



UNDP REGIONAL BUREAU
FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

MITIGATING HARM

A FORESIGHT ETHICS GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

UNDP RBAP Strategic Foresight Network

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The fundamental practice of foresight is the process of imagining and designing what our futures can and should be. Like any tool, foresight is not neutral. It is conditioned by our positionality, cultural values, our economic systems, and our capacity for collective imagination. Often, however, such processes have been predominantly constructed by communities that uphold pockets of monopolies, capitalism, power, and privilege that shape our views of what is possible. While there's no simple or singular solution to disrupt these dynamics, there is significant power in asking more intentional questions – particularly those that help to identify the assumptions and biases we bring to the application of any new method.

The UNDP RBAP Foresight Ethics Guide offers several lines of inquiry for this purpose. Its intentionally expansive questions are intended to prompt reflections that can support a group to move towards more justice-led and power-sensitive modes of thinking about, facilitating and responding to the future. They may be particularly useful as frames for designing a foresight process, tailoring the tools to the context, and identifying opportunities to evolve existing development planning, decision-making, or knowledge practices.

This is a foresight ethics and governance approach that de-centers coloniality, disrupts the idea of 'solutionism', centers justice and equity, and actively works to mitigate harm, now and into the future. It aims to build on practices and frameworks to date but working to ensure that the basis of such approaches do not merely 'tokenistically include' historically oppressed, excluded, and impacted communities. The framework emphasizes **foresight and decoloniality** to amplify current frameworks and approaches that are still somewhat narrow in their lenses and seeks to provide concrete ways to go beyond just 'centering, empowering or including' impacted populations. It promotes a *shared responsibility for our collective futures across* all actors and constituents in the aid sector.

Ethics Reflections Questions:

“Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together [...], is a revolutionary decolonizing activity.” – Adrienne Maree Brown.

- How do we serve all of humanity without bringing the inequities of our past into our futures? *To understand this, we must ask ourselves:* How has humanity arrived at this unique point in time? What systems corral how humanity exists? How do they play out in people’s experiences and why? Who is deliberately unseen or exploited in today’s predominant development systems and structures?
- What types of investments and actions might help us start to undo the systems of oppression that have served only a select privileged few, and prevent locking people into future indebtedness and inequity?
- How do we avoid flattening people’s identities into stereotypical ideas of who they are and what they desire so that when they most need the best of humanity, they feel safe and seen in the support being offered to them? *E.g., if we are using personas or incorporating ethnographic stories into the discussion, how to avoid reducing people to stereotypes, or treating minoritized identities as homogeneous?*
- Whose visions of the future ought to prevail? How do we talk about long-term possibilities when fragility is sometimes a fundamental baseline in people’s lives? Do we consider these issues when we design ideas about the future?
- Are we applying foresight in homogenous or linear ways that ignore relevant place-based capacities and approaches that may already exist, or culturally specific specificity of the means of relating to and working with the future?
- What assumptions underpin the processes and frameworks by which we make sense of, prioritize, and translate futures data and insights into decisions for action? *e.g. When we ask people to share their perceptions, experiences, or visions for the future, who interprets the data? Do we make space for people to draw connections and implications from their own stories?*
- Where might our foresight processes be treating equity as the mere inclusion of different voices, while not addressing the structural barriers that prevent those voices from systematically influencing levers for societal, political and institutional transformations?
- How does safety, trust and belonging factor into the design of participatory processes, particularly those which ask people to think outside the box or challenge predominant modes of thinking?
- How can we avoid reinforcing the requirements of those with existing power, or treating subjective beliefs and worldviews as universal truths about what the future will bring?
- Where might the ways we conceive of and transfer knowledge, or perceptions of what knowledge is most seen as credible and valid, be rooted in colonial legacies and ideologies? How does this affect the ways we interpret reality?

Lines of Inquiry

Foresight-based Ethics	Decoloniality-based Governance
What is the current and future theory of harm that might accompany this implementation of project/process?	What different epistemology on concepts of ethics, privacy, rights, and consent were utilized to inform the design of this project/process? How was this epistemology sourced and from whom?
In what ways might future rights of the population evolve?	Has the design of the project/process considered the wider political, social, economic, and environmental ecosystem in which it will be implemented?
Could future impacts of this project/process restrict choice and opportunity for the population?	Have definitions of ‘fairness’ and ‘just-ness’ been assessed against political and social factors?
Who might own the fiduciary and legal accountability to future selves of the population?	Who is involved and how is the analysis and interpretation of assessments conducted?
Who would retain advantage and privilege and who would be disadvantaged or dispossessed through the implementation of this project/process, now and into the future?	Has an analysis of privileging forces (patriarchy, race/ethnicity, colonialism/paternalism, hetero/cis-normativity, classism/class privilege, ableism, and ageism) been conducted for this project/process?
Who might hold responsibility for the absorption of current and future harm on populations?	
What possibilities might be foreclosed in the future by implementing this project/process?	

Foresight Ethics Principled Practice

Moving From	Moving To
<p>Tight circles of ‘recognized’ expertise: Current foresight practice sees similarity in expertise and little recognition of non-academically qualified practitioners or people with lived experience. Cynthia Selin puts forward the argument that foresight methods have their own schemes on what counts as anticipatory knowledge and specify through which channels such knowledge should be generated and shared. These futures then get accepted as ‘official futures’ without nuance and become self-fulfilling.</p>	<p>Recognizing Positionality: When the same groups of “experts” facilitate foresight processes and workshops, we continue the same epistemology of knowledge and learning. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we recreate our own image. Recognizing the positionality of facilitation and decision making within our wider metropolis allows an assessment on impacts of bias or privilege.</p>
<p>Narrow epistemology: The frameworks behind foresight tools and approaches have hardly evolved over the last few decades. Though recent years have seen expansion of epistemology in terms of storytelling and concepts of time, this has not translated in a legitimate way to mainstream curricula.</p>	<p>Legitimacy in Pluriversality: Utilizing a wider range of knowledge sources and experiences legitimizes a multiplicity of conceptual models and prevents the replication of an echo-chamber worldview via limited perspectives that do not account for normative, philosophical, and cultural realities. The addition of different epistemologies allows us to recognize that multiple truths and multiple realities exist at the same time and are seen, experienced, imagined and lived by different groups of people even within similar contexts.</p>

<p>Hegemonic Language: Futures and foresight tools use the same language regardless of whether it resonates with people the world over or influences their cultural mental models. The same terms are used to describe approaches and methods regardless of whether it is understood or embraced, or even whether the term exists in other languages. When language and terms are not understood, it becomes a form of exclusionary privilege.</p>	<p>Democratizing Language: When the language of knowledge is so out of touch and reach for much of the world and we dismiss people’s ability to understand it, we fail to recognize the fundamental factors needed in democratization: resonance, understanding and embracing.</p>
<p>Simplistic Solutionism and Constructed Representation: Problem identification in futures and foresight approaches tends to be minimal, based on the perspectives of who is in the room. This often results in solutionism that narrowly focuses on what appears to be an obvious issue with some degree of certainty.</p>	<p>Objective Truth and Relational Ethics: Assessing patterns across a wider range of contextual social, technical, economic, and historical systems, norms, and structures to understand <i>why</i> rather than blindly and simplistically designing technical solutions and systems based on singular or similar representations.</p>

RELATED RESOURCES

[Unsettling the Coloniality of Foresight](#) – Chapter in Sacred Civics (Aarathi Krishnan, 2022)

[Reimagining Development in Asia and the Pacific: A Synthesis Report](#) (UNDP RBAP)

[A Social Designer’s Field Guide to Power Literacy](#) (Maya Goodwill, 2020)

[With/Out Modernity Cards](#) – Tool from Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF)

[15 Resources to Decolonise Futures & Imaginaries](#) – Nupur Maley, from Anticipatory Governance Community

[White Supremacy Culture – Still Here](#) (Tema Okun, 2021)