

# Futures for Fragility

## Applying Foresight, Advancing Development

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Picture: "Fragile Future" (CC BY-ND 2.0) by [LievenVM](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Presenting his priorities for the year to the General Assembly in early February 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on leaders to raise their time horizons beyond the present, and into the future. Relating directly to the Quintet of Change,<sup>1</sup> which is to accelerate the transition towards a United Nations 2.0, his appeal underscores the centrality of strategic foresight within global public policy-making. The emergence of strategic foresight as a white hope to anticipate defies and help attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) occurred not least in light of the manifestation of health, financial, geopolitical, and climate challenges cumulating to an alleged 'polycrisis'.<sup>2</sup>

With such prevalence of crises, an epistemology centering on risk has taken root. Within the United Nations, Our Common Agenda<sup>3</sup> attests to this. Although couching international aid frameworks in concepts of risk certainly comes with distinct advantages, strategic foresight taken seriously not only calls risk-informed approaches to development into question, but also provides a constructive and more compelling alternative – namely one that unlocks development trajectories. The international donor community's success in delivering on the promise of peace and prosperity may, ultimately, hinge on its ability to embrace uncertainty and engage with uncharted futures by tapping the full potential of strategic foresight.

## FORESIGHT: FROM THE FUTURE, FOR THE PRESENT

Constituting a “strategic thinking capacity”,<sup>4</sup> foresight is fundamentally about expanding perceptions of future options available, and enhancing the operational context in which strategy is developed. In contrast to forecasting, which seeks to predict and be probabilistic about the future by extrapolating from prevailing data, foresight sets out to uncover the possibility of multiple, plausible futures. Another key difference between foresight and forecast lies in the respective time horizon they leverage. Whereas forecasts are concerned with the immediate future, attempting to address the question “what will happen next?”, foresight tends to look a generation ahead, inquiring “what futures are conceivable?”.

Supposedly, then, foresight appears better suited to engage with incremental change than imminent crises. After all, firefighters need to attend to the present, rather than ponder the future. Albeit common, such reasoning is misguided. For one, instead

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of being for the future, foresight works with the future, for the present. For another, losing sight of the long-haul runs the risk of

not seeing the wood for the trees, irrespective of the time horizon. For firefighters not to raise their gaze beyond the blaze when devising their strategy to extinguish a fire turns out to be irresponsible at best, and perilous at worst. In an effort to square the circle and to bring long-term benefits in line with immediate needs, leaders in both public and private spheres have reverted to risk management.

## MANAGING RISK, RISKING DEVELOPMENT

In the field of international development, risk management has largely been pioneered in contexts of fragility. Most prominently, this is evidenced by the OECD’s States of Fragility framework. Having been anchored in concepts of risk for the past decade,<sup>5</sup> it defines fragility as “the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks”.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, also the United Nations Development Programme’s ‘Approach to Risk-Informed Development’<sup>7</sup> as well as the United Nations and World Bank joint ‘Pathways for Peace’<sup>8</sup> have availed themselves to risk frameworks.<sup>9</sup> In part, this evolution roots in

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fragility having long been portrayed in pathological terms, and cast in notions of deficiencies that need to be expunged for progress towards the SDGs to be made.

An inherent challenge with such risk-based approaches is, however,

that they confine the range of possible trajectories towards peace and development. By employing measures towards mitigating risk for societies to stay ‘on track’, risk-based frameworks purport – implicitly or explicitly – that there was an established pathway from fragility to development which needed to be adhered to. This logic is problematic, as it effectively ‘locks in’ processes of development – at least if the latter are understood in a non-prescriptive manner as the realization of a society’s capabilities and potential.<sup>10</sup> Such constraining of options is, largely, conditioned by conflating risk and uncertainty. Whereas for conditions of risk different outcomes and their respective probabilities can be modelled on the basis of past data, conditions of uncertainty elude such appraisal as neither the distribution of outcome, nor respective probabilities are known.<sup>11</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGING UNCERTAINTIES, CHEATING ANALOGIES

The challenge with Knightian uncertainty – akin to ‘unknown unknowns’<sup>12</sup> or ‘black swans’<sup>13</sup> – is that it suspends basic human processes of decision-making. Cognitive scientists have come to understand that human cognition roots in analogy.<sup>14</sup> At heart, humans not only learn, but also take decisions by drawing inferences from past experience. Yet, there are a few issues with basing decision-making on analogies. First, individuals are neither perfectly rational beings, nor intuitive statisticians.<sup>15</sup> Second, entertaining deeply rooted ways of making sense of the world,<sup>16</sup> human minds latch onto dearly held analogies, rendering them so ‘sticky’ that they persist even in the face of disconfirming evidence.<sup>17</sup> Third, while under conditions of risk such mental heuristics render reasonably reliable results,<sup>18</sup> the inherent assumption that tomorrow will be more of today is untenable under conditions of uncertainty.

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Lacking antecedents by its very definition, uncertainty precludes historical analogy.<sup>19</sup> Reasoned conversely, it is precisely due to the absence of experience and, thus, analogies, that uncertainty emerges.

Fortunately, there is a lifeline to maintain informed decision-making under conditions of uncertainty – namely by supplementing analogies drawn from ‘data of the past’, by ones that are based on ‘data from the future’.<sup>20</sup> By replacing recorded analogies (i.e. ‘experience’) with fabricated analogies (i.e. ‘imagination’), decision-making in contexts of uncertainty can escape fortuity. Whilst imaginations are of different quality than analogies, and do, thus, generally not exert the same traction in decision-making, it is pivotal to recall that these two cognitive strands exhibit distinct points of reference – conditions of risk versus uncertainty. And while in contexts of uncertainty imagination may not have equivalent purchasing power than do analogies in situations of risk, it is worth stressing that, under conditions of uncertainty, analogies carry disproportionately less currency.

## ESTABLISHING FORESIGHT FOR FRAGILITY, LEVERAGING STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Fabricating ‘analogies from the future’ is the purview of strategic foresight. Rather than limited to creative thinking and daydreaming, however, strategic foresight constitutes a systematic analytical process for engaging with uncertain future developments.<sup>21</sup> Constituting a heuristic device to establish a sound basis for decision-making under conditions in which analogical reasoning does not apply, foresight is well-suited to address conditions that are marked by Turbulence, Uncertainty, Novelty, and Ambiguity.<sup>22</sup> In a world said to be increasingly marked by such characteristics, contexts of fragility amount to TUNA conditions of XXL proportions. Exhibiting a pervasive lack of predictability not least due to the malleability of their institutional frameworks,<sup>23</sup> contexts of fragility squarely root in the universe of uncertainty. Converging on uncertainty, foresight is, indeed, prime-positioned to attend to fragility.

Shifting the focus from risk to uncertainty in international development may well be more than merely epistemological in nature. Accepting ‘black swans’ for what they are, rather than whitewashing them to manageable risk, revises the original starting point for development – one which is not confined by what has been, but one that opens up to what could be. This invitation to consider primarily the manifold opportunities entailed in development in general, and societies finding themselves in contexts

of fragility more particularly, features along the lines of the strengths philosophy according to which capitalizing on one's qualities promises greater success than would be possible by making comparable investments into obliterating deficiencies.<sup>24</sup>

Honing in on strengths and opportunities crucially entails getting 'off track' vis-à-vis risk-based pathways.

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While the outcome of 'off track' ventures cannot be gauged, the underlying process is one that exhibits significant degrees of endogeneity, agency, and ownership. And in recognizing the ontological plurality

of futures beyond a predefined emergency exit fraught with risk, foresight unlocks new prospects for peace and development. If taken seriously, foresight may, hence, well herald a paradigm shift in international development.

## SCENARIOS AND THEIR VIRTUES

In order to exert foresight for fragility, 'data from the future' needs to be acquired. This is the mainstay of scenario planning, a leading method within the field of strategic foresight. Constructing relevant, possible, and plausible stories from the future, scenarios exercises allow for creating analogies 'by other means'. Utilizing structured and iterative analysis, and dealing flexibly with new information that can radically change prevailing assumptions, scenario construction permits to compare distinct narratives with one another to facilitate decision-making. Being a systematic, rigorous, explicit, and evidence-based process, scenario exercises ensure that thinking about the future is not based on 'blue skies' – and comes with a number of virtues to unlock peace and development:

**1. In prompting its conceivers to scrutinize prevailing propositions and admitting new perspectives, scenarios are constitutive in avoiding falling prey to undue analogies and extrapolations from the past.** Although such questioning of axiomatic assumptions and deconstruction of dogma can post a significant challenge to its respective proponents, providing novel, yet plausible perspectives constitutes a key contribution of scenarios – not least as this enhances sensitivity to change and confines overconfidence in specific courses of action.<sup>25</sup> This is of particular relevance in contexts of fragility in which individuals frequently retreat – whether by choice or necessity – into both physical and mental trenches.

**2. In rooting in 'tame stories' rather than 'tangible stakes', scenario exercises establish a safe(r) environment that allows for (more) open exchange than would be possible in contexts of formal negotiation, amongst others.** Given that "every useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous",<sup>26</sup> scenario exercises allow for much greater room for maneuver, permitting even subjects otherwise considered taboo between warring parties to be discussed. In part, the additional scope foresight brings to the table roots in the fact that while futures are inherently political, and, thus, contested, scenarios are inclined to take political saber rattling out of the equation.

**3. Scenarios can help unlock uncharted trajectories towards peace and development by reviving notions of agency that can quickly be lost in contexts that are fully overwhelming.** While certain steps of scenario exercises render apparent that the future cannot be created, let alone controlled, at will, scenarios



also reveal that the future is not predetermined either. Rather than conveying images suggesting that the future is something to be scared of, scenarios depict how different futures may emerge – and what certain actors can and cannot do about co-creating them. In contexts of fragility, in which even hope is in short supply, also this virtue appears adding significant value.

**4. Finally, scenarios assist in looking beyond immediacy.** By unearthing neglected strength of certain actors, carving out opportunities in the medium run, instilling novel relationships of collaboration, and highlighting long-term visions, scenarios can help seeing through and beyond smokescreens of conflict and violence – a trait that is crucial if actors are not to get entangled in providing little more than band aid. Simultaneously, by prompting to think ahead, scenarios enhance intellectual and operational agility to swiftly adapt to unexpected circumstances that are certain to arise in TUNA contexts.

## BRINGING FORESIGHT TO BEAR ON FRAGILITY

Foresight approaches can be brought to bear at all stages of conflict in helping warring parties to take a step back from confrontation, to envisage what a more constructive future could look like, and to think through potential pathways to get there. Constituting as much a learning journey as a strategizing tool, foresight can be drawn upon at any point of the conflict cycle, and beyond. And whilst futures thinking is not new to the field of peace and development,<sup>27</sup> in which visioning exercises have been conducted in contexts of constitution building or institutional reform, much of this has remained implicit and intuitive<sup>28</sup> – and, as depicted previously, confined to the risk management sphere of strategic foresight. In seeking to further harness the potential of foresight for contexts of fragility, the following may constitute relevant entry points.

One field of application pertains to crisis prevention. By surfacing and scrutinizing dominant premises amongst key actors involved, foresight enhances conflict sensitivity and discourages blueprints. Moreover, in providing tools to surface trends

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and critical turning points, foresight methods can contribute to early warning endeavors. And the aforementioned fact that approaches, such as scenario planning, provide a safe atmosphere in which debates revolve around ‘fictive stories’ rather than ‘factual stakes’, allows foresight to shift attention from opposing positions of the past to shared visions of the future. In allowing for interactions transcending immediate interests and dogmatism,<sup>29</sup> and in complementing a focus on risks with an appreciation of opportunities, foresight can turn ‘preventive diplomacy’ into what may be termed ‘enabling diplomacy’.

Another line of action lies with facilitating a second-generation approach to mediation. Whereas classical mediation processes are about negotiating differences and coming to agreement, foresight approaches not only assist in cutting the cake, but enlarging it in the first place. Amongst others, this is fostered by the fact that rather than seeking to identify a common denominator amongst warring parties, foresight sets out to discover the range of numerators in the equation. In doing so, foresight is well-placed to take particularly ‘spoilers’ into account, as their ‘extreme’ and ‘uncompromising’ perspectives are constitutive in stretching mindsets – and, thus, enlarging the denominator. Relatedly, by employing plausible conceptions of

the future to talk about prevailing constraints in the present, approaches such as scenario planning can change the tone of discourses from defensive and antagonistic to more open, constructive, and (self-)reflective modes.<sup>30</sup>

And also for actors not directly engulfed in violent conflict can foresight prove valuable in helping address situations of fragility. By means of establishing a common understanding of challenges and opportunities, language and mindset, as well as vision and strategy for a given context, scenarios can propel collaboration that allows different entities to act in greater unity. In constituting much more than a mere tool for collaboration, methods such as scenario planning can significantly aid delivering on whole-of-government approaches and the humanitarian, development, and peace (HDP) nexus. And, by anticipating alternative trajectories, it propels mental and, thus, operational flexibility which allows to adapt more quickly to unforeseen developments certain to arise in contexts of fragility.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

One of the biggest promises foresight holds for overcoming conflict and fragility lies in it scrutinizing prevailing prescriptions, and encouraging all actors involved to imagine the unimaginable. To be sure, “[i]nnovative thinking and futures ready strategy development does not emerge from comfort zones”,<sup>31</sup> which are harnessed by short-term thinking. Viewed from this perspective, foresight is not only applicable to contexts of fragility, but particularly prone to flourish in such environments. Hence, the international community might well need to get comfortable with the uncomfortable, and embrace uncertainty to improve present-day decision-making. By working with futures towards ‘fabricating analogies’, foresight works for the present with the aim of devising more robust strategies – also, and particularly ones that are to guide action taken by firefighters.

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Even though foresight is no silver bullet to ‘make fragility history’, prevailing experiences with applying foresight both to and in contexts of fragility suggests that there is a potential for futures thinking to support processes towards peace and prosperity.<sup>32</sup> It is along these lines that Gioacchino and Sumberg<sup>33</sup> remind us that “[l]ooking to the

future is – or certainly should be – at the core of development studies.” While facing many of the same challenges that other initiatives geared towards curtailing conflict and fragility have to put up with, futures thinking and foresight constitute a valuable addition to existing toolboxes in the field of international development assistance. Amongst the policy implications that can be gleaned from the preceding discussion, the following stand out in particular:

- **International peace and development actors need to acknowledge that, instead of being for the future, strategic foresight works with the future, for the present.** Insofar as it improves decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, futures should not be left to attend to themselves, but should be brought to bear on current decision-making processes. Relatedly, there is a need for recognizing that losing sight of the long-haul runs the risk of not seeing the wood for the trees. As a failure of firefighters to raise their gaze beyond the blaze is irresponsible

at best, and perilous at worst, international peace and development actors have much to gain from strategic foresight.

- **In seeking to help societies transition from conflict and fragility to peace and development, the international donor community should be compelled moving beyond risk-based approaches.** Whilst constituting a first step in approaching the foresight-fragility-nexus, reliance on risk-based frameworks for understanding and addressing development challenges under conditions of uncertainty is unwarranted. By accepting ‘black swans’ for what they are, rather than seeking to whitewash them to manageable risk, the international donor community can unlock development trajectories, and is, ultimately, better placed to deliver on prospects for peace and prosperity.
- **By tapping the full potential of strategic foresight, the international donor community will, invariably, find itself challenged by some of its dominant epistemes and worldviews.** Whilst highly demanding, embarking on such a learning journey aimed at scrutinizing received wisdom and identifying more suitable approaches to fundamental development challenges is as respectable as requisite. This starts with the realization that contexts of fragility do not constitute a cumulation of all things faulty, and supports a paradigmatic shift towards recognizing also the opportunities and potentials such contexts hold.
- **The international donor community is well-advised to further build both the breadth and depth of its strategic foresight capacities.** While many strategic foresight initiatives exist at diverse levels both within and beyond the United Nations, strategic foresight thinking has not yet been streamlined into operational procedures. Exposing more of its (operational) staff to strategic foresight trainings, and conveying the idea that foresight is less of a magic formula than an alternative heuristic, would take the international peace and development community far in providing critical space to ‘think the unthinkable’ – and, ultimately, ‘do the undoable’.

Tools such as scenario planning provide great opportunities to leave the preconceived, narrow race track cluttered with measurable performance indicators, for a soaring discovery of yet unknown perspectives and destinies that are still in the air. Just as is the case for history, the future is not an empty space either – it is simply one that has not been codified yet. Consequently, decision-makers at all levels have both the opportunity and responsibility to discover and harness the space set out by futures as much as possible. And there hardly seems to be a more apt time to do so and deliver on the promise of development than now that a new Agenda for Peace is about to see the light of the day. After all, the future is nothing to fear, but an opportunity to create – with those thinking ahead being best positioned to size respective opportunities, as “chance favors the prepared mind”.<sup>34</sup>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dominik Balthasar is an associated researcher with swisspeace, and advises on matters strategic foresight as well as conflict and fragility. Having worked in different capacities in research, policy-making, and development practice towards addressing conflict and fragility in places such as DR Congo, Syria, and Somalia, he comes with both experience in and curiosity towards dealing with uncertainty. Dominik holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science, received foresight training at the University of Oxford, and is a member of the Association of Professional Futurists.

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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This policy brief demonstrates how strategic foresight can valuably be brought to bear in contexts of conflict and fragility. Making the case that contexts of development and fragility do not belong to the sphere of risk, but rather pertain to the universe of uncertainty, the paper depicts means by which scenario exercises can contribute to the puzzle of peace. At heart, the brief argues for the need of moving beyond risk-informed approaches and tapping the full potential of strategic foresight in order to unlock uncharted future trajectories from conflict and fragility towards peace and prosperity.