

International Civil Society Centre

CASE STUDY

From Vision to Implementation:

The World YMCA's 'Bite-Sized' Approach to Foresight

At a glance

Embedding foresight in a movement built on local autonomy is no easy task. For the World YMCA – a federation of more than 120 National Movements representing more than 12,000 local YMCAs that span diverse cultural, political, and operational realities – this challenge set in motion a transformative journey toward a shared vision and stronger strategic alignment.

In such a decentralised ecosystem, progress does not come from top-down directives but from inclusive processes that foster collective insight and commitment. This case study follows the World YMCA's introduction of foresight in 'bite-sized' ways: shaping the development of their Vision 2030, strengthening strategic thinking, and encouraging internal experimentation, all while nurturing ongoing dialogue across the movement.

Where it all began

The **World YMCA**'s purpose is to strengthen, connect, and represent YMCAs globally, empowering them to deliver greater **impact for young people** and their communities. Guided by a shared mission to help individuals to thrive in body, mind, and spirit, the organisation works across **four strategic priorities: building capacity** and **leadership**, enhancing **collective impact**, amplifying **youth voices**, and ensuring **organisational sustainability**.

The YMCA's decentralised structure dates back to 1855, when delegates from nine countries met in Paris and adopted the Paris Basis, a foundational agreement combining shared Christian values with autonomy for each national and local YMCA to shape its own activities in response to local realities. While this model has fostered strong local ownership and adaptability, it has also brought its share of challenges in ensuring coordination and strategic coherence across the movement.

> **"We don't impose, we facilitate and coordinate. This approach inspires us to work creatively and collaboratively to build genuine buy-in across the worldwide YMCA Movement."**
>
> Răzvan-Victor Sassu, Head of Strategy and Policy, World YMCA

Within this unique context of balancing global vision with local freedom, the World YMCA began its foresight journey.

What needed to change

Foresight emerged as both a **response to external disruption** and a **catalyst for internal unity**. A key moment for the organisation came during the YMCA's 175th anniversary celebration in London in 2019, where over 3,000 young leaders, staff, guests, and volunteers from around the world gathered to reflect on the organisation's legacy and future.

As part of the programme, 500 young people and partner organisations participated in foresight workshops facilitated by Forum for the Future. These sessions encouraged participants to imagine the YMCA's role in the decades ahead. The takeaway was clear: To remain relevant and impactful in a **rapidly changing world**, the YMCA needed a **shared global strategy**.

That urgency only grew in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed systemic vulnerabilities and highlighted the need for collective resilience. In response, the World YMCA launched 'Padare', a grassroots digital initiative inspired by African community problem-solving traditions. Hundreds of YMCA stakeholders from across the Movement participated in online consultations, surfacing concerns and new priorities.

These insights became the foundation for **Vision 2030**, a global strategy co-developed over three years and formally adopted at the YMCA World Council in 2022. Centred on 4 pillars – ***Community Wellbeing, Meaningful Work, Sustainable Planet, and Just World*** – Vision 2030 offers a shared roadmap for the YMCA Movement.

By 2023, a new set of questions had emerged: Was Vision 2030 actively shaping decision making, or was it at risk of remaining a symbolic reference point? Were national YMCAs adapting their own strategies to align with the shared vision or defaulting to business as usual?



How they went about it

Rather than rolling out a single foresight programme, the World YMCA has pursued a layered, incremental approach. **Futures thinking** has been introduced through **large-scale gatherings, leadership retreats, partnerships with external actors**, and **internal strategy processes**. These touchpoints, big and small, are **seeding a culture of anticipation** across the Movement.

Accelerator Summit: Embedding foresight into strategic reflection (Mombasa, Kenya - October 2024)

Two years after adopting Vision 2030, the World YMCA convened its first-ever Accelerator Summit in Mombasa as a deliberate 'mid-journey checkpoint'. More than 450 participants from 60 countries gathered to assess progress, spotlight challenges, and reconnect with shared objectives in a rapidly changing world shaped by post-pandemic recovery, climate shocks, and evolving youth expectations.

Approach

While the Summit featured a wide range of sessions and themes, one key workshop aimed to raise awareness of strategic foresight as a tool for navigating complexity and change. Facilitated by the International Civil Society Centre, *"Shaping the Future: Harnessing Strategic Foresight for Civil Society"* introduced the concept of strategic foresight as a way to navigate uncertainty by imagining and preparing for a range of possible futures.

Foresight tools and process

Grounded in the *Toolkit for Tomorrow: Anticipating Civil Society Futures*, the session followed a structured format designed to make foresight both accessible and actionable:

1. **Introduction to the *Toolkit for Tomorrow:*** Participants were introduced to the toolkit's purpose, structure, and practical application in civil society contexts.
2. **Crafting future scenarios:** In small groups, participants used a **2×2 matrix** to explore how the future might unfold based on the interaction of two major trends: **growing inequality and climate injustice**, identified by participants as key challenges likely to shape communities by 2030.
3. **Exploring scenarios:** Each group then examined its future narratives, unpacking the risks, opportunities, and implications of each narrative for the YMCA and its partners.

4. **Translating scenarios into action:** Discussions focused on identifying early actions to address these imagined futures, such as strengthening advocacy efforts, working closely with local communities, investing in inclusive partnerships, and prioritising long-term impact over short-term gains.

5. **Reflections and next steps:** The session closed with group reflections on key insights and ideas for how participants could experiment with futures thinking in their own contexts.

Movement Strengthening Meeting: Backcasting from a dream (Chicago, USA - January 2024)

Earlier in 2024, the World YMCA convened a global senior leadership strategic meeting in Chicago with about 15 senior staff and representatives from the four regional alliances and several major national YMCAs (including USA, Canada, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Germany, and England & Wales). The meeting objective was to co-create a Movement Strengthening Strategy that could serve as a coherent framework for organisational development across the decentralised YMCA Movement.

Approach

The group focused on articulating an aspirational vision, called the **'Movement Strengthening Dream'**, of what success might look like in 2030 if the YMCA achieved its ambitions. This exercise invited participants to imagine a future characterised by stronger coordination, shared tools, and more coherent approaches to supporting national and local YMCAs. Interestingly, the idea to 'start from the future' was suggested by one of the participants, not YMCA headquarters, underscoring participants' ownership of the process. The group applied **backcasting**, working backwards from the desired 2030 future to identify the milestones, systems, and behaviours needed to reach it.

Foresight tools and process

The process unfolded in several stages, bridging past, present, and future:

1. **Needs analysis (past and present):** Participants began with an assessment of existing challenges, including the lack of coordination across national YMCAs, fragmented funding flows, and inconsistent definitions of 'movement strengthening'.

2. **Dream creation (future vision):** Participants then co-wrote the **'dream'**, a narrative envisioning how YMCAs could operate in a more coordinated, impactful ecosystem by 2030. This narrative was formally embedded in **a written strategy**, rather than remaining on flipcharts. While aspirational and not a guarantee, its inclusion in strategic documents provided a clear direction for the future the Movement hopes to build toward.

3. **Backcasting (pathways to the dream):** From the dream, participants worked backward to determine necessary milestones, such as piloting an **organisational health assessment**, designing a new **movement-wide organisational development process**, embedding **mentoring and peer-coaching mechanisms**, and exploring the creation of a **Movement Strengthening Fund** to better coordinate funding flows.

To enhance buy-in, 80% of meeting sessions were facilitated by participants rather than World YMCA staff. This distributed facilitation approach diffused responsibility and ensured that foresight methods were experienced as a collective practice rather than a centrally driven exercise.

The 'start from the future' approach also helped avoid premature debates about feasibility:

> **"When you imagine a future ten years away, people don't immediately say, 'This is impossible'. They allow themselves to dream, and then we work backwards to make it realistic."**
>
> Răzvan-Victor Sassu, Head of Strategy and Policy, World YMCA

Other foresight touchpoints: Bite-sized experimentation

- **Internal leadership retreats** (e.g., Geneva, 2024): **Scenario planning** was applied in leadership retreats focused on crisis management and long-term risks.
- **Trend analysis:** The World YMCA engaged with two of the four pillars from its Vision 2030 global strategy: *Meaningful Work* and *Sustainable Planet.* To explore these areas through a futures lens, the World YMCA partnered with Deloitte to examine the future of employment and partnered with Ernst & Young to analyse environmental and climate trends. The resulting trend analyses and strategies deepened understanding within the movement and marked the YMCA's first collaboration with corporate actors in futures-focused thought leadership.

What they created

These foresight touchpoints generated concrete outputs that now shape the YMCA's strategy:

- **Fostering awareness through scenarios (Mombasa, 2024):** At the Mombasa Summit, participants experimented with **scenario building** to explore how challenges such as inequality and climate injustice might shape communities by 2030. Time was too short to develop full-fledged scenarios at the Summit, yet the exercise demonstrated the application of futures thinking. More importantly, it inspired participants to see foresight as relevant to their own contexts and contributed to greater willingness within the YMCA movement to use foresight in upcoming processes, including a foresight exercise planned for the YMCA World Council 2026.

- **Building a 'Movement Strengthening Dream' (Chicago, 2024):** The leadership group co-wrote a two-page narrative describing how YMCAs could operate in a more coordinated, impactful ecosystem by 2030. Unlike the outcomes of previous exercises, the 'dream' was formally embedded in the *Movement Strengthening Strategy*, accompanied by a **backcasted roadmap** which included assessing organisational health, joining and coordinating available resources, and providing mentoring and coaching.

- **Exploring futures through global partnerships:** Trend analyses with Deloitte and Ernst & Young resulted in published outputs, such as *Future Ready: Reimagining Meaningful Work for Young People* (2024), positioning the World YMCA as a thought leader on youth employment.

- **Embracing the 'future-ready' agenda:** Becoming 'future-ready' has evolved into a unifying narrative that is now embedded in the World YMCA's 2025–2028 strategic plan. The strategic plan positions the movement as helping young people, communities, and employers embrace future readiness, providing evidence of foresight's influence on the highest levels of organisational framing.



Changes that followed

The cumulative effect of these activities has been a growing recognition within the YMCA Movement that foresight is both valuable and adaptable:

- **Raised awareness:** Many participants in the Mombasa Summit encountered foresight for the first time and returned home eager to experiment at the national level.
- **Integration into core processes:** The Chicago meeting demonstrated that foresight can directly shape global strategy.
- **Ecosystem mindset:** Engaging corporate partners and civil society allies in foresight broadened the YMCA's perspective.
- **Strategic reframing:** Embracing future readiness shifted the global framing of the YMCA's strategy.



Lessons they learnt

Embedding foresight in a global movement like the YMCA was never going to be a linear journey, and several key lessons were brought to light through this journey:

Bridge foresight and operational reality

Foresight can feel abstract or disconnected from immediate organisational needs. As Răzvan-Victor Sassu, Head of Strategy and Policy at World YMCA, observed: *"People want to know: Where is this going? Am I just dreaming in the clouds, or will this lead somewhere?"* These questions reveal an ongoing challenge that can be addressed by helping participants see the concrete outcomes of futures thinking and ensuring that foresight is used to **support real-world decision making**.

Don't centralise, coordinate

The YMCA's ethos of local autonomy means that foresight cannot be imposed from above. The challenge facing the organisation lies in enabling shared frameworks and tools while respecting local ownership.

Start early and include broadly

The decentralised nature of the YMCA Movement meant that not all national YMCAs were able to work alongside their local branches during Vision 2030's early development. National YMCAs that worked together with their local branches during the foresight and strategy process in 2019–2020 are now the furthest along in implementation. This observation underscores the critical insight that **foresight is most effective when it is inclusive from the start.**

Make foresight practical and accessible

To build credibility and traction, futures thinking must be tangible. Grounding foresight in real-world relevance makes it easier for people to engage.

> **"Try to make it [foresight] as practical as possible so people can see the outcome. Where will that outcome lead to?"**
>
> Răzvan-Victor Sassu, Head of Strategy and Policy, World YMCA

Open the circle

Involving external partners enriched discussions and signalled a shift toward an ecosystem mindset.

What comes next

Foresight is not yet a formalised system across the YMCA Movement, but its value is increasingly recognised. The next milestone will be the YMCA **World Council 2026** in Toronto, which will gather about 1,000 delegates. At the heart of this gathering will be five new **'Solution Studios'**, defined as interactive spaces in which members co-create responses to pressing challenges and imagine future directions. One of these will be the ***Tomorrow Party***, a dedicated time travel exercise. While the exact theme is still under discussion (e.g., future of young people, YMCA at 200 years old in 2044, or AI-driven change), the aim of the *Tomorrow Party* is to collectively imagine the YMCA's long-term relevance. The decision to include this foresight component in the World Council gathering is fixed, marking the first time foresight will serve as a core element of a World Council programme.

> **"Foresight helped us connect the dots, not just to envision a bold future, but to start walking toward it together."**
>
> Răzvan-Victor Sassu, Head of Strategy and Policy, World YMCA



© International Civil Society Centre

International Civil Society Centre

From Vision to Implementation:

The World YMCA's 'Bite-Sized' Approach to Foresight

October 2025

Written by Patricia Mugenzi
Edited by Eva Gondor, International Civil Society Centre

About us

At the International Civil Society Centre, we work to ensure the international civil society sector remains resilient, relevant, responsive and forward looking, so it can better support the most vulnerable and marginalised communities worldwide.

Get in touch

If you have any questions or feedback, get in touch with Eva Gondor from the International Civil Society Centre at egondor@icscentre.org

IN COOPERATION WITH

Sida