scan and so largely reflects the most mainstream and widely accessible sources which are producing and disseminating this analysis. This means that several references come from global multilateral organisations and private sector management consultancies. The Centre recognises the inherent power dynamic in this related to asymmetry and privilege in resourcing and influence, and promotes using more diverse inputs and analysis to balance this out. This is a gap which the Centre endeavours to close in our own futures work.

Organisations have had very different experiences, influenced particularly by the stage they were at in their strategy processes/cycles, the degree of centralisation in strategy-making and varied leadership focus (strategy vs. operations vs. resources) during the first year of the pandemic. However, from this diversity and turbulence, our five common key strategic pointers for the future have still emerged for the sector in this Guide.

Strategic Pointers for Decision-Making in Complex, Uncertain Times

STRATEGIC POINTER

1.

Focus on the values-driven 'how', rather than the uncertain 'what'

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"We might try to notice how is this centralised form of power showing up in us? In our organisations, which are under economic pressure, in NGOs and businesses, some leaders are making decisions and imposing them in an authoritarian way."
Laura Winn (2020)[10]

"The typical approach – postponing these 'big-bet' decisions to wait for more information – will be far too slow to keep up. In fact, waiting to decide is a decision in itself."
Andrea Alexander et al (2020)[11]

Whilst organisations cannot control external events and disruptions, they do have control over:
▸ how they take decisions about this during times of turbulence, and
▸ how they do things, with both existing programmes and longer-term strategic adaptation.
These 'hows' go beyond operational effectiveness and accountability to something more fundamental about ambition, approaches, direction and priority.

Organisations need to focus on vision and high-level goals, defining the long-term directional 'north stars' to follow, regardless of all possible

scenarios and which make the overall mission concrete for an extended time period. The ownership, resilience and stability of these 'north stars' across the organisation through times of turbulence is best ensured by levels of high and deep participation when they are first set.

Agility also requires **common core values and guiding principles,** which can be kept consistent to confer some certainty. So this means focusing the 'how' on the organisation's fundamental guiding principles – rather than the mechanics - for strategic decision-making. These principles should address questions such as: how we should be in the future, how we can be more diverse, more legitimate and less competitive with local actors, as we move towards our long-term goals? These equity and values dimensions should also reach into and be embodied in **'how' decisions are taken around and through crisis response.**

The shifts which organisations have had to make to COVID-19 show that good ideas, fast pivots and greater risk-taking is not only possible, but can be implemented with agility. These shifts defeat previous arguments that structural changes are too hard or will take a long time. How do organisations now sustain these changes and what else should they still intentionally shift in their bureaucracies to help agility and anticipation in ever-complex times?

The upsurge of localised civil society responses to COVID-19 also inspire more fundamental and diverse discussions around the institutional structures needed for future 'never normals'. Models beyond binary centralised or decentralised options may be needed, such as networked nodes with flattened, but still accountable, access and decision-making structures.

10   Winn, L. (2020) COVID-19 and Systems Change: Some Reflections from the Field, School of Systems Change blog, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/covid-19-and-systems-change-some-reflections-from-the-field-3aab2849f6af

11   Alexander, A., De Smet, A. and Weiss, L. (2020) How to Make Smart Decisions Quickly in Uncertain Times, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-organization-blog/how-to-make-smart-decisions-quickly-in-uncertain-times

1.1 Consider crisis decision-making values-driven 'hows' and strategy for shared security

Even, perhaps especially, in times of significant operational disruption when people don't know *what* is happening or what to do, strategy can provide a shared 'security blanket' and sense of comfort for people to 'hold onto' through uncertain times. And there can still be shared certainty and unity about strategic longer-term 'north stars' (see 1.2).

Short-term crisis thinking and hurried decisions taken with poor information may close down possible futures and create false and over-simplistic dichotomies. It may fundamentally misjudge the nature of change - overestimating its speed, but underestimating the scale. This includes assumptions about 'reopening' after the immediate direct impacts of crisis have eased. This will take different forms and stages in different places for different stakeholders and be a tale of at least **two pandemics**.

In a rush to re-establish a sense of operational 'normality', opportunities to experiment with or model new values and more equitable power dynamics - in terms of who makes decisions and how they are made - may be missed.

Interesting links between strategy and security on an operational level also emerged from the ICSO interviews. Fast-tracking early warning signs about the global nature of the pandemic from the organisational security/risk function to the strategy team helped with early pivoting, preparedness and analysing potential impacts, e.g. at Mercy Corps and World Vision. Security was also an opportunity to strengthen internal scenario planning skills e.g. at Islamic Relief Worldwide (see Strategic Pointer 4 on scenarios).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Many colleagues have struggled to get over the uncertainty, but we can't have a strategy that consists of 'it's all quite uncertain'. And actually, the strategy has given people something to hold onto in times of high flux."
William Garrood, WaterAid (2021)

"It's important to stay calm, keep observing, trust the process - and to continuously connect what we see happening, and our internal messages and communication, to the long-term strategic goals that guide us. COVID felt so big, but this helped everyone see where they could hold on and develop their own stories."
Doris Bäsler, Oxfam International (2021)

"Managers must doggedly question established assumptions, especially the ideas adopted under conditions of extreme uncertainty. The organization cannot treat any assumptions as sacrosanct....should accept that they will be wrong and celebrate learning quickly from experience."
Patrick Finn et al (2020)[12]

"Some of the important questions to ask were: How might COVID impact on our way of working, rather than the human rights 'content' we work on? How and when does a reactive piece of work become a permanent piece of work, and how do we transition that back to the longer-term strategy and out of crisis?"
Danny Vannuchi (2021)

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12   Finn, P., Mysore, M. and Usher, O. (2020) When Nothing is Normal: Managing in Extreme Uncertainty, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/risk/our-insights/when-nothing-is-normal-managing-in-extreme-uncertainty

WORLD YMCA – A LESSON IN REIMAGINATION DESPITE WRONG ASSUMPTIONS

World YMCA's experiences provide a fascinating example of the steadying, unifying and empowering function of strategy in uncertain times, despite using incorrect assumptions about the projected duration of the pandemic.

The movement's longer-term strategy development process was complemented with a short-term one-year COVID-19 Emergency Response Strategy of 'Resilience, Recovery and Reimagination'. This was developed and approved very early in 2020, as the movement was notably quick to acknowledge the coming global nature of the crisis. This strategy anticipated four quarterly phases of the pandemic for 2020:

Crisis phase	Timeframe	World YMCA strategic response
Emerging pandemic	January-March 2020	Monitoring the growing crisis and taking early measures of support or preventive action, ensuring staff and volunteer safety
Spreading pandemic	April-June 2020	RESILIENCE BUILDING – assessing the pandemic's impact on the movement and connecting for knowledge sharing and crisis support
Successful containment	July-September 2020	RECOVERY – evaluating the pandemic's impact on the movement and mobilising it towards recovery
Recovery	September-December 2020	REIMAGINATION – kickstarting a global reflection process on the crisis response and strategic learning across the movement, organising support for most severely affected YMCAs and re-engineering the Vision 2044 (later 2030) process according to the new post-pandemic reality

With the 'long pandemic', these timeframes now seem hugely over-optimistic. This response strategy was first adapted every three months and ultimately replaced by the reshaped 2021-22 strategy for the movement, but it served some fundamental functions. Firstly, it helped support national and local YMCAs which were feeling massive operational disruptions, with a shared movement-wide solidarity and priority strategic action framework to 'manage their shock' and guide conversations about potential next steps to take. Secondly, it catalysed early, diverse and broad engagement in 'reimagining' conversations across the movement at the same time as early recovery thinking – as shown best by the Padare Series (see Strategic Pointer 2 on diversity). This has created a more ambitious, resilient Vision 2030 and already made the whole YMCA movement better prepared for the challenges of the future.

INSIGHTS FROM THE MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

Social sector decision-making in COVID-19 involves 'finding your anchors',[13] clarifying your core beliefs, values and principles to help ground decision-making in uncertain times. Name the values which define your work and which you will firmly hold onto, regardless of change. Surface hidden assumptions, identify what you can influence and your role in the ecosystem, and consider your boundaries: 'talk about what decisions, if they turn out to be incorrect in hindsight, you could live with...and talk explicitly about what trade-offs you can accept'. **Be intentional about applying a clear equity lens** 'both to your external work and to your values, statements, strategies, and internal processes'.

13   Monitor Institute (by Deloitte) (2020) An Event or an Era: Resources for Social Sector Decision-Making in the Context of COVID-19, https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-deloitte-monitor-institute-scenarios-for-the-social-sector.pdf

Set clear values-based principles to steer decision-making[14] using a 'compass for the crisis' with four categories:

▶ principles to protect the mission,
▶ principles to put our people first,
▶ principles to elevate equity, and
▶ principles to focus on financial resilience.

This sets the basis for quick, consistent decisions considering difficult trade-offs and honouring equity commitments. The Centre recently held an informal, anonymous poll of Chief Executives of international CSOs to find their perceptions of how they had balanced these principles to steer decision-making over the past 12 months. They all indicated that putting their people first was 'set and met', protecting the mission and financial resilience also featured highly, but principles around elevating equity were under far more pressure in crisis situations. This contrasts with renewed longer-term strategic emphasis on elevating equity – see Section 1.2.

Although with military roots, the use of 'red teaming' ahead of or during a crisis can systematically stress test and challenge or validate proposed solutions and 'surface pain points'.[15] A mixed group of core team experts and 'cold eyes' should assess management decisions, identify potential weaknesses, risks and bias, or unrealistic assumptions. During times of crisis, **the time horizon 'collapses' from years ahead into immediate short-term action**, but should still explicitly consider staff wellness and the exhausting effects of ambiguity on employees, especially in 'indefinite crisis'.

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14 Waldron, L. and Nayak, P. (2020) A Compass for the Crisis: Nonprofit Decision Making in the COVID-19 Pandemic, Bridgespan Group, https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/organizational-effectiveness/nonprofit-decision-making-in-covid-19-crisis

15 Zenko, M. (2020) Red Teaming in a Crisis: From 'What If' to 'What Now?, McChrystal Group, LinkedIn article, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/red-teaming-crisis-from-what-now-micah-zenko-1c/?articleId=6648237460755218432

Five principles for smart decision-making in uncertain times[16] include: taking a breath, making **critical small choices** which may have longer-term strategic implications, and **setting up a 'nerve centre' for strategic decisions,** a centrally co-ordinated network of cross-functional teams.

1.2   Focus on longer-term values-driven 'hows'

The global nature of the COVID-19 emergency, happening everywhere at the same time rather than nationally or regionally as 'usual', has required coordinating responses and information-sharing on a mega scale. For many organisations, this may have been 'business as usual' on steroids,[17] 'doubling down' on existing areas of work with some COVID-19 adaptations, or identifying and promoting existing internal innovations most relevant in this context (see Strategic Pointer 3 on innovations).

95 Chief Executives of USA-based international CSOs shared their perceptions on current and future change with InterAction in January 2021. A big majority indicated a rethink in strategy: **66% are shifting both organisation programme priorities and operating models in response to COVID-19** knock-on effects.[18] This rethink is rapid enough

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16 Alexander, A., De Smet, A. and Weiss, L. (2020) How to Make Smart Decisions Quickly in Uncertain Times, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-organization-blog/how-to-make-smart-decisions-quickly-in-uncertain-times

17 One example questioning whether this has fundamentally challenged ways of working was the window of travel still used by many international organisations to fly in non-local staff in response to the Beirut Explosion.

18 InterAction (2021) CEO Survey Report: NGO Leaders on Current and Future Change, https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CEO-Survey-Report-May-2021.pdf. Over half of all respondents are developing, executing, or evaluating significant change in the five operational change areas in the survey: (i) diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices, (ii) cultivating agility, (iii) protection against sexual exploitation abuse and harassment, (iv) working differently with local actors and (v) environmental sustainability practices. Of the five, organisations are furthest along with respect to DEI by some way.

that, interestingly, 76% felt their organisation is keeping up (well) with the rate of change in the external operating environment.

Many, perhaps most, of the ICSOs interviewed for this Guide felt that the anti-racism or decolonisation dimensions are really what will 'stick' to fundamentally change long-term strategic thinking. Many organisations are now being both more ambitious and explicit in defining their intent on this in new strategies and vision statements, and developing operational planning detail on how they will advance anti-racist behaviours and approaches. This includes developing concrete performance metrics and progress indicators.

Racial justice and equity issues are definitely not new, and may be part of a '**long values shift**' and wider social transition in some areas of the world.[19] The new *opportunity* for proactive change is perhaps what is more revolutionary. However, mixed reactions across some global ICSOs and movements have shown some parts seeing anti-racism as a US- or Global North-'issue' reflecting or reinforcing existing power dynamics, or being sceptical of the 'sudden' attention on long overdue equity and localisation debates and action.

Organisations need to rethink the design of new future-fit operational models within a fundamental reinterpretation of their value systems and underlying assumptions and worldviews about the role of development and aid in new, shifting paradigms. To remain trusted amongst their constituents, this means rethinking their role in fostering solidarity and ensuring that they are not reinforcing past inequalities. Can CSOs come together to collectively imagine what a future decolonised sector looks like and what transformed, but still relevant,

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19   Curry, A. (2020) This is What Millennial Politics Looks Like, The Next Wave blog, https://thenextwavefutu-res.wordpress.com/2020/06/22/millennial-politics-black-lives-matter-values-generations/

ICSOs would look like within this? Organisations which Southern civil society would feel are aligned in values and which they would still want to support and seek out as partners?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"The issues may not be new, but the opportunity is new. Just because it is a long-term challenge, it is not an excuse for not investing and embarking in the process, while starting with some immediate and well-overdue changes."
Andrés Gómez de la Torre, CARE International (2021)

"We're focusing more on how we're trying to transform systems - rather than getting fixated by the exact end result."
Samantha Albery, Mercy Corps (2021)

"This is a great opportunity to shift power internally much more intentionally – e.g. through changes to governance and decision making, localisation in the truest sense and diversity and inclusion at the highest levels in the organisation – brought about by these external changes."
Rebecca Sorusch, Plan International (2021)

"Getting the work done is more important than that we are we the ones doing it. Really complex issues - like the impact of China in the world - need multifaceted responses. We have to see the opportunities to support, or even to stand back, as much as the opportunities to engage or to lead."
Heather Hutchings, Amnesty International (2021)

"We can be emboldened and ambitious with the energy and momentum from what we see can be done in one year – but we need to push ourselves to take more risks, especially on major partnering to move beyond competition and operate on a different plane across the sector....How can we use this shock to the system as a new shift to mega-collaboration?"
Megan Steinke, Save the Children International (2021)

"There's still some certainty no matter what (human rights) issues you're working on with strategic directions and systemic root causes which cut across themes – such as getting better at influencing corporate actors."
Danny Vannuchi (2021)

ORGANISATIONAL EXPERIENCES

In **CARE International**'s Vision 2030, racial justice and equitable partnerships have specifically made it into the ambition of the organisation it wants to be, and as an area for which it can be held to account. This change in the 'how' requires a deep shift in mindsets and behaviours primarily around power and perceptions of risk when working in partnership. It challenges a 'control' mentality, such as assuming your own operations are lower risk while working in partnership is higher. The events of the past year have actually shown that very different outcomes can be true.

In contrast, there have been some more nuanced COVID-19 content changes on the 'what' of CARE's programmatic impact areas, as its work builds from the learning and progress made in the last strategic period. CARE contributes to lasting impact at scale in poverty

eradication and social justice, with gender equality at the centre of everything it does. Changes include restating sexual and reproductive health to health more broadly, broadening women's economic empowerment to wider complexities of economic justice and working more widely on climate justice.

In 2020, **Greenpeace International** set its campaign plans aside and instead stepped into the moment of disruption to consider both how it should campaign, and on what. Just continuing what was planned was unlikely to bring impact, so instead Greenpeace quickly developed a new programme approach which focused on 'stepping into the opening' presented by COVID-19. It was clear that the current system is broken and the inequalities and failures created by the neoliberal system are more visible than ever, along with the need to create a better world together and build back better. It was a moment to 'make ideas formerly seen as radical, as now quite reasonable'. It was also very clear that the system that created income and health inequalities also created systemic racism. Greenpeace opened up an active and broad dialogue - both internally with all marginalised groups to begin to address its own internal inequalities, and externally, to change the way it engages in the world in greater ally-ship with others to stop racial injustice.

Experiences over the past 12 months have influenced the development of the international theory of change for **Habitat for Humanity International**, with strategic conversations including more 'political' and power dimensions, and ensuring that systemic equity is placed at the heart of its visions for change in the housing and shelter space, wherever it works in the world.

Oxfam International was just about to approve its new 2030 Global Strategic Framework as the global pandemic emerged, and decided

to proceed (rather than reconsider what had emerged from the strategy process) as the overall strategic priorities were considered even more relevant and urgent when looked at through a COVID lens – 'the glove that fits the hand of COVID'. The solid consultative process it had been through in 2019 to develop the strategic framework reinforced the choice of these priorities in existing areas of Oxfam's thought leadership around just economies and new economic models, inequality and divided societies, as well as gender justice, climate justice and accountable governance. It also highlighted the importance of engaging more on digital rights and space – an area that was previously seen as one in which Oxfam may struggle to add value. The new strategy was also designed as a more flexible framework which could respond to specific contexts and emerging changes (see Strategic Pointer 5 on emergence), rather than a more detailed plan with programmatic commitments.

Focus on 'how we work is as important as what we work on', and 'changing from within' are given as much emphasis and space as the 'what' (i.e. areas of thematic focus) in Oxfam's strategy document. A COVID lens is now applied to implementation, but did not trigger any changes to the framework itself. In a 2-year planning process that applied horizon thinking, to ensure greater focus on using limited resources for maximum relevance, impact and resilience, all parts of Oxfam were asked to consider if the work they were proposing was:
(i) reflecting COVID-19 impacts/influences,
(ii) demonstrating commitment to transformative partnering and 'being feminist in everything Oxfam does', and
(iii) focusing on work that was already funded or had a strong pipeline.

Analysis of the two-year plans developed by countries, regions and Affiliates has helped identify a small number of collective 'core priorities' and a number of 'shared priorities' for the coming two financial years. After this, Oxfam will take stock as part of developing a next 'horizon plan' for the following years.

Sightsavers has now added an additional key performance metric - which it will report on externally – on demonstrating good governance, including safeguarding, partnership, diversity, gender leadership, disability and ethics. This formally codifies its organisational ambitions for and commitment to change and transparency on these key issues.

Transparency International's Strategy 2021-30 is being used as the key reference point to also restructure how the movement wants to deliver, and as a structured opportunity to discuss power relations, questioning and rethinking some of the traditional dynamics and opening up new realities. This relates to a number of areas: governance structure, purpose-driven partnerships and 'presence' beyond formal membership models, ways of connecting and collaborating from national to global across the movement, and on resourcing, advocacy and communications and more impact-driven use of evidence and technology.

HOW ANTI-RACISM AND COVID-19 HAVE INFLUENCED WORLD YMCA

Anti-racism has been a critical emerging topic for World YMCA in the aftermath of the George Floyd moment in the USA. African American Chief Executive Officers of YMCA in the USA organised an online event on systemic racism which attracted the biggest ever audience of more than 10,000 members from across the global movement. Combined with the pandemic context, it has completely reshaped the strategic process in the USA and more broadly, and also involved looking back in

history and acknowledging the YMCA's historic role as part of the discriminatory system during racial segregation in the USA.

The World YMCA's proposed Vision 2030 for the whole movement includes four 'Pillars of Impact' (strategic directions): 'Community and Wellbeing First', 'Meaningful Future of Work', 'A Sustainable Planet', and 'A Just World'. For the first time ever, each Pillar of Impact includes commitments for the YMCA movement itself, as well as for community and global impact. 'A Just World', which initially focused more on civic engagement, now includes YMCA commitments to adapt its programmes and practices to become a truly just, diverse and inclusive global movement in the fight against all types of discrimination. It also has an explicit new global impact aim for the YMCA to become a global voice in the fight against discrimination, inequity and systemic racism. And under "A Sustainable Planet", the YMCA will take steps towards becoming a carbon neutral movement, besides community impact goals.

The biggest overall strategy change related to COVID-19 uncertainty has been the shortening of the original vision timeframe from 2044, the 200th anniversary of the YMCA, to 2030 (also to align with the SDGs). The main

Photo: © World YMCA

COVID-19 related content changes have been under the 'Community and Wellbeing First' Pillar of Impact, with a long-term YMCA-wide pledge to ensure that leaders, staff and volunteers at all levels benefit from a culture where organisational and individual wellbeing is a fundamental priority. This stems from the recognition of the huge pressure and stress that has been experienced by people during the pandemic, and codifies a **longer-term commitment to value and safeguard individual and community wellbeing.** The original 'health' aspect at community and global impact levels to support young people has also now been broadened to make mental health and wellbeing more explicit.

Photo: © World YMCA

Recommended recent resources

The McConnell Foundation's (2020) **'COVID-19 Decision-Making: A Social Impact Tool for Social Purpose-driven Organizations'** [20] helps guides plan-ning and sense-making ambitions through strategic considerations. The-se include:

▸ what future generations would want to see from you,

▸ how to live out your organisational purpose,

▸ the current behaviours to demons-trate the future culture you want, and

▸ the diverse perspectives and non-do-minant worldviews you want to consi-der.

It also uses a 'social infrastructure de-cision lens' including aspects like com-munity resilience, future generations, diversity and inclusion and indigenous reconciliation.

Deloitte's (2020) early presentation on **'The Heart of Resilient Leaders-hip: Responding to COVID-19'** hi-ghlighted five qualities to define this: [21]

▸ mission first (to 'stabilise today' and use the opportunity to emerge stron-ger),

▸ speed over elegance (decisive action with courage over perfection),

▸ design from the heart (aligned to organisational purpose and societal obligations),

▸ owning your narrative (to combat misinformation), and

▸ embracing the long view (to antici-pate emergent business models).

Resilient leaders will also need to eva-luate actions within the context of their geography and sector, and leverage the lessons of others experiencing the same crisis conditions.

Peace Direct, Adeso, Alliance for Peacebuilding and Women of Color Advancing Peace, **Security and Con-flict Transformation (WCAPS)'s** (2021) **'Time to Decolonise Aid: Insi-ghts and Lessons from a Global Consultation'** [22] shares strategic re-commendations for ICSOs and others, including:

▸ creating space for change, especially for those with marginalised identities,

▸ encouraging an internal organisatio-nal culture of openness to critique,

▸ investing in indigenous knowledge creation and valuing local knowledge, and

▸ adopting a transition mindset for organisational strategies with clear mi-lestones for the transfer of power and resources to local organisations.

It also shares ideas of what a manifesto for decolonising aid would look like.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Focus on the values-driven 'how', rather than the uncertain 'what' by:

▸ Considering crisis deci-sion-making values-driven 'hows' and strategy for shared security

▸ Focusing on longer-term values-driven 'hows'

20 McConnell Foundation (2020) COVID-19 De-cision-Making: A Social Impact Tool for Social Purpose-Driven Organizations, https://mccon-nellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/McF_SocialDecisionLensPurpose_v4.pdf

21 Deloitte (2020) The Heart of Resilient Leaders-hip Responding to COVID-19, presentation, https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/De-loitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/dttl_the_heart_of_resilient_leadership_COVID19_1.pdf

22 Peace Direct, Adeso, Alliance for Peacebuilding and Women of Color Advancing Peace, Securi-ty and Conflict Transformation (WCAPS) (2021) Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and Lessons from a Global Consultation, https://www.pea-cedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/. This was a three-day online consultation with 158 activists, decision-makers, academics, jour-nalists and practitioners on structural racism and decolonisation within the aid, development and peacebuilding sectors.

Strategic Pointers for Decision-Making

in Complex, Uncertain Times

STRATEGIC POINTER

2.

Increase diversity to build collective intelligence to 'look around and look ahead'

Organisations need to listen to and seek data from a wider set of perspectives outside their normal circles of 'expert' analysis and evidence as a much-needed participatory lever for decision-making, especially in uncertain times. Organisational bias often limits action to what is within their influence or easily solvable. Engaging a broader range of 'data gathering' sources and strategies identifies emerging groups of issues, highlights biases, strengthens collective intelligence and encourages greater collaboration for holistic planning.

This need for pluralism and diversity speaks to engaging with more ideas, insights and analysis within organisations, partners and networks, across the civil society sector and with other sectors. There are big risks in seeking quick convenience or consensus, instead of engaging openly in understanding different views. Organisations need humility about what they do or cannot know, and to move beyond thinking they can find all the answers within their 'walls' or the wider civil society sector. 'Maintaining diversity and redundancy' and 'broaden participation' are also two of seven key principles for building resilience in social-ecological systems.[23]

Organisations also need to be self-critical about **whose knowledge and foresight they are privileging**, questioning their own mental models and the basis on which they make decisions. Critically, this means including people whose vulnerability is directly affected by these events and forces. Leveraging digital technology may offer huge

opportunities to increase grassroots engagement in these discussions, but needs careful, intentional design to ensure genuine inclusion. Organisations also need to move beyond over-reliance on analysis from the Global North, just because sources and institutions from there are better resourced to produce this.

> "The racial injustice conversations raised important questions - for example reflecting about what analysis, events or experiences an organisation values and how it responds to feedback and input depending on where it comes from - Global North or Global South."
> **Danny Vannuchi (2021)**

Organisations also need to challenge power dynamics internally and **fully value their own geographic diversity** and perspectives. Understanding context is critical, as weak signals and what is considered important will vary in different parts of the world at the same time. They should find more dynamic ways to bring national and global contextual understandings, new weak signals intelligence and driver analysis together in regular dialogue, as the shared base for organisational decision-making. This should not just be one exercise for big five or ten-year strategy setting processes, but at least annually, and far more often during periods of particularly rapid change and uncertainty. Organisations should also think about opportunities to repurpose and transform more traditional, vertical planning hierarchies into a more horizontal, distributed network of scanning 'hubs'.

Complexity thinking should bring in a 'radical pluralism perspective' with **diversity in worldviews** – hierarchical, egalitarian, meritocratic - as well as age, ethnicity, culture, gender and language. It may also

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23 Biggs, R., M. Schlüter, M.L. Schoon (eds.) (2015) Principles for Building Resilience: Sustaining Ecosystem Services in Social-Ecological Systems, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, https://www.stockholmresilience.org/publications/publications/2016-02-02-principles-for-building-resilience-sustaining-ecosystem-services-in-social-ecological-systems.html. The seven key principles for building resilience are: maintain diversity and redundancy; manage connectivity; manage slow variables and feedbacks; foster complex adaptive systems thinking; encourage learning; broaden participation; and promote polycentric governance.

involve including representatives of future generations (see Strategic Pointer 5 on long-termism) and other species.[24]

2.1 Deploy more diverse and intentionally inclusive digital strategy-making

Nearly all the organisations we interviewed indicated the opportunities of digital tools to 'break up bureaucracy' and consult much broader groups of both staff and external stakeholders for strategy-making. Given the recent explosion of digital resources and webinars, etc. on scenarios, foresight, potential COVID effects and racial justice in the sector, it is also now easier than ever to identify interesting and more diverse external contributors, reach out quickly and invite them into organisational conversations. Sightsavers noted that the extent and quality of their external stakeholder consultation was restricted by enforced use of digital means compared to usual in-person engagement because of access constraints. So 'digital strategy-making' becoming the norm may enable diversity but not necessarily inclusion, which still needs to be intentional rather than assumed.

It has also not necessarily been easier to put different people at the heart of decision-making and enable ways to do so collaboratively (versus an in-person option), and a strong 'engine room' is still needed to drive the whole process forward. So in some cases, it is a 'broader but looser' participation which has changed. Organisations need to carry on with this consistency and investment in ensuring and widening digital access. It also does not necessarily imply ability to reach

consensus about what realities are, there can be a messy 'mindmeld in the middle' in trying to match up global and national thinking.

2.2 Redefine 'expertise' to be more inclusive and value mindsets over technical knowledge – engage 'foxes' rather than 'hedgehogs'

In complex and uncertain times, **traditional technical experts may well not know more about how things might play out in future**. ICSOs should not necessarily jump first - and definitely not only - to these sources. Looking back to March 2020, 'everyone was wrong on the pandemic's societal impact':[25] experts, such as behavioural and social scientists, were just as inaccurate as laypeople in their predictions about COVID-19's potential societal effects.

In fact, the 'peculiar blindness of experts' means they can be 'comically bad' at predicting the future, and have 'as dismal a track record as ever' in science, economics and politics.[26] Psychologist Philip Tetlock ran a 20-year project in the USA looking at more than 82,000 probability statements about the future on international affairs from 284 expert political forecasters.[27] The only consistent pattern was that 'how you think matters more than what you think.'[28] Single subject specialist 'hedgehogs' - who narrowly knew 'one big thing' - were constantly

24 Van der Bijl, M. (2018) Why Being Smart is Not Enough — The Social Skills and Structures of Tackling Complexity, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/why-being-smart-is-not-enough-the-social-skills-and-structures-of-tackling-complexity-ad6e4689437e

25 Varnum, M., Hutcherson, C. and Grossman, I. (2021) Everyone Was Wrong on the Pandemic's Societal Impact, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/18/pandemic-social-science-predictions-wrong/
26 Epstein, D. (2019) The Peculiar Blindness of Experts, The Atlantic, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/how-to-predict-the-future/588040/
27 Ibid.
28 Brand, S. (2007) Ignore Confident Forecasters, summary of Philip Tetlock's 'Why Foxes Are Better Forecasters Than Hedgehogs', Long Now Foundation Seminar About Long-Term Thinking, https://longnow.org/seminars/02007/jan/26/why-foxes-are-better-forecasters-than-hedgehogs/. Tetlock found that the more self-confident experts were about their predictions, the less accurate they were.

outperformed, especially on long-term predictions, by 'foxes' - who integrated broad knowledge of 'many little things' from a range of disciplines and were comfortable with ambiguity. Hedgehogs get stuck within their "tidy theories of how the world works...through the single lens of their 'specialty'"[29] and fail to notice when they are wrong, whereas foxes learn and adapt their ideas based on actual events and experiences. So it may even be better not to include technical experts who can get boxed in by their existing 'cone of expertise'.[30] With this in mind, **community envisioning is much more effective** when it comes to imagining futures.[31]

Organisations also really need to look at the social skills required to tackle complexity,[32] with **mindsets being more important than knowledge**. The most important related attitudes are comfort with ambiguity, willingness to learn and openness to taking risks. This also speaks to the traditional **over-prioritisation of delivery over discovery skills** which arguably exists in the international civil society sector (see Strategic Pointer 3 on innovation).

Principles for smart decision-making in uncertain times[33] include **rejecting the normal hierarchy** to involve more people, and empowering

leaders who have previously demonstrated **resilience in judgement and character** rather than just the usual suspects.

More fundamentally, redefining who is an expert and defining expertise in a more inclusive way is also an important principle of what it means to decolonise the future.[34] Other key diversity and plurality aspects of this are:
▸ challenging the mental models and unlearning cultural norms that benefit a hierarchical worldview,
▸ creating spaces for marginalised and underrepresented people and voices, and
▸ embracing a plurality of decolonial knowledge, experiences and truth sources.

2.3 Break out of the international civil society sector bubble

Scanning the Horizon's 2020 community convening highlighted that ICSOs have '**taken on each other's narratives**' about the future, converging on the preferable rather than the plausible or probable. ICSOs need to intentionally break out of this echo chamber and their traditional communities, and include other sectors as a priority. They often assume or predict a big role for ICSOs as central actors in future solutions, but civil society organisations rarely feature in this way in the analysis and scenarios from other sectors. Organisations need to listen to others who might challenge their worldviews with opposing perspectives, and seek out unusual suspects and critical friends to help draw attention to their blind spots.

29   Epstein, D. (2019) The Peculiar Blindness of Experts, The Atlantic, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/how-to-predict-the-future/588040/

30   Van der Bijl, M. (2018) Why Being Smart is Not Enough — The Social Skills and Structures of Tackling Complexity, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/why-being-smart-is-not-enough-the-social-skills-and-structures-of-tackling-complexity-ad6e4689437e

31   Gomez, K. (2021) Of Crystal Balls, Pandemics and Resilience: Why Foresight Should Be in the DNA of the Social Change Field, Open Global Rights, https://www.openglobalrights.org/of-crystal-balls-pandemics-and-resilience-why-foresight-should-be-in-the-dna-of-the-social-change-field/

32   Van der Bijl, M. (2018) Why Being Smart is Not Enough — The Social Skills and Structures of Tackling Complexity, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/why-being-smart-is-not-enough-the-social-skills-and-structures-of-tackling-complexity-ad6e4689437e

33   Alexander, A., De Smet, A. and Weiss, L. (2020) How to Make Smart Decisions Quickly in Uncertain Times, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-organization-blog/how-to-make-smart-decisions-quickly-in-uncertain-times

34   Bhagat, A., Krishnan, A., Parida, T., Parikh, T., Batyne, N., Pan, W. and the Diaspora Futures Collective (2021) What Does It Mean to Decolonize the Future?, https://medium.com/diaspora-futures-collective/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-the-future-98baf6c294a7

Within a wider environment of growing misinformation, filtering appropriate information and analysis from (not too narrow a pool of) trusted sources may also require significant extra effort. ICSOs can continue to draw on different futures and management analysis from the private sector, academia and global organisations like the World Economic Forum, World Bank and OECD, but not to the exclusion of other complementary sources.

ORGANISATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Mercy Corps played with rapid storytelling exercises to help people brainstorm the potential implications of COVID-19, and every team - country, technical and support function - produced an analysis from their perspective. Its decentralised structure enabled strong signals scanning from country teams - for instance, around mis- and dis-information, hate speech and stigma - to be picked up and shared around the organisation.

A broad group from across **Plan International** have been involved in the recent global strategy refresh, with a core group of 50 people working across eight themes to share ideas. Plan has also been able to do much more regular digital engagement with staff compared to previous processes, especially to test out and get feedback on different options and recommendations. However, this did generate a large database of comments which still had to be manually worked through and analysed by the strategy team.

World YMCA seized the opportunity in the crisis to reset and reimagine the future of the movement - and the world - in the face of COVID-19, using a highly participatory process. Between July and August 2020, 185 YMCA staff and volunteers from local, regional, and national YMCAs – representing 56 countries from Albania to Zimbabwe - convened online to discuss ideas to help YMCAs navigate crisis in the short term, while planning for resilience, relevance and adaptability in the long term.[35] These global virtual roundtables were digital versions of traditional Zimbabwean Padares, special meeting forums to share wisdom and counsel on community problems, promoting equity of ideas and participants, typically held under a tree. These allowed inclusive global reflection and **'reimagination' about the future of the movement, as much as considering recovery**, right as the turbulence of the pandemic was being felt at its fullest. This process has helped provide a strong sense of the overall direction for the movement's 'North Star' destination, its vision for the world in 2030, and been hugely influential in shaping its four main 'Pillars of Impact' (strategic directions). The conclusions and learnings from the Padare series have been written up for the movement as a Handbook: 'Becoming an 'Adaptive YMCA' for the 21st Century'. World YMCA has also shared design and facilitation resources for the sessions and visual outcomes of the sensemaking sessions.

35 The three big questions explored were:
▸ How can YMCA evolve as a trusted partner for young people, building their resilience in the face of global crisis?,
▸ How can YMCA build a sustainable economic and financial recovery from this crisis?, and
▸ How can YMCA become an 'adaptive' organisation, moving with the times and the needs?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"We need to engage different perspectives, and envision the future collectively, so that it is not a vision that has been uniquely produced by people in positions of power, who can write the future from their dominant perspective…How might we explore multiple desirable futures so the adaptive pathways from this crisis lead us towards a future founded on multiple values?"
Laura Winn (2020)[36]

"Assume that more is happening than we see, but that what happens is less familiar than we imagine…leave space around the margins… don't dismiss things because they don't fit a particular story. Listen more and be skeptical about standard sources."
Laurence Cox (2020)[37]

"The benefit of the conversation may lie elsewhere: not so much finding out new stuff, but rediscovering what was always there, but had somehow been lost from our understanding."
Duncan Green (2020)[38]

"At busy times, it can be really difficult to look beyond your own 'family' and the 'other families' but you have to include and engage with the non-usual suspects to know what is the world beyond."
Andrés Gómez de la Torre, CARE International (2021)

"The types of conversation and who we have in the room has changed dramatically, with better diversity and inclusion of more people in different places."
Samantha Albery, Mercy Corps (2021)

"We have seen an organic coming together internally in this connective space which has shown we can push through the pain of our 'siloedness' and take more of a fabric approach in our programming, advocacy, resourcing and partnering."
Megan Steinke, Save the Children International (2021)

"You need to have the courage to make yourselves vulnerable and speak to people you don't usually speak to and who will disagree with you, rather than those who we already know are 'in our box'. This gives you more 'snippets' about change that might be on the horizon, and these snippets can be the most important thing to pay attention to. For instance, one of our global scenarios referenced the possibility of climate change leading to the emergence of new viruses leading to a global pandemic, increased inequality, more civic space restrictions and the importance of digital spaces…."
Doris Bäsler, Oxfam International (2021)

36   Winn, L. (2020) COVID-19 and Systems Change: Some Reflections from the Field', School of Systems Change blog, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/covid-19-and-systems-change-some-reflections-from-the-field-3aab2849f6af

37   Green, D. (2020) What are We Seeing so Far on Emergent Agency in COVID? Top Insights, plus Next Steps, From Poverty to Power blog, https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/what-are-we-seeing-so-far-on-emergent-agency-in-covid-top-insights-plus-next-steps/

38   *Ibid.*

Recommended recent resources

3 online methods to digitally diversify futures thinking in your organisation:

The Institute for the Future (2020)'s '[After the Pandemic: A Toolkit for Transformation](#)'[39] will need adapting for non-USA contexts, but is a card-based game designed to engage groups remotely in action-oriented conversations about building post-pandemic futures. It maps four post-pandemic scenarios and seven big system failures to set the scene, before participants game with three decks of 'data-signal-action' cards for each system failure. This prompts 'response, reckoning and reinvention' conversations to build an action roadmap towards their preferred future. The facilitation guide supports either rapid or in-depth thinking.

The International Women's Development Agency (IWDA)'s (2020) '[Imagining Feminist Futures After COVID-19](#)'[40] participatory online workshop methodology engages diverse audiences in conversations on how the COVID-19 crisis is changing future trajectories for feminist social change towards 2030. It is highly accessible and does not require previous knowledge or experience in running futures thinking exercises. The clear facilitation guidance and Miro 'cheat sheet' for a virtual session documents outcomes for wider sharing.

Sitra's (2021) '[Futures Frequency](#)'[41] is a three-hour workshop method for building alternative futures with groups of 8–20 people brand new to futures-oriented thinking. It inspires them to think about positive and preferred futures and how to act towards them, drawing on megatrends, weak signals and other anticipatory innovation methods for context and depth. It can also be used online, with clear facilitation guidance, online presentations and a Miro workshop template.

39   Institute for the Future (2020) After the Pandemic: A Toolkit for Transformation, https://www.iftf.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/ourwork/IFTF_After_the_Pandemic_Complete_Toolkit.pdf

40   International Women's Development Agency (2020) Imagining Feminist Futures After COVID-19: Facilitator's Guide, https://iwda.org.au/feminist-futures/

41   Poussa, L., Lähdemäki-Pekkinen, J., Ikäheimo, H.-P. and Dufva, M, (2021) Futures Frequency - Workshop Facilitator's Handbook: A Workshop Method for Building Alternative Futures, Sitra, https://www.sitra.fi/en/publications/futures-frequency-workshop-facilitators-handbook/

3 accessible guides to democ-ratise and 'demystify' futures thinking and foresight practice:

JustLabs' (2021) 'Guide to Foresight in the Social Change Field'[42] is one of the most accessible efforts to clearly introduce and explain futures thinking for social change practitioners. It has been written thinking of staff and activists who are under stress and working in volatile contexts and find it hard to make time and mental space to engage in futures thinking. It helps them to identify easy, manageable steps to enter into these new kinds of conversation to empower their work.

The RSA's (2020) 'A Stitch in Time: Realising the Value of Futures and Foresight',[43] by generalists for generalists, introduces the value of futures approaches for creative problem-solving on complex, uncertain and long-term social change. Strategic recommendations include: establishing a 'chief foresight officer role' with responsibility for the long-term impact of an organisation, developing incentives, reporting structure and a code of ethics to prioritise longer-term, sustainable practice over short-term action, and connecting to other organisations actively working on this.

Save the Children UK and the School of International Futures (SOIF)'s (2019) 'The Future Is Ours: Strategic Foresight toolkit – Making Better Decisions'[44] includes 12 widely-used strategic foresight techniques they have successfully adapted for their own and partner use. The tools can be used separately or together to help organisations explore drivers of change, visualise alternative future scenarios and how to prepare for and influence the future. It systematically walks you through the tools, why and when you would use each one, and includes helpful facilitation notes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Increase diversity to build collective intelligence to 'look around and look ahead' by:
▸ Deploying more diverse and intentionally inclusive digital strategy-making
▸ Redefining 'expertise' to be more inclusive and value mindsets over technical knowledge – engage 'foxes' rather than 'hedgehogs'
▸ Breaking out of the international civil society sector bubble

42 Gomez, K. (2021) JustLabs Guide to Foresight in the Social Change Field, JustLabs, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5adfc952ec4eb743393ebbbd/t/6075a1b4d148dc7bf6173c0f/1618321870456/ForesightGuide2021-JustLabs-Links_compressed+%2814MB%29.pdf

43 Shallowe, A., Szymczyk, A., Firebrace, E., Burbidge, I. and Morrison, J. (2020) A Stitch in Time: Realising the Value of Futures and Foresight, RSA, https://www.thersa.org/reports/futures-thinking-foresight

44 Save the Children UK and School of International Futures (2019) The Future Is Ours: Strategic Foresight Toolkit – Making Better Decisions, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/16327/pdf/strategic_foresight_toolkit_online.pdf
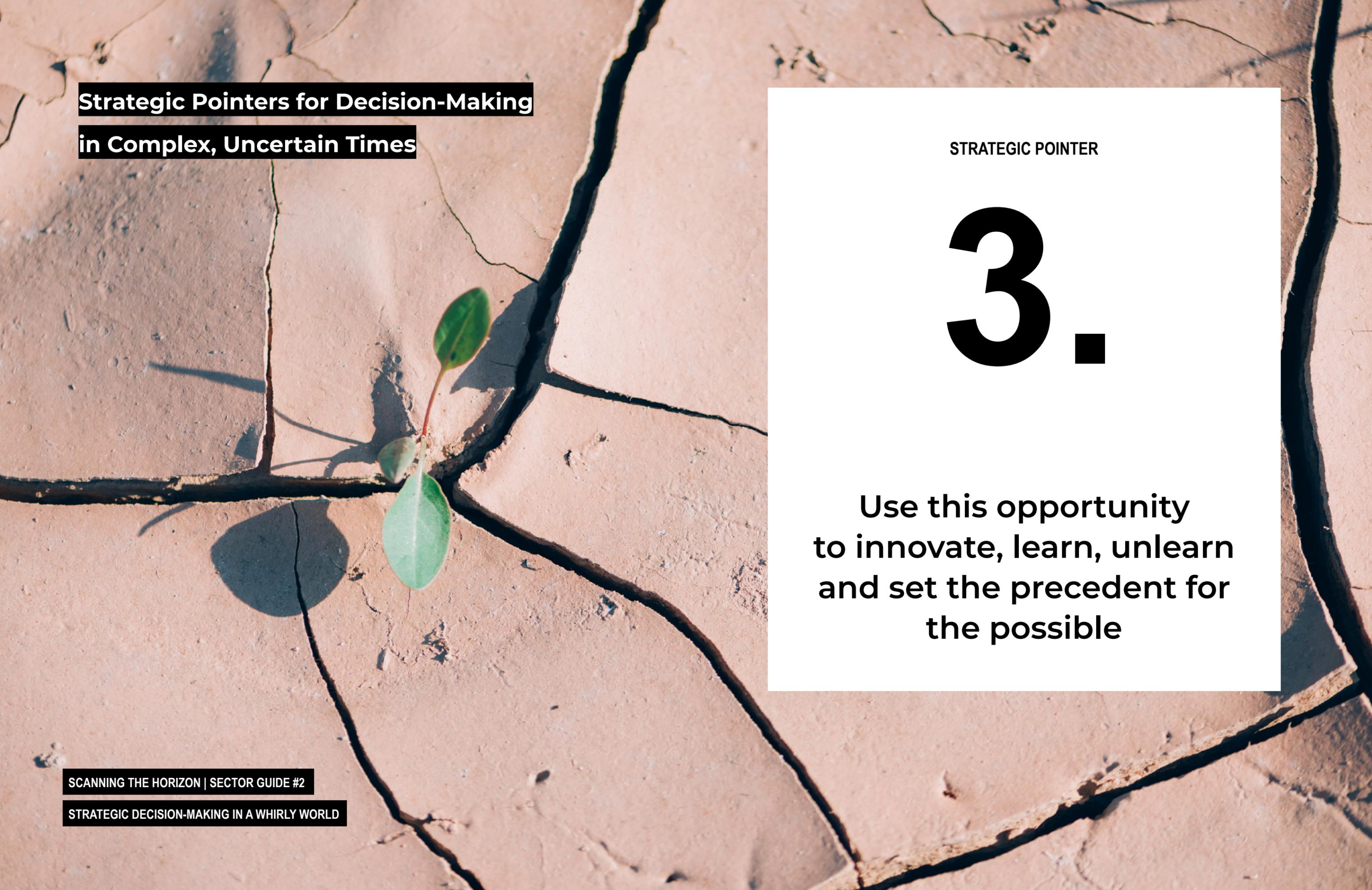
Strategic Pointers for Decision-Making in Complex, Uncertain Times

STRATEGIC POINTER

3.

Use this opportunity to innovate, learn, unlearn and set the precedent for the possible

COVID-19 has highlighted the urgent need for organisations to emphasise innovation as much as operations. Many ICSOs identified the opportunity in the pandemic to 'go where you know you can deliver' by better identifying, leveraging and **repurposing relevant existing innovation** within the organisation. Innovation at local and national innovation is now being actively sought out, recognised and revalued by regional and 'headquarters' offices in ways which may not have happened pre-pandemic. It has also been a short-term opportunity to test and learn about what is possible on longer-term strategic changes and 'crisis-driven experiments', which could be developed into more systematic ways of working ready for tomorrow's 'never normals'.

Organisations now need to look more carefully at how they can sustain this energy to test new things, and take more strategic approaches to support and equip their people with future-fit skills, attitudes and behaviours that can help make this transition.

The pandemic has also been a transformative opportunity for organisations to finally **realise the importance of digital innovation**, with deliberate design for diversity and inclusion. Many strategists expressed frustration about this overdue change - 'why did it take this crisis, and this long?' The new timeframes and potential for digital re-invention and the necessary underlying people and process shifts can clearly be rapid. Almost every organisation shared at least one example of how this 'forced' innovation has led to effective improvements in digital fundraising, research and stakeholder engagement. This happened within a few months, often with existing or easy-to-adopt technologies, and shows the long overdue potential for reimagining how to do things.

Futures thinking and trends analysis needs to have a stronger role in existing innovation strategy in organisations (including with rapid digital developments). And now there is this clear evidence – as common experiential learning – setting the precedent that organisational behaviours can change very quickly. This should silence naysayers and challenge future doubt and internal resistance about the possibilities for wide and rapid change. It can happen, because it did, so now what can happen when organisations decide to shift from the 'inside out', as much as being forced from the 'outside in'?

Five main strategic learning opportunities emerge from the management literature, as priority areas where organisations need to be far more intentional and explicit:

1. Reflect on the 'emergency decisions' which were made and practices used (in different periods), to learn about organisational priorities and preferences during these unprecedented times.
2. Support individual learning journeys around navigating uncertainty and improving innovation skills, especially during 'quieter times'.
3. Use the opportunity to learn about organisational characteristics of agility and resilience to help build this further in future.
4. Recognise the need for broader selective 'unlearning' and conscious 'exnovation'[45] to phase out what is no longer relevant for future 'never normals'.
5. Identify what - if any - learnings about systems change during, through and from the response, to apply to future efforts.

45 'Exnovation' (or de-implementation) is deconstructing systems, practices and norms that are no longer effective or in line with strategic development. See Junginger, S. and Paulick-Thiel, C. (2020) Systemic We-Construction: Exnovation as a Key to a Common Future, States of Change Learning Festival Webinar, 9 June 2020, Politics for Tomorrow, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT9e56y92PI

A recent poll of global Chief Executives of leading international CSOs convened by the Centre asked which of these five strategic learning opportunities were already happening in or are important for their organisation. Nearly all indicated learning around organisational re-silience and agility, and more than half about systems change. But supporting individual (staff) learning around uncertainty lagged someway behind. This should increasingly be seen and supported as a critical skill set.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"It takes deliberate mindfulness to keep observing...notice subtle cues... see our old and persistent issues with new eyes...[and] keep a lookout on connecting seemingly disconnected dots."
Hodan Abdullahi and Najoua Soudi (UNDP)[46]

"Importantly and pragmatically, innovation is about recombination to new purposes under changing conditions...It may also involve forget-ting prior lessons learned."
Marc Ventresca (2021)[47]

"We need to accept that uncertainty is here to stay, so the question is how do we build an uncertainty-friendly environment that can lead both to organisational resilience and capacity to innovate in an always-changing world? The urgency of this is itself a big learning from the pandemic."
Răzvan-Victor Sassu, World YMCA (2021)

"The rapid creative thinking in response to movement restrictions and remote working has had positive spin-offs like community-based health models which...will now be permanently part of the mix."
Sue Birchmore, World Vision International (2021)

"We need to double down on adaptation and knowledge sharing – in-ternally and externally, and digitally – over the next 18 months + to po-sition ourselves better for the future."
Megan Steinke, Save the Children International (2021)

"When uncertainty is high we need our programmes to be resilient and our actions to be safe to fail. Sometimes the only thing we can know is the immediate next step and we have to be able to take that step, learn from it, and take another small step – to feel our way for-ward rather than taking a high-risk big leap."
Heather Hutchings, Amnesty International (2021)

"The people's vaccine campaign is really energising and inspiring us at the moment...not just showing what we can do acting as a broker but a real positive opportunity with so many different actors coming together. It's one way we've focused on what we can do, rather than the things we can't do anymore."
Doris Bäsler, Oxfam International (2021)

"There can be a disconnect between the centralised, slow-moving 'big machine' way of doing things – even if it steers you to move in the same direction – and the greater nimbleness you need to respond to other lo-cal pressures at play which requires a more transformational approach."
Marlen Mondaca, Save the Children Canada (2021)

46   Abdullahi, H. and Soudi, N. (2020) How Sherlock Holmes Would Have Handled COVID-19', apolitical.co
       blog, UNDP, https://apolitical.co/en/solution_article/systems-thinking-covid-19-economy
47   Ventresca, M. (2021) Four Innovation Precepts for Leaders in the 'Long Now', Oxford Answers blog, https://
       www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/oxford-answers/four-innovation-precepts-leaders-long-now

INSIGHTS FROM THE MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

3.1 Intentionally learn and reflect about emergency decisions and practices

Generating opportunities for learning and reflection about the effects of decisions and rapid-response actions taken is a 'must have' in a time of crisis,[48] requiring a very intentional approach. This means 'creating spaces to think, slowing down, being mindful and paying attention, creating new patterns of thinking, surfacing alternative interpretations, and creating new theories of action.' Cycles of reflection should happen within three specific periods - days and weeks (short-term), a few months (intermediate-term) and when the crisis abates (longer-term), as the different types of question you need to answer will change and evolve, through reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-for-action.[49] 'This may mean putting aside some habits or expectations, such as feeling the need to be right or having the right answers; proving that something works; holding information/not sharing; and making sure that everything we produce looks polished, is perfect, or is proprietary'.[50]

3.2 Support individual learning journeys for navigating uncertainty and improving innovation

Many staff already navigate complexity on a daily basis even in 'quieter' times, and should be allowed more space to **surface and understand these existing 'uncertainty' skills**, and supported with practical tools to do so, including on an emotional level (e.g. the Uncertain Times

Tools).[51] **Staff should also be allowed 'individual destiny' to shape their own digital learning journeys**,[52] and engage their curiosity and motivation in moving from 'basic survival skills' to new ones which better equip them for an uncertain future.

More broadly, **valuing and building discovery over or before delivery skills**[53] will allow individuals to create opportunity and persist through uncertainty.

> Research shows that innovators and entrepreneurs are no more risk-taking than average, but much more comfortable making decisions during uncertain times.

Decoupling ideas of innovation capacity from those of any built-in risk appetite, and linking it more explicitly to skills around navigating uncertainty - which can be learned and practiced - is far more empowering.[54] Relationships and social skills[55] are also as important to how to think about innovation in complex situations, and organisations should encourage the ongoing networking and broadening of relationships, even without a specific intentional learning purpose.

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48 Preskill, H and Cook, J. (2020) Learning in a Time of Crisis, FSG, https://www.fsg.org/blog/learning-time-crisis

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 Robinson, C. and Saltmarshe, E. (2020) Uncertain Times: Tools to Navigate Uncertain Times, https://cassie-robinson.medium.com/the-uncertain-times-tools-13a882716e

52 Talwar, R. (2020) Fast Future Keynote Theatre - Navigating Deep Disruption, Webinar, 12 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_UVAJAWtV4&feature=youtu.be,

53 Saxton, T. (2020) To Be a Great Innovator, Learn to Embrace and Thrive in Uncertainty, The Conversation blog, https://theconversation.com/to-be-a-great-innovator-learn-to-embrace-and-thrive-in-uncertainty-143876

54 *Ibid.*

55 Van der Bijl, M. (2018) Why Being Smart is Not Enough — The Social Skills and Structures of Tackling Complexity, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/why-being-smart-is-not-enough-the-social-skills-and-structures-of-tackling-complexity-ad6e4689437e

3.3 Use the opportunity to learn about agility and resilience

'Spur-of-the-moment' agility is fragile, and innovation sporadic[56] rather than systematic, but it does provide an opportunity to 'begin spreading the principles of agile throughout the organization, even to the parts of it that must remain bureaucratic'. Five characteristics of resilient organisations[57] to help build future agility out of the crisis are:

(i)   establish a common purpose and clear communications,
(ii)   set up rapid decision-making structures to reallocate resources to new priorities,
(iii) create networks of local teams with clear, accountable roles,
(iv)   develop an empowering culture allows people to use their entrepreneurial drive, and
(v)   provide them with the technology they need.

Of 95 Chief Executives of USA based international CSOs surveyed in January 2021 by InterAction, 65% are either already developing, executing, or evaluating significant change in 'cultivating agility'.[58] 46% of executives felt their organisation is currently vulnerable to significant business model disruption, and 61% are either developing, executing, or evaluating significant change in business model, mergers and acquisitions and social enterprise. As a private sector comparison, McKinsey's 2021 survey of 300 senior executives in Europe[59] found

roughly half reported COVID-19 exposed 'strategic resilience' weaknesses in the ability of their companies' business model and competitive position to resist disruption. Business-model innovation[60] was by far the most important strategic lever for organisations which became stronger during the pandemic.

Resilience, from socio-ecological systems thinking, is not just about the capacity to absorb, adapt to or recover from change, but also 'the capacity to use shocks and disturbances to spur renewal and innovative thinking'.[61] This additional emphasis on engaging in 'transformative activities to capitalize on disruptive surprises that potentially threaten organization survival', and developing new capacities, makes resilience distinct from organisational agility.[62] So the longer-term balance between standard operations and innovation should also be reset for future resilience.

> **Pushing for greater efficiency can reduce organisational resilience.**

Decision-makers must bear this in mind when responding to pandemic-induced income uncertainty with cost-cutting mindsets. Human systems and organisations need to learn from the way in which ecological systems balance efficiency and resilience.[63]

56   Rigby, D. K., Elk, E. and Berez, S. (2020) Develop Agility That Outlasts the Pandemic, Harvard Business Review, https://hbr.org/2020/05/develop-agility-that-outlasts-the-pandemic

57   Although focused on UK organisations, it is more broadly applicable.

58   InterAction (2021) CEO Survey Report: NGO Leaders on Current and Future Change, https://www.interaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CEO-Survey-Report-May-2021.pdf. Each step further along the change spectrum for 'cultivating agility' is associated with a 5% increase in the leader's perception of their organisational effectiveness.

59   Diedrich, D., Northcote, N., Röder, T., and Sauer-Sidor, K. (2021) Strategic Resilience During the COVID-19 Crisis, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/strategic-resilience-during-the-covid-19-crisis

60   The five key areas of business model innovation were: new digital experiences, products, and services in response to changes in customer behaviors and needs; new partnerships - both within and outside of the industry; supply-chain and operating-model adjustments to manage risk; sales-model changes and faster product development through more rapid iteration.

61   Moberg, F. and Simonsen, S.H. (2011) What is Resilience? An Introduction to Social-Ecological Research, Stockholm Resilience Centre, https://www.stockholmresilience.org/download/18.10119fc11455d3c-557d6d21/1459560242299/SU_SRC_whatisresilience_sidaApril2014.pdf

62   Lengnick-Hall, C. A., Beck, T. E., and Lengnick-Hall, M. L. (2011) Developing a Capacity for Organizational Resilience Through Strategic Human Resource Management, Human Resource Management Review, 21(3), 243-255

63   Lietaer, B., Ulanowicz, R.E., Goerner, S.J. and McLaren, N. (2010) Is Our Monetary Structure a Systemic Cause for Financial Instability? Evidence and Remedies from Nature, Journal of Futures Studies, 14(3), 89-108, https://www.bcb.gov.br/pgbcb/122011/revista_pgbc_vol5_num2.pdf#page=103

Efficient systems – such as "just-in-time" supply chains - have many dependencies and are tightly coupled, so cannot make corrections in times of crisis and are likely to fail. These systems have only worked where there are abundant resources and where they have 'significant control over their operating environments'.[64] Well-functioning ecological systems therefore keep both efficiency and resilience in balance, but prioritise resilience.

3.4 Recognise the need for selective unlearning and conscious 'exnovation'

COVID has provided a unique opportunity – and in fact forced - most organisations to 'selectively forget and unlearn'[65] old legacy habits and dysfunctional practices which are no longer relevant. This is a critical aspect of building success which is typically under-pursued compared to new business models and improving existing business practices. It involves:
▸ uncovering and questioning established assumptions,
▸ establishing the urgency to break patterns,
▸ creating space and time for experimentation, and
▸ encouraging feedback across all levels of an organisation.

Getting leaders to accept that "what got you here won't get you there"[66] involves asking more questions – 'trading cleverness for

curiosity', being humble about both unlearning and learning, and getting comfortable with the discomfort of change. In times of great disruption, the need to 'unlearn' may well speed up to much shorter timeframes of weeks or months,[67] as data on the situation rapidly changes.

Recent behavioural science research shows that **people systematically try and add new elements rather than take things** away when it comes to problem-solving.[68] 'Exnovation' (or de-implementation) is also underappreciated as necessary counterbalance to innovation,[69] deconstructing systems, practices and norms that are no longer effective or in line with strategic development. It involves actively phasing out and systematically 'building down' outdated structures and attitudes, and is a deliberate process of 'collaborative deconstruction' requiring collective intelligence and empathy. This should be seen as an equally 'thriving' and positive force creating space for desirable new things and configurations to break through.[70] Ackerman (2020)'s 'Novation Dynamic' model from healthcare innovation[71] stresses the need to leverage all three components of innovation, exnovation and renovation (incrementally improving or adapting what already exists) in turbulent times.

64 Ibid.
65 Govindarajan,V., Srivastava A., Grisold, T., and Klammer, A. (2020) COVID-Imposed Opportunity to Selectively Unlearn Past Practices, California Management Review Insight Note, https://cmr.berkeley.edu/2020/10/selective-unlearning/
66 Warrell, M. (2020) Learn, Unlearn & Relearn: What Got You Here Won't Get You There, Forbes blog, https://www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2020/06/12/learn-unlearn--relearn-what-got-you-here-wont-get-you-there/?sh=5f00c60020a6

67 Ramachandran, N. (2020) There is Plenty for Us to Unlearn and Relearn as We Tackle COVID-19, Mint.com opinion piece, https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/there-is-plenty-for-us-to-unlearn-and-relearn-as-we-tackle-covid-19-11602510808343.html
68 Adams, G.S., Converse, B.A., Hales, A.H. et al (2021), People Systematically Overlook Subtractive Changes, Nature, 592, 258–261, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03380-y
69 Junginger, S. and Paulick-Thiel, C. (2020) Systemic We-Construction: Exnovation as a Key to a Common Future, States of Change Learning Festival Webinar, 9 June 2020, Politics for Tomorrow, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT9e56y92PI
70 Ibid.
71 Ackerman, M. (2020) #COVID-19: There is No Better Time for #Innovation, LinkedIn article, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/covid-19-better-time-innovation-michael-ackerman/

3.5 Identify any relevant learnings about systems change from the response

Are there any practical lessons for organisations to learn about systems change during, through and from the response? What are they and (how) can you apply them to future efforts? There has been more enthusiasm around changing complex systems, within and beyond development, during the past 12-18 months. However, 'while the idea of systems change is clear, the practice is not'[72] and social change organisations were already finding it difficult to describe either the systems themselves or the change they are aiming to achieve. So it is a challenge to define and evaluate both 'results' and key performance or progress indicators for systems change efforts.

This also means a wider lack of 'consensus about what working from a genuine system perspective should look like'.[73] Although lessons from history suggest organisations should focus - rather than bold new initiatives - on avoiding the previous 'ineffective mindsets and engineering approaches' which stop them from effectively adopting systems perspectives. So in other words, prioritise strategic learning about what 'pathological behaviour' to unlearn and 'exnovate' in order to make way for what is needed to become effective systems changers. Although practitioners may even already be 'beating systems change

to death'[74] because it is too hard to measure, 'fraught at best' to orchestrate, they are actually mostly using - rather than changing - systems, get overwhelmed by 'root causes' which can be intractable, and change efforts can't be replicated anyway.

> Despite this lack of clarity, let alone consensus, this interest is at least helping to start a conversation - with resources, models and tools – to inform how organisations engage with problems, realities, and communities, and the questions to ask themselves during times of change.

The School of System Change has highlighted learning, in COVID-19 analysis,[75] for four of its ten systemic practices:[76] working across multiple timescales; engaging multiple perspectives; experimenting, struggling, failing and learning; and, tuning in to power.[77] Insights from UNDP's recent experiments with different approaches to transform complex systems include overlapping both top-down and bottom-up approaches and assumptions, and adopting different ways of 'listening to, seeing and interacting with the system' to learn more about it and its 'power-political underpinnings'.[78]

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72 Cabaj. M (2019) Evaluating Systems Change Results: An Inquiry Framework, Tamarack Institute https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publications/Paper%20Evaluating%20Systems%20Change%20Results%20Mark%20Cabaj.pdf. This is one model aiming to give clarity on three broad types of results for any social system change effort: (i) strategic learning (the only outcome within control), (ii) changes in drivers of system behaviour, or changes in behaviour of system actors or the overall system itself, and (iii) mission outcomes.

73 Seelos, C., Farley S. and Rose, A.L. (2021) The 'Thou Shalt Nots' of Systems Change, Stanford Social Innovation Review, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_thou_shalt_nots_of_systems_change

74 Starr, K. (2021) We're Beating Systems Change to Death, Stanford Social Innovation Review, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/were_beating_systems_change_to_death

75 Winn, L. (2020) COVID-19 and Systems Change: Some Reflections from the Field, School of Systems Change blog, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/covid-19-and-systems-change-some-reflections-from-the-field-3aab2849f6af

76 Birney, A. (2019) Systems Practices — What Might These Be?, School of Systems Change, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/systems-practices-what-might-these-be-ff998d6b15a3

77 Winn, L. (2020) COVID-19 and Systems Change: Some Reflections from the Field, School of Systems Change blog, https://medium.com/school-of-system-change/covid-19-and-systems-change-some-reflections-from-the-field-3aab2849f6af

78 Haldrup, S. V. (2021) We Are Experimenting with Different Approaches to Systems Transformation — Here are Five Insights, UNDP Innovation blog, https://medium.com/@undp.innovation/we-have-experimented-with-different-approaches-to-systems-transformation-here-are-five-insights-ae545a2339b1

ORGANISATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Amnesty International made a concerted effort to look for the pockets of innovation existing in the movement with particular relevance to the crisis context of the global pandemic, and where it could 'double down' existing expertise, resources and efforts, such as scaling up a campaign around healthworkers, the right to work and the right to health. Amnesty also decided to adopt an interim two-year COVID-19 Response Strategy for 2020-21 to better understand how it might need to pivot in the context of COVID-19, while still developing its new global strategic framework. The interim strategy emphasised the need to work more on systemic inequality issues more outside of Amnesty's traditional 'comfort zone' - like focusing on social and economic rights, such as right to work and right to health. It was a learning opportunity to 'road test' and socialise working on these longer-term strategic changes, with an agile monitoring and evaluation framework to learn about progress

over the first six months, and identify any needed adjustments. This has made the ambitions in the draft global strategic framework seem less radical and more achievable in the movement, and changed the nature of the conversations around it. Piloting new ways of working in the pandemic has also meant looking at internal flexibility. For instance, the China Abroad project needed to work entirely remotely with a locally-recruited research team in the Philippines, and had to bridge the fluid reality of a grassroots community research approach with Amnesty's tight internal quality assurance processes.

Habitat for Humanity International looked intentionally at what aspects of necessary 'future state' structural change it could use this disruptive opportunity to accelerate further, including staff reduction, network footprint and revenue streams, and closer co-ordination across regions. Some of these changes advanced over a two-month rather than two-year period. It has also looked strategically at some of the organisational pivots it made over the last year, such as advocacy learnings and supporter engagement models, and has already engaged its board in conversations around what should 'stick' looking out ten years from now into the future.

Mercy Corps has been on a long multi-year journey to build adaptive management and agile decision-making capacity into its work, which has influenced many processes in the organisation, including the way it recruits staff. This meant its teams were well placed to continue programming in their contexts, and COVID-19 was incorporated as just one more element of a multi-crisis response, including the locust swarms in East Africa. There was also strong internal early learning shared across the organisation from its teams in Asia responding to COVID-19, and also drawing from previous experience with the Ebola response in West Africa.

67

Plan International ran its first ever global fundraising campaign uniting all its national organisations through digital channels, with its COVID-19 pandemic appeal for girls' equality, an example of whole-movement working previously not thought possible. Alongside its global strategy refresh, Plan is also focusing on innovation workshops and inviting in non-peer companies and organisations - recognising there are limits to what new things ICSOs can learn from each other – with a strong track record on Plan's selected innovation themes, like brand identity or operational efficiencies.

Save the Children International carried out primary research with 40,000 children and families across 46 countries to hear their real-time first-hand experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, to inform its programming and advocacy. This relatively large sample size showed what could actually be achieved in research leveraging digital platforms, which might not have been thought possible or attempted in 'normal' times. Save the Children also benefitted significantly from previous investments in strengthening its evidence base, and developing and documenting with peer organisations what works best for health, education and protection of children and families, regardless of context. There was common perception that the pandemic exacerbated many of the challenges already being faced by children and families, and the right things to do did not fundamentally need to change – community case management of childhood illness, child protection in home rather than school settings, distance and digital learning. This meant it was like 'synapse fires across the movement' for leveraging knowledge management and peer support across countries – for instance, Somalian colleagues were able to provide support and advice to American colleagues on cash-based programming in Appalachia.

COVID-19 also accelerated innovative collaboration amongst the Big Six alliance of the world's largest youth movements, triggering joint discussions around the ways in which they will need to remain relevant to young people in a post-pandemic world. This resulted in a joint policy position paper with key policy recommendations to support 'Young People Championing Post-Pandemic Futures'. This work in turn attracted the attention of the World Health Organization and United Nations Foundation, leading to the launch of the "Global Youth Mobilization for Generation Disrupted" initiative to invest and scale-up youth-led solutions and engagement for the young generation severely impacted by COVID-19. This was unprecedented speed for the Big Six's global efforts to unify advocacy positions and speak with a single voice on the key issues young people will face in future.

Recommended recent resources

Cynefin Centre's and EC Joint Research Centre's (2021) 'Managing Complexity (and Chaos) in Times of Crisis: A Field Guide for Decision Makers Inspired by the Cynefin Framework'[79] supports decision-makers with a straightforward four-step process to:
(i) assess where they are and initiate a response,
(ii) adapt to the new context and pace and start building 'sensing networks' to inform decision-making,
(iii) 'exapt' to leverage existing capability for radical innovation, and ultimately
(iv) transcend the crisis and strengthen resilience.

Pact's (2020) 'Adaptive Management: A Practical Guide to Mitigating Uncertainty and Advancing Evidence-Based Programming'[80] works through how to develop and put into practice the mindsets, resources, processes and leadership behaviours enabling an effective adaptive management system. It guides thinking through both 'chaotic' and 'complex' theories of context, change and action to determine the most effective adaptive management strategy for the degree of uncertainty you face. It then outlines five steps to execute adaptive management and eight tools to apply it in practice.

Graham Teskey and Lavinia Tyrrel's (2021) 'Implementing Adaptive Management: A Front-Line Effort - Is There an Emerging Practice?'[81] summarises the 'state of the debate' and weaknesses in current approaches:
(i) using an over-simplified project cycle,
(ii) focusing adaptive management too much on the 'delivery' phase, and
(iii) confusion in terminology.
It proposes a new framework for politically informed, locally-led and adaptive (PILLAR) responses with a 'reimagined' project cycle, and 15 easy steps to put adaptive management into practice.

Cassie Robinson and Ella Saltmarshe's (2020) 'The Uncertain Times Tools'[82] are sympathetic guides to help people navigate complexity on a day-to-day basis on three levels:
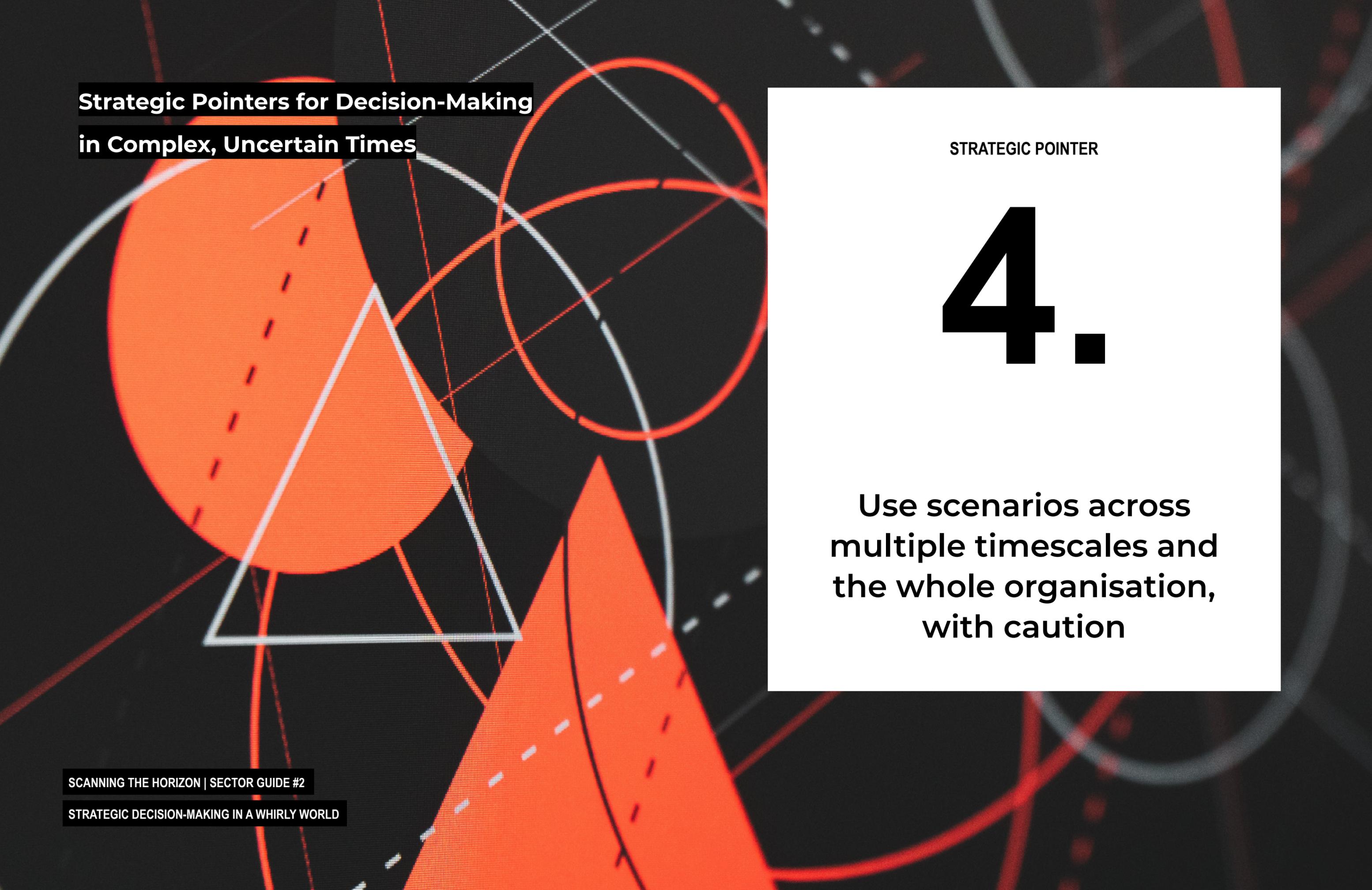(i) emotional qualities which help as companions or obstruct as saboteurs,
(ii) initiating and grounding action ('embark, explore, engage, experiment and earth'), and
(iii) weekly planning and reflection.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Use this opportunity to innovate, learn, unlearn and set the precedent for the possible, by:
▸ Learning and reflecting about emergency decisions and practices
▸ Supporting individual learning journeys for navigating uncertainty and improving innovation
▸ Learning about agility and resilience
▸ Recognising the need for selective unlearning and conscious 'exnovation'
▸ Identifying learnings about systems change from the response

79   Snowden, D. and Rancati, A. (2021) Managing Complexity (and Chaos) in Times of Crisis. A Field Guide for Decision Makers Inspired by the Cynefin Framework, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC123629

80   Byom, K., Ingram, M., Oakley, A. and Serpe, L. (2020) Adaptive Management: A Practical Guide to Mitigating Uncertainty and Advancing Evidence-Based Programming, Pact, https://www.pactworld.org/library/adaptive-management-practical-guide-mitigating-uncertainty-and-advancing-evidence-based

81   Teskey, G. and Tyrrel, L. (2021) Implementing Adaptive Management: A Front-line Effort - Is there an Emerging Practice?, Abt Associates, The Governance & Development Practice Working Paper, https://abtassocgovernance-soapbox.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/abt-associates_adaptive-management_a-frontline-effort_digital-1.pdf

82   Robinson, C. and Saltmarshe, E. (2020) Uncertain Times: Tools to Navigate Uncertain Times, https://www.uncertaintimes.community/

STRATEGIC POINTER

4.

Use scenarios across multiple timescales and the whole organisation, with caution

The past year has seen the use of 'scenarios on steroids' in the civil society and other sectors, to think through both shorter-term financial and operational implications and longer-term preparedness and strategic positioning for post-COVID impacts. Many of these have been happening simultaneously at different levels of an organisation.

Among the organisations interviewed for this Guide, those which employed scenarios found them useful, but others decided against such a structured process because of the speed at which everything was changing. One or two organisations were also able to benefit from pre-existing scenario thinking which had helped them already imagine a degree of pandemic preparedness.

Different organisational experiences included:
▸ running different internal scenario initiatives and marrying together timeframes and outputs from national-to-global levels,
▸ adapting external reference scenarios through an organisation's own lens, and
▸ exposing general capacity and skills gaps in scenario planning, but also using the opportunity to improve this for the future.

Despite these mixed experiences, some common notes of caution still apply:
(i)   be clear about the difference between contingency and scenario planning,
(ii) recognise scenarios as just one tool to help think about - but never predict - the future,
(iii) scenarios are meant to open up rather than limit or 'box in' possibilities, and
(iv) scenarios are only as robust and useful as the diversity of the people involved.

4.1 Scenario planning is different from contingency planning

Contingency planning involves detailed preparatory thinking about how to respond to, manage and mitigate a known risk if it actually happens. Scenario planning is broader, although it can help identify potential future risks or events requiring further contingency planning. Scenario planning is a structured way to imagine multiple potential - and plausible - future contexts to inform current strategic decisions, and also involves 'looking for new opportunities, collaborations and communities'.[83]

4.2 Scenarios are just one of many ways to help think about the future

Scenarios are just one technique from the futures toolbox to challenge assumptions and open out new conversations about what might be possible in future.

These processes are not about eliminating uncertainty or attempting to predict or forecast one more probable outlook for strategic planning.

The aim is not to be 'future proof' for specific eventualities, but 'future savvy' for what organisations may need to respond to, with scenarios as trusted 'early warning' receptors to increase adaptability and resilience in the present for the otherwise unexpected.

Scenarios can show up blind spots, surface and prompt reflection on or unlearning of assumptions, and highlight emerging issues

83   Ramirez, R. and Lang, T. (2020) The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach in the Era of COVID-19, Oxford Answers article https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/oxford-answers/oxford-scenario-planning-approach-era-covid-19

or uncertainties to monitor or find out more about. Organisations should ensure they are short and sweet so people will read them, and use rapid scenario techniques to keep up with changing information and events.

4.3 Scenarios are meant to open up rather than limit or 'box in' possibilities

Organisations should not get entranced by the stories they tell in their own scenarios. Key elements of different scenarios are likely to exist in parallel at any one time, and there are real dangers in following a single storyline or set of stories. Scenarios should be kept live and updated with signals of emerging change, not just as one-time inputs into strategic thinking, and their underlying assumptions should be made as clear and explicit as possible. This allows for more rapid understanding of the potential impact and implications of new events and shifting variables, which can be laid over existing strategy.

Uncertainty during the pandemic seems to have been a '**trigger for ordinariness rather than imagination**' in scenario thinking.[84] The urgent, reactive and short-term focus of crisis thinking and 'generally-desired restoration of the former *status quo*' may limit mental flexibility to a 'logic of continuity' and hinder creativity in imagining alternative futures. Fascinating analysis of 'world after' scenarios produced at the height of the first wave of the crisis shows 'a reluctance to rethink the present as a moment of discontinuity opening up the horizon of possibilities' for post-pandemic futures. More understanding is needed about how to practice anticipation and creative futures thinking at these pressurised moments, to 'enable crises to be used for the liberation of the future rather than its lockdown into the limits of the present'.

4.4 Scenarios are only as robust and useful as the diversity of the people involved

Dangers include a greater risk of 'anchoring bias'[85] - being mentally preoccupied with information about the current situation - and groupthink - where scenarios reflect the familiar worldviews and comfortable ideas of those involved. 'You want a range of backgrounds, values, and experiences in the group; people who can challenge and stretch each other's thinking. Diversity yields panoramic, stereoscopic vision'.[86] ICSOs which ran internal scenario processes highlighted the importance of moving the process online to reach beyond the senior management team(s) and collaborate across geographies, and equipping country teams with tools and guidance to participate.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"There is a lot *we don't know* and we cannot possibly espouse to know. Confusing robust scenario design (that inherently are built on uncertainties) with risk modelling forecasts, falls back on the assumption of the continued status quo. In practice what this means is ensuring that your decision-making processes, your risk matrixes and risk appetites, your policies and frameworks have to inbuild uncertainty and elasticity into its layers."
Aarathi Krishnan (2020)

84   Jahel, C., Bourgeois, R., Pesche, D., de Lattre-Gasquet, M. and Delay, E. (2021) Has the COVID-19 Crisis Changed our Relationship to the Future?', Futures & Foresight Science, e75, Wiley & Sons, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ffo2.75. 83 scenarios from March-June 2020 were used for the analysis.

85   Ramirez, R. and Lang, T. (2020) The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach in the Era of COVID-19, Oxford Answers article, https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/oxford-answers/oxford-scenario-planning-approach-era-covid-19

86   Finch, M. and Casasbuenas, J. (2020) Using Scenarios to Reimagine our Strategic Decisions: Q&A with Matt Finch, Nesta project update, https://www.nesta.org.uk/project-updates/using-scenarios-reimagine-our-strategic-decisions/

"Scenarios are back in fashion but are frequently misused. They are not…forecasting tools but …a means of bounding the uncertainty you confront. The goal is to understand the range of possible eventualities you may face so you can stress-test your portfolio of planned strategic moves against the extremes and ensure that your strategy can succeed in a range of future outcomes."
Dago Diedrich et al (2021)[87]

"Whereas we thought the crisis would stimulate imagination and creativity, it seems rather to have contributed to reaffirming the existing options, convictions and beliefs of the actors, who have produced largely unsurprising scenarios… very few scenarios produced during the COVID-19 crisis envisage a clear break in the logic of growth that dominates the current functioning of our human societies."
Camille Jahel et al (2021)[88]

"If we move to pattern-spotting too early, there's a risk we will squeeze out the odd and unusual, and see only the usual suspects. How do we guard against that?"
Duncan Green (2021)[89]

"It's helping people think long…but there's still a long way to go. You have to avoid paralysis by analysis, helping people to make judgements rather than just making long lists of things."
William Garrood, WaterAid (2021)

"Scenario planning is a lot more mainstream than it used to be, now all of our offices have an idea about it and are ready to have a go."
Sue Birchmore, World Vision International (2021)

"Scenario planning helped to accelerate some of our decisions, and a leading consulting firm provided pro bono support to work with our senior leadership to push on the harder examples and more extreme scenarios to plan for several potential outcomes."
Laura Vandermandele, Habitat for Humanity International (2021)

INSIGHTS FROM THE MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

Deloitte's early scenarios for social sector decision-making[90] were for organisations to adapt and customise the axes according to their needs (NB. but not falling into the trap of putting themselves at the Centre of Everything).[91] The authors advised imagining and testing how existing organisational strategies and operations might fare in each scenario, and developing a 12-18 month plan with six-month increments and a flexible roadmap for quick adaptation, with simple tracking of signals of how scenarios are progressing or diverging.

The Bridgespan Group's straightforward four-step scenario planning framework[92] to help non-profit leaders think through potential

87 Diedrich, D., Northcote, N., Röder, T., and Sauer-Sidor, K. (2021) Strategic Resilience During the COVID-19 Crisis, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/strategic-resilience-during-the-covid-19-crisis

88 Jahel, C., Bourgeois, R., Pesche, D., de Lattre-Gasquet, M. and Delay, E. (2021) Has the COVID-19 Crisis Changed our Relationship to the Future?', Futures & Foresight Science, e75, Wiley & Sons, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ffo2.75

89 Green, D. (2020) What are We Seeing so Far on Emergent Agency in COVID? Top Insights, plus Next Steps, From Poverty to Power blog, https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/what-are-we-seeing-so-far-on-emergent-agency-in-covid-top-insights-plus-next-steps/

90 Hirt, M., Smit, S., Bradley, C. Uhlaner, R., Mysore, M. Atsmon, Y, and Northcote, N. (2020) Getting Ahead of the Next Stage of the Coronavirus Crisis, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/getting-ahead-of-the-next-stage-of-the-coronavirus-crisis

91 Green, D. (2020) 5 Common Mistakes When NGOs Start Strategizing, From Poverty to Power blog, https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/5-common-mistakes-when-ngos-start-strategizing/

92 Waldron, L., Searle, R. and Jaskula-Ranga, A. (2020) Making Sense of Uncertainty: Nonprofit Scenario Planning During a Crisis https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/strategy-development/nonprofit-scenario-planning-during-a-crisis

adaptations for continuity and recovery over 6-12 months involves:
▸ identifying key organisational economic and impact drivers at risk,
▸ modelling best-, moderate- and worst-case scenarios with a portfolio of actions for each, and
▸ determining key trigger points for decision-making.

The authors of the popular Oxford Scenario Planning Approach (OSPA) noted six main adaptations[93] needed during the pandemic - using shorter time horizons, more iterations, online opportunities, incorporating different new voices, not being captured by current information and stretching plausibility.

A 'plan-ahead' team[94] can help get ahead of the next stage of the crisis, separate to but informing the day-to-day crisis response team. Unlike a typical strategy team, it should be modular with cells considering scalable thinking for specific issues across multiple time horizons. This team collects forward-looking intelligence, develops scenarios, and identifies both strategic and tactical options, and key trigger points for decision-making across all time horizons - two, four, and seven days; two and four weeks; one and two quarters; one and two years; and the 'next normal'.

ORGANISATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI) created a dedicated internal 'scanning team' from April to July 2020, from staff who were freed by the pandemic from some of their usual operational responsibilities.

This team developed three types of detailed scenarios intended to identify what was needed to sustain operations in the present versus the future 'disrupted state', and the critical path and degree of adaptation between the two. One type of scenario exercise explored the shift from a COVID-'only' response to a 'COVID + disaster' response in a country like India, and how the government might respond in the wake of a dual crisis. This scenario also raised questions for leadership regarding the scale of disaster that would trigger an organisational - rather than local - response from HFHI, along with the big fundraising and operational shifts this would involve. Another scenario considered economic impacts and the potential impact on revenue, involving strong modelling based on historical internal and external public data.

Islamic Relief Worldwide's Global Strategy Manager was part of the organisation's security management process, which meant that when this sensed that the pandemic was a big risk – as early as November 2019 - short, simple operational scenario guidance was quickly developed and shared with all country teams and global business functions. The analysis was completed by the end of February 2020, just as the pandemic quickly spread globally. This operational scenario guidance was for three situations - not being able to travel at all, only being able to travel to one part of the country, and mobility largely unaffected. The internal learning gained through this organisation-wide process should now support country office capacity to provide feedback on the new six-year strategy cycle, which will involve a number of different vaccine rollout scenarios, as different countries have cycles of release-lockdown-release or vaccine/variant 'tangoes'.

WaterAid used Oxfam's global megatrends review to check its assessment of the drivers already impacting on its work and emergent pandemic-related issues. It also participated as a case study in the

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93 Ramirez, R. and Lang, T. (2020) The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach in the Era of COVID-19, Oxford Answers article, https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/oxford-answers/oxford-scenario-planning-approach-era-covid-19
94 Hirt, M. Smit, S., Bradley, C. Uhlaner, R., Mysore, M. Atsmon, Y, and Northcote, N. (2020) Getting Ahead of the Next Stage of the Coronavirus Crisis, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/getting-ahead-of-the-next-stage-of-the-coronavirus-crisis

scenarios programme of the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford. However, WaterAid staff were also keen to do an internal exercise to build scenarios from scratch, despite most being new to this. It required significant support from the strategy team to upskill people internally and stop them getting bogged down in methodology. It was longer and more laborious than expected, and with hindsight the strategy team would have provided more 'generative' external analysis to inform the participatory element of the process. However, the exercise did generate a useful resource for country teams, consolidating the global drivers they identified under seven big outcome themes. It has helped bridge a culture and skills gap about thinking both long-term and high-level, which will benefit future organisational strategic planning.

World Vision International (WVI) used a mixture of internal organisational and external analysis. Global scenarios were produced and shared to support teams in planning, building on World Bank economic data, trajectories for the pandemic across the world, vaccination prospects, McKinsey scenarios, and data from WVI's Office of Corporate Security. Country offices were supported with a scenario planning approach adapted from existing internal practice for rapid fragile/peacebuilding context analysis, the 'Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response' (GECARR). This was adapted for use online, so it could digitally draw together the views of a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders, including local community members, as the 'Good Enough Online Context Analysis for Rapid Response' (GEOCARR). Early analysis from country teams' conversations with community leaders identified quickly that the biggest impact of the pandemic would be as a livelihood, and not just health, crisis and was published as a 'COVID-19 Aftershocks' report in early April 2020.

Recommended recent resources

Long Crisis Network's (2020) 'Our COVID Future: The Long Crisis Scenarios'[95] from early in the pandemic have been mentioned by many organisations as a particularly accessible, engaging and useful reference. Check them out for both content for four different potential futures – 'Rise of the Oligarchs', 'Big Mother', 'Fragile Resilient' and 'Winning Ugly' – but also as a great example of how to communicate and present short, sweet but powerful scenarios.

Forum for the Future's (2020) excellent 'Four Trajectories from COVID-19'[96] is a flexible framework for organising emerging signals of change, short of full scenarios. Each trajectory - transform, compete and retreat, discipline and unsettled - has a different underlying mindset,[97] approach to change, understanding of power and sustainability and strengths, 'shadows' and weaknesses. This is now a dedicated live research project tracking signals of change and the narratives which are becoming dominant.

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95   Long Crisis Network (2020) Our COVID Future: The Long Crisis Scenarios, http://www.longcrisis.org/scenarios/

96   Forum for the Future (2020) How to Use "Trajectories from COVID-19" as a Futures Tool?, https://www.thefuturescentre.org/tool/how-to-use-trajectories/

97   Forum for the Future (2020) Trajectories from COVID-19 – Comparison Tool, https://www.thefuturescentre.org/tool/trajectories-from-covid-19-comparison-tool/

EYQ's (2020) 'Megatrends 2020 and Beyond: Are You Reframing Your Future or is the Future Reframing You?'[98] exposes leaders to forces and trends beyond their typical scope of analysis to build 'future-back', rather than present-forward, journeys of organisational change. It connects four primary forces and eight megatrends-based scenarios with critical questions and concrete strategic actions to help organisations navigate COVID-19's influence on accelerating global forces.

Rick Davies' ParEvo is an online, open source participatory process for developing evolving future scenarios or alternative past histories. With careful moderation over time, groups of 10-15 people can collaborate anonymously to generate emergent narrative storylines across a range of diversities and time zones, with more outcomes than standard 2x2 scenario approaches. People engage in imaginative more than analytical ways, and external commentators and 'unusual suspects' can be invited in. It helps identify missing and contested storylines, key themes and sentiments from participants and how to plan strategic responses.

98   EYQ (2020) Are You Reframing Your Future or is the Future Reframing You?: Megatrends 2020 and Beyond, https://assets.ey.com/content/dam/ey-sites/ey-com/en_gl/topics/megatrends/ey-megatrends-2020-report.pdf

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Use scenarios across multiple timescales and with the whole organisation, but be cautious because:
▸ Scenario planning is different from contingency planning
▸ Scenarios are just one of many ways to help think about the future
▸ Scenarios are meant to open up rather than limit or 'box in' possibilities
▸ Scenarios are only as robust and useful as the diversity of the people involved

Strategic Pointers for Decision-Making in Complex, Uncertain Times

STRATEGIC POINTER

5.

Rethink adaptable strategies to embrace emergent change within a long-term view

Of the five overall strategic pointers from this Guide on which the Centre recently polled global Chief Executives of leading international CSOs, asking which were already happening in or are important for their organisation, this came out top. However, our research and interviews suggest that change should be informed by critical reflection in some fundamental areas.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"The unanticipated second- and third-order effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have reminded us how uncertain the future is — both in the long and short term...We must be ever vigilant, asking better questions, frequently challenging our assumptions, checking our biases, and looking for weak signals of change. We need to expect the unexpected and apply the lessons of this pandemic to our craft in the future."
Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2021)[99]

"While we need to adapt to constant uncertainty, it may be misguided to equate this with attempting to eliminate risk, a term that implies asserting control of our environment (and which is not used by Indigenous peoples whose wisdom derives from thousands of years of adapting to crises and change). Indeed, when COVID's main lesson is one of human-planetary interconnectedness, is it helpful to use a term that emphasises control and assumes power?"
UNDP (2020)[100]

99 Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2021) Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World, https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home/
100 UNDP (2020) UNDP Future of Development High Level Strategy Lab: Futures and Complexity, https://futureofdevelopment.undp.org/content/fod/en/home/our-products/undp-future-of-development-high-level-strategy-lab-futures-and-complexity.htm

"In metaphorical terms...we should think fitness, not war, preparedness instead of planning, and purpose rather than game-plans... we must let go of our idea to "conquer with plans" and substitute it with "comprehend with reflection and learning."
Narayan Ramachandran (2020)[101]

"Thinking the unthinkable on a regular basis should become part of the training of every leader and manager and embedded in the governance processes of every organisation."
Rohit Talwar (2020)[102]

"Organisations that question the long term role they play in a system and that continue to change to be relevant and supportive of that future are more adaptive and resilient as a result."
Adanna Shallowe et al (2020)[103]

5.1   Rethink risk and crisis as continuous uncertainty

Many signals point to the inevitability of multiple disruptive events happening simultaneously and a shifting paradigm of complex, converging, intertwined, global crisis.[104] Our experience of the past will simply not be relevant or applicable to the future. How do ICSOs shift from focus on organisational survival and siloed responses, to becoming ef-

101 Ramachandran, N. (2020) There is Plenty for Us to Unlearn and Relearn as We Tackle COVID-19, Mint.com opinion piece, https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/there-is-plenty-for-us-to-unlearn-and-relearn-as-we-tackle-covid-19-11602510808343.html
102 Talwar, R. (2020) Fast Future Keynote Theatre - Navigating Deep Disruption, Webinar, 12 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_UVAJAWtV4&feature=youtu.be
103 Shallowe, A., Szymczyk, A., Firebrace, E., Burbidge, I. and Morrison, J. (2020) A Stitch in Time: Realising the Value of Futures and Foresight, RSA, https://www.thersa.org/reports/futures-thinking-foresight
104 See, for example, the Cascade Institute in Canada, https://cascadeinstitute.org/

fective actors and agents of equitable transformation in systems-based responses?

'Tame futures'[105] - which behave as we would expect from past experience and where we can quite confidently project what comes next from data and models of what has gone before - are a thing of the past. Not even past pandemics could help with comparisons or parallels to understand the potential impacts of COVID-19 because of today's hyperconnected economic, political and technological systems.

Whilst rapid vaccine development may have brought an emerging sense of 'nearer normal' control of COVID-19, climate change means we are just at the start of needing to prepare for continuous uncertainty, constant crisis and rapid, 'never normal' change and convergence.

With such emergent, unpredictable 'wild futures', our experience from the past will not have relevant bearing. And human intervention in systems or situations which we assume can be tamed can further result in responses which may make them even wilder and more out of control ('feral futures').[106] This could well unknowingly be the case with some current policy responses to COVID-19 or climate change (for instance, some of the geo-engineering solutions being explored). Our postnormal times cannot be 'controlled' or 'managed', only navigated.[107]

So we should accept 'surprise as the new normal',[108] focus foresight more on the improbable and unpredictable, and also more on

105 Ramirez, R. and Ravetz, J. (2011) Feral Futures: Zen and Aesthetics, Futures, 43 (4), 478-487, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016328710002880
106 *Ibid.*
107 The Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies 'Post Normal Times' https://postnormaltim.es/; see also their COVID Chronicles, https://postnormaltim.es/covid-chronicles
108 Heinonen, S., Karjalainen, J., Ruotsalainen, J. and Steinmüller, K. (2017) Surprise as the New Normal – Implications for Energy Security, European Journal of Futures Research, 5, Article 12, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40309-017-0117-5

'discontinuities' - wider developments beyond single events. In these contexts, an organisation's own assumptions risk being their worst enemy. Expecting 'new normals' implies that things might reset or settle down at some point in the future with periods of relative calm and stability. But this can bring a false sense of security and work against the more transformative change needed whilst organisations sit and wait to adjust to a next imagined stage of more ordered 'normality'. This is not what 'anticipation' and 'adaptation' are about.

An organisation's capacity to respond to 'never normals' will require multi-dimensional transformation well beyond reframing or redesigning programmes and services to respond to changing external contexts. It also requires a rigorous rethink of internal structures and models - including decision-making, risk appetite, financing, collaborations, culture and agility.

All of this makes imagined futures, sense-making and scanning for signals of emergent change at the peripheries of experience much more relevant and urgent. For this, organisations need to engage with two types of futures thinking highlighted by UNESCO's Head of Futures Literacy, Riel Miller:[109]

► **Anticipation for the Future** - where they engage in thinking about possible futures to inform their strategic choices in the present, and
► **Anticipation for Emergence** - where they try to 'comprehend and make sense of ever-emerging novelty and appreciate the difference and diversity of our ever-transforming, complex world'.[110]

109 Miller, R. et al (2018) Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century, Taylor and Francis and UNESCO, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323696039_Transforming_the_Future_Anticipation_in_the_21st_Century
110 Balcom Raleigh, N. A. (2020) Demystifying Futures Literacy, a Key Skill for Climate Innovation, FLx-Deep blog, https://medium.com/flxdeep/demystifying-futures-literacy-a-key-skill-for-climate-innovation-4cf868a63e93 after, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285051882_Learning_the_Future_and_Complexity_An_Essay_on_the_Emergence_of_Futures_Literacy.

ICSOs have invested in and strengthened their 'anticipation for future' capacity over the past 5-10 years, with significant growth in use of scenarios and other futures techniques. Whilst this is important, it is not enough on its own and the increasing need to invest in 'anticipation for emergence' skills and cultures is clearer than ever from COVID-19 and our 'never normal' climate-crisis world. Organisations need to expand their traditional strategy- and decision-making techniques with tools to explore emergent, experiential and speculative futures, including futures from 'marginal' places and spaces they do not usually consult.

5.2 Rethink planning as dynamic, proactive scanning

When monitoring and analysing critical uncertainties and 'never normals', signals and insights should be seen as a 'point in time' in a collective intelligence process.

> Scanning for uncertainties will require continuous iteration in a world changing so rapidly that current intelligence can be outdated in the space of even a few weeks.

The management literature stresses the need for more dynamic planning processes. [McKinsey's private sector survey](https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/strategic-resilience-during-the-covid-19-crisis)[111] highlights half the executives expecting dramatic shifts away from traditional annual strategic-planning exercises to much faster iteration. Some companies will move to monthly strategy meetings to review new opportunities or changes, as the external context makes some planned strategic moves obsolete.

Organisations need to ['learn new dance routines' in three shorter simultaneous strategic time horizons](link) (compared to the typical 1, 3 and 4-10 years).[112] These should be:
▸ 1-3 months focusing on operational stability ('viable resilience'),
▸ 4-12 months focusing on business adaptation ('new rules'), and
▸ 1-10 years focusing on future capability ('reinvention').
Organisations need to prioritise what will really make a difference to 'the pain points hampering progress' in all three horizons, in 30-/60- and 90-day time slots, and drop things where no progress is being made. Organisational 'weekly workouts' can help develop risk-taking and rapid experimentation muscles, with a 'no holes barred brainstorm' on how to approach one specific issue differently in these three shorter strategy horizons.

Our ICSO interviews also highlighted a common desire - although limited current capacity - to build more opportunities and skills for regular sensing and scanning for signals. This suggests the need for organisations to:
▸ 'unlearn' their emphasis on detailed planning,
▸ revalue discovery over delivery (on plans) and exploration over efficiency, and
▸ intentionally repurpose or 'exnovate' the extensive planning hierarchies and processes they have evolved over time to create dedicated space and individual skills for uncertainty, innovation, sensing and sense-making.

The ICSOs which have been on this journey to build their scanning capacity over the past few years have seen the benefit during these turbulent times, with others now also starting to address this need.

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111   Diedrich, D., Northcote, N., Röder, T., and Sauer-Sidor, K. (2021) Strategic Resilience During the COVID-19 Crisis, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/strategic-resilience-during-the-covid-19-crisis

112   Talwar, R. (2020) Fast Future Keynote Theatre - Navigating Deep Disruption, Webinar, 12 August 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_UVAJAWtV4&feature=youtu.be

ORGANISATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Amnesty International's China Abroad project has, for the past two years, adopted a very intentional action learning and iterative strategy development approach towards the complex and emergent issue of China's global influence, with regular horizon scanning at six week intervals, including during COVID-19. This has been 'worth its weight in gold', identifying new areas for its work from spotting trends, quick adaptations and 'purposeful pivots'. Geopolitical shifts and tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic have only contributed to greater complexity and uncertainty and it is more impossible than ever to know the full picture or predict the future trajectory of China in the world. This more emergent approach to strategy, even within this complexity, has enabled Amnesty to have more certainty about what it can do, its value, contribution, strengths, and the questions it needs to ask and the decisions it needs to make, before moving ahead with any intervention aimed at influencing China.

Greenpeace International has been working and learning within a 10-year strategic framework centred around its own understanding of systems change since 2016. This approach recognises the need to address the root causes of both social and environmental problems and engage with the fundamental interconnectedness between them. It also envisions the journey of radical change needed in people's attitudes, values, routines and relationships, policies, resources and power structures.

This systems change strategic framework considers three intersecting transformational goals:
(i)   respecting environmental boundaries for climate change and bio-diversity, and peace,
(ii) changing mindsets, and
(iii) shifting power dynamics.
This helps identify root causes – such as consumer and social status mindsets – behind symptoms like ocean trash and toxic e-waste. This in turn enables exponential, rather than incremental, theory of change thinking along two dimensions:
▶ Disruption Theory of Change: Working to shift entire systems, not just individual actors (e.g. weakened oil sector being replaced with solar)
▶ Cultural Theory of Change: Changing minds by appealing to hearts, not just heads.

Changing mindsets and shifting the power dynamics to people involves a number of key underlying 'systems thinking habits'. Many link to key themes in this Guide, including:
▶ identifying and accepting the circular nature of complex cause and effect relationships,
▶ considering short-term, long-term and unintended consequences of actions,
▶ surfacing and testing assumptions, and
▶ using a 'probe - sense – respond' approach to check results and change actions if needed.

Overall for Greenpeace, this means being 'tight on strategy, loose on implementation and tighter than today on evaluation'. One clear strategic priority for 2021 is 'living the new normal' to be more suited as a movement for both 'today's context and a future full of disruptions'. This longer-term systems approach to strategy explicitly recognises and anticipates disruptions - like those from the past 12 months – as inevitable, is more resilient to short-term crisis events and helps build organisational agility to engage with the complex, changing dynamics of interconnected injustices.

Mercy Corps' Safety and Security team caught the global nature of the pandemic early and its COVID response strategy and operational adaptations were already in place by late March/early April 2020. It works with 10-15 strategic objectives each year, on a 1-3 year rolling basis, and by May 2020 a new objective around COVID-19 response had been firmly established in its annual strategic Compass.

Save the Children Canada created a role to bring in external strategic and futures thinking to the organisation, recognising that this needs dedicated time to develop and connect with a wide array of new contacts and networks. It would otherwise not be realistic for programme and operational staff to do this on top of existing workloads. The position helps infuse/inform strategic thinking and planning.

Sightsavers supplemented its ongoing strategy review process in 2019 with ongoing horizon scanning which picked up the disruptive risk of a pandemic potentially leading to a humanitarian crisis. As this was already on the radar of senior management, they had the opportunity to reflect on what it might mean for Sightsavers through the lens of a crisis mode. This was the only organisation interviewed which seems to have caught and considered this possibility in advance.[113] In 2020, further strategic review focusing on its thematic areas resulted in the decision that programmatic-level strategies – for areas such as eye health, refractive error, inclusive education, neglected tropical disease and social inclusion - would no longer be timebound, and instead be managed on a more rolling, emergent basis. This will allow Sightsavers to be more sensitive and responsive to movements in the external environment. Further future big programmatic-level strategy

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113   This exercise also picked up antibiotic resistance as another potential crisis in waiting, which has also been identified as under-appreciated and under-explored by non-sector futurists.

reviews will now take place when it makes sense based on context and progress, rather than mandated by a five-year cycle.

Transparency International (TI) invested significantly in 2019 in developing its Vision 2030 report, engaging across the movement and with external stakeholders to better understand the driving forces it needs to respond to. This investment meant resilient analysis for understanding changes in the 'what' during COVID-19 - the strategy team could quickly integrate additional COVID-19 characteristics from the rapid analysis produced by TI's research team for the further strategy development process in 2020. TI's ambition from now on is to integrate a trends analysis in the review and course-correction processes at the end of shorter 2:4:4 year implementation planning cycles for its next 10-year strategy. The first cycle has been deliberately shortened to allow enough time both for the second- and third- order effects of COVID-19 to become clearer, and for necessary adjustments to be identified earlier.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Horizon scanning forces us to look up and look around periodically, bringing the complexity of a bigger picture of the world to our narrower plans we set, knowing what we can usefully focus on and contribute."
Heather Hutchings, Amnesty International (2021)

"Emergent and adaptive strategy and how to plan has now become a more mainstream mindset...our fragile context offices were like 'welcome to our world!'"
Sue Birchmore, World Vision International (2021)

"We're working that humanitarian spirit into the way we're thinking to be more nimble – more of that sensibility, sense of urgency and comfort with the unknown, with the best information we have to hand."
Megan Steinke, Save the Children International (2021)

"We have a typical strategy with four goals and 23 objectives, but we're going to have to be realistic about what we can both fund and do - we'll have to be prepared to 'pump' some things and 'dump' others in our new strategic plan."
Ismayil Tahmazov, Islamic Relief Worldwide (2021)

"There's been deep reflection on things which were already with us that we hadn't paid proper attention to, or things that were going on under the surface. We're connecting differently and people are giving much more space to these kind of discussions...but we're only seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of the changes we'll experience over the next decade."
Marlen Mondaca, Save the Children Canada (2021)

"It felt like with our partners and outside the organisation, a lot of people were scrambling to understand the pandemic. We were a step ahead in looking at this longer-term and how we could maximise our resilience to it... we saved ourselves time."
Paula Mendez Keil, Sightsavers (2021)

"Undertaking long-term implications analysis is the basis for designing the potentialities of what might emerge, and stops us from merely designing reactive solutions. Instead, it brings to the front difficult decisions we might need to make, that we might have previously thought were not needed."
Aarathi Krishnan (2020)

5.3 Rethink strategy as dynamic dialogue and learning from experience

[Organisations need to think about strategy as a hypothesis](#)[114] which you constantly test and adjust with dynamic learning from experience and new information as you implement it, rather than a 'stable, analytically rigorous plan for execution'. [Or through two music metaphors,](#)[115] determined by the stage an organisation is at. Early, proof-of-concept 'jazz' which is 'impromptu' and 'improvising' and evolves and adapts within a big vision and general directional sense of strategy and business model. This is 'intimate', with the leader playing as part of the band. Later on, this needs to transition to a 'symphony' stage with a conductor-leader, more formality and execution planning to take it to next-level scale. The critical timing is when to move from jazzy emergence and exploration to symphonic execution and exploitation (see Innovation in the Long Now below).

Direct Impact Group also argues that ICSOs need to rethink old models, metaphors and mindsets of strategy and organisations to better fit these turbulent, uncertain, novel and ambiguous (TUNA) times. Strategy in a post-COVID world needs to be a framework of decisions that define the nature, direction and priorities of an organisation, providing a common overall direction to empower all stakeholders to bring in their capabilities to address local longstanding and emergent needs. Strategy development can no longer be seen as a careful, lengthy deliberation process which assumes a maximum amount of information. Instead, it is ongoing, diverse multi-stakeholder dialogue to make the best balanced current choices about the nature and

114   Edmondson, A. C. and Verdin, P. J. (2017) Your Strategy Should Be a Hypothesis You Constantly Adjust, Harvard Business Review article, https://hbr.org/2017/11/your-strategy-should-be-a-hypothesis-you-constantly-adjust

115   Tjan, A. K. (2010) Strategy as Jazz vs. Symphony, Harvard Business Review blog, https://hbr.org/2010/02/strategy-as-jazz-vs-symphony.html

direction of the organisation. Strategy reviews should not be comprehensive, lengthy and time-consuming exercises, but rather regular, quick, tailor-made checks of the continued relevance of underlying assumptions.

These traditional strategy-making processes are also grounded in mindsets and metaphors that sees an organisation as a finely-oiled machine, with decision-making on top and implementation cascading down across all levels. But organisations which embody this type of thinking easily find themselves in complex governance systems paralysed by slow decision processes which are challenging to reengineer. Organisations which instead see themselves more as living organisms ensure a common direction and priority, as well as fast flow of information. Living organisms are constantly sensing changes in the environment around them and adapting their behaviours in response, so this seems a more fitting metaphor to think in for 'anticipation for emergence'.

5.4 Rethink time and short-termism as extending legacy within the 'Long Now'

'Embracing the Long Now' stretches responsibility over longer timescales than what we typically think of as 'now', and beyond a human lifetime. It gives a bigger picture to short-term turbulence and helps ensure immediate crisis decision-making can still elevate long-term equity. It extends 'legacy' thinking to help identify what is worth keeping from the past,[116] what needs to be 'unlearned' or 'exnovated' in the moment to create space for what might emerge, and what it will take to avoid future-loading major risks from decisions being made today.

116 One nice example of this was World YMCA's looking back in history during the pandemic, with recollections from the movement's legacy of surviving the turbulence of two World Wars and sharing messages of hope - #YMCAStandsTogether and #WeShallOvercome.

This should allow exploration of emergence within a truly long-term transformational vision to leave a fairer distribution of the costs and benefits of resources across generations to come, and reduce future conflict, inequality and turbulence. Innovation also looks different in the 'Long Now',[117] balancing the 'exploit to explore ratio' of what from the past still continues to deliver value today (for ICSOs, both organisational and societal value) with 'experiments to invent tomorrow'.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"The Long Now is the recognition that the precise moment you're in grows out of the past and is a seed for the future. The longer your sense of Now, the more past and future it includes."
Brian Eno, "The Big Here and the Long Now" (2000)

"The wicked problem of battling VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) becomes the wicked opportunity of embracing the long now [mindset]...The ability to look at time in a new way and to realise that we need to value and pull from the best knowledge and the best experience of the past, while also looking forward to our aspirational futures and taking all of that information and bringing it back to today to make better decisions in the present. So it's a recognition of legacy but also of that future perspective, and understanding that it's all tied together and it should all be influencing the decisions we make right now."
Yvette Montero Salvatico and Frank Spencer (2021)[118]

117 Ventresca, M. (2021) Four Innovation Precepts for Leaders in the 'Long Now', Oxford Answers blog, https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/oxford-answers/four-innovation-precepts-leaders-long-now
118 Montero Salvatico, Y. and Spencer, F. (2021) Wicked Discoveries: Embracing One Long Now, The Wicked Opportunities Podcast episode, Kedge, https://podcasts.apple.com/sr/podcast/wicked-discoveries-embracing-the-long-now/id1527341331?i=1000504133293

"We need to look with three heads…backwards to use what we've done and learned to inform what we do in this moment; at the right now, what are we doing and is it making a difference; and looking ahead, at what's coming up on the horizon and how we will need to adapt in anticipation."

Heather Hutchings, Amnesty International (2021)

THE LONG PANDEMIC AND THE LONG NOW

COVID-19 has been described as a '[crisis of the mind](#)'.[119] Learning from the myths and shared stories which helped our ancestors make sense of crisis in the past can inspire lessons now for 'collective grieving' to help navigate both the current crisis and prepare for the future. 'A much deeper process of grief…will unfold over years to come…with climate breakdown and mass extinction still gathering pace'.[120]

The three types of myth important during crisis are:
▸ Apocalypse myths, not literally about the end of the world, but 'depicting an unveiling of things as they really are';[121]
▸ Restoration myths on 'how a wound or rupture in the world is healed and things are made whole again'; and
▸ Emergence myths on 'how the death of the old also leads to the birth of the new'.[122]
Whilst the public health crisis of COVID-19 could last 2+ years, and the economic crisis 5+ years, the 'social emergency' and psychological

impacts could endure for a generation and the impacts of trauma be transmitted to future generations.[123] Organisations increasingly need to bear these psychological responses to, and impacts of, crisis in mind as they think strategically about their role in our future 'never normal' world.

123 Evans, A., ter Kuile, C. and Williams, I. (2020) This Too Shall Pass: Mourning Collective Loss in the Time of COVID-19, The Collective Psychology Project, https://larger.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/This-Too-Shall-Pass.pdf

Recommended recent resources

The Long Time Project and EIT Climate-KIC's (2020) '[Long Time Tools: Tools to Cultivate Long-Termism in Institutions](#)'[124] is a guide on how to integrate long-termism into organisations, cultivating care for the future as a way to change current behaviour. It shares six organisational 'long time levers' – ritual and routine, norms and behaviours, symbols, stories and myths, power structures and regulatory systems and processes, plus 13 tools to test out long-termism - both easy, informal ones and others needing wider organisational change.

124 Burks, B. K. and Saltmarshe, E. (2020) The Long Time Tools: Tools to Cultivate Long-Termism in Institutions, The Long Time Project and EIT Climate-KIC, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eb2e536e7ddf65e8cb25952/t/5f3e-5375754fa93c1a097e6b/1597920137599/Long+Time+Project_Long+Time+Tools.pdf

119 Evans, A., ter Kuile, C. and Williams, I. (2020) This Too Shall Pass: Mourning Collective Loss in the Time of COVID-19, The Collective Psychology Project, https://larger.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/This-Too-Shall-Pass.pdf
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.

The School of International Futures (SOIF) and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's (2020) 'Framework for Intergenerational Fairness'[125] is a methodology for independent, systematic and participatory assessment of whether policy, programme and investment decisions are fair or not for all generations - current and future. Pilots over the past three years in Portugal and the UK are now informing how the framework can be used elsewhere to embed practical foresight-informed thinking and action into the everyday design of better, equitable policies and programmes, for people living today and tomorrow.

SOIF's 'The Long Pandemic: After the COVID-19 Crisis' (2021)[126] uses a futures wheel to map out potential first- and second-order effects from COVID-19 under six themes: business, finance, technology, home, health, and geopolitics. It highlights six broad questions for organisations to consider, and the need for them to take a systemic look at how joined-up programmes and strategies are to improve impact in an interconnected world. This is a useful reference both from a content and process perspective.

The Canadian Cascade Institute focuses its research on modelling complex global systems to address the full breadth of humanity's converging environmental, economic, political, technological and health crises. Three initiatives will be of particular interest to ICSOs:

▸ the 'Inter-Systemic Cascades Project' maps causal pathways of how COVID-19 could destabilise eight key global systems, leading to 'cascades of change' for social benefit or harm

▸ the 'Norm Cascades Project' investigates potential opportunities out of the pandemic for transformation in people's beliefs and values which might also accelerate the sustainability transition

▸ the 'Climate Values Mapping Project' identifies pathways for better collaboration within and between seven key climate change stakeholder groups.

Futures Literacy Across The Deep (FLxDeep) is a six-partner initiative to co-create and implement practices that apply futures literacy and integrate 'anticipation for emergence' in climate and sustainability innovation and systems transformation processes. It is led by Finland Futures Research Centre at the University of Turku, with futures literacy experts at UNESCO, and funded by EIT Climate-KIC. It shares stories about its experiments and practitioner insights.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Rethink adaptable strategies to embrace emergent change within a long-term view, by rethinking
▸ Risk and crisis as continuous uncertainty
▸ Planning as dynamic, proactive scanning
▸ Strategy as dynamic dialogue and learning from experience
▸ Time and short-termism as extending legacy within the 'Long Now'

125 School of International Futures (2020) Framework for Intergenerational Fairness Pilot Report, https://soif.org.uk/app/uploads/2020/12/FrameworkforIGF_PilotReportDec2020.pdf

126 School of International Futures (2021) The Long Pandemic: After the COVID-19 Crisis, https://soif.org.uk/app/uploads/2021/02/SOIF-The-Long-Pandemic.pdf

CONCLUSIONS

The turbulence of the past year has generated key insights and further urgency around the fundamental transformations which international CSOs still need to make in an inevitably increasingly 'whirly world'. For many organisations, it may feel like the most momentous things have already happened. But actually what comes next and the types of strategic decisions they make now will be critical to whether they can remain resilient and effective agents of equity in a complex, interconnected and uncertain world.

There is clearly no way of getting strategy-making in uncertain times 'right', but this Guide does strongly suggest many ways in which organisations could get it very wrong.

The **overall message** from this Sector Guide is that the world's 'new normals' are 'never normals' - with always-imperfect information - and what got organisations 'here' won't get them 'there'. The fatal mistake of today's leaders would be responding to tomorrow's problems with yesterday's logic. This means that only reacting to today's short-term challenges with efficiency and cost-reduction mindsets is already this 'greatest danger' in times of turbulence.

So the **overall call to action** from this Sector Guide is that **now is exactly the time to invest** in genuine models of inclusion and collaboration, new types of innovation, exploration and discovery skills. We need to rethink strategy to better anticipate and prepare for the uncertainty and 'whirliness' which will continue to emerge in future.

CLOSING
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"A high-resilience system encourages foresight, shares the burden of managing risk, encourages innovation and cooperation, and is resistant to disruptive actors that aim to undermine the basis for cooperation. In contrast, a low-resilience system is absorbed by firefighting the most immediate crisis, places the burden of risks on actors who are least equipped to manage them, and is prone to increasing polarisation and conflict. A strategy for resilience builds a commitment to collective action that delivers lasting benefits, while stimulating the will to co-operate. This does not simply happen. It requires effective leadership, broad participation, an investment in building alliances and networks, and clear communication of problems, solutions, and successes."
Alex Evans and David Stevens (2020)[127]

"Organisations and institutions need to account for the long-term impacts of short-term actions, because if we are not acting in ways that will enable our descendants to thrive on this planet, we are actually colonising their future."
Adanna Shallowe (2021)[128]

127 Evans, A. and Steven, D. (2020) Shooting the Rapids: COVID-19 and the Long Crisis of Globalisation, Long Crisis Network, https://www.longcrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-and-the-Long-Crisis-of-Globalisation-17May20.pdf

128 RSA US Salon + Forum for the Future Americas: Taking Futures and Foresight into the Everyday (2021), Webinar, 27 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN3og0rPqsU

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY CENTRE AND THE SCANNING THE HORIZON INITIATIVE

Our mission is to strengthen the impact and resilience of international civil society organisations and to support people to change their world for the better.

Since 2015, the Centre's **Scanning the Horizon** collaborative platform has helped international CSOs prepare for disruption and benefit from change. With members including leading international CSOs, national CSO umbrella organisations and private sector consultancies, the platform addresses the need for collaborative trend analysis in the sector. Futurists, strategists, trend analysts and organisational learning specialists form a cross-sector community of practitioners to share insights, explore key trends and develop relevant strategies. The platform also enables mutual learning and the pooling of resources.

This is the second in our series of publications aimed at sharing key insights from the platform's thematic discussions with practitioners, strategists and leaders in the wider international civil society sector. The first looked at the implications of the global rise of China.

Visit **https://icscentre.org/our-work/scanning-the-horizon/** to find out more.

We would also like to thank futurists **Aarathi Krishnan**, who provided important early thought inputs to the Guide, and **Tanja Hichert** for peer review of the first draft. We would also like to acknowledge special support from **Deborah Willig** at InterAction and strategy consultancy **Direct Impact Group** for their invaluable review and comments on draft versions.

Finally, we would like to thank our two cooperation partners - **Direct Impact Group** and **Ford Foundation** – for kindly supporting our Scanning the Horizon work over the past 18 months.

ABOUT DIRECT IMPACT GROUP

Direct Impact Group is an independent international consultancy supporting organisations to maximise the social impact they seek. The Group achieves sustainable change through co-created programmes, rather than presenting off-the-shelf solutions. In a world with many disruptive forces, it is critical for any organisation's success to deal with change effectively. The Group's approach is holistic, ensuring that people, process, organisational culture and systems are in sync. Learn more at: https://www.direct-impact-group.com/.

ABOUT FORD FOUNDATION

Ford Foundation believes in the inherent dignity of all people. But around the world, too many people are excluded from the political, economic, and social institutions that shape their lives. Across eight decades, Ford Foundation's mission has sought to reduce poverty and injustice, strengthen democratic values, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. Learn more at: https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/about-ford/.

ANNEX: STRATEGIC POINTERS ON COVID-19 AND INTERSECTING DRIVERS INFLUENCING THE SECTOR

Whilst futures thinking is and can not be about predictions, reconfirmed by findings that everyone was wrong about the societal impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic a year ago, there are some emerging signs of how it might be intersecting with and accelerating other major longer-term global drivers, deserving of further attention. This is a high-level overview of some of these potentially profound changes and how the international civil society sector might prepare better for them. The list is neither detailed nor exhaustive, but instead aims to flag areas of special additional emphasis to support CSO strategic thinking.

DRIVER CLUSTER 1:[129] GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, INTER-DEPENDENCIES, (NEW) ACTORS AND GLOBAL PLAYERS, CITIZEN-STATE RELATIONS, FRAGILITY

1A. Is the global pandemic response leading to a renewal of commitment, trust and investment – by citizens and states – in **multilateral institutions and initiatives** on big issues such as climate change or inequality, or further entrenching the fragmented and nationalist tendencies of response and recovery, including COVID-19 vaccine delivery?
The role of ICSOs in promoting multilateralism is obviously critical, but also needs more nuanced understandings of the economic, social and psychological factors working against this and how to communicate and engage with and influence publics and politicians.

1B. There are also changing and complex dynamics related to **citizen-state relations**, such as a greater demand and expectation for intervention (e.g. social protection or post-pandemic economic recovery), or authoritarian reactions.

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129 For the purposes of an overall framework to help structure the analysis in this section, these 'trend clusters' were adopted from the 'list of trends' groupings in the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development 's 2019 'Interconnections of Global Trends: Analysis Tool', with the one adaptation of grouping 'global governance, inter-dependencies, (new) actors and global players', and 'citizen-state relations, fragility' together as one, https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/Interconnections%20of%20Global%20Trends_Analysis%20Tool_May%202019.pdf

and further challenges to rights and civic space by strong-handed self-justified state interventionism, or **data and digital monitoring and surveillance methods**, including for COVID-19 public health protection measures, such as 'vaccine passports' and tracing. These will play out very differently in national contexts but clearly affect all (I)CSOs and their partners in those countries, so effective joint monitoring of civic freedoms, and response, solidarity and public engagement mechanisms will be needed. This also still links to the different but generally declining **trust levels** in governments and other institutions, although trust is what mattered during the pandemic, including CSOs.

1C. The **growing influence of China** – and also how other countries may change their responses to its global superpower status - is still hugely underexplored by the international civil society sector but cuts across many of these other drivers. Just for starters: concrete leadership and commitments on carbon neutrality and closer coordination with the new Biden administration in the USA, global ambitions on development, influence on debt and security, the potential for a COVID-19 vaccine (and broader) 'Health Silk Road', China becoming a world leader in artificial intelligence, digital currencies in Africa, etc.[130]

1D. The role of **non-state actors**, growing political influence of **interest groups** which may be hostile to civil society, and impact of **social movements**, are also areas which ICSOs should work on together to monitor and analyse, in fragile and non-fragile settings, as they can exert significant power over public opinion and perception of both (I)CSOs and the issues they work on. During the pandemic, service delivery may have increased trust[131] by and legitimacy of civil society organisations with local populations. The Emergent Agency in a time of COVID-19 collaborative research project (coordinated by Oxfam GB) has confirmed the central role of community-based organisations

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130 The anti-racism conversations amid the pandemic have also created new strategic opportunities to expose deeper issues. For instance, the conversations about the apparent targeting of African migrants in the Chinese city of Guangzhou during the pandemic allowed Amnesty International's China Abroad programme to also to highlight deeper inequalities in the broader China/Africa relationship.

131 Green, D. (2021) Trust, Politics, Exhaustion and Anger: Findings on Emergent Agency in a Time of COVID, From Poverty to Power blog https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/trust-politics-exhaustion-and-anger-findings-on-emergent-agency-in-a-time-of-covid/

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and emergent self-help groups and mutual aid networks around the world as first responders to the pandemic.[132]

1E. The **increasing power of transnational companies**, heightened role of business in the SDGs, and role of new social start-ups – as both development actors, intermediaries, disruptors and innovators - and powerful economic and political contextual players. Typical ICSO fundraising 'ally' partnerships with individual private sector companies or traditional 'adversary' advocacy targeting of harmful corporate practice will remain important. However, this misses the bigger picture and limits the strategic, systemic, diversified and nuanced nature of engagement needed from ICSOs. There are also opportunities for ICSOs to engage with the **increasing power and role of city-level administrations** in delivering and innovating SDG progress, especially if the multilateralism fragmentation and nationalist tendencies grow further.

DRIVER CLUSTER 2: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, POVERTY, INEQUALITY, HEALTH

2A. Differential **economic recovery** from COVID-19, impact and disruption on global supply chains and local **livelihoods**, specifically with regards to drivers of inequality like disability, gender, ethnic group, class or region and also including multiple shocks on young people.

2B. The **COVID-19 vaccine(s)** as a new additional driver of inequality.

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132 Nampoothiri, N. and Artuso, F. (2021) What Can We Learn from 200 Case Studies of 'Emergent Agency in a Time of COVID?, From Poverty to Power blog, https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/what-can-we-learn-from-200-case-studies-of-emergent-agency-in-a-time-of-covid/.This reaffirms:

(i)   the community relationships of trust with faith organisations, customary structures, women's rights organisations and other civil society groups and networks,

(ii)   the need for engagement with faith groups on a range of important issues relating to trust, agency, norms, wellbeing, vaccine rollout,

(iii)   coalition-building and 'blurring of lines' between formal and informal civil society,

(iv)   the complex dynamics with protest movements and the lack of clarity around the nature of the role COVID-19 may have played, and

(v)   the opportunities for digital literacy and new spaces this can create for younger generations.

2C. New opportunities for **social protection**/safety net proposals e.g. universal basic income and re-evaluation of the **care economy**, and the implications for women's economic livelihoods.

2D. A potential **mental health** 'pandemic', linked to both disease pandemics and climate change-induced events and disasters, especially with young people. This is not a traditional area of expertise for many ICSOs but will need to be mainstreamed.

2E. Similarly, a **gender-based violence** 'pandemic' which will demand deepening and extending efforts, and understanding the connections to future crisis and climate change-induced events and upheavals.

2F. Increasing acceptance of **new economic models** e.g. doughnut economics, circular economies.

DRIVER CLUSTER 3: ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURAL RESOURCES, (UN)SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

3A. **Climate change** and second-order impacts remain a critical given for urgency and collaboration.

3B. Accelerating **biodiversity loss** is a critical issue that all ICSOs need to strengthen and connect to in their work and should not just be considered the remit of environmental and conservation organisations. In 2020, the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report rated this as the [second most impactful and third most likely risk for the next 10 years](#) (after failing to mitigate and adapt to climate change). It has critical interlinkages and implications for other areas of wellbeing, food security and health systems – and of course to how the COVID-19 and other pandemics emerged. There is also significant opportunity and potential for **[nature-based solutions](#)** and a nature-positive economy to play a major role in addressing these global interlinked challenges and crises.

3C. Renewed interest in sustainability and reducing **global consumption** by privileged elites at the cost of the majority of people. The observable (and often forced) lifestyle adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and radical reductions in the cost of alternative and renewable energy models now mean the economics can strongly work in favour of **energy diversification and decentralisation,** which ICSOs can work to promote and influence more explicitly.

DRIVER CLUSTER 4: TECHNOLOGY, INNOVATION, FUTURE OF WORK

4A. ICSOs are well aware of the **scale and speed of digitalisation and technological innovation** and its disruptive potential – such as artificial intelligence or blockchain for good, or surveillance and discriminatory algorithms for bad. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably highlighted a gap between the public and private sectors – and ICSOs - in rapidly innovating and delivering new digital services and means of public engagement. Digital innovation in ICSOs needs to go far beyond optimising internal business function efficiencies.

4B. There are also highly influential developments for civil society of how others are developing or using **digital technology**, including digital and data power concentration and inequality, surveillance capitalism, cyberinsecurity, dis/mis/malinformation, Internet shutdowns and other digital curtailments of freedom of expression, and risks to human rights and ethical standards. Addressing equity in these areas of work need to be mainstreamed by other organisations, beyond specialist rights- or tech-focused organisations.

4C. Huge disruptions and transformations for the **future of work**, education and livelihoods also remain important for ICSOs to monitor and understand inequality/equity dimensions, including the multiple shocks on young people.

DRIVER CLUSTER 5: DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, URBANISATION, MOBILITY, MIGRATION

ICSOs have minimal direct influence over these factors, such as ageing populations, the youth bulge in Africa, accelerating urbanisation, increased mobility and forced migration, but need to better understand the extensive implications for their work and varied interactions with other drivers in different parts of the world. They should be looked at through the lens of interconnecting with the effects of climate change and future pandemics, based on lessons learned and weaknesses exposed from the global scale of COVID-19.

SCANNING THE HORIZON

Sector Guide #2:

"Strategic Decision-Making in a Whirly World"

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