What is Strategic Foresight?

UNITED NATIONS
ESCWA

Shared Prosperity **Dignified Life**

Ahmed Al-Awah, Chief,
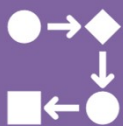**Data Science and Decision Support Division**

Session Objectives

1. Clarify the concept of strategic foresight and how it differs from traditional planning.

2. Examine how foresight relates to other disciplines

3. Discuss practical steps to build a foresight ecosystem.

What is Strategic Foresight?

Strategic foresight is a **systematic approach to imagining multiple, plausible futures to inform better decisions today**. It embraces uncertainty by exploring a range of scenarios.

Focus: Goes **beyond short-term forecasts to consider emerging trends, uncertainty**, and potential disruptions.

Outcome: Informs strategy, innovation, and policy development by **providing insights into possible future pathways.**
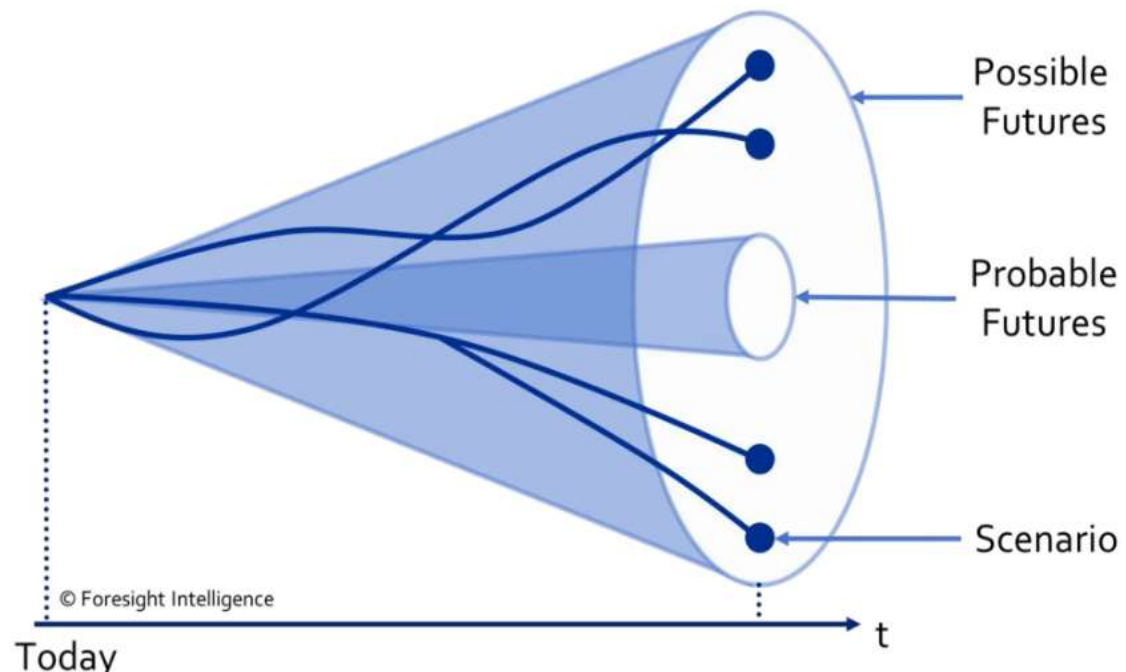
Importance: Governments and organizations operate in **rapidly changing environments**; strategic foresight **helps anticipate opportunities and manage risks**.
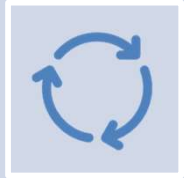
Key Characteristics

- **Long-term Perspective:** Looks beyond the immediate planning horizon, often considering 5, 10, or even 20+ years. **Challenges short-termism** in policy or business decision-making.

- **Multiple Futures:** Goes beyond single-point forecasts.

- **Systems Thinking:** Recognizes interdependencies and second-order effects.

- **Proactive & Adaptive:** Encourages agility and resilience.

Scenarios are (strategic) foresight tools

Possible Futures

Probable Futures

Scenario

© Foresight Intelligence

Today

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Foresight vs Traditional Planning

Traditional Planning: Often **linear**, reliant on **historical data**, **assumes relatively stable conditions**.

Strategic Foresight: Embraces uncertainty, includes weak signals and **emerging issues**, encourages **creativity and divergent thinking** before convergent decision-making.

Foresight vs Forecast

	Forecast	Foresight
Epistemology	Predicting, explaining a future state	Thought experiments about future developments
Criteria	Probability	Plausibility
Change	Incremental	Structural/fundamental
Goal	Foreknowing the future, creating knowledge about the future	Better understanding of complex environment, making sense of an uncertain futures, avoiding surprise
Approach	Context independent information gathering	**Structured group process**

Relationship to other skills and techniques

- **Futures Studies**
  - Overlap: Strategic foresight sits under the broader umbrella of futures studies (which includes forecasting, horizon scanning, trend analysis).
  - Difference: Strategic foresight is more action-oriented—designed to inform real-time decision-making and strategy.
- **Horizon Scanning**
  - Definition: Systematic examination of potential threats, opportunities, and likely future developments.
  - How It Relates: Provides early warnings and feeds insights into foresight processes.
- **Scenario Planning**
  - How It Relates: A core tool within strategic foresight to explore different contexts and stress-test policies or strategies.

- **Risk Management**
  - How It Relates: Strategic foresight informs risk management by identifying "unknown unknowns," enabling more robust contingency planning.
- **Design Thinking & Innovation**
  - How It Relates: Foresight insights can shape design thinking processes by suggesting future-user needs and guiding innovation priorities.
- **Policy Analysis & Evaluation**
  - How It Relates: Foresight integrates future considerations into policy analysis, highlighting potential long-term impacts and trade-offs.

Core Strategic Foresight Activities

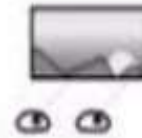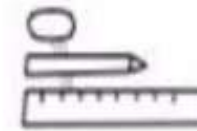| Framing	Scanning	Forecasting	Visioning	Planning	Acting
Scoping the project: attitude, audience, work environment, rationale and purpose, objectives, and teams.	Collecting information: the system, history and context of the issue and how to scan for information regarding the future of the issue	Describing baseline and alternative futures: drivers and uncertainties, tools, diverging and converging approaches, and alternatives	Choosing a preferred future: implications of the forecast, and envisioning designed outcomes	Organizing to achieve the vision: strategy, options, and plans	Implementing the plan: communicating the results, developing action agendas, and institutionalizing strategic thinking and intelligence systems.
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Focal Issue	Information	Baseline & Alternative Futures	Preferred Future	Strategy & Plans	Actions

What is a Future Scenario?

- A narrative/story about the future, describing a plausible, coherent and challenging picture of the environment

- Provides a consistent account of how the world gets to that future state, from the current reality

- Scenarios always come in sets of more than one, to express the uncertainty of the future

- Good scenarios are:
    - Plausible (not predictions)
    - Internally consistent (not extrapolations)
    - Relevant and challenging (not best case/worse case/'blue sky'

- Require solid and in-depth research and gathering of opinions from a diverse group of people – all relevant stakeholders (internal and external)
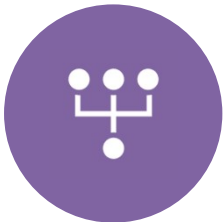
Key Components of a Foresight Ecosystem

Leadership & Culture: Ongoing commitment and openness to innovation.

Skills & Capacity: Practitioners trained in foresight methods.

Processes & Structures: Dedicated foresight units and integrated workflows.
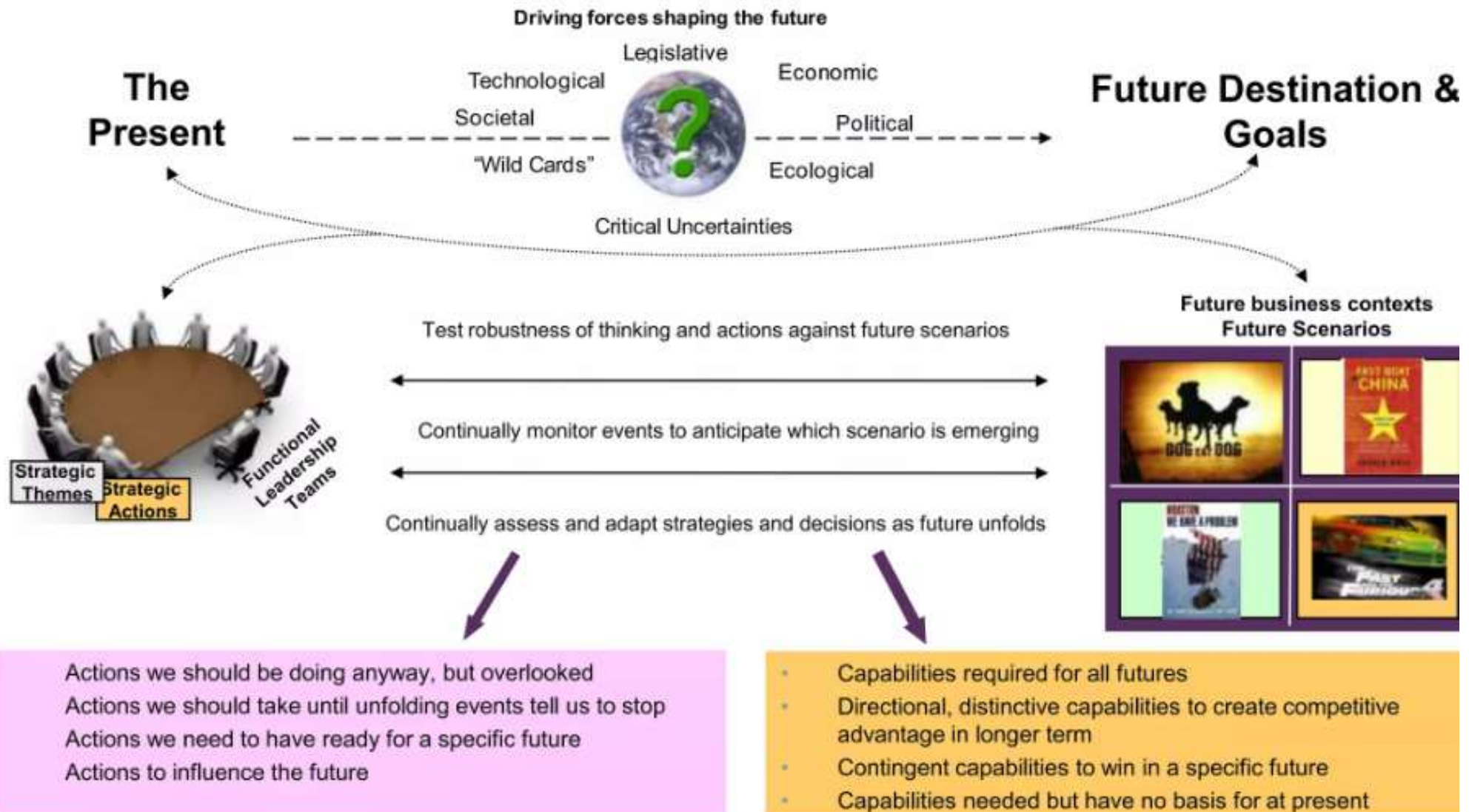
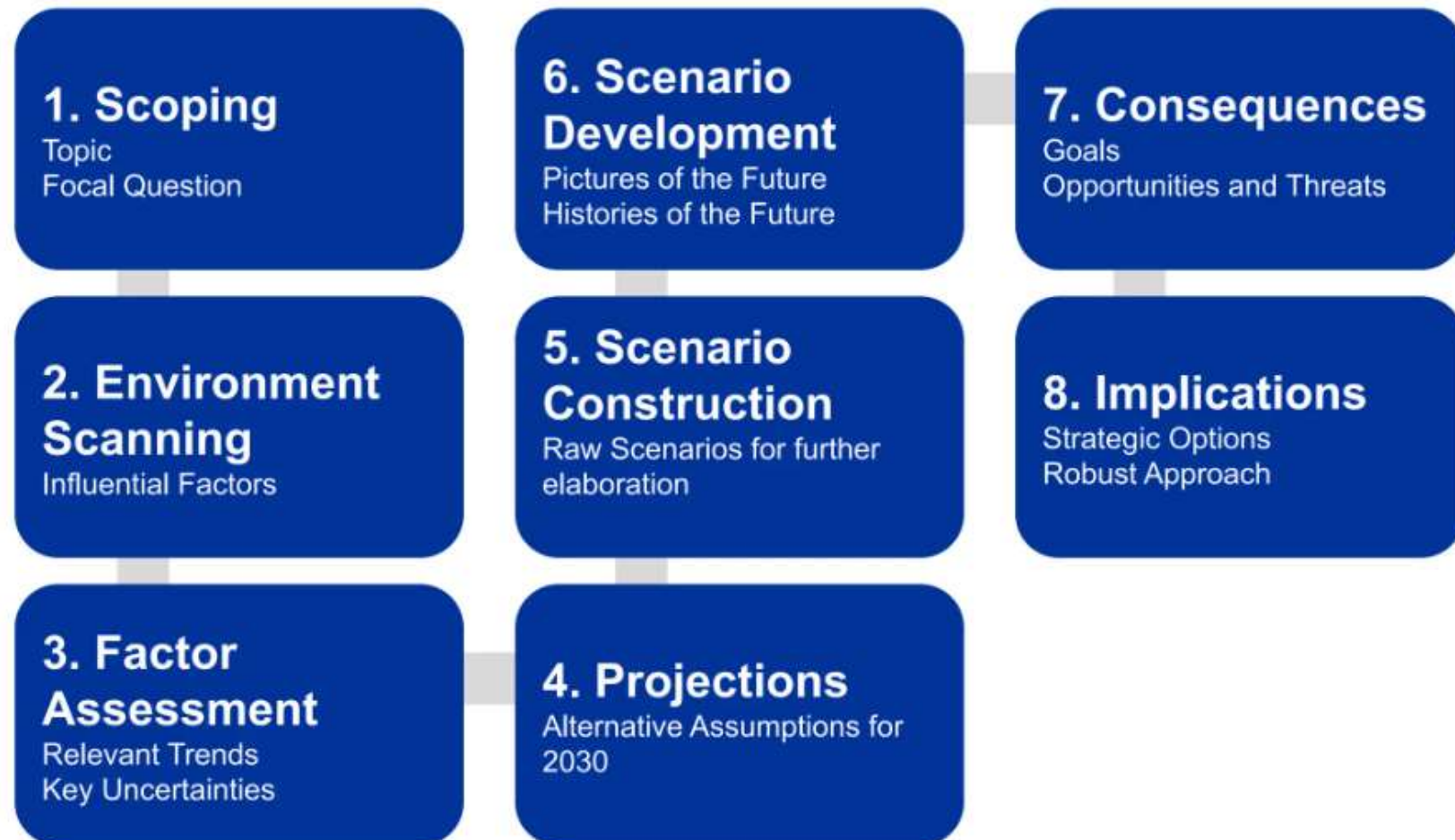**Tools & Methodologies:** Trend analysis, Delphi, scenario planning, etc.

Stakeholder Engagement: Collaboration across sectors and disciplines.
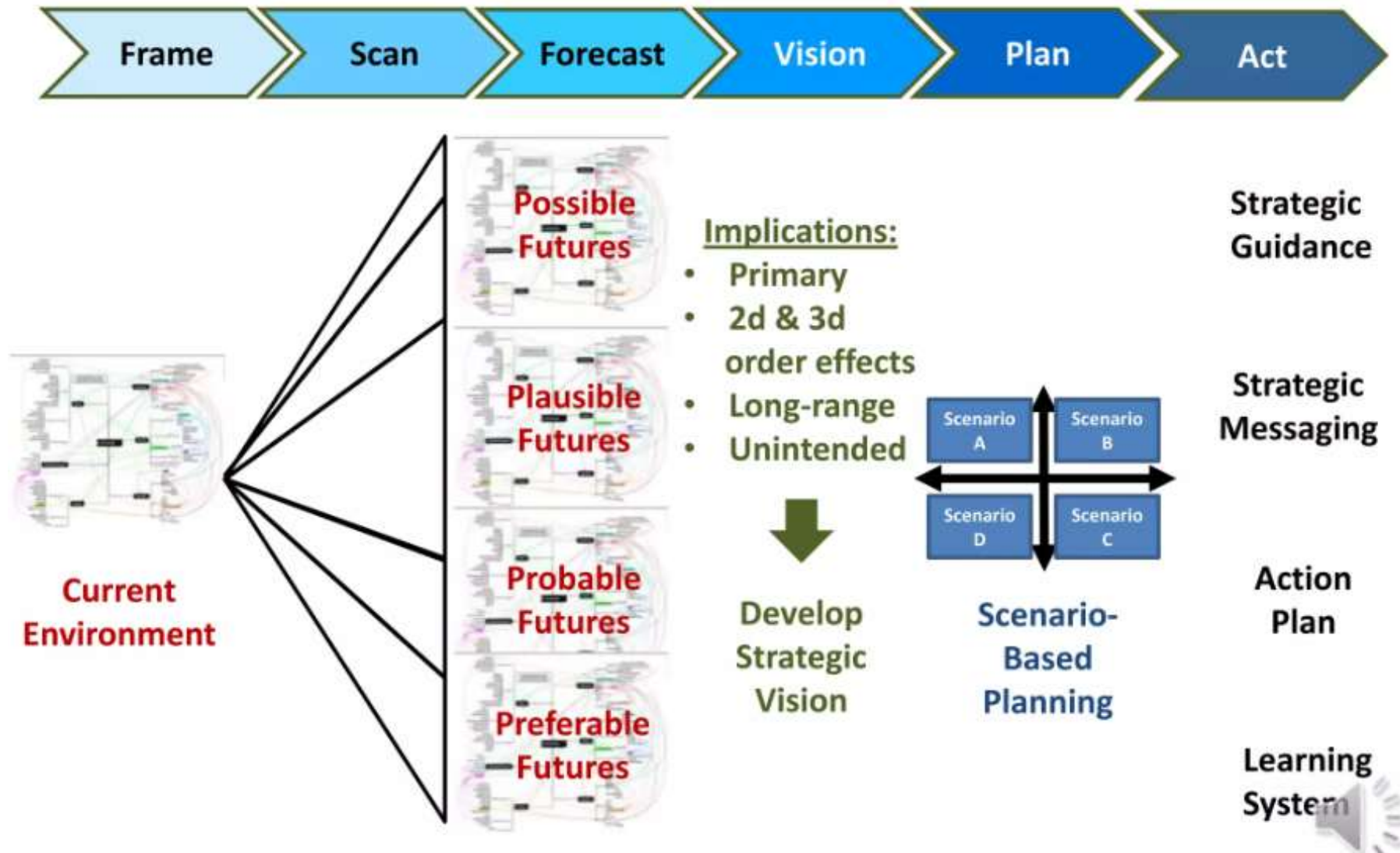
High-Level Strategic Foresight Ecosystem

Driving forces shaping the future

The Present

Technological
Legislative
Societal
"Wild Cards"

Economic
Political
Ecological

Critical Uncertainties

Future Destination & Goals

Strategic Themes Strategic Actions Functional Leadership Teams

Test robustness of thinking and actions against future scenarios

Continually monitor events to anticipate which scenario is emerging

Continually assess and adapt strategies and decisions as future unfolds

Future business contexts
Future Scenarios

Actions we should be doing anyway, but overlooked
Actions we should take until unfolding events tell us to stop
Actions we need to have ready for a specific future
Actions to influence the future

- Capabilities required for all futures
- Directional, distinctive capabilities to create competitive advantage in longer term
- Contingent capabilities to win in a specific future
- Capabilities needed but have no basis for at present

Adapted from IDON Scenario methods

Building a Strategic Foresight Approach

Approach

1. Scoping
Topic
Focal Question

2. Environment Scanning
Influential Factors

3. Factor Assessment
Relevant Trends
Key Uncertainties

4. Projections
Alternative Assumptions for 2030

5. Scenario Construction
Raw Scenarios for further elaboration

6. Scenario Development
Pictures of the Future
Histories of the Future

7. Consequences
Goals
Opportunities and Threats

8. Implications
Strategic Options
Robust Approach

Strategic Foresight Methodology

Best Practices

Start with a pilot project or small-scale exercise.

Embed foresight in strategic planning and budgeting.

Establish communities of practice to share insights.

Provide continuous training and professional development.

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits: Improved agility, risk management, and innovation.

Challenges: Short-termism, resource constraints, organizational silos.

Mitigation: Demonstrate foresight's value through pilot successes and leadership buy-in.

Resources & Support

International Organizations & UN Bodies:

ESCWA: provide region-specific workshops, toolkits, and guidance.

OECD: Publishes guides on strategic foresight for policy, including methods and case studies.

UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence: Foresight resources focusing on public sector innovation.

Government Agencies & Specialized Government Offices

Policy Horizons Canada: Offers future-oriented research reports, frameworks, and courses.

UK Government Office for Science: Produces Foresight Reports on global challenges.

Dubai Futures Foundation: Produces foresight reports and training programs

Professional Associations & Networks:

World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF), Association of Professional Futurists (APF), Millennium Project: Provide knowledge-sharing platforms and events.

Universities & Online Courses & Toolkits:

Institutions/Universities with futures or foresight programs (e.g., University of Houston Foresight Program, Finland Futures Research Centre).
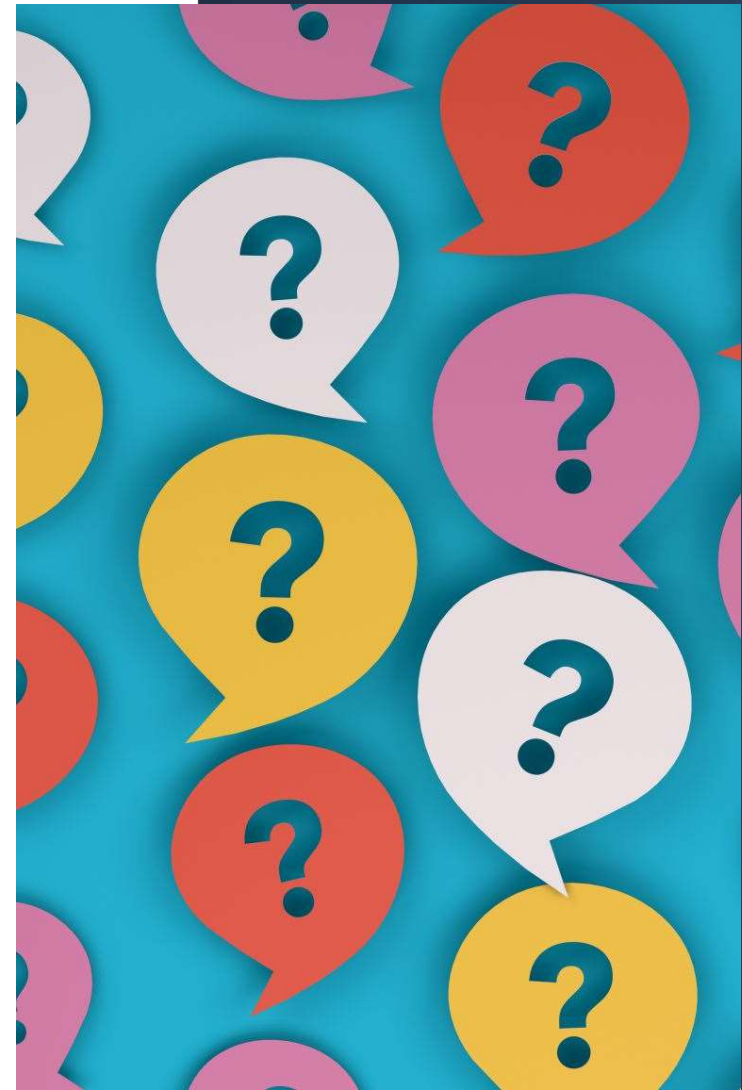
Coursera, edX, and specialized platforms offering foresight and futures studies modules.Practitioner toolkits

Academic & Research Futures Labs and think tanks providing frameworks and training

Conclusion & Key Takeaways

- **Strategic Foresight is Essential**: It equips policymakers and organizations to navigate complexity and uncertainty with greater confidence.

- **Holistic Ecosystem:** Building a foresight culture requires more than just a single exercise; it involves leadership, training, processes, and continuous engagement.

- **Integration with Other Techniques**: Foresight complements risk management, policy analysis, design thinking, and innovation, creating a comprehensive strategy framework.

- **Action Steps:**
  - Identify small-scale pilot projects for immediate application.
  - Seek available resources and networks to build internal capacity.
  - Advocate for dedicated foresight roles or units to ensure sustained impact.

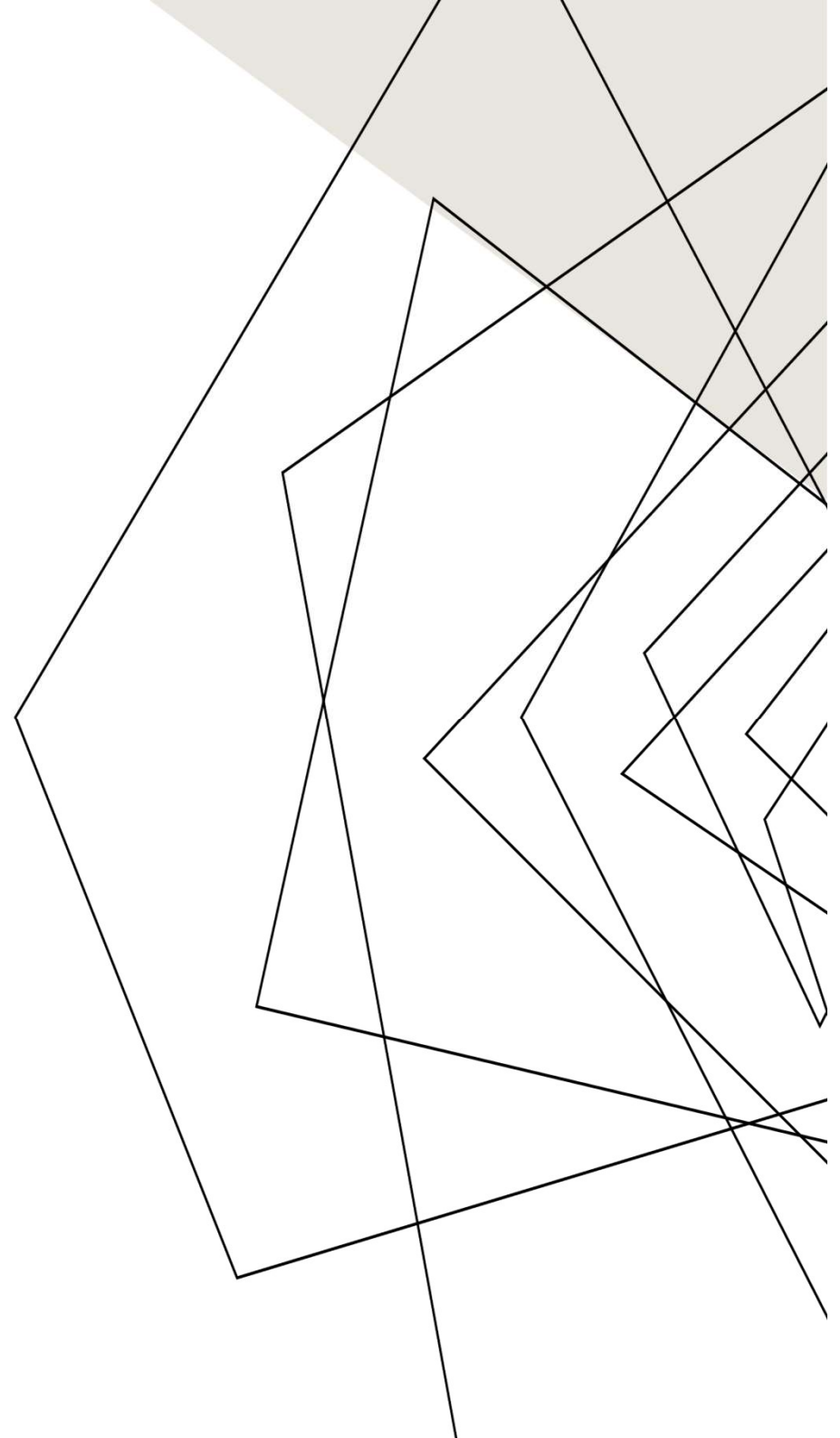Strategic foresight helps **navigate uncertainty** and **shape a more sustainable future**.

COUNTRY
EXAMPLES

DUBAI FUTURE FOUNDATION (UAE)

The Dubai Future Foundation was set up to guide Dubai's transformation into a hub of innovation and future-ready governance. It conducts horizon scanning to identify emerging technological and social trends—such as AI, blockchain, and immersive technologies—and translates these insights into pilot projects and policy recommendations. This approach has helped create forward-looking regulations and initiatives, from autonomous transport strategies to digital service delivery across government entities.
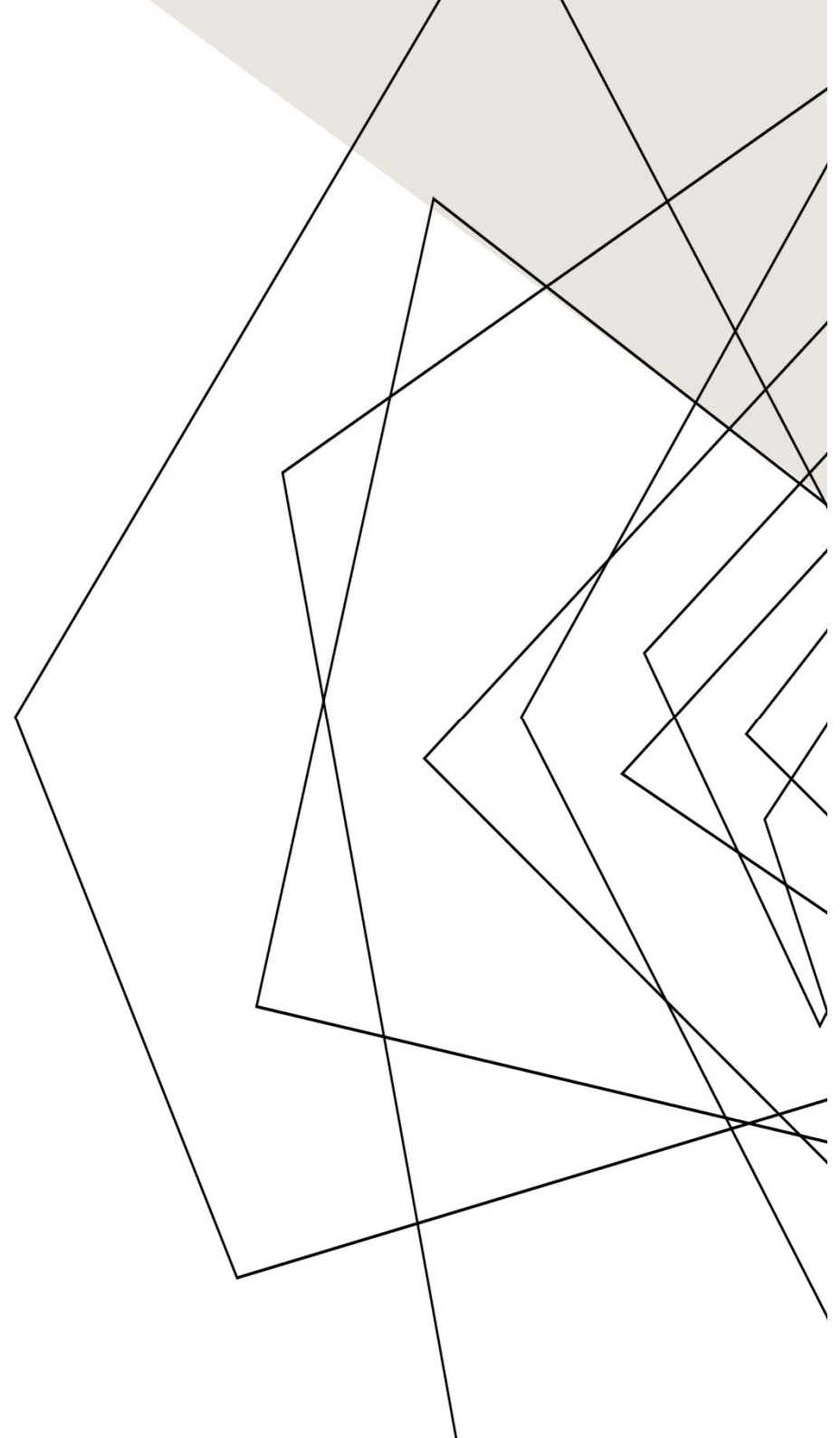
A key success factor is the high-level support from Dubai's leadership, which has allowed the foundation to secure resources and shape city-wide priorities. Furthermore, public-facing initiatives like the Museum of the Future engage citizens and businesses alike, fostering a broader culture of innovation and openness to change.

19

POLICY HORIZONS CANADA (GOVERNMENT OF CANADA)

Policy Horizons Canada is a federal government unit tasked with scanning the horizon for emerging challenges and opportunities that could significantly impact Canadian society. Through methods like scenario development and systems mapping, they produce forward-looking studies on topics such as the future of work, demographic changes, and digital transformations.

Policy Horizons collaborates with multiple government departments, ensuring that long-term insights feed directly into policy design and legislative planning. Their published reports encourage interdepartmental dialogue and integrate a cross-cutting view of future risks and opportunities, helping policymakers make informed, future-proof decisions.

EUROPEAN UNION'S FORESIGHT NETWORK (ESPAS)

The European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) coordinates foresight activities across key EU institutions, including the European Commission, European Parliament, and the European External Action Service. Through joint scenario planning exercises, ESPAS develops shared visions of Europe's role in a shifting geopolitical landscape.

By aligning the long-term priorities of multiple EU bodies, ESPAS strengthens policy coherence in areas like climate policy, digital transition, and managing demographic changes. This collaborative foresight approach also underpins strategic funding decisions, such as research and innovation investments under programs like Horizon Europe.