



# A Future for Planetary Health and Human Wellbeing 2050

## Youth Assembly – UNEP Foresight Workshop

**Nairobi, Kenya, 17 February 2024**

Organized by the Youth, Children & Major Group (YCMG) in collaboration with UNEP Office of the Chief Scientist (OCS)



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## Introduction

**We are a young planet.** There are 1.2 billion people aged between 15 and 24 years old. Add in children, and this number is on a par with the populations of India or China. The future belongs to them, yet they are seldom consulted or allowed to participate in long-term planning. This is an oversight which should be removed for accurate foresight. When the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) decided to revise how it looks at the future, it was determined to involve and prioritise youth voices.

UNEP is administratively divided into six global regions of Member States. The Foresight Process elevated youth to an equal region in its own right, conducting a foresight workshop in February 2024, the outcomes and recommendations of which carried the same influence as the six other regional workshops conducted earlier.

As a crucial part of the development of a new foresight strategy for UNEP, the regional and youth workshops provided valuable insights. The goal of the entire process is to develop an anticipatory and future-oriented culture, recognizing that tackling the global systemic challenges we face requires integrating forward-looking knowledge and insights across disciplines, knowledge systems, and sectors of society.

As part of this effort, UNEP and the International Science Council administered a Delphi Survey and convened a Foresight Expert Panel who met in September 2023 to collectively interpret emerging signals of change distilled from a global survey. Four scenarios were developed at the global level, representing four possible visions of the world in 2050. The scenarios are neither “utopian” or “dystopian” visions, but rather, representations of possible futures used to facilitate discussions on issues, pathways and interventions which may affect planetary health and human well-being in the future. Following this global analysis, a series of regional workshops were held to contextualise global findings and explore region-specific, dynamics, issues, risks, and opportunities.

The Delphi survey (Phase 1) conducted in 2023, only yielded 7% of youth respondents. Given the importance of appropriate inclusion of youth voices, the aim of this workshop was to identify issues of concerns that could be relevant in the next 25-50 years from the youth lens and in recognition that today’s youth will be at the helm of leadership in the years to come and therefore it is essential their voices are heard.

This report provides an overview of the main insights captured during the Youth Foresight Workshop organised on the margins of UNEA, the Youth Assembly 17 Feb 2024. The participants reflected on three global scenarios, namely: Sustainability Paradox, Global Awakening and Fortress Multipolarity. Young people shared their views on possible pathways through which those scenarios could hypothetically materialize and reflected on how this could affect the transition towards a sustainable future of improved planetary health and human wellbeing.

## Background

The triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution affects everyone, but with half of the global population being under the age of 30, young people will be the most affected and are likely to experience environmental changes now and into the future.

Young people are central in achieving a more sustainable and healthier planet. Youth have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness and capacity to address environmental and climatic challenges through innovative ideas, demanding policy- and decision-makers for bolder action through advocacy. Meaningful and effective inclusion of young people in environmental action and decision making is a responsibility given the disproportionate consequences of the triple planetary crisis on the young. Inclusion of young people and their views in processes such as Foresight ensures better, more resilient, inclusive and sustainable decisions that will have long-term benefits.

We are entering the final phase of UNEP's 2023-2024 Foresight Process. The first phase scoped a wide range of inputs including a Global Delphi survey and construction of four divergent scenarios of possible futures to 2050. Global issues require a global perspective, but also require understanding of the unique regional, sociocultural and demographic contexts as well as the informed views as specific groups, such as Youth. UNEP's Foresight Process incorporates this contextual element. The second phase of the foresight process, the regional and Youth-led workshops, brought together over two and fifty hundred experts from six regions, as well as Youth representatives to reflect on possible futures and crucially, to "reverse engineer" them: to walk backwards from them to the present, with respect to interventions needed in 2024 to address the underlying causes of the triple planetary crisis and achieve planetary health and human wellbeing. In doing so, key disruptive issues have been identified along with, perhaps more importantly, interventions to take account of disruptive issues and improve the environment for future generations.

This Youth Foresight Workshop aimed at both engaging young people in a process of considering their own future, and provided a platform to express their ideas, aspirations, and concerns, enabling them to make informed decisions that affect their lives. It recognized the unique experiences, perspectives, and values of young people and seeks to incorporate them into our thinking about the present and future<sup>1</sup>. It is another layer of data and insights to feed into UNEP's Global Environmental Foresight report.

## Methodology

Three global scenarios were presented to the youth on possible futures of a world in 2050. An overview of each scenario was introduced and participants were asked to think about the issues that would be dominant in these scenarios, what sorts of issues and facets of society would be prevalent. Participants at the workshop were encouraged to think 25 years ahead.

Below is a summary of the scenarios and how they were contextualized for participants.

## Scenario 1: Sustainability Paradox

This scenario envisages a world where 'green meets greed'. A high degree of trust is placed in science and technology and is actively used to successfully solve the symptoms of many environmental problems and resource scarcity. Market forces dominate socio-political agendas. Trust is placed in further globalization with the liberalization of trade flows and capitalization – increasing the wealth of corporate elites. Society and institutions continue to believe that economies can grow exponentially, and people continue to consume without limits, since "green technology" will take care of emerging pollutants, climate change and severe losses of ecosystem

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3016/file/%20UNICEF-Innocenti-YFF-Our-Future-Pledge-toolkit-2023.pdf>

services and biodiversity. In line with the Jevons' paradox, the more efficient products and production become, the faster consumption grows. Many of the short-term technological innovations and resulting social dynamics generate new, unintended environmental change issues and exacerbate root problems. The scramble for resources leads over time to increased conflict, protectionism, and geopolitical instability where disparities and inequality prevail. By 2050, problems requiring collective action remain unanswered, and the world operates well outside the safe operating limits of planetary boundaries.

In this scenario science and technology are actively used to successfully solve many environmental problems and resource scarcity. Therefore, society continues to believe that economies can grow exponentially, and people continue to consume without limits.

### **A summary of the key thematic areas and issues relevant to this scenario were:**

**Environmental governance and management:** It was noted that there has been increasingly poor implementation of policy and governance, compounded by corruption. This has led to mistrust in government institutions. Participants noted that multilateralism has failed, with Governments and international regimes being ignored. Participants also raised concerns about increased voting gaps based on race, gender and economic background.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI), Innovation and Technologies:** Participants talked about privacy violation and bias in decisions caused by advanced technology, and the inability of humans to use and understand AI. They considered there would be a loss of analytical skills and hence lost human agency. Participants also called for centralization of data and technology. On a positive note, life expectancy and human health has and would be expected to increase or be improved.

**Economic development and finance:** Participants noted that governments have placed high priority on economic growth to the exclusion of other, potentially more valuable, metrics. There were also concerns there will be a hyper-powered private sector. Capitalism is bound to increase due to control by the private sector or elite societies/countries resulting in inequality.

**Knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits:** Common issues raised included the fact that knowledge can be easily manipulated, data is polarized, there is difficulty in validating truth and more people live in virtual worlds. Cases of cybercrime will increase. The world is currently experiencing improved education and learning due to technology but these other aspects could be negatives. There will be no "truth", as foresight and validation systems are lost, and human agents can be easily manipulated.

**Social dynamics:** On this theme, concerns were expressed about mass migration, growing inequality and a widening generation gap. Inequality will increase as capitalism and elitism advance, along with rules formulated by elites and private sectors.

**Resource scarcity, efficiency, and waste:** Some of the issues raised included increased resource scarcity, extinction of species, water pollution and a rise in the use of sustainable energy. There is a need for legislation to oversee extraction of natural resources.

**Direct environmental change:** Green technology may give rise to new challenges, such as potential resource exploitation. Participants noted that there was a gap between global expectations for Africa on green technology like carbon capture (a rich resource) and what Africa has the technology or capacity to deliver.

**Geopolitical instability:** Due to geopolitical instability and climate change, small islands are likely to be wiped out, hyper-urbanization will be experienced and rural areas and economies diminished.

## Scenario 2: Global Awakening

This scenario envisions a global awakening, as younger generations recognize the interconnectedness of their actions and their impact on the health of the planet. Supported by Artificial Intelligence and a surge in technical innovations, governments, NGOs, financial institutions, corporations, and individuals alike unite towards a common purpose: to create a world where harmony between humans and nature is paramount. This realisation, initially driven by the global youth that later becomes a new generation of leaders, is the catalyst for change, sparking an era of tech-enabled collaboration and cooperation that transcends borders and allegiances. The adoption of polycentric governance and new approaches to decision-making facilitate dramatic shifts in our ability to address the cumulative and transboundary impacts (and costs) to the environment. This scenario describes a world where human capacity for cooperation and positive actions is married with the responsible use of new technology and scientific evidence and a willingness to accept restrictions on personal choice. This facilitates not only the mitigation but also the stabilisation of the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss. This, in turn, allows human populations to reap the rewards in the form of sustainable peace and prosperity.

**A summary of the key thematic areas and issues relevant to this scenario were:**

**Environmental governance and management:** There would be more accountability from international institutions – e.g. reform of the International Criminal Court and the Security Council (no more veto right). Participants emphasized the need to establish youth committees in all ministries of environment. There were calls to have more legally binding instruments (e.g. governing plastic pollution), investment in sustainable agricultural standards as well as increased enforcement of laws. In addition, it was suggested that countries should have more integration of environmental rights in domestic frameworks. Universal application of the Aarhus Convention and procedural rights was a key recommendation. Synergies should be promoted across international conventions and MEAs, with sharing of best practices.

**AI, innovation and technology:** Concerns included the need to better account for indigenous knowledge. AI and digitalisation should establish a 'common scientific environmental language', be used for environmental purposes that transcends borders and communities for common understanding. Countries could consider using AI models for scenarios informing decision-making. The ethical use of AI must be supported by credible and trusted models. As such, there is a need to develop a framework to control emerging technologies, for example for countries to have an oversight and validation system.

**Economic development finance:** There were calls for reform in the current international financial system/architecture. Countries should move away from the GDP model and towards a Universal Health Index that really captures the value of environmental and human health. For instance, the informal work sector must be accounted for within measurement of economic growth. There was an identified need for more economic incentives for central banks to move to sustainable standards. A move away from concentrating the world's capital and wealth in a few hands is essential. The environment must be central to economic policies. Cancelling debts and taxes by developed nations will greatly free resources for developing countries.

**Knowledge attitudes skills:** Investment in more behavioral change and education was considered essential to reach the desired change. Intersectionality, interdisciplinarity and acceptance of diversity should be at the center of behavioral change resulting in sustained critical and analytical thinking, enhanced by use of AI technologies. The participants outlined the need

to review public education systems at local, national and international levels with a focus on decentralisation.

**Direct environmental change:** Participants outlined the need to invest in lessons learned from COVID (e.g. reduced GHG emissions as a result of less travel). There were calls to increase investment in the use of alternative sources of energies in particular renewable energies sources, as opposed to overreliance on fossil fuels. Protection of vulnerable countries such as Small Islands Developing States (SIDs) from adverse environmental effects of climate change should be the concern of the global community.

**Social dynamics:** The participants felt that the ability of humans to communicate freely via free media should be encouraged. This will foster a sense of inclusivity and belonging which has a bearing on mental health in society consequently, resulting in improvement to life expectancy.

### **Scenario 3: Fortress Multipolarity**

This scenario assumes a future shaped by a 'polycrisis' – where a series of cascading disasters and compounding impacts affecting the world simultaneously trigger population and fertility shocks and shake the resilience of societies, economies, and governance. Humanity has no choice but to adapt and to fundamentally change the trajectory of unsustainable resource use and environmental degradation. Trust in science, which has been waning for some time, is partially restored. Nevertheless, there is a general loss of trust in large institutions, both private and public, which failed to adequately manage planetary health. This has been further emphasised by the polycrisis, fostering calls for strong, authoritative leadership. Humans reorganise themselves in hybrid “fortresses” – fortified enclaves with mega-cities that have stringent physical and virtual surveillance. The fortresses are managed using AI-based tools to protect the human wellbeing and environment by protecting people from themselves as well as against intruders at the expense of individual freedom and liberties. Collective action has occurred to respond to environmental crises, but security remains an issue due to competition for scarce resources.

#### **A summary of the key thematic areas and issues relevant to this scenario were:**

**Environment governance and management:** Participants perceived a future with harsher regulations and penalties to maintain social and environmental order. There were divergent views on the kind of relationships that may exist between nature and the environment such as valuing the environment and awareness of the possible disconnect from nature due to a reliance on digital technologies. This may result in a decline of environmental governance. In 2050 and beyond, there would be a decrease in institutional transparency and accountability. It is expected that income and wealth disparities would widen. Lack of democracy and subsequently more conflicts due to regional and political imbalance were considered likely resulting in increased polycrisis and more individualism.

**Artificial Intelligence, Innovation and Technology:** There will be more application of AI and development of new technologies. Regulation of AI in 2050 is key including use of data for advancement and security. Overdependence on AI will result in loss of critical thinking among the human population.

**Economic Development and Finance:** Benefit sharing seems impossible but the emergence of cryptocurrency is likely. There was a possibility of the establishment of a basic/standard wage with access to services. The participants mentioned that globalism was on the decline thus



increasing loss of international dependence among countries. This has been exacerbated by unfair trade blocs.

**Knowledge, Attitude, Skills, Habits:** It is expected that education will be authoritarian and used as a controlling mechanism. This may result in a disconnected society with a high prevalence of mental health challenges. Increases in the development of regional education frameworks were likely. Aspects related to population control such as family planning would be dependent on customs and belief systems. A decline in knowledge of human history as a result of dependence on AI will result in traditional ways of preserving knowledge coming to the brink of extinction. As a result there will be a decline in family values.

**Resource efficiency and waste:** Renewables and alternative energy sources will be established. There will be increased generation of plastic waste. Use of nuclear technologies will be widespread. Due to scarcity of resources, there will be an increase in regional conflicts and associated increases in forced migration. Aviation was predicted to decline.

**Direct environmental consequences:** There will be increased frequency of pandemics, more loss of biodiversity, and restoration will be disrupted. Due to declining multilateralism, cases of increased pollution is likely in 2050 due to increases in industrial activities, despite efforts to address pollution by the global community. Increasing pollution among other environmental challenges will result in a decline in public health. To address this, regional environmental governance is likely to increase. Humans will value the environment more resulting in efforts such as increasing green spaces and protected areas. As a result, more regulatory regimes and rules are expected in such a society.

**Social dynamics:** Forced and voluntary migration are bound to increase. With the fortresses being established, nationalism among citizens will rise. This may result in a decline in free will among the population and perhaps a decline in individualism.

## **Conclusion: Summary of Potential Interventions**

**Governance was key** with a focus on environmental rules and regulations to reduce environmental harms. It was noted this was challenging in many parts of the world.

**Artificial Intelligence** is a dominant issue that will affect all facets of life and the environment in the future. It will be essential for the regulation of AI to be prioritized as well as to include traditional and indigenous knowledge.

**Reform of UN:** There were calls to reform the UN security council including striking off veto power by increased implementation of the United Nations 3.0 conceptual model i.e UN 3.0. In addition, UN agencies should endeavor to work together and stop competing for resources. Effective implementation of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs).

**Development and Implementation of a Total health index instead of GDP:** There was a suggestion that the world ceases to use GDP as a measure of economic growth instead, a total health index should be explored which could encompass the polluter pay principle, natural capital and concepts of loss and damage.

**Decentralisation of trade and resources control:** The participants called for a change from the current structure where multi-billion companies have power including decision making over the locals. Capacity development of local, national and regional institutions was key.

**Consideration be given to different finance and economic models. Implement debt relief:** Developed countries should consider doing away with debt and taxes owed by developing/poor countries which could aid the development agenda and decrease inequalities currently widening. Participants suggested that the world should employ a doughnut economic model if indeed the global community wishes to address global challenges currently facing humanity.

**Youth at the table:** Youth should be involved at all levels of decision-making including being in all ministries of environment.

**Enhanced role for indigenous/ traditional knowledge in how issues are discussed and debated and also decision making:** For this to happen it will need to be included in discussions on all key issues.

**Reviewing research & literature practices with a view to inclusion of history in the work of the future:** With increased desire to get results, there were calls to identify ways to incorporate historical literature into ongoing research, e.g. how will we incorporate research, literature into the world that we foresee?

**Provision of information to support developing countries to draw lessons from the mistakes of developed countries.**

## Annex 1: List of Participants

### Selected Youths for Foresight Workshop at YEA 2024 on 17th Feb from

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