

Explanation of the concepts, “future-proofing”, “anticipatory and forward-looking”, a “future-oriented organizational culture” and “futures literacy”, as provided by the Co-Facilitators for the intergovernmental process for the Declaration on Future Generations during informal consultations on 1 July 2024

Future-proofing

Future-proofing is the process of anticipating future shocks and stresses and striving to minimize their potential negative effects. Future-proofing has also been increasingly adopted in the public sector by governments and international organizations, particularly in response to the challenges posed by climate change.

This practice is widely utilized in numerous industries, including infrastructure, insurance, industrial design, medicine, electronics, and technology.

Within the United Nations, the UN Futures Lab’s “*Strategic Foresight Guide*” defines future-proofing as examining areas such as operations, workforce planning, and ways of working to ensure the organization is prepared for various future possibilities. This includes potential changes in talent needs or another global pandemic.

The OECD defines future-proofing as “stress-testing existing or proposed strategies and policies”. The OECD closely links future-proofing to related concepts such as strategic foresight, which you can explore further at their Strategic Foresight website.

Similarly, the European Union views future-proofing decision-making as the practice of implementing the best processes to solve future problems at the right time. The concept has also been utilized in the Caribbean, for example by Barbados, in future-proofing sustainable tourism within the Caribbean region.

Future-proofing an organization means anticipating change, increasing resilience, maintaining a competitive advantage, and mitigating risks. These initiatives help organizations achieve sustainable success for themselves and their employees, regardless of future uncertainties.

Anticipatory and forward-looking

The terms “anticipatory” and “forward-looking” have gained significant recognition, including through the work of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), which has provided best practices and guiding principles for the financial protocols of Anticipatory Action (AA) funds. This approach can be used to develop future scenarios based on data and information.

In an era of multiplying and interrelated risks and challenges, fostering a culture of anticipatory and forward-looking analysis is essential for building resilience and ensuring sustainable development for future generations.

Future-oriented organizational structure

In business research, a “future-oriented” or “future-ready” organizational structure refers to the way an organization considers its long-term prospects, goals, and future. Such organizations adopt a proactive approach to the future, working either implicitly through the way employees perceive and analyze information or explicitly through methods like scenario planning and trajectory analysis.

Fostering a future-oriented organizational structure is one of the Common Principles on Future Generations, endorsed by the UN System. According to this principle, the UN System should strive to

implement governance and accountability that are fit for the future. This includes reviewing and strengthening existing UN rules, policies, and procedures to better identify and account for future generations, developing tools to measure impact in terms of both immediate and long-term objectives, and designing institutions and processes that are agile and can evolve with changing circumstances and emerging risks and opportunities.

Additionally, it emphasizes taking meaningful steps to include the views and needs of future generations at all stages of decision-making, ensuring that their interests are represented and safeguarded.

Futures literacy

Developed by UNESCO, the term futures Literacy refers to a set of capabilities, competencies, and skills that help individuals, organizations, and communities better navigate today's volatile, uncertain, and complex environment.

Futures literacy is the capability to imagine diverse and multiple futures and to use these futures as lenses through which we can view the present in a new light. The core idea is that relying solely on the past and present to make decisions may cause us to overlook important emerging phenomena. By expanding our use of the future, we can integrate complexity into our choices, making uncertainty something to be appreciated and even embraced.

UNESCO considers futures literacy an essential competence of the 21st century because it allows people to better understand how they connect with the future and change. It also helps them realize the pivotal role that future ideas, images, and emotions play in shaping our actions in the present.

By cultivating futures literacy, we gain a powerful tool to look beyond short-term interests and demonstrate our commitment to protecting the needs and interests of future generations. This approach encourages us to take a proactive stance in creating a sustainable and inclusive future for all.