

Towards Long-Term  
Governance

# From Future Awareness to Action

Long-term  
governance hub

DEMOS  
HELSINKI

# Towards long-term governance - from future awareness to action

*This white paper was originally developed to address challenges and opportunities for Finland's long-term governance in the aftermath of the UN's Summit of the Future. It reflects the country's distinctive strengths, such as a globally recognised foresight ecosystem and high level of institutional trust. Moreover, it highlights a critical concept applicable across governments worldwide: the "impact gap" between futures knowledge and decision-making. By translating the Finnish experience into a broader context, this document aims to provide universally applicable strategies for advancing long-term governance and promoting intergenerational justice.*

Political decision-making has often been characterised as short-sighted, with limited representation of future generations within our political systems. This is evident in the long-term challenges we face, such as the climate crisis and biodiversity loss. These issues further manifest as geopolitical crises, migration, technological competition, epidemics, and growing global inequality. Responding reactively to these immediate challenges and uncertainties limits our capacity for anticipatory policies with regards to carbon neutrality, green and digital transitions, the sustainability of the welfare state, or security.

The importance of **long-term, more anticipatory decision-making** is emphasised across several critical policy areas. These interconnected challenges, which governments around the world grapple with, require unified policy actions:

- Investments in RDI and its strategic priorities
- Demographic change and immigration
- External and internal security
- Future labour markets, education, and skills needs
- Social and healthcare costs and the wellbeing economy
- Carbon neutrality and climate policy

We do not face these long-term goals in a vacuum: we can both prepare for and influence potential futures. Amidst uncertainty, our thinking about the future can easily be dominated by dystopian scenarios unless we actively create shared language, imagery, and spaces that unite different societal actors around desirable futures.

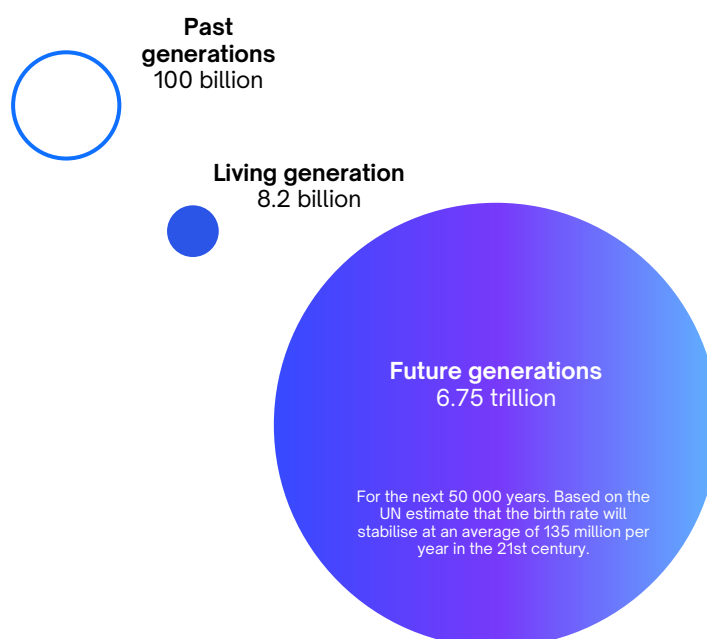


Image 1: Potential number of future generations. Adapted from "The Good Ancestor" by Roman Krznaric (2020). Graphic design by Nigel Hawtin. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.

The essence of long-term governance is to recognise our agency and power in shaping the future in relation to future generations. Countries such as Finland, Singapore, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Wales have strong foundations for building intergenerational and long-term governance—internationally recognised foresight ecosystems, a long tradition of preparedness, and trust in societal institutions. These capabilities can provide a basis for reflection and inspiration for other countries seeking to strengthen their own long-term governance practices.

The purpose of this publication is to **map out and build consensus on the ways to promote long-term governance** in alignment with the UN’s Summit of the Future. This white paper is based on broad input from actors within Finland’s foresight ecosystem, examining the present context, challenges, and steps forward to establish a clearer direction.

## Commitments from the Summit of the Future

In September 2024, the United Nations convened the Summit of the Future, where nations collectively committed to advancing a more sustainable and equitable future, acknowledging the rights of future generations. As part of this historic event, the Pact for the Future was introduced, accompanied by the adoption of the Declaration on Future Generations. This declaration articulates 32 principles, commitments, and actions designed to strengthen the integration of future generations’ interests into decision-making processes, including:

24. *Leveraging science, data, statistics and **strategic foresight to ensure long-term thinking and planning**, and to develop and implement sustainable practices and the institutional reforms necessary to ensure evidence-based decisionmaking, while **making governance more anticipatory**, adaptive and responsive to future opportunities, risks and challenges.*
26. *Strengthening our systems of national and global accounting, including by **promoting the use of forward-looking, evidence-based impact assessments, developing stronger anticipatory risk analyses** and encouraging the use of measures of progress on sustainable development that complement and go beyond gross domestic product.*
28. *Undertaking a whole-of-government approach to coordination, including at the national and local levels, on the **assessment, development, implementation and evaluation of policies that safeguard the needs and interests of future generations.***

Governments across the world endorsed and committed to these commitments at the Summit. They represent a significant first step but must also be translated into action. To ensure progress, it is imperative to critically evaluate the adequacy of existing governance capacities and efforts in addressing these goals.

## Long-term governance — beyond foresight

Foresight is a systematic way of thinking about and exploring futures, aimed at understanding them and influencing the future more effectively. As a critical starting point for long-term governance, foresight enables us to move beyond a short-term perspective, analyse and understand the systemic nature of change, and view possible futures through the lens of the present: what is our **agency, capacity, and means of influence?**

Countries such as Finland have decades of tradition in anticipatory governance. Notably, the decentralised and collaborative nature of Finland's foresight system has received global recognition. The current institutional framework for future-oriented governance has been evolving since the early 1990s: the Parliamentary Committee for the Future, Government Report on the Future, Ministries' joint foresight working group, the Foresight Steering Group, the National Foresight Network, the Finland Futures Research Centre at the University of Turku, and now the EU-wide foresight network.

Despite Finland's robust institutions and considerable expertise in foresight, the influence of foresight on decision-making remains constrained (OECD 2022). This disconnect between well-established foresight frameworks and practical policymaking is particularly pronounced in policy areas that span multiple ministries and agencies, hindering the development of a cohesive, government-wide approach to long-term governance. Additionally, foresight efforts often focus on short-term interests, with timeframes extending at most to a decade, rather than on intergenerational justice.

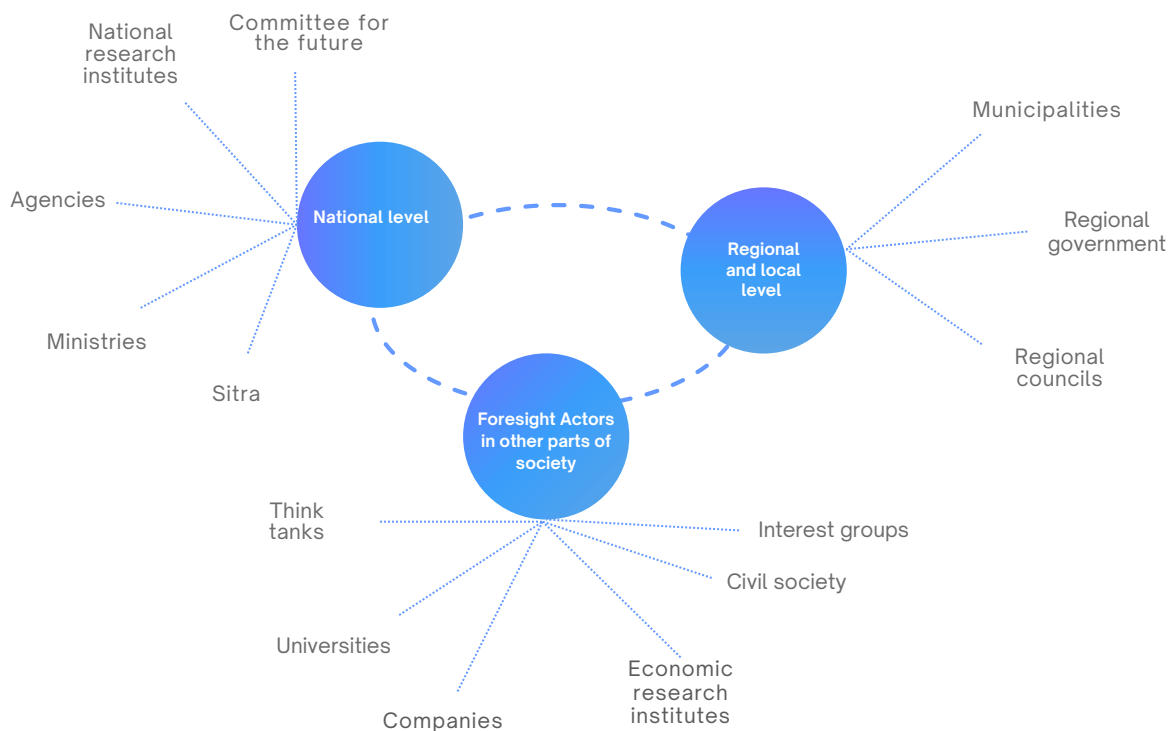


Image 2: Finland's national foresight ecosystem. Adapted from Pouru et al. (2020).

It is important to recognise that long-term governance extends beyond the realm of foresight. It encompasses not only the production of futures knowledge but also the shaping of political culture, the creation of incentives and processes to consider future impacts, the development of institutional mechanisms to enhance future-oriented decision-making, and even establishing new international institutions.



Examples of such measures include lowering the voting age, appointing commissioners for future generations, conducting future impact assessments, promoting deliberative citizen participation, implementing multi-year budget frameworks, and adopting wellbeing indicators—all of which can contribute to more long-term decision-making (see Boston 2017; 2021).

## Key challenges for translating futures knowledge into action, as experienced in Finland

One way to conceptualise the challenges associated with achieving impactful anticipatory and long-term governance is through the notion of the "impact gap" (OECD 2022; Pouru et al. 2020) which refers to **individual, collective, and institutional constraints that hinder the utilisation of futures knowledge in decision-making**. This gap reflects the difficulty of translating future awareness and foresight into action or broader societal reflection due to its perceived irrelevance or disconnect from priorities, despite the unprecedented abundance of data and knowledge available to us today. Furthermore, research projects such as FORGE (Airos et al. 2022) have identified several challenges related to recognising the rights of future generations and embedding them more comprehensively into legislative frameworks.

Active thinking and consideration of the future is often challenging for individuals—underscoring the need for shared structures, a supportive culture, and the development of essential skills to effectively bridge the impact gap. These findings were further substantiated in a workshop, where representatives from ministries, agencies, research institutions, and NGOs engaged in a reflective dialogue on the most significant challenges facing anticipatory and long-term governance in Finland. The key points are outlined below.

### Impact gap

#### Three challenges in connecting foresight with decision-making



Image 3: Description of the impact gap between foresight and decision-making.

While countries such as Finland have established admirable long-term policy targets, there remains a risk that these ambitions may be eclipsed by short-term pressures and immediate crises, meaning they remain under-realised. A significant perceived challenge lies in the prevalence of quarterly economic thinking, which is reflected in short-term political cycles and performance indicators. Furthermore, heightened political polarisation, growing distrust, and conflicting interests have been identified as factors that complicate the utilisation of foresight knowledge. The planning and futures-oriented work previously undertaken by political parties has also been perceived by some as contributing to administrative burdens.

*"Short-termism stemming from political cycles."*

*"Distrust: Everything is perceived as having an agenda."*

*"Short-sighted indicators and the dominant techno-economic mindset."*

Several issues related to foresight culture and competencies were highlighted, including the sporadic nature of foresight activities, the absence of clear objectives, and a limited appreciation of its value among leadership. Foresight was also seen as insufficiently integrated into decision-making processes, with limited commitment to applying its insights. Institutionally, challenges such as siloed and fragmented governance structures, poor coordination between national and regional foresight initiatives, and inconsistent engagement from top decision-makers were emphasised.

*"Lack of understanding of foresight at the leadership level."*

*"Fragmentation and weak connection to decision-making."*

*"There is scattered foresight expertise and interest, but overall, the government's ability to collaborate internally and externally is weak."*

A lack of future-oriented public discourse was identified as a further challenge hindering the demand for long-term governance. The importance of citizen participation and dialogue becomes particularly pronounced in matters of intergenerational justice, such as the pension system and climate change. In intergenerational matters, citizens may better represent the diverse interests of future generations than individual ombudsmen. For example, deliberative processes are being increasingly piloted in Finland, but their connection to decisions with intergenerational impacts is still perceived as weak. This also reflects the uneven distribution of power to define futures in society: certain individuals and professions, such as economists, dominate the discourse about the future.

*"The great promise of foresight in governance is that we create the future we want: we have good structures, but the activities are concentrated within a small circle."*

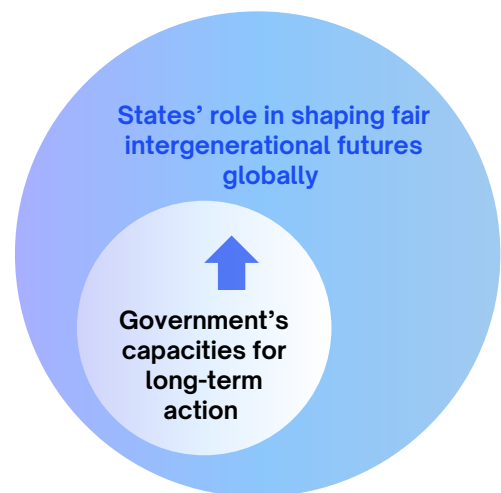
*"Insufficient citizen dialogue and participation."*

In general, improved foresight capacities and knowledge production do not, in themselves, guarantee intergenerationally fair decisions. It is crucial to critically examine our societal and emotional connection to the future, considering how this shapes our aspirations and sense of accountability to future generations. This includes broadening the scope of how future generations are understood and represented, extending beyond children and young people to encompass those yet to be born. A more profound reimagining of democracy, accompanied by cultural transformation, is required to fully acknowledge our responsibility to generations decades or centuries into the future.

*"A multi-term electoral framework: how sustainable well-being should be reflected as objectives and processes in national decision-making."*

## Next steps for intergenerational governance

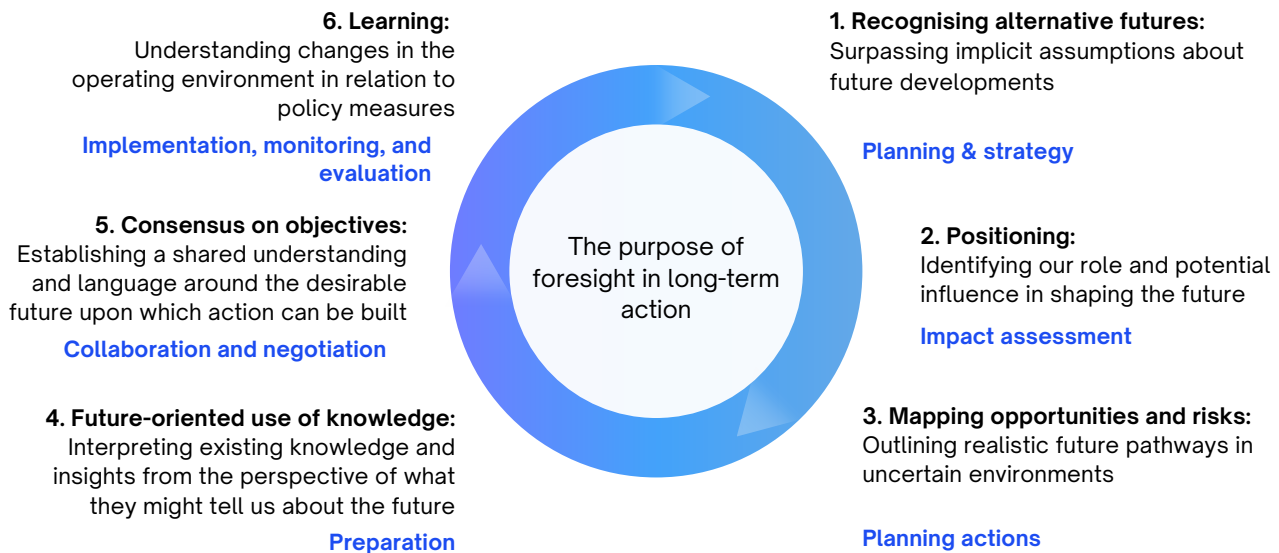
Based on the challenges identified above, we have outlined three pathways forward. These pathways aim to enhance the government's ability to plan for and evaluate actions not only from a future-oriented perspective but also through the lens of intergenerational justice. The central idea underlying these pathways is that long-term governance is not an end in itself; rather, it is a prerequisite for building a brighter society, safeguarding the well-being of those yet to come, and ensuring the government's influential role in shaping global futures. No society exists in isolation; all are in constant interaction with global forces of change and must position themselves for collective action on an international scale. While not exhaustive, this list represents the principal approaches to advancing long-term decision-making, as identified through workshops and interviews in Finland.



Picture 4: Government's role in advancing long-term governance.

### 1. Embedding long-term considerations and foresight as core components of decision-making and good governance

Current societies are characterised by rapid change, instability, and unpredictability. It is profoundly human to resort to caution in the face of uncertainty. At a societal level, however, we can collectively develop methods and conditions to maintain proactivity and a long-term perspective, even amidst uncertainty. To support decision-making, it is essential to monitor change, discern its interdependencies, and expand our awareness of alternative futures. Such an approach empowers us to better anticipate and shape the future.



Picture 4: Framework of different ways to utilise foresight in decision-making.

Countries such as Finland benefit from a strong foundation and broadly positive attitudes towards foresight. However, the practical benefits and value of foresight in different decision-making contexts is often not sufficiently understood or recognised.

→ The significance of foresight should be linked to **agenda-setting, monitoring, and the principles of good governance**. More individuals should have the opportunity to utilise and understand foresight, seeing it as both useful and practical in their work.

→ In addition to producing quality foresight knowledge, it is essential to clarify the purpose of various futures knowledge, tools, and processes, as well as their best applications. This could relate to different phases of **legislation, strategic planning, or performance management**.

Foresight activities must better address the usability, resonance and timeliness of their outputs. The development of a foresight culture and skillset depends on whether governance actors see themselves solely as consumers of foresight or as active participants in the foresight process.

→ Foresight processes need to be **more closely linked to decision-makers**, who are expected to make use of the information, rather than doing it in isolation from them. Joint dialogue between foresight practitioners and decision-makers from the initial stages of foresight processes can help **identify leverage points where foresight is seen as most helpful** in supporting policy and strategic decisions.

Despite the wealth of valuable foresight initiatives, many foresight projects and actors operate in isolation, with insufficient interaction. To address this, deliberate efforts to break down silos is essential. The diverse foresight processes currently in place generate unique insights into the future, which, if interconnected, could enrich one another and illuminate links across broader contexts. For instance, in Finland foresight efforts at the state and regional levels remain largely disconnected. As such, we should advance:

→ **Communication, collaboration, and deliberate identification of connections** among individual foresight processes to ensure foresight insights are effectively shared and reinterpreted across diverse contexts.

→ **Shared foresight models and standards** that provide a clear, structured framework for how foresight is conducted and organised.



### Internationally countries can:

→ Actively engage in **global futures discourse**. This necessitates a shared, foresight-driven vision that integrates considerations of security situation, climate action, technological advancement and care, enabling impactful actions and coherent messaging from a unified foundation.

→ Assume a more prominent role in advancing **anticipatory governance by investing in international foresight cooperation**, such as efforts within the United Nations or the European Union.

## 2. Expanding futures literacy and the collective power to define futures

A key way to promote long-term governance is to broaden and democratise discussions about the future, challenging narratives of inevitability and decline. Our perceptions of the future are shaped by who we listen to, who we discuss with, and who we include in our planning activities. In this regard, dialogue and collaboration are vital pillars of societal trust: they allow us to see beyond polarisation and make visible the knowledge, values, concerns, and dreams underpinning different perceptions of the future. To counter political apathy and societal disconnection, we need cultural change: empowering citizens with futures literacy and spaces that equip them with concrete power to define futures.

By ensuring inclusive future dialogues, we can see beyond short-term conflicts. Broadening the power to define futures needs to be supported by structures and capacities to leverage dialogue:

→ **New forums for future dialogue** must be created with active participation of the civil society. This ensures that the voices of young people, representatives of various professions, minorities, vulnerable groups, and non-citizens are more strongly heard across society.

→ **Better integration of citizen deliberation into future-oriented decision-making**, by requiring policymakers to respond to the issues raised in dialogues, providing justifications for subsequent courses of action, and demonstrating how these inputs have shaped or informed decisions. The success of such forums and processes depends on the commitment from decision-makers.

Futures literacy refers to the ability of individuals to consider alternative futures and, on this basis, recognise their own capacity to influence outcomes, enabling them to more concretely demand long-term action from decision-makers. The ability to step back from the present moment and view the bigger picture helps in identifying what is most important for decision-making across different time horizons, including from the perspective of future generations. This can be supported by, for example:

→ **Making futures literacy a civic skill**. Amidst growing uncertainty, societies have largely focused on equipping citizens to withstand possible future shocks and crises—ranging from geopolitical disruptions to natural disasters and pandemics. However, futures literacy goes beyond this; it involves the ability to navigate uncertainty and actively envision desirable futures and long-term outcomes.

→ **Supporting cultural change and fostering open communication** are fundamental to creating spaces for meaningful deliberation about the future. For instance, introducing initiatives like National Futures Days, particularly within schools, can help embed futures thinking into everyday conversations. A key element of such initiatives is ensuring that the language used to discuss futures is both accessible and inclusive, enabling wider engagement.

→ Encouraging imagination and foresight literacy by **broadening participation and embracing the diversity of potential futures**. This includes building empathy and emotional intelligence to better consider the perspectives of 'others,' including future generations.

A deeper awareness among decision-makers of their individual capacity to define futures is essential to ensuring its responsible application. This means acknowledging one's own influence over futures and critically reflecting on how they exercise this power. This can be advanced through:

→ **Strengthening national foresight networks across society**, positioning them as active spaces for peer learning that extend beyond dedicated foresight practitioners. Utilising open events and gatherings can demystify foresight and lower participation thresholds.

→ **Institutionalising and systematically utilising major cross-government foresight processes**, such as government reports on the future, for increasing society's futures literacy while ensuring the integration of civil society perspectives into their drafting. This could also be connected to political parties' efforts to articulate future visions and stimulate broader societal discourse on desirable futures.



### Globally governments could:

→ Cultivate a more inclusive dialogue by **incorporating insights and experiences from underrepresented regions and cultural contexts**, by building upon initiatives outlined in the Pact for the Future. This approach would help ensure that global governance frameworks reflect a wider plurality of values, histories, and futures.

→ **Facilitate meaningful connections between civil society and global futures discourses**: Governments could serve as mediators and ensure that global conversations are rooted in diverse lived experiences and perspectives nationally.

## 3. Institutionalising consideration of future generations' rights

Incorporating the rights of future generations into decision-making represents a critical area for development on a global scale. While the future remains inherently uncertain and the precise interests of future generations cannot be fully known, challenges such as climate change undeniably threaten their fundamental rights in a profoundly unjust manner. Beyond safeguarding these essential rights, efforts must also focus on ensuring the democratic inclusion of future generations. Achieving this necessitates institutional reforms and systemic change. Central to this endeavour is reframing today's decisions and challenges through a forward-looking lens: how can we evaluate the intergenerational impacts of the choices we make today?



The largest challenges facing our societies cannot be resolved within the confines of a single electoral cycle. As such, it is imperative to create space for long-term goal-setting and actions that prioritise the interests of future generations, grounded in broad parliamentary consensus.

→ **Promoting cross-parliamentary, long-term goal-setting** is essential, exemplified in parliamentary working groups as well as in climate policies, which lay down specific emission reduction targets going into the future.

We must ensure that decision-making and foresight activities prioritise intergenerational wellbeing, rather than being driven merely by short-term competitive interests. The existence of strong institutions enforcing accountability over long-term governance is therefore imperative.

→ **Expanding the existence and mandate of parliamentary committees, commissioners for future generations**, and similar bodies to include the authority to issue statements, motions, and even vetoes regarding the rights of future generations is one approach to achieving this.

→ **Developing and utilising indicators to measure intergenerational equity**, while applying the precautionary principle to areas where potential risks to the wellbeing of future generations are identified.

We ought to evaluate the long-term impacts of our decisions and actions, ensuring that findings from such assessments are considered and made widely accessible. We can promote more intergenerational and forward-looking impact assessments by:

→ **Strengthening the connection between the rights of children and future generations** by building upon existing child and environmental impact assessments, and extending them to comprehensively address the wellbeing of future generations.

→ **Revising legislative impact assessment guidelines to better account for long-term impacts**, for instance, by incorporating foresight methods, accompanied by clear and actionable guidelines to facilitate their implementation.



### **Internationally countries could:**

→ **Elevate the profile of future generations across various fora** by engaging more extensively with initiatives such as the OECD's OPSI and WISE centres, while promoting frameworks that safeguard the rights of future generations through coordinated international efforts.

→ Adopt indigenous seventh generation thinking or the Futures Design method from Japan, which places **participants in the shoes of future generations** to deliberate about the long-term impact of decisions.

→ **Advocate for cultural interventions**, such as the establishment of future-focused museums, designed to inspire citizens and policymakers alike to reflect on and prioritise the rights and wellbeing of future generations.

## From future awareness to action

Following the UN Summit on the Future, governments must not only formulate bold visions, but also create robust frameworks for proactive, **anticipatory governance that take into account future generations**. We need to rethink our long-term governance capacities to make the valuable work already done in many countries in the areas of foresight and civic participation more effective and stronger. Short-term pressures and unexpected crises will continue, but regardless of the political cycles, we can identify shared future values to transcend polarised conflicts of today. Forerunner countries can lead by example by placing **intergenerational justice at the core of decision-making**, thereby strengthening their long-term agency.

Even countries like Finland, that have long been recognised as a pioneer in future-oriented governance, still face challenges related to short-term pressures, foresight skills, and institutional capacities. In this publication, we have set out three paths to overcome these challenges:

- 1) Embedding long-term considerations and foresight as core components of decision-making and good governance
- 2) Expanding futures literacy and the collective power to define futures
- 3) Strengthening our connection to future generations and recognition of their rights.

In the face of growing global challenges, countries have an opportunity to redefine what anticipatory governance means in practice. The purpose of this publication is not to reinvent the wheel, but to create a **shared aspirational space for long-term governance**. Throughout the publication, we have highlighted promising examples to strengthen future-regarding governance and the foresight ecosystem. These initiatives provide fertile ground for change towards better long-term governance.



This publication is part of Finland's hub for long-term governance funded by the School of International Futures and the European Climate Fund, aimed at advancing the goals of the UN Future Summit in Finland. The hub's activities are coordinated by **Demos Helsinki, Fingo, and Sitra**.

Starting in Autumn 2024, we are hosting events, publishing initiatives, and inviting stakeholders to collaborate on defining an approach to:

- Utilise the opportunities created by the Summit of the Future and highlight the work being done by various actors in Finland to promote long-term governance.
- Develop reforms that could advance anticipatory decision-making.
- Promote intergenerational justice by addressing 1) Finland's long-term governance capabilities and 2) Finland's role within global futures.

The principal authors of the publication are Vera Djakonoff and Atte Ojanen from Demos Helsinki.

The drafting of the publication and the related workshop held in October 2024 involved participants from various organisations from the Finnish public sector, including:

- Ministry of Social Affairs and Health
- Ministry of the Interior
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry for Foreign Affairs
- Prime Minister's Office
- Regional Council of Uusimaa
- Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia
- Finnish National Agency for Education
- Statistics Finland
- UN Global Pulse
- SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health
- University of Turku
- Itla Children's Foundation
- UN Youth Delegate
- Citizen Forum

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