

Committee of Permanent Representatives
Subcommittee Meeting
Tuesday, 23 May 2023
14:00 – 18:00 (GMT+3)
Conference Room 1
Hybrid meeting

Agenda item 3: Briefing on UNEP’s work on strategic foresight and horizon scanning.

This background document has been developed by the Secretariat to inform the Committee of Permanent Representatives on the development and implementation of a foresight trajectory for UNEP. Following the presentation, Member States and Stakeholders are invited to engage in an exchange of views with the Secretariat on the findings of the report.

Developing and implementing a foresight trajectory for UNEP



The pace of change sweeping the world is faster today than ever before. Disruption is intensifying, and the multilateral systems that address critical global issues are struggling to keep pace with the growing prevalence of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Organizations need to adapt their approach to addressing future issues by being more proactive in their orientation toward the future, to better anticipate what could happen next and take the actions today that will be most beneficial tomorrow. However, visionary organizations are also aware that such a path is not just a case of sufficiently understanding trends to make better predictions.

Leveraging foresight and futures thinking to improve our preparedness to tackle disruptive change. Along with other entities in the UN and as part of Our Common Agenda and UN2.0, UNEP is putting in place an institutionalized approach to strategic foresight and horizon scanning with the view to developing an anticipatory and future-oriented culture and to help navigate current and future uncertainty to strengthen the delivery of its mandate. The process will culminate in the issuing of a biennial Global Foresight Report as a contribution to the 2024 Summit of the Future; an uplift in its internal capacity and the introduction of a systemic methodology to help inform decision making.

Foresight is a set of approaches and tools that help explore, envision, anticipate, and even shape the future in an open, structured and systematic way. At UNEP, we are using foresight in an open and structured manner to improve our preparedness to tackle change and uncertainty.

Strategic Foresight is an organizational approach and capacity to anticipate trends, risks, emerging issues, and their potential implications and opportunities to draw insights for planning, priority-setting and preparedness. It allows decisionmakers and stakeholders to have structured strategic conversations about change, uncertainty and complexity, and take its potential impacts into account. UNEP has therefore embarked on an internal process to

determine how Strategic Foresight can be used to aid in improved strategic planning and to better support our member states.

While UNEP has a history of working in the early warning, foresight and futures space, it has primarily focused on identifying and exploring emerging issues of concern. The implementation of strategic foresight will enhance existing processes by establishing a stronger and robust evidence base. It will also implement a common approach across the organization, which will ensure that outputs and issues are prioritized with a supporting rationale for any specific issue that is receiving attention by UNEP and others.

Process and approach. The foresight process will kick-start with a scenario-building exercise and an exploratory scanning of signals that follows a classic Delphi method. A mix of techniques and an iterative multistage process has been designed to obtain a wide range of informed views, ideas and evidence. These insights will then be transformed into consensus through structured analysis and deliberation by expert panels at the global and regional levels (step 3 of the schematic figure).

It is expected that a final Report together any relevant insights and recommendations put forward through the expert panel workshops will inform the deliberations of the sixth UN Environment Assembly in February 2024 and the Summit of the Future in September 2024.

Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the steps to be implemented for the establishment of a UNEP strategic foresight mechanism.

