

Scanning the Horizon 2022: Annual Meeting

Date: 6-7 September, in-person

Location: WaterAid UK office, 6th Floor, 20 Canada Square, E14 5NN, London, UK

19 September 2022

Outcome

For the first time in three years the Scanning the Horizon community of Strategists and Futurists from ICSOs, CSO networks, philanthropy and consultancies was invited to meet again in person for its annual meeting. 16 participants used the two days at the WaterAid office in Canary Wharf, London, to share learnings and methodologies on trends, exchange on challenges to the integration and mainstreaming of foresight, inform the Centre's Scanning-SANE cross-over project and discuss the future of the Scanning Community. The ICSC is grateful for the commitment, energy and sense of community that made these two days fly by and left hopefully everyone with useful insights and inspiration.

Civic Space Futures

We began the meeting by introducing and then discussing the Centre's new project Anticipating Futures for Civil Society Operation Space. In a nutshell, this three-year project aims to complement the sector's reactive projects and models vis-à-vis restrictions to the operating space with futures-looking strategies. By crossing over between the Centre's community of Scanners and the civic space focused Solidarity Action Network (SANE) the Centre hopes to bridge between scenario and futures work to work out practical steps that increase preparedness for crises that will impact CSO operating space.

In a Q&A the group highlighted the following considerations:

- Need to think about partners outside the civil society sector, in particular corporates and academia, but also consider e.g. youth movements
- It could be of help to include enough digital capacity/knowledge in the project to also capture well the qualitative data as we move forward with the project
- Having national pilots could be a good avenue to involve the national level and ensure that the project will in fact be relevant to this level
- Scenario writing as envisaged in the project will be important, but equally, there should be a focus on signal scanning in particular weak signals and working out how that capacity can be strengthened in organisations
- Keeping scenarios up to date is a key challenge; some organisations would also like to improve their "translation" from scenarios to practical steps more
- It will be key to get participants in this project (and the ICF) out of the mode that it is about knowing the future but about embracing the uncertainty and stretching the imagination

The group completed a survey from the consultants working on this project with the ICSC, focusing on current organisational capacities to anticipate and respond to crises. In group discussions, participants then explored how to better integrate foresight and programme development and collected the following (existing or potential) strengths and (existing) weaknesses:



Strengths:

- Potential for consortium-working (networked)
- Increasing **awareness** of impact [of possible scenarios or trends]
- Building **flexibility** into programme design that can increase the ability to adapt
- Stretching people's imagination – capacity building at the individual level but also increasing the comfort to shift old goals
- **Resilience** can be strengthened, performance in crises improved
- Bolster through knowledge and expertise
- Potential for innovation and exploration
- There's more **diversity** of voices when both sides are involved
- Increased awareness of areas for agility

Barriers

- **Time, capacity, and resources** for building futures thinking into programme design
- “We're always in a crisis”, there are always short-term priorities, sometimes funding-dependent – high opportunity costs
- **Mindset**: There's not always the appetite on the programme implementation side, possibly due to not seeing the benefit, having the skills, finding it too abstract, not accessible
- Mindset struggle from knowing to imagining
- Lacking flexibility from **donors** to dedicate enough time and resources to futures/scenario/trend analysis work and integrating this into programme design
- Funding and donor-focused mindset
- Lack of direct **incentives** (corresponds with not seeing the benefits)

Disbenefits

- There's a resource trade-off and loss of focus
- Lacking the evidence that this will improve the impact?
- Can “spook” people

The ICSC thanks everyone for engaging in these exercises and discussions. The intel gathered here will be fed back to the project consultants and inform our next steps.

Community Rapid ‘Show and Tell, Discuss’ – Noora Vähäkari, FINGO

In this session, Noora Vähäkari, Advisor in Foresight and Development, at the Finish Develop CSO Network FINGO shared with the community her's and FINGO's latest steps in strengthening FINGO'S foresight capacities. Noora shared that the network recently established that the skill most missing and needed among the network's organisations was futures thinking. While FINGO had already developed Trend Cards in 2020 and 2022 to support the annual planning, they wanted to become more participatory and hands-on with their community and invited a group literally into the woods to explore the Futures Frequency methodology. During the weekend, camp participants explored desired futures and how to get there. The focus was on changing and exploring different ways of thinking. Participants feedback was that it was very good to leave the daily work behind. And while vision might have not been radical the exercise also helped to restore hope and the ability to move and look forward.

Noora's [presentation](#) can be found here and information on [Futures Frequency methodology here](#).



Participants then discussed how they include foresight into their planning cycles and what might help with getting colleagues on board:

- ActionAid UK has quarterly meetings to check in on (weak) signals colleagues are seeing
- Plan International includes regional offices in regular trend analysis/check-in
- A diverse representation of colleagues is key here
- Futures exercises could be used for team bonding and thereby “softly” introducing new ways of thinking and working
- Encouraged to generally simplify and make futures exercises for colleagues light touch, to help let go of perfectionism

Community Check-In: Global trends and game-changers?

Ready to discuss trends and game-changers, William Garrod, Director for Strategy and Transformation, from WaterAid led a session on reviewing [organisational trend analysis](#), what was missed, why, and whether there are any glaring blind spots.

Among the underestimated, missed and underexplored are:

- Conflict in Europe
- Weaponisation of Energy
- Demographic shifts (youth in Africa, declining population in China, aging in Europe, etc.)
- Scale and length of displacement
- Mental health issues, decreasing human resilience
- Cyber conflict (incl. disinformation)
- Digital threats incl. radicalisation, marginalisation, surveillance

Reasons for why some things were underestimated, missed, or still underexplored:

- Unconscious bias and lacking diversity in perspectives consulted (e.g. yes, we predicted war, but not in Europe)
- Some things are unpredictable (Black Swans)
- Organisational capacity gaps, e.g. on the (digital) technology side
- Need to look at the whole system; need for more intersectionality
- Tendency to take the current status for granted

Community Sharing I: World Vision Global Trends Futurestorming

In the next session, Sue Birchmore, Strategy Technical Director at World Vision International, guided the group through a future storming exercise. [Find the presentation and method to run this yourself here.](#)

Three break-out groups took to looking at the intersections of two trends and what possible effects they could have, assessing likelihood and impact. All groups chose digital transformation intersecting with one other trend. You can find the exercise’s results here:

[Digital Transformation and Inequality](#); [Digital Transformation and demographic change](#); [Digital Transformation and Climate Change](#).

The group then collectively chose the most likely and impactful possible developments from each group and identified potential action. The table below is the result of ad hoc brainstorming without subject experts present.



Possible futures	Stop	Speed up	Start
Climate&Dig. Trans.: Early Warning systems strengthened/digital as a tool for climate adaptation		Incorporate EWS into planning and programming, strengthen preparedness and resilience; put tech in hands of crisis-affected communities; influence traditional leaders	Advocate for equal access to and maintenance of EWS
Demography&Dig.Trans.: Marginalisation of older population with less digital skills/overexposure within digital space created opportunities for exploitation	Avoid unsafe engagement of youth activists in digital space	Advocate for governance, policies for protection; access to digital education	Be inclusive when using digital in projects; advocate for continuing alternatives to digital
Inequality and Dig.Trans.: Digital public services shut out sections of society	Digital programming without accessibility factored in	Educate vulnerable, excluded groups	Advocate for universal access to tech

Future of the Scanning Community

On the second day, we began by looking at the future of the Scanning community. Wolfgang Jamann, ED of the ICSC shared reflections on what has been going well and what has been challenging in regard to working with this community. The group then reflected on what it is they value in this community and what might be missing/should be strengthened or added:

Valued:

- Monthly newsletter
- A community of peers who are futures oriented; having a sounding board
- Already within the group there is a wide range of different organisations offering different perspectives
- The surgery sessions and the annual meetings provide useful time to concentrate on futures thinking
- Curation: concrete exposure to future forward thinking (newsletter, meeting), new tools and methodologies; specific lenses, e.g. the feminist futures workshop

What is missing:

- Can we come up with a strategic cycle for trends/analysis check-ins with each other?
- Futures 101 for starters in the topic



- Bringing in further knowledge and insights, e.g. from the private sector, specialist knowledge, in particular as we look at the futures we want to see
- Need to ensure greater diversity of perspectives, particularly Global South; broaden the scope to other civil society actors, e.g. movements and unions
- Explore focusing on a key topic (for a certain length of time or meeting) and bringing in the topic experts from the organisations
- Newsletter content feeds into a “database” so it is searchable
- Revive scanning squirrel concept

To sum up, the community values community learning, curation of new and interesting content from the ICSC’s side, hopes for more diversity, and suggests exploring think tank partnerships. There was much encouragement in that this community is very much valued, unique, and needed. The ICSC is grateful for the positive and constructive feedback, in particular, the individual commitments given. We will invite colleagues to further shape the next phase of this community.

Community Sharing II: Learning from Bond’s Future Dialogues

In this community sharing session Helen Rumford, Policy Advisor, and Abigael Baldoumas, Policy and Advocacy Manager from the UK development NGO network Bond shared plans, content, challenges, and successes of their ongoing Futures Dialogues project. [The details of the project can be found here.](#)

Helen and Abigael then split the groups into two and discussed respectively how influencing strategies vis-à-vis the government and the sector could look like

The following were key takeaways from the respective discussions:

- Not just two or three sets of targets, but also two distinct streams – looking for small, specific short-term gains (incremental) while at the same time seeking large-scale systemic change (mindset shift). Those require different tactics.
- For incremental changes:
 - Think about the right targets – what is best aimed at specialists, what is more political?
 - Junior ministers as messengers – a longer game?
 - HMG futures group – horizon scanning – building relationships there
- For mindset shift:
 - Using journals, journalists, and think tanks to shift the terms of debate; influencing party donors, expert advisors (futures lab with them); engaging with behavior change experts
 - Who are the right messengers?
 - Not enough to just target the UK – link up/create global networks to influence decision-makers beyond the UK; Tap into other domestic networks – GADN, A4GH, etc.
- Where is the public in all of this? The importance of public pressure – how are you reaching them? (see also above)
- The potential is greater for the sector to adopt these ideas – lots of conversations happening, coalescing around decolonisation, local leadership – shows openness; the sector might also get excited over specific elements in this



- Think about who is being targeted within the sector. Is targeting today's leaders the best approach?
- Who are potential allies within domestic spaces – unions, social movements, domestic organisations
- Out of the box: develop a Virtual Reality model, develop an online gaming system

Community Sharing III: Philanthropy and civil society foresight session

In the final content session of the day Pierre-Olivier Bigo, Policy Analyst, Foresight and Analysis at the Open Society Foundations, shared how OSF was currently tackling foresight. This session had to be pivoted spontaneously as the other philanthropy representative could not participate due to unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, the session focused more on OSF and their foresight work as well as their role in the sector rather than a session on philanthropy more generally.

The group collectively discussed a range of core challenges, some controversially. A key challenge for a donor seems to be an expectation (perhaps more so of themselves) to have the answers and analysis ready before grant-making and this can result in (prospective) grantees pivoting their work towards OSF's analysis rather than possibly their original plans and analysis. This then in turn limits the diversity of perspectives and analysis, as well as limitations to building the foresight and analysis capacity of grantees. There is therefore a struggle between being humble and open, and living up to the responsibility given the resources able to dedicate to analysis and foresight. Participants stressed the importance of flexible grant-making, also allowing grantees to build foresight capacities. Different modalities for inviting diverging perspectives to break the "donor dilemma" were discussed. There was also a slightly controversial discussion over a donor's "neutrality", with several believing that such a thing does not exist and that OSF with its clear mandate for an open society is also looked towards to be anything but neutral as it comes to defending democratic and open society values.

Closing and Evaluation

The wrap-up and evaluation of the meeting once again showed that the community very much enjoyed being together in person again. Getting peer support but also engaging with each other in future exercises and content discussion was valued. Being exposed to different projects and methodologies was a highlight for several participants. The active engagement and presentations of all participants were highly appreciated.

Final shout-outs from participants and the ICSC go to former colleague Vicky Tongue for having accompanied and shaped this community (and prepared most of this meeting), Ryan Stanton for logistics from far-way Berlin, WaterAid UK for hosting us, and the event team from WaterAid UK for their fantastic support throughout!