

Committee of Permanent Representatives
Subcommittee Meeting
Nairobi, 10 September 2024
09:00 – 12:00 and 13.00 – 16:00 (GMT+3)
Hybrid meeting
Conference Room 4 (in person)
and Microsoft Teams (online)

Agenda Item 3: Briefing on the Global Foresight Report on planetary health and human wellbeing

This note serves as an information background document for consideration of agenda item 3, whereby the Committee will be provided a presentation on the Strategic Foresight uplift by the Secretariat.

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.

New Horizons: A Global Foresight Report on planetary health and human wellbeing

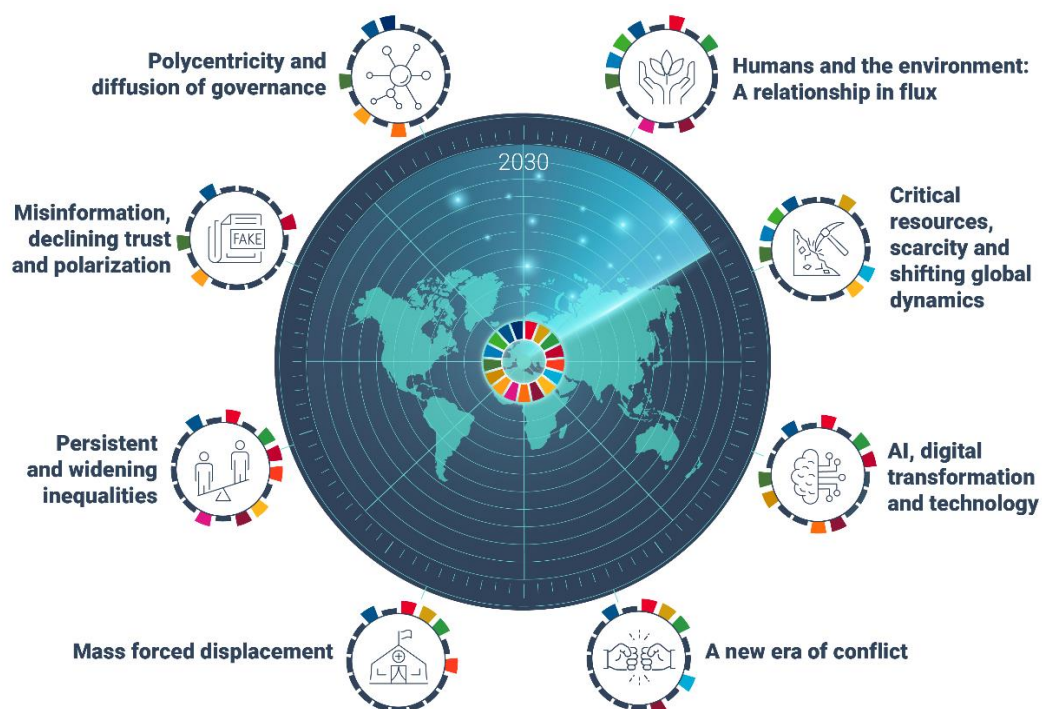


Background

In response to the UN Secretary-General's [Quintet of Change](#) initiative, UNEP launched its foresight trajectory in 2021, taking a science-based approach with the view to establishing what sort of Foresight UNEP should use in future to fulfill its mandate.

This work builds on UNEP's long history of identifying new and emerging issues as part of the organization's mandate to keep the environment under review. This process ultimately seeks to formalize and advance UNEP's strategic foresight and futures-thinking work by putting in place an institutionalized approach to strategic foresight and horizon scanning. In so doing, UNEP will fulfil its mandate of monitoring the environment through identifying emerging signals of change that could have implications for maintenance and protection of the environment.

This work has culminated with the launch of [Navigating New Horizons: A Global Foresight report on Planetary Health and Human Wellbeing](#). The report was produced by UNEP in partnership with the International Science Council (ISC).



Key Findings

The Foresight process intended to identify signals of change, specifically those issues for which there is evidence of a small but potentially important development, practice, idea or innovation that points to a future possibility. Many participants highlighted issues that are now solid trends resulting in the process identifying 8 critical shifts that have occurred in recent years, along with 18 signals of change that have the potential to significantly disrupt management of the global environment. A summary of the 8 critical shifts observed and the 18 signals of change are outlined in figure 1 and a brief description of a selection of signals associated with those shifts are outlined below.

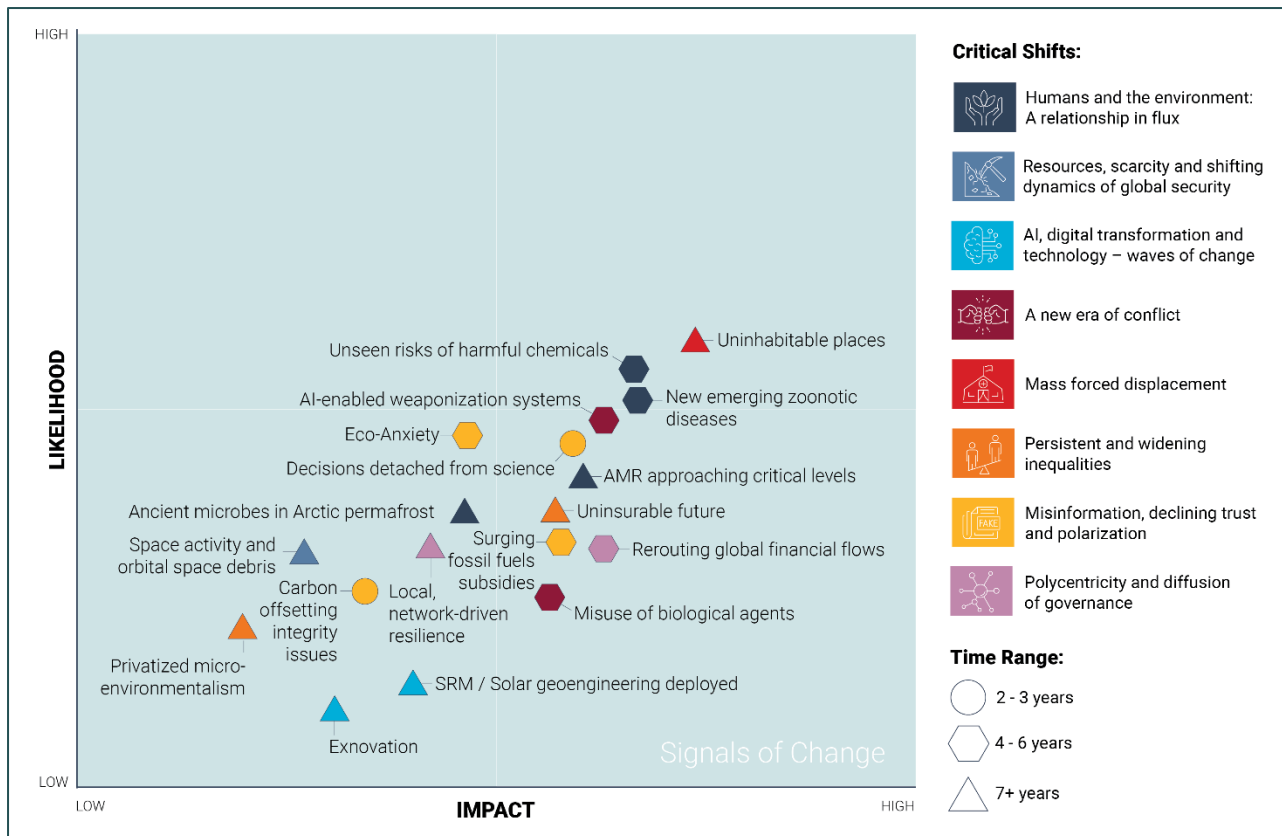


Figure 1: The eight critical shifts and eighteen signals of change representing potential disruptions depicted along three dimensions: likelihood, impact and time horizon.

- **The relationship between people and the environment is in flux** and is evidenced by increasing frequency and intensity of weather events and a rapidly changing environment that is impacting planetary and human wellbeing. Several signals of change were identified in this critical shift, such as thawing permafrost and increases in pollution and waste, both having the potential for significant implications for human and wildlife health and wellbeing into the future.
- **Critical resources - scarcity and competition reshaping dynamics of global security** is apparent through the demand and supply of critical minerals and metals as well as in conflict for natural resources. This issue may have reverberating environmental consequences if countries and companies do not adopt efficiency and circulatory as principles of operation.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI), digital transformation, and technology – a wave of change** was seen as an advancement offering opportunities for economic growth and social progress, but with multifaceted implications for the environment. While AI and digital transformation can bring many benefits, potential environmental implications include increased demand for critical minerals, rare earth elements, and water resources for mining the metals needed to meet new data centre and renewable energy demands.

- **A new era of conflict** - Conflict causes environmental impacts and leaves behind legacy issues that will be dealt with for many years, with significant impacts on human health due to, among other things, the destruction of infrastructure and the use of munitions introducing new contaminants into the environment.
- **Mass forced displacement** - The combination of conflict and climate change is affecting both internal and external displacement, with a wide range of environmental impacts from the lack of services such as water, sanitation and hygiene, solid waste management, and energy provision.
- **Misinformation, declining trust and polarization** - The decline in trust in science and institutions is an increasing issue, manifesting differently in various contexts. Some factors contributing to this decline include: perceived failures to fulfil environmental commitments, worsening economic instability, rising inequality, corruption, and the proliferation of misinformation via social media platforms, eroding trust in traditional media sources. Lack of trust in science could seriously undermine decision-making and affect responses to the triple planetary crisis.
- **Persistent and widening inequalities** - Inequalities in wealth and income lead to ecological inequities. The wealthiest people contribute the most to climate change and environmental degradation; one recent study finds that the wealthiest 1 per cent of the global population and the poorest 66 per cent each account for 16 per cent of GHG greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Polycentricity and diffusion of governance** - Multipolarity is already evident, and new and diverse forms of governance could improve environmental outcomes depending on the ability to create harmonized frameworks that enable transparency and accountability. By developing and implementing new tools and actions to reconfigure financial systems and reroute capital flows – a positive signal of change identified in this process – could help to reduce inequalities, eradicate extreme poverty, and address environmental crises.

What Next

The objective of implementing a foresight trajectory is to develop a systemic, UNEP-wide, approach to addressing emerging issues proactively, with the view of providing guidance on future work programmes and to sister agencies within the UN system about environmental issues which may have significant impacts, supporting them in minimizing surprises.

There are certainly many challenges, and the trends of environmental change are trending in the wrong direction. However, UNEP remains hopeful and believes that by openly identifying and addressing these issues, the drivers and mitigation measures can be addressed thereby preventing weak signals from becoming solid trends. To succeed, we rely on our partners and stakeholders in governments and the private sector to implement their commitments to achieve the Paris Agreement targets and the goals of the Kunming-Montreal Global biodiversity Framework and the SDGs.

Integrating horizon scanning and foresight as standard tools to keep the environment under review and to inform strategic planning, will allow UNEP to consider whether to include the issues in its existing workstreams or to advise where other agencies could take action. This approach will enable UNEP to address global environmental changes comprehensively while keeping an eye on signals with major disruptive potential. Foresight is a tool and a process that creates opportunity to work across organizations and silos.

The outcomes of the foresight work will be integrated into UNEP's strategic planning, inform UNEP's next medium-term strategy (MTS) and present an opportunity to consider expanding programmes in priority areas.

The report will also feed into the Summit of the Future and member state deliberations on the issues of relevance to them. As such, it will serve to provide input into the preparatory discussions and events, including the High-level Political Forum, in the lead-up to the Summit of the Future as they relate to environmental dimensions.