

---

## 33. Bringing a futures mindset to evaluation

*Jewlya Lynn, Katri Vataja and Rose Thompson Coon*

---

Many strategies evaluators engage with seek to influence change in complex, dynamic environments. This is true of programmatic work, where context can affect implementation and outcomes, and of systemic change strategies. The linear thinking we often bring to strategy design and evaluation is in conflict with the messy pathways to real and lasting change. Yet, too often, evaluators only investigate the predicted path ahead (our theories of change), even as the strategy is influenced by many different external dynamics. Foresight and futures thinking have a critical and often unseen role in helping us make sense of strategies amid complexity, by replacing our overly simplistic predictions with an exploration of diverse potential futures.

Many evaluators begin by working with program staff to identify or refine the theory of change or logic underlying the program (see Chapter 14 in this *Handbook*). These tools articulate a single potential pathway to a desired future: one in which the strategy has its maximum predicted impact, and the larger environment is largely held stable. Yet, in practice, our ability to predict the future is weak in many settings (Saffo, 2007), and predicting a specific future can make it hard to conceptualize other possible futures. Nor is it realistic to imagine that the larger environment surrounding our strategies and evaluations will remain stable. In fact, we are now living in “postnormal” times, a period of transition in society and in the world that is filled with complexity, contradictions, and uncertainty (Sardar, 2010). Under such conditions, one cannot expect predictions of the future to hold true.

This chapter introduces experienced evaluators to a new way to think (futures thinking) and a set of tools (foresight methods) that can be used to help us attend to the complexity of the present and unpredictability of the future. We believe all evaluations can benefit from a futures mindset, including formative, summative, impact, and developmental. Some evaluations are working in highly complex, dynamic contexts, with drivers of change coming from many directions, making this mindset particularly necessary. When strategies (a term we will use throughout as a short-hand reference for different evaluands, such as programs, interventions, and projects) are complex and context-dependent, the evaluator can play a critical role: supporting the program staff to appreciate how the problem they are seeking to solve, their strategy, and its potential outcomes are all influenced by a dynamic context. With a futures mindset, the evaluation can help maintain attention to the long time horizon for systemic change.

In this chapter, we assume the reader is already familiar with the practice of evaluation and many of its tools and processes, including theories of change. Here, we will explore three practical ways to expand that practice by bringing together futures thinking and evaluation:

- *A light touch approach*, where the evaluator either brings in a foresight technique to strengthen collective thinking and engagement around the impact of a strategy or leverages futures thinking information within the strategy design process.
- *A deep and transformative approach*, where futures thinking is at the heart of the evaluation.

- *A responsive approach to a futures-focused strategy*, where the evaluator is being asked to evaluate a strategy in light of its futures focus, carrying implications for how evaluation must adapt.

Before exploring these three approaches, we will provide more background on futures thinking and foresight, including the types of tools that help an evaluator engage more fully with the future.

## UNDERSTANDING FUTURES THINKING AND FORESIGHT METHODS

There are many definitions for “futures thinking” and “foresight” in the field of futures studies and foresight practice. Understanding the key terms, including how they relate to strategies and evaluation, will help with exploring the different ways futures thinking and foresight can be brought into evaluation. Here, we define these concepts in ways commonly used in foresight practices drawn from many different sources (e.g., Center for Strategic Futures & Civil Service College, n.d.; Policy Horizons Canada, 2018; Sitra, n.d.-a).

First, the concept of *futures*, in the plural, indicates the presence of possible alternatives that might happen in the mid-to-long-term time horizon. Futures are often categorized as possible, plausible, probable, and preferred futures.

A *futures mindset* refers to a way of thinking that is oriented towards the future. People with a futures mindset seek to anticipate and prepare for future challenges and opportunities. This involves an openness to new possibilities, a willingness to question assumptions about the future, and an aim to influence how the future is shaped. *Futures thinking* is an orientation and ability to explore and envision possible futures. Futures thinking helps us:

to understand how the future affects the present and, conversely, how the decisions and actions in the present affect the future. The goal of developing futures literacy is to learn to think more creatively, critically and broadly about the future. (University of Turku, n.d.)

[Futures thinking] begins with an awareness of the imaginary nature of the future, thereby opening up a learning frontier as people explore: the diversity of reasons and sources for imagining the future; and the role of imagined futures for what we see and do, perception and choice, fears and hopes. (Feukeu et al., 2021, p. 3)

As these two definitions help us to see, futures thinking is both an analytical process for carefully considering alternative futures to act differently and influence the preferable future directions, and a creative process to explore divergent thinking and open up our ability to generate novel pathways forward. Futures thinking is not a predictive way of thinking; rather, it is focused on exploring multiple possible futures with the aim of strengthening today’s decision-making. One of the great values gained from futures thinking is making visible our assumptions about the future, including exploring unintended consequences, generating new insights about conditions that may or may not remain stable, and reducing the risk that a strategy (or changed system) will fail amid shifts in the larger context.

Finally, *foresight* is a systematic approach to futures thinking that involves the use of methods and tools to anticipate and prepare for future developments, recognizes factors that affect the future, and determines measures required to reach the desired future. Foresight

methods are similar to evaluation methods in that they can be implemented at a small or large scale, rigorously or loosely, and with few inputs or in fully participatory ways. Just like futures thinking, foresight methods do not attempt to predict the future, but rather take data from the past and present and extrapolate it to the future to envision a variety of potentials. *Forecasting* is sometimes considered to be one of the ancestors of foresight, as it refers to a process for making predictive statements on future events based on quantitative analysis and modeling.

Foresight methods can be used to support decision-making. They can help us avoid the fallacy of only focusing on high probability, high visibility, and high impact changes in the environment. Often, we ignore the less probable, less visible, or lower impact changes that will still affect a strategy's deployment and impact.

Foresight can be implemented using Western practices that center trends, drivers, signals, scanning, and so on, or through decolonized and alternative methodologies that include storytelling, science fiction, art, and music to help dislodge the dominant futures narrative and discover what the future may look like for those often left out of its stories. See Table 33.1 for methods, and a later section of this chapter for more on decolonizing the future.

A futures mindset can also be used without the formal tools of foresight, as it is the ongoing practice of looking forward to multiple possible futures and taking an interest in what is possible (not just what is most probable). In many cases, futures thinking and specific approaches to foresight are focused on a longer time span, such as ten or more years. However, some strategies may benefit from futures thinking that looks for more immediate shifts in the environment, such as in the domains of policy change, disaster preparedness, public health, and others that can experience abrupt and significant shifts in the external context.

Futures thinking can be infused throughout the evaluation cycle, from the initial development and framework, to baseline assessments, ongoing data collection and analysis, and even how recommendations are constructed. Futures thinking is more accessible than formal foresight methodologies, as it can be infused throughout existing evaluation methods. That said, futures thinking can be strengthened by applying specific foresight methodologies.

## EXAMPLES OF METHODS AND TOOLS

The foresight toolbox is very large. Evaluators do not need to have the full range of tools! Instead, awareness of tools and ideas about when to engage a futurist can be helpful. In Table 33.1, we have included a short list of some of the foresight methods that can bring value in evaluation. We explore examples of their application throughout the rest of the chapter. When selecting methods, it is important to be clear on the desired purpose for bringing a foresight method to the evaluation (e.g., helping build a vision of multiple possible futures or discovering novel pathways), and to match the method to the readiness (see below), resources, and capacity of the evaluation.

### Whose Future?

Futures thinking, while something we all do naturally, has been formally developed as a discipline in Western countries in ways that have historically marginalized non-Western cultures, women, people of color, and others whose future is often determined by those who hold power over them (Sardar, 1993; Son, 2015). This colonization of futures thinking comes in part from

*Table 33.1 Examples of methods for exploring the future*

Purpose of the foresight	Description	Method examples
Planning and forecasting	Methods to forecast a variety of futures. They can also help plan toward a desired future, while attending to the many different futures that can unfold.	Extrapolation methods Trend analysis Time series Futures landscape Shared history Roadmapping Horizon scanning
Exploring and visioning	Methods to understand the inherent unpredictability and uncertainty of the future, discover multiple possible futures, and help us envision a path ahead to a desired future.	Three Horizons Framework Emerging issues analysis Futures wheel Nuts and bolts Tracking and exploring trends, signals, megatrends, drivers, wildcards, etc. Scenarios (e.g., single variable, 2x2, archetypes, integrated) Futures triangle Backcasting Postcards from the future Headlines from the future Implications/futures wheel
Transforming	Methods that are explicitly focused on unpacking and deepening our understanding of the future in order to discover novel pathways toward a transformed future. These methods often challenge the status quo of whose futures are centered and how the future is depicted.	Causal layered analysis Four-quadrant mapping Future histories Creative visualization processes Other creative and participatory futures processes (e.g., art, storytelling, narratives) Futures Literacy Lab Futures Frequency

*Note:* To explore some of these methods and learn when to apply them, helpful resources include: Government Office for Science (2017); Ramos et al. (2019); Sitra (n.d.-b); UNDP (2019).

who has the “know-how” to deploy foresight methodologies, from the tools themselves, and from who is using and making decisions based on futures thinking and foresight methods (Feukeu et al., 2021).

Yet, the changing circumstances and increasing complexity of our world call for an evolution and renewal of futures thinking and foresight practices, and indeed this is happening. One of the arguments for decolonizing the future (understood as freeing our concepts of the future from the effects of colonization) is grounded in the notion that when we describe the future through only one segment of society’s lenses, we are imposing our future on others, and limiting our openness in the present to what we have discovered in those narrow futures.

The fields of decolonized and reparative futurism are important parts of this shift, articulating futures from a very different perspective. They honor the different ways in which cultures

think about time, including cultural orientations that do not separate the past from the future, or do not perceive the past and future as being in a linear relationship. Examples include:

- Decolonized futures are approaches to futures work that seek to undo the harm of colonialism by disrupting and displacing dominant and oppressive narratives. Indigenous futurism and Afrofuturism are two overarching areas of futures work that are often included when talking about decolonized futures (Bisht, 2020). Storytelling approaches are often part of the methods. The Decolonizing Futures Initiative (<https://www.decolonizingfutures.org/>) is a good starting place to learn more.
- Reparative futures work seeks to make progress toward a future that is more just by engaging with the past and making it visible. It includes revealing unjust pasts, including who has been silenced or hidden. It also includes the construct of future histories, where these patterns of the past are acknowledged, reimagined, and remade to envision a future that is more just and inclusive.

In the context of evaluation, it is important to be aware of the history of the formalized practice of futures and the emerging shift away from it, as it helps us to avoid replicating its historical challenges. While scenario mapping and other foresight techniques are often discussed as methods to promote futures thinking, alongside these Western practices, we need to also be aware of the practices that have emerged from Afrofuturism, Indigenous futurism, and decolonized futures more broadly.

Expanding whose future we center is not just about what methods we use. Another shift in foresight work is a change in who is part of the sensemaking that generates futures stories. Participatory futures work seeks not only to have practical descriptions of multiple futures, but also to create shared visions of a desired future, and pathways for transforming the present into this future (see Hebinck et al., 2018; van den Ende et al., 2022).

In evaluation, we need to consider whose future we are centering. Are many voices engaged in discovering a shared future when we use futures thinking and foresight in evaluation? Are the funders' perceptions of many possible futures centered, similar to what too often happens when we develop a theory of change that predicts a single future? Who gets left out, and what alternatives are left out, because of the assumptions about the future that are taken for granted? In practice, if we bring futures thinking into our evaluations, it is critical we consider: (1) who is helping to describe the multiple possible futures; (2) what assumptions are left unquestioned in those futures; (3) who is empowered to act to advance toward those futures; and (4) who is making recommendations about what it will take to act today using a futures lens.

As an evaluator, you can take your participatory evaluation skills into how you engage with futures thinking and foresight practices. To go deeper, Inayatullah and Milojević (2015) offer insight into how participatory research helps to create a more collective intelligence about the future, and the opportunity to share in acting on it.

## KNOWING WHEN THERE IS READINESS FOR FUTURES THINKING AND FORESIGHT

We are all “future-makers,” engaging in futures thinking in our professional and personal lives in many ways, whether explicitly or not (Appadurai, 2013). Yet, not all strategies and teams are equally futures-oriented and ready to engage with futures thinking. Some questions to

consider as you explore when and how to bring futures thinking and foresight methodologies into your evaluation include:

- To what extent is the evaluand framed or designed as futures-related? For example, does the evaluand have a long-term vision and objectives, seek to transform the future, and describe the future and its variability? What kind of assumptions about the future does the evaluand embrace?
- Were any foresight methodologies used during the development of the strategy?
- What is the role of the evaluation: is it focused forward (development and transformation) or looking back (retrospective, focusing on traditional accountability)?
- Does the evaluation have a participatory approach, engaging an advisory group or creating other collaborative space to explore futures thinking and the results of foresight methodologies?
- How ready are you to use futures thinking? Are you comfortable exploring multiple possible (not necessarily probable) futures as a tool for thinking about today? Can you bring a futurist in to work alongside you?

If you find there is readiness, the next question to ask is how *mature* is the strategy and yourself when it comes to futures thinking and methods. A program team may be ready, with openness and desire to use futures thinking and foresight methods, but have no previous exposure. An evaluator may be ready and know how to deploy foresight methods themselves or may need the help of a professional.

Finally, remember that any type of evaluation can integrate a futures thinking lens and foresight methods. Consider not whether it is the right type of evaluation, but rather how the specific type of evaluation you are implementing (e.g., formative or summative, developmental or impact-focused) might benefit from a futures thinking approach. The examples below highlight many different types of evaluations.

## TOUCHING LIGHTLY: ATTENDING TO THE FUTURE IN YOUR EVALUATION

If you are newer to futures thinking and foresight, and the strategy you're evaluating is not explicitly a futures or foresight strategy, it may make sense to begin by "touching lightly" and either bringing futures thinking into the evaluation or using a specific foresight practice. By doing one or the other, you are helping the strategy become more "future proofed," preparing it for adaptation and success across multiple possible futures. Another way to understand this concept of "future proofing" is to make the strategy more resilient and adaptable, so that it can continue to produce meaningful outcomes amid both minor and significant changes in surrounding conditions.

A light touch can be employed during any stage of the evaluation. Foresight can be undertaken just once, generating insights that can be incorporated into the evaluation, evaluation findings, or strategy overall. Or, a light touch approach to foresight can be repeated with a cadence that helps to steadily bring a futures lens into the evaluation and strategy. Some

light touch approaches lean into existing foresight analyses, publicly available in many places, while others rely on collecting and analyzing new data. Examples include:

- *Leverage futures tools within dialogues to promote a futures mindset.* There are many simple ways to bring a futures mindset into evaluation dialogues. When exploring outcomes, ask questions about the future context under which they are realistic, and help participants think about ways the context might change. Participants can individually construct stories about the future that include the strategy and its context, and then discuss how the context differs across their stories and what that variability might mean for implementing the strategy over time. The number of small ways to promote futures thinking are endless – be creative! Ask yourself: what might help the designers of the strategy or evaluation participants begin thinking about the future as dynamic, unpredictable, and exciting to explore?
- *Leverage existing foresight analysis relevant to your context.* Employing foresight analysis can help you understand what might change in the context over time, influencing conversations about the theory of change and potential long-term outcomes. It might influence what you monitor in the external environment as potential influencers on the strategy or desired outcomes. It might also lead to moments where the theory of change needs to be revisited as the context shifts in a way that may influence measured outcomes.
- *Replace or supplement traditional theories of change with stories about the future* to maintain an active focus on the many different possible futures that could unfold. This approach can be powerful when the strategy is larger than any one organization can achieve on its own, and when it is designed to influence a dynamic, complex environment (e.g., an advocacy or systemic change initiative). Many foresight methods can generate more helpful stories about the future than a traditional theory of change, including scenario mapping, the Three Horizons Framework (Sharpe et al., 2016), and Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 2009), among others. One of the distinctions between a theory of change and these other types of futures stories lies in the diversity of potential futures, and the decision to explore multiple futures without seeking to predict just one desired future or pre-plan a specific pathway to it. In some ways, bringing futures stories into an evaluation to replace or supplement a theory of change is similar to a complexity-aware theory of change (see Chapters 16 and 18 in this *Handbook*), which leaves a great deal of room for adaptation, exploring divergent pathways, and attending to an emerging context. Where it differs is the active work required to make sense of potential futures, including how trends may emerge over time and interact to make a variety of futures possible.
- *Include futures thinking as part of a participatory interpretation process* to help make sense of what the findings mean for today, as well as for the near- and longer-term future. If a successful strategy is expected to sustain itself, it may be important to explore how much of the strategy's success depends on the current context, and what might change. This approach includes exploring what is already happening that may scale or change the strategy's impact in the future (e.g., trends, megatrends), and what changes are just starting to bubble up, with highly unpredictable impacts on the future (e.g., weak signals, wild cards). If the strategy is long-term in nature, using futures thinking can help interpret findings and the likelihood of continued success (or failure) in light of potential future contexts that may enhance or limit the strategy.

- *Use futures thinking and existing foresight analysis to inform the “recommendations” or “issues to consider moving forward” from the evaluation.* After findings have been interpreted, some evaluations report recommendations for how to strengthen, expand, or otherwise move the strategy forward. Evaluators can encourage the use of futures thinking to inform the continued implementation or adaptation of a strategy, or can apply light touch futures thinking by using existing foresight analysis to explore some of the potential environments that the strategy may need to operate within for it to sustain. This can be a powerful opportunity to incorporate reparative futures approaches, where facilitated dialogue around historical context and future histories can help make visible current harms, their causes, and how they could be repaired. As an example, Kiran Obee (2022), an evaluator for a community nonprofit organization, Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities, conducted an evaluation that considered how the strategy adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic. The evaluation ended mid-way through the pandemic, when uncertainty was still high. After observing how the strategy was disrupted by the pandemic, she included a recommendation that program managers use decolonized futures methodologies to future-proof their subsequent strategies in a culturally relevant way, and better prepare their community for future disruptions.

Employing futures thinking when planning, interpreting findings, or developing recommendations for an evaluation is a way to help introduce the idea of “future proofing” a strategy. The relevance, sustainability, and coherence of both the strategy and the evaluation depend on looking forward, not just backward. Future proofing is particularly valuable when a strategy struggles amid changing dynamics, a condition that became particularly visible during the pandemic, when adaptation was necessary in many different contexts.

A light touch on futures thinking can also be integrated throughout ongoing data collection and analysis processes, including in highly participatory evaluations:

- *Utilize an upfront and ongoing foresight technique, process, or method to identify relevant trends and monitor signals* of their direction. This might be helpful for strategies that can be highly disrupted by specific types of intensifying or quickly shifting trends, such as political, technological, social, and environmental trends, among others. Often, participants in the strategy are well-positioned to look for these types of signals. In this use of foresight, your goal is to monitor strategy resilience (or signals that a strategy will need to adapt) based on what has been learned about both the strategy’s effectiveness in the current context, and how that context may be shifting.
- In an evaluation that provides ongoing feedback to inform strategy development, you could regularly signal emerging trends, and examine strategy outcomes in light of the unfolding context. Rick Davies (n.d.) developed a tool to support this type of ongoing futures storytelling, ParEvo (short for participatory evolution), which is a participatory method for exploring alternative futures that evolves as the participants engage with each other’s stories over time. Another way to do this work is to capture signals, monitor key trends, and engage in sensemaking with the participants to understand the implications for their work.

In whatever manner foresight is brought into the evaluation with a light touch, it is critical to actively consider who helps to articulate potential futures, who is empowered to make sense of them, and who makes recommendations about what it will take to act today using a futures

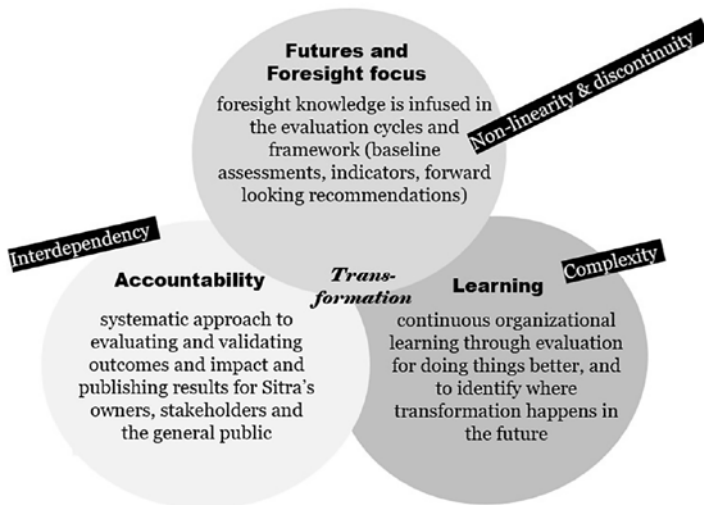


lens. For example, if a set of scenarios will replace a theory of change, it is critical to consider who is participating in developing the scenarios, and who will have the opportunity to participate in ongoing reflection as the future unfolds and the scenarios are revisited and revised. To explore a participatory approach to using scenarios in place of a theory of change, see Snow et al.'s (2015) description of a strategy and evaluation that used scenario mapping with participants to initiate and engage in ongoing shared learning and action as part of a collaborative, multi-year process.

## BEING TRANSFORMATIVE: INFUSING A FUTURES FOCUS THROUGHOUT EVALUATION

The preceding section introduced small steps that evaluators can take to begin to help “future-proof” a strategy, preparing it for adaptation and success across multiple possible futures. Futures thinking within evaluation does not need to be limited to these light touches, however. With high readiness, futures thinking and foresight methods can be applied and integrated throughout the entire evaluation cycle.

The Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra) evaluation framework models this, where evaluation is increasingly seen as a facilitator of change, and futures thinking and foresight provide the analytical frameworks to connect systems approaches with diversity, equity, and inclusion for a more transformational evaluation practice (Thompson Coon et al., 2022). The evaluation framework is based on a model that integrates futures focus and foresight as the third evaluation pillar, alongside accountability and learning, as shown in Figure 33.1.



Source: The model was produced by Thompson Coon et al. (2022) describing the key elements of transformational evaluation at Sitra. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 33.1 Sitra's model for transformational evaluation

A futures focus also brings the necessary timespan elements to evaluating systemic change. While formative evaluations are inherently forward looking, the analysis and evaluation questions focus on the “evaluand,” and often examine a limited timeframe. For transformative approaches, the unit of analysis requires a more holistic and dynamic systems approach, where the focus is shifted from the inside to the outside, and from the parts to the whole system. This shift necessitates a deeper analysis of how changes in the operating environment, external events, trends, and uncertainty affect implementation and contributions to larger societal changes.

Further, strategies that are evaluated based on adherence to a predicted pathway may be perceived as failures when they deviate, even if that pathway has disappeared due to how the environment is changing. Strategies that stick to their predicted pathway and chain of outcomes even when the environment and needs are changing dramatically may be judged as successes if we fail to attend to how the world is changing. Thus, our assessments must consider unpredictability not just when we see “failures,” but also when we seek to make judgments about the value of a “success.” Evaluation should also attend more carefully to the unintended and unexpected outcomes and impacts that the strategies might contribute to, whether adhering (implementation fidelity) or deviating from the predicted pathways. Integrating futures thinking and foresight across the evaluation cycle is especially relevant in formative and developmental evaluations, but could also support *ex post* type evaluations.

### **Integrating Futures Thinking and Foresight Across the Evaluation Cycle**

Building on the above, transformative use of futures thinking and foresight across the evaluation cycle can include:

*Integrating futures-thinking in an evaluability assessment.* Evaluability assessments are often implemented as “stand-alone” exercises, in preparation for design approval or a forthcoming evaluation. Nevertheless, improving and maintaining evaluability should also be an ongoing process for future-proofing strategies and managing impact in a dynamic, complex environment. Evaluability assessment can also help to determine the strategy’s “maturity” and readiness for utilizing futures-focused evaluation frameworks.

*Integrating futures thinking into framing the purpose of the evaluation.* The purpose of evaluation often balances between accountability- and learning-based approaches. Neither one of these approaches actively addresses the future(s) or considers the longer timelines needed for transformation. Exploring possible or alternative paths forward can help the evaluator better identify the emergence of new, unexpected, unintended outcomes or impacts over time. Futures thinking can hence frame the entire purpose of the evaluation and its strategic intent. By expanding their time range to futures, evaluations can better support the change process towards probable, preferable, or projected futures, and better prepare for potential, plausible, preposterous, and possible futures (Voros, 2003, n.d.).

*Explicitly including futures-thinking and foresight throughout evaluation design, including:*

- When choosing and designing the evaluation methodology and tools.
- When formulating evaluation questions that ask questions around what will work, instead of primarily focusing on what works now or has worked in the past (Beauchamp et al., 2022).

- When formulating evaluation questions that can also explore the unintended and unexpected consequences of strategies for the environment, for social and power relations, and for women, Indigenous peoples, and vulnerable groups.
- When selecting key informants and data sources – whose futures is the evaluation attending to, and who should be heard?

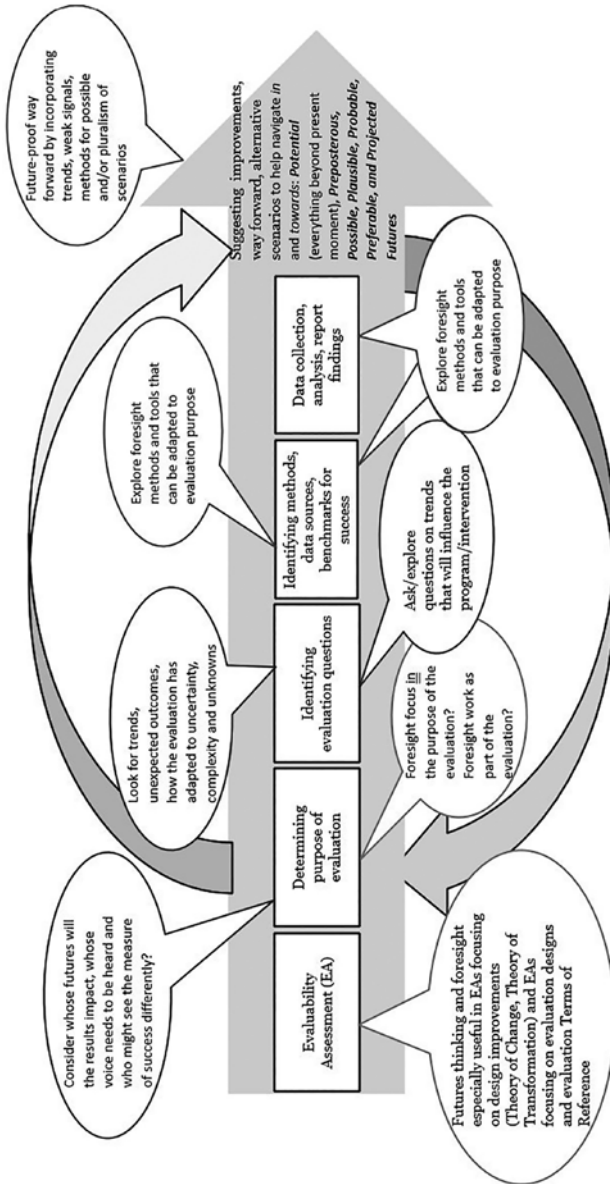
*Future-proofing evaluation recommendations by attending to the future rather than the past.* The usefulness (e.g., timeliness, relevance, level of specification) of evaluation recommendations is extensively discussed. If recommendations assume the strategy's context will remain stable, the usefulness and sustainability of evaluative knowledge might be limited. Future-proofed recommendations look to how the context is changing, not just what has happened in the past. For example, you may recommend that more attention be given to the operating and enabling environment and how it is changing, or tracking changes in key trends that appear to influence strategy implementation or outcomes.

As noted in the previous section, the evaluation recommendation stage is also an opportunity to carry out futures work. For example, the Delphi method is an interactive, multi-stakeholder process for creating a story about the future, and its implications for the strategy in the short- and long-term. This process lends itself well to grounding recommendations about the future of the strategy within insights gathered from others closer to the work and its context. The World Bank has recently used Delphi analysis as part of a comprehensive, multimethod evaluation of renewable energy; Jayawardena et al. (2022) describe the approach and process for designing and carrying out the Delphi study in detail. In 2023, the Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra) also evaluated its sustainability solutions theme through integrating the Delphi method into the evaluation framework (Hjelt et al., 2023). Figure 33.2 provides an overview of the possible entry points for integrating foresight and futures thinking across the evaluation cycle.

## BEING RESPONSIVE: EVALUATING A FUTURES STRATEGY

A strategy that is largely composed of futures work requires an evaluation that is highly oriented to the future, and able to consider the type of futures strategy being deployed. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of futures strategies we need to respond to in evaluation: (1) a foresight strategy, and (2) a strategy for future-oriented change-making. In this chapter, our attention is on futures strategies and actions that apply the methodology and practice of foresight and futures studies. This kind of futures work can be organized and implemented in many different ways, ranging from specific foresight initiatives and projects, to integrated foresight processes in and across organizations, communities, or networks.

A futures strategy can also refer to a strategy that is utilizing futures thinking and a futures mindset, and thereby adopting a long-term perspective in its goal-setting, policies, and actions. This is typically future-oriented change-making, but it does not manifest foresight per se. Still, such futures strategies are purposefully tapping into drivers that are likely to influence the future or are building in adaptability in preparation for different or alternative futures. These strategies could be intentionally advocating for a preferred futures vision and promoting transformational systems changes, while maintaining awareness of the unpredictable nature of the future. Such futures strategies necessitate a transformational evaluation approach, as described in the previous section.



Source: Authors.

Figure 33.2 Entry points for integrating foresight and futures thinking across the evaluation cycle

## How Does Evaluation Respond to Different Types of Foresight Approaches?

The growing interest in using futures thinking and foresight in policymaking and as a part of societal change work generates the need to develop sophisticated ways to evaluate foresight. The evaluation approaches currently applied to evaluating foresight focus on: (i) accountability, asking whether the foresight was efficiently conducted; (ii) justification, asking whether the effects of foresight justify its costs; and (iii) learning, asking how foresight can be done better (Johnson, 2012). This conceptualization is perhaps too limiting, as an evaluator could also explore the impact of a foresight process on the participants, strategies that are being informed by it, and the larger context in which it occurs.

Given the variety of purposes, there is no “one size fits all” evaluation approach for foresight. Rather, appropriate evaluation methodologies and criteria for accountability, justification, or development and learning strongly depend on the nature of the foresight, how foresight is understood, how futures are approached and “used,” and the desired impact (Vataja et al., 2019). Frameworks for evaluating foresight have been developed to some extent, but these frameworks and related evaluation criteria do not necessarily recognize the multidimensional nature of foresight, or the pluralism of foresight approaches (e.g., Makarova & Sokolova, 2014). Therefore, foresight evaluation could go beyond conventional approaches, and provide interesting and useful knowledge about its impact, for example, exploring whether the foresight is shifting mindsets, leading to changes in strategies, making hidden dynamics visible, and/or expanding engagement in policies.

The first step for designing an evaluation of a foresight strategy is to recognize the nature of futures thinking presented in a future strategy, and what kind of evaluation approach would fit best. Futures thinking is neither a monolith nor a collection of foresight methods and tools. Beyond methods, there are many schools of thought with diverse ontological and epistemological assumptions. The foresight typology offered by Minkkinen et al. (2019) can help us recognize the assumptions and mental models underlying the particular foresight approach adopted, which prepares us to align our evaluation accordingly. The typology is based on two dimensions:

1. The perceptions of the *level of uncertainty* in the foresight work, including how much it embraces complexity and emergence (i.e., level of perceived unpredictability).
2. The *level of change* being pursued (i.e., attempting to achieve a desired future versus simply making sense of multiple possible futures ahead).

Using these two dimensions, Minkkinen et al. (2019) have identified six frames of foresight – planning, predictive, visionary, scenaric, transformative, and critical – each containing different assumptions and leading to different choices for the appropriate evaluation approach and methods.

Below we explore how evaluation may meaningfully respond to each frame, including possible purposes for the evaluation, evaluation criteria, and potential evaluation methods (see Figure 33.3). This design map for foresight evaluation can be used as a starting point when formulating a theory of change and designing a context-sensitive evaluation for a foresight strategy. The potential evaluation methods are examples to illustrate the differences between the foresight frames. In practice, it is usually worthwhile to use multi- and mixed-method approaches.

↑ Focused on change Level of change being pursued ↓ Not focused on change	<b>Planning frame</b> <b>Possible evaluation purpose:</b> Use and value of the foresight knowledge for planning and effectiveness in achieving determined outcomes. <b>Possible criteria:</b> Preparedness, control, coherence, optimisation <b>Possible methods:</b> Input-output – assessment Before-after – comparisons Control groups	<b>Visionary frame</b> <b>Possible evaluation purpose:</b> Value and influence of visioning in steering and creating progress towards determined high-level goals. <b>Possible criteria:</b> Quality of the process, dialogue with multiple perspectives, openness for long-term futures, optimism, plausibility, commitment <b>Possible methods:</b> Qualitative process analysis Before-after assessment	<b>Transformative frame</b> <b>Possible evaluation purpose:</b> Contribution to generating alternative and novel pathways and agency towards a transformative change. <b>Possible criteria:</b> Additionality, capacity for change, emergence, novelty, discontinuity, pluralism <b>Possible methods:</b> Theory based approaches System dynamic models Contribution analysis
	<b>Predictive frame</b> <b>Possible evaluation purpose:</b> Validity of knowledge and rigorous analysis in calculating and assessing possibilities of futures outcomes. <b>Possible criteria:</b> Accuracy, predictiveness probability, control, preparedness <b>Possible methods:</b> Quantitative comparative analysis Control groups	<b>Scenario frame</b> <b>Possible evaluation purpose:</b> Value of the scenarios in increasing awareness of futures alternatives. Assessing scenarios as output. <b>Possible criteria:</b> Awareness, resilience, quality of scenarios against certain criteria <b>Possible methods:</b> Quantitative & qualitative analysis Checklists & indicators	<b>Critical frame</b> <b>Possible evaluation purpose:</b> Ability to challenge, shape and create credible, novel and/or meaningful alternative futures. Ability to shift whose futures are centred. <b>Possible criteria:</b> Novelty, emergence, power, ability to challenge the present. <b>Possible methods:</b> Participatory & narrative methods Real time assessments
	Low	High	High
	Level of perceived uncertainty		

Source: Adaptation of foresight frames from Minkkinen et al. (2019) to an evaluation context.

Figure 33.3 *Design map for foresight evaluation*

Note that the methods of foresight do not fall neatly into these frames, as any specific method can be deployed in multiple frames depending on how it is used. For example, scenarios in the scenario frame are typically exploratory, and are used to increase awareness of what could happen. Yet, scenarios can also be used in the predictive frame (exploring what will happen) and planning frame (exploring how to reach a goal; Börjeson et al., 2006). It is important to recognize that many of the foresight methods presented in Table 33.1 can be used across the six frames in Figure 33.3. While some foresight methodologies lend themselves better to one frame than another, the frame is not dependent on the methods used, but rather highlights the underlying set of assumptions, and the overall orientation and purpose of the foresight approach.

For instance, both the planning and predictive frames perceive the level of uncertainty as low, but differ in their purpose. The planning frame emphasizes rational planning to reach determined outcomes when the level of pursued change is high. The predictive frame may include calculating trends or producing economic forecasts for predicting probabilities of future outcomes, rather than pursuing change (Minkkinen et al., 2019). Within both of these frames, the evaluation’s focus can be to address the extent to which the foresight knowledge (and the ways in which it is used) is informing and raising awareness, supporting planning, or even supporting attempts to control for the future. In these frames, the evaluator might ask how well foresight knowledge has been used for decision-making and planning the action, and for what kinds of risks and opportunities the foresight activities have helped prepare.

The visionary and sceneric frames, on the other hand, take the stance that futures are both uncertain and potentially dangerous to predict. In the visionary frame, the level of pursued change is high since the aim is to reach a determined high-level goal; whereas in the sceneric frame, the aim is more descriptive than normative, and embraces a variety of unpredictable alternative futures (Minkkinen et al., 2019). Evaluation of a visionary future strategy could focus on exploring how foresight work succeeds in generating a shared story of a preferred future and action toward it. Evaluation criteria could focus on the plausibility of the preferred future and ways in which it led to strategies for managing uncertainty on the journey toward that future. It may also be important to assess interaction and participation, engagement, and motivation. In these frames, the evaluator might ask how well the foresight work has supported participants in identifying the preferred future and working together towards it.

Lastly, the transformative and critical frames are very close to each other, and the differences between them are often more theoretical. Both concentrate on making sense of the assumptions of the future and challenging them, instead of describing futures by producing data and knowledge, visions, or scenarios. The goal is to create novel paths for the future (Minkkinen et al., 2019). When a future strategy assumes this kind of deep uncertainty and complexity, evaluation also needs to be sensitive to identifying unintended outcomes and emergent paths to changes at different levels of social systems.

Futures Literacy is an example of critical and transformative foresight, focusing on the capacity to discover and invent anticipatory assumptions, and aiming to enhance the sophistication of our anticipatory systems (Miller, 2011). See Box 33.1 for a description of Futures Literacy. According to Miller (2011), the relevant question is not how to cope with a universe that seems to be getting more complex, but rather how to improve our ability to take advantage of the novel emergence that has always surrounded us. Therefore, the rationale for evaluating transformative and critical foresight frames is to expand our capabilities to discover and seriously consider alternative, feasible futures.

Transformative foresight aims explicitly to influence societal changes, and the evaluation focus may be on the contribution of the foresight process to attaining normative goals. For example, Neuvonen (2022) has studied the value of backcasting in urban planning, defining it as an approach that supports imagining and preparing transformative solutions for some of the most important long-term problems our contemporary societies face. Evaluation in this context must attend to agency and empowerment, while supporting learning and unlearning on the pathway to change. In the frames of transformative and critical foresight, the evaluator might explore if the capability of people for futures thinking has been increased through foresight activities, and what kind of changes the futures thinking and activities generates in practice, at the individual, organizational, or society level.

### **BOX 33.1 EVALUATION OF FUTURE FREQUENCY (A TRANSFORMATIVE FORESIGHT METHOD)**

Future Frequency is a workshop method for building a mindset for alternative futures, and provides a good example of transformative foresight work. The method was developed by the foresight specialists of the Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra) to help a growing number of people and organizations adopt and scale futures thinking and action towards the realization of a preferred future. Future Frequency is an excellent example of foresight in the trans-

formative frame, described above as challenging assumptions about the future, imagining preferred futures, and making them a reality. The method is intended to be used by anyone, and it could be applied to the needs of different groups. All the materials are openly available online (Sitra, 2021).

Sitra commissioned an external evaluation in 2021 that focused on analyzing the emergent, unintended, and desired outcomes achieved using the Futures Frequency method. The evaluation investigated how users have applied the method in practice, and explored to what extent the method has been perceived to be effective and scalable in different contexts. One of the objectives of the evaluation was to develop an analytical framework to identify and evaluate outcomes of transformative foresight work.

In the 2021 foresight evaluation, a multi-criteria model was applied to situate the agency at the individual, community, and society level, and the results were analyzed against the three relevant phases of the Futures Frequency method: challenging assumptions about the future, imagining futures, and developing actions to take to achieve the preferred futures. Changes were analyzed at the individual, community, and societal levels. Foresight and futures work are often considered “hard to measure,” and therefore, the evaluation utilized a participatory and interactive mixed method approach to elucidate outcomes that are not tangible or easily quantifiable (Halonen et al., 2022). The case illustrates well how to explore and assess transformative aspects of foresight, and the impact paths from the individual level to wider societal transformation.

## CONCLUSION: BUILDING YOUR FORESIGHT TOOLKIT AND KNOWLEDGE

Futures thinking and foresight tools and methods present an opportunity for evaluators to help strengthen a strategy and build its future focus, and to help the implementers explore the strategy in the context of multiple possible futures (i.e., “future proofing”). Whether futures thinking is infused from the very beginning of the evaluation in transformative ways or mixed in at key moments through a light touch approach, adopting this orientation to evaluation can not only bring new value, but also prepare strategies for our increasingly turbulent and uncertain world. Evaluation can serve as a pathway to bringing futures thinking to bear on more strategies, as there is a growing need to understand the value of foresight and futures thinking. In this chapter, we offer a framework for foresight evaluation that helps to navigate the different frames of foresight, and identify their value within different contexts and levels. We also offer a pathway to integrate futures thinking more deeply, helping not only to transform evaluation, but also influence strategies to be more “future proof.”

Evaluators do not need to be foresight specialists to gain value from the use of foresight tools. A foundational level of foresight knowledge and an orientation toward futures thinking can help an evaluator see when and where to adopt these approaches. A basic level of understanding about foresight can also help the evaluator consider power dynamics inherent not only in the evaluation, but also in whose futures are centered, and how they are surfaced and interpreted. A connection to futurists multiply positioned to bring a variety of traditional and more inclusive or democratizing methods can help the evaluator not only consider the need and power dynamics, but also move the work forward with expertise.



Futures work is becoming more widespread, and its orientation is increasingly focused on helping evaluators achieve a more equitable, sustainable future. This use of futures thinking can help evaluators challenge assumptions about whose future matters, and what it will take to obtain to our preferred future given the long time horizons, and dynamic and messy context in which strategies are implemented. As this type of thinking becomes more common and begins to shape more strategies, bringing a futures lens to evaluation can not only be a value-add, but quite possibly become recognized as a necessary aspect of evaluating amid complexity. Evaluators have an important role to play in establishing this new norm within evaluations: experiment with how to bring futures thinking into evaluation, and decolonize the approaches when possible, but also make visible what they are discovering about the power of futures thinking in evaluations and social change.

## REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (2013). The future as cultural fact: Essays on the global condition. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 14(4), 649–650.
- Beauchamp, E., Marsac, C., Brooks, N., D’Errico, S., & Benson, N. (2022). *From What Works to What Will Work: Integrating Climate Risks into Sustainable Development Evaluation – a Practical Guide*. International Institute for Environment and Development.
- Bisht, P. (2020). Decolonizing futures: Finding voice, and making room for non-Western ways of knowing, being and doing. In R. Slaughter & A. Hines (Eds.), *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (pp. 216–230). Association of Professional Futurists and Foresight International.
- Börjeson, L., Höjer, M., Dreborg, K., Ekvall, T. & Finnveden, G. (2006). Scenario types and techniques: Towards a user’s guide. *Futures*, 38(7), 723–739.
- Center for Strategic Futures & Civil Service College (n.d.). *Foresight: A Glossary*. [https://www.csf.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/csf-csc\\_foresight--a-glossary.pdf](https://www.csf.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/csf-csc_foresight--a-glossary.pdf).
- Davies, R. (n.d.). *ParEvo*. <https://parevo.org/>.
- Feukeu, K. E., Ajilore, B., & Bourgeois, R. (2021, April 1). *The Capacity to Decolonise: Building Futures Literacy in Africa*. Library Home. <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/handle/10625/60080>.
- Government Office for Science (2017). *The Futures Toolkit: Tools for Futures Thinking and Foresight Across UK Government. Edition 1.0*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/674209/futures-toolkit-edition-1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674209/futures-toolkit-edition-1.pdf).
- Halonen, M., Hyytinen, K., & Kurki, S. (2022). *Future-oriented thinking as a civic skill: The results of the Futures Frequency workshop method evaluation study*. Sitran selvityksiä 221. <https://www.sitra.fi/julkaisut/tulevaisuusajattelu-kansalaistaidoksi/> (English summary).
- Hebinck, A., Vervoort, J., Hebinck, P., Rutting, L., & Galli, F. (2018). Imagining transformative futures: Participatory foresight for food systems change. *Ecology and Society*, 23(2), 16.
- Hjelt, M., Moisiö, M., Jyrälä, M., Järvinen, J., Saukkonen, T., Sepponen, S., Halonen, M., Sanna Ahvenharju, S., & Lauttamäki, V. (2023). Evaluation of Sitra’s sustainability solutions theme. [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Sitra.
- Inayatullah, S. (2009). Causal layered analysis: An integrative and transformative theory and method. *Futures Research Methodology*, version 3.
- Inayatullah, S., & Milojević, I. (2015). *CLA 2.0: Transformative Research in Theory and Practice*. University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.
- Jayawardena, M., Heijndermans, E., Meiers, M. W., Watkins, R., Butscher, J., Feng, S., & Berrah, N. (2022). *Delphi Technique: How Expert Panels Predict Emerging Opportunities and Challenges in Renewable Energy*. IEG Methods and Evaluation Capacity Development Working Paper Series. Independent Evaluation Group, World Bank.
- Johnson, R. (2012). Developing the capacity to assess the impact of foresight. *Foresight*, 14(1), 56–68.
- Makarova, E. A., & Sokolova, A. V. (2014). Foresight evaluation: Lessons from project management. *Foresight*, 16(1), 75–91.

- Miller, R. (2011). Futures literacy: Embracing complexity and using the future. *Ethos*, 10(10), 23–28.
- Minkinen, M., Auffermann, B., & Ahokas, I. (2019). Six foresight frames: Classifying policy foresight processes in foresight systems according to perceived unpredictability and pursued change. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 149(4).
- Neuvonen, A. (2022). Re-focusing on the future: Backcasting carbon neutral cities. Tampere University Dissertations 656.
- Obee, K. (2022, October 26). *Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities' Be Well Initiative*. Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities.
- Policy Horizons Canada (2018). Module 1: Introduction to foresight. *Foresight training modules*. <https://horizons.gc.ca/en/resources/>.
- Ramos, J., Sweeney, J. A., Peach, K., & Smith, L. (2019). *Our Futures: By the People, for the People*. Nesta. [https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Our\\_futures\\_by\\_the\\_people\\_for\\_the\\_people\\_WEB\\_v5.pdf](https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Our_futures_by_the_people_for_the_people_WEB_v5.pdf).
- Saffo, P. (2007). Six rules for effective forecasting. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(7/8), 122.
- Sardar, Z. (1993). Colonizing the future: The 'other' dimension of futures studies. *Futures*, 25(2), 179–187.
- Sardar, Z. (2010). Welcome to postnormal times. *Futures*, 42(5), 435–444.
- Sharpe, B., Hodgson, A., Leicester, G., Lyon, A., & Fazey, I. (2016). Three horizons: A pathways practice for transformation. *Ecology and Society*, 21(2), 47.
- Sitra (2021, November 12). *Futures Frequency*. <https://www.sitra.fi/en/projects/futures-frequency/>.
- Sitra (n.d.-a). *Dictionary*. <https://www.sitra.fi/en/dictionary>.
- Sitra (n.d.-b). *Futuremakers Toolbox*. <https://www.sitra.fi/en/projects/toolbox-for-people-shaping-the-future/>.
- Snow, E., Lynn, J., & Beer, T. (2015). Strategy design amid complexity: Tools for designing and implementing adaptive funding strategies. *The Foundation Review*, 7(2), 4.
- Son, H. (2015). The history of Western futures studies: An exploration of the intellectual traditions and three-phase periodization. *Futures*, 66, 120–137.
- Thompson Coon, R., Vataja, K., & Parkkonen, P. (2022). *Sitra's Evaluation Framework*. <https://www.sitra.fi/en/publications/sitras-eva>.
- UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (2019). *Foresight Manual*. United Nations Development Programme, Singapore.
- University of Turku (n.d.). *Futures literacy*. <https://www.utu.fi/en/university/turku-school-of-economics/finland-futures-research-centre/collaboration/futuresliteracy#:~:text=Futures%20literacy%20is%20an%20individual,and%20broadly%20about%20the%20future>.
- van den Ende, M. A., Wardekker, A., Hegger, D. L. T., Mees, H. L. P., & Vervoort, J. M. (2022). Preparing Participatory Foresight Methods. In M. A. van den Ende, A. Wardekker, D. L.T. Hegger, H. L.P. Mees, & J. M. Vervoort, *Towards a Climate-Resilient Future Together* (pp. 7–36). Springer.
- Vataja, K., Parkkonen, P., & Dufva, M. (2019). Evaluating the impact of a futures-oriented organization. *World Futures Review*, 11(4), 320–330.
- Voros, J. (2003). A generic foresight process framework. *Foresight*, 5(3), 10–21.
- Voros, J. (n.d.). *The Futures Cone, use and history*. The Voroscope. <https://thevoroscope.com/2017/02/24/the-futures-cone-use-and-history/>.