IMAGINING 2040: MINI LIBRARY RESOURCE ON IMAGINATIVE FUTURES THINKING

OVERVIEW

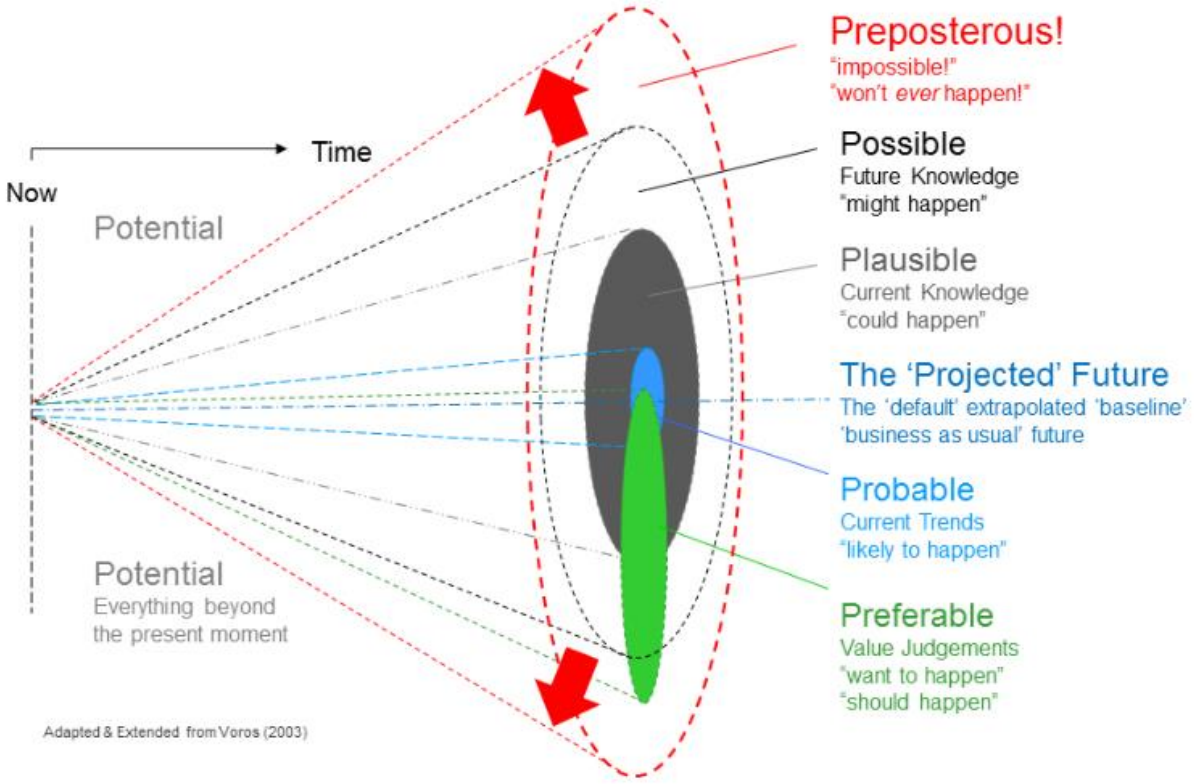
The following notes are a grab bag of background information aimed at helping the audience members of **Imagining 2040: pathways to flourishing futures (IMAG40)** make sense of the future visualisation exercises in the series - and to encourage the use of some simple futures foresight tools in their everyday life. We aim to add to this document over time to create a concise mini library of futures foresight ideas and resources.

We do not expect our listeners to turn into imaginative future vision experts overnight. Research suggests a minority of everyday citizens think positively about the collective future of their societies in systematic ways. This deficit in public future vision imagination and lack of collective visioning is a problem we are trying to address through the podcast. We want to boost the Futures Literacy of our audience. We shall use an imagined, values based, preferable futures framing across all episodes of the series - and invite the audience to use the ideas presented. We want our audience to start thinking and acting differently - to help shape preferable future community development pathways in their own places.

If listeners are unfamiliar with futures foresight and vision concepts, have a look at the 'Futures Cone' graphic reproduced here. You can also follow the links to a couple of associated short, online articles on futures and strategic foresight concepts provided by futures thinker Joseph Voros. These are a short primer on futures thinking and suggestions on the use of the futures cone graphic.

THE FUTURE IS NOT FIXED - THERE ARE MANY POSSIBLE FUTURES!

One place to start thinking imaginatively about 'the future' is the realisation that not just one but a range of unknown, potential futures could eventuate. As Ian Lowe, Australian author and professor of science, technology, and society is quoted as saying:



'Remember that the future is not somewhere we are going, it is something we are creating. Every day we do things that make some futures more probable and others less likely.'

Within the 'possible' to 'preferable' futures range of the potential futures cone described here by Voros, it is the 'preferable' futures area marked in green which is of greatest interest within the IMAG40 series. A preferable future can be defined as one which would contain what we want to see happen or what we believe should happen. Such futures could be achieved by working toward the moral and ethical value inspired outcomes many of us long to see in better futures for all human communities, and the more than human species we share the planet with.

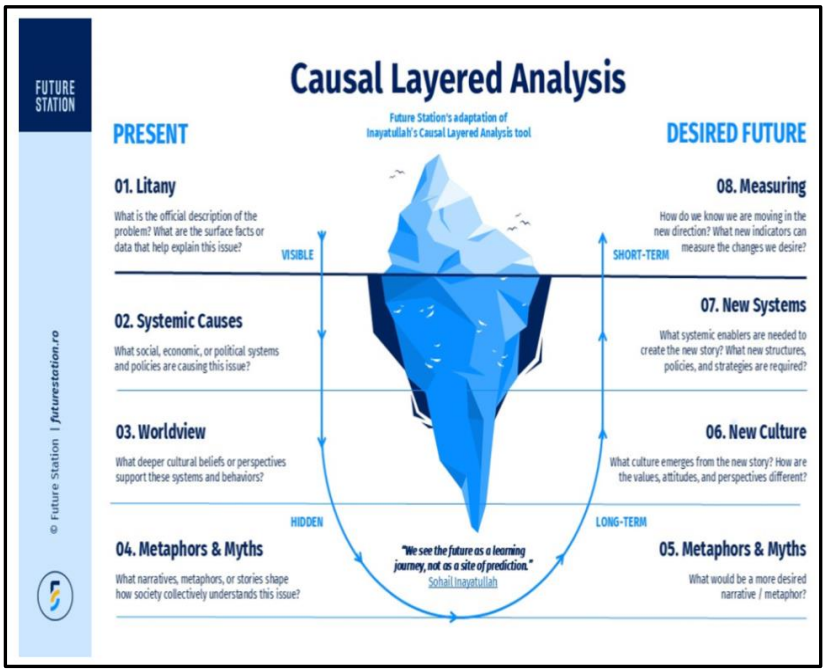
What could such preferable futures look and feel like? How might such futures differ from the other potential futures existing within the cone? In answer to such questions, many of us might start to envisage future communities that are more climate safe, nature protected, socially supportive and economically fair. The sorts of possible, preferable futures we would be **proud** to pass on to our children or children's children?

And what if many more people started thinking in more imaginative and curious ways about the possible development pathways that could help bring about such futures? These are the sort of overarching questions which will help structure the imaginative core of the IMAG40 podcast series.

When we try to visualize preferable futures, we can directly incorporate value judgements, ethics and morality as a way of framing our future vision considerations. For instance, we might choose to envisage future communities that are more climate safe, nature protected, socially supportive and economically fair. Are these the sorts of possible, preferable futures we would be **proud** to pass on to our children or children's children?

THE STRONG IMAGINATIVE FOCUS OF THE IMAG40 PODCAST SERIES

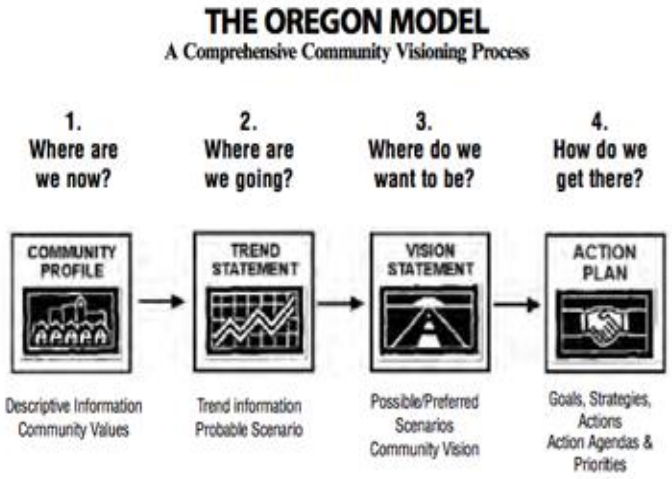
When viewing the Voros cone and reading his articles, two other aspects of futures thinking methods are worth considering. One involves more conventional forecasting methods of thinking about possible futures. Such methods often rely heavily on extension or 'extrapolation' of existing trends already at play in current, business-as-usual models of government, social policy, and economic development. This approach is more likely to lead us toward almost default, taken for granted, **projected futures** within the Voros cone diagram. The taken for granted, default and frankly failing futures that such thinking is currently driving us toward will be given only passing reference in our podcast episode discussions.



A popular imaginative foresight method developed by futurist Sohail Inayatullah

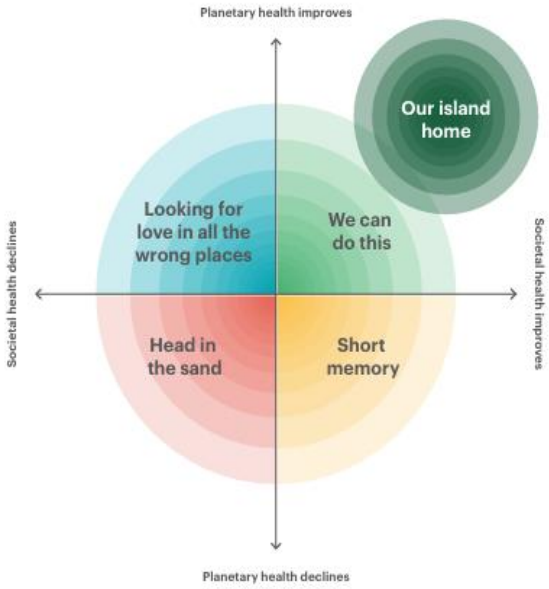
Default future thinking applies little or no imagination to envisage possible, fundamentally different future development pathways. Inevitably, our podcast would waste limited guest interview time pointing to the litany of failures of conventional development models and the threats those failures pose to our future health and wellbeing. Such 'downstream' largely reactive thinking is necessary but insufficient to deal with the complexity, escalating and compounding nature of the diverse development problems we face in this decade of the 21st century.

Instead, this podcast series mainly focuses guest discussion around the use of imagination and the use of upstream thinking to help bypass the negative, failing, downstream development litany of business as usual.



Sourced from Steven C. Ames (1997)

NFP sector generated scenarios taken from a report by the Climate and Health Alliance Australia, 2021

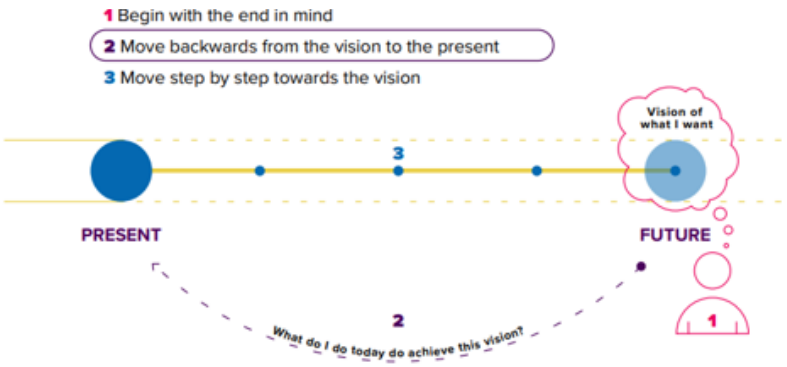


We and our guests spend most of our time pointing toward the novel, bold and urgently required system level reforms which could help get us past the failure of business as usual – to start creating the preferable future development paths we need out to 2040 and beyond.

So, preferable, normative or values based futures thinking starts from the imagination of a desirable end state or states, set at some specified future date, for instance 2040. We can then use such imaginative visualisation to work backwards to the present day - and map or 'backcast' a path of the required intermediate steps between then and now which could help achieve that preferable envisaged future or futures.

The method of Backcasting is useful in helping to think about the intermediate stages or goals that might be required to move us from a present day, business as usual state to an imagined preferable future. As the name implies, the process is to start with your imagined preferable future and work backwards to create intermediate steps to achieve it, one objective at a time. An example of how backcasting works in the context of food systems development is given here.

Backcasting is a versatile foresight method.



One way to approach a backcast sequence is to literally work backward from the preferred future - to ask: what step, goal or objective would need to have been achieved immediately preceding the preferred future end point I am visualising? Then repeat that question/answer with each intermediate step backwards, until sufficient steps have been created back to our present point in time.

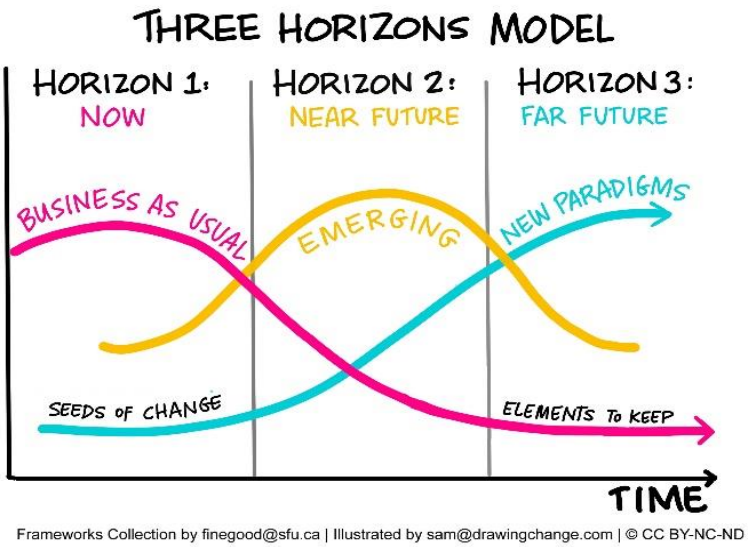
Taken together, these form of futures thinking including imaginative leaps, futures visualisation and backcasting exercises are of most interest to the IMAG40 podcast series. You can hear this type of future vision thinking being used by our guests in the discussion segments framed by imaginative time travel to

2040, backcasting from 2040 to the present day; searching for signals of the future - and taking bold unconstrained actions to advance a preferred future.

SIMPLE IMAGINATIVE FUTURES FORESIGHT METHODS USED IN IMAG40

One imaginative futures foresight method used a lot in the IMAG40 series involves a guest's search for 'signals of the future' occurring in the present. Such 'signals' comprise observable, innovative and progressive initiatives, processes or mindsets in the here and now. They herald potential early signs of trends and outcomes that could come to pass in a range of possible, plausible or preferable futures.

Such 'signals' futures thinking may be used in future risk assessment, strategic foresight (horizon scanning) and community visioning and scenario building exercises. Two graphics depicting the latter approach are given immediately below.



Scenario Building –This futures foresight approach can employ imagination and incorporate ethical and moral values considerations in order to develop internally plausible stories of more preferable or probable futures. It has been a popular method used as part of community development planning and visioning exercises over the years. The graphic above to the left depicts the so-called Oregon model of community visioning and illustrates one sequence of community engagement in which scenario building is employed.

In Australia, a fairly recent (2021) example of scenario building by the Climate and Health Alliance (Australia) was aimed at community engagement on climate disruption and the implications of that challenge for the interconnection between planetary and public health. A graphic of the final scenarios generated is depicted here and can also be found in the full report on the exercise Australia in 2020 – possible alternative futures prepared by the Climate and Health Alliance (Australia).

The UK Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) has also utilised imaginative futures thinking recently. Their report Social Visions for a Low Carbon Future (2024) showcases an interesting mix of imaginative visioning and scenario building to anticipate the features of possible low carbon lifestyles which could be present across various international communities in 2050.

Time 'Horizon Scanning' is another approach to anticipating the future. There are large number of individual methods within it. Some of benefit to community groups and the sort of audience that IMAG40 is aimed at.

The Three Horizons scanning framework is a well-known way to help think about the possible interactive phases involved in achieving future change. According to the Future Stewards consultancy in the UK, The Three Horizons framework is 'particularly useful in guiding groups towards meaningful action in complex environments, making it applicable across business, policy, and community contexts.' The consultancy has some good short video resources explaining the way the framework works and how it compares to other forms of futures vision methods such as scenario building.

SOME MORE EXPERIENTIAL FUTURE IMAGINATIVE VISION METHODS

Perhaps the strongest use of imagination in thinking about possible futures can be found in a variety of methods collectively known as experiential futures foresight. Experiential futures thinking explicitly seeks to make alternative futures tangible, emotional, and psychologically real. It has been described as the design of situations and 'artifacts' that bring imagined futures into present experience. Some of the better known methods in this future thinking approach have been influential in the creation of the IMAG40 podcast series.

Imaginary future 'artifact' newspaper headlines.



Examples of experiential futures methods include the exercises Letter Or Report From The Future and Letter/Report To Future Generations. These two written exercises that can stimulate the imagination to create and visualise possible and preferable futures. The first, requires visualising a future imagined state and describing it in as much detail as possible in an imaginary letter or report sent 'back' in time to someone or oneself in the present. It could thus complement the use of backcasting methods as already described.

The second exercise requires the writing of a letter or report to an imagined inhabitant of a future society, perhaps a present-day child or younger relative. The letter/report writer describes some current trends they are observing, both negative and positive, and projects the outcomes of those trends into the imagined future - perhaps also using a framing of Radical Hope. This is a form of hope which is rooted neither in unrealistic optimism nor doomist pessimism about the future.



Imaginary time travel device - IMAG40

The Time Travel Exercise used in IMAG40 is an experiential futures method. On version of this method is to ask an individual or group to imagine using a time travel device to transport themselves to a future time, perhaps 10, 20, 30 or even more years ahead. Upon arrival in the imaginary future, or following their return, time travellers are asked to report back as vividly as possible on the changes they saw. They may also be asked to imagine the changes that would have to have transpired across the intervening years, along with some of their imaginary implications.

This part of the method can then also link to the backcasting approach already described.

In order to describe their imaginative visualisation in more depth the 'time traveller' might describe the sights, sounds and smells and other impressions on an imaginary walk they made in the future world. Or they could describe their own or somebody else's imagined activities in the future world by way of a Day In The Life storyline.

Another imaginative stimulation exercise, the Miracle Question is originally drawn from the field of solution focussed therapy. It can be repurposed for experiential futures thinking to imagine the achievement of progressive, community level reforms. The miracle question is used in the IMAG40 podcast in the last section of guest interviews - where guests are asked to imagine being in a position of collaborative power and influence over progressive future development decisions and suggest up to three actions, to be taken immediately, that could not be resisted by vested interest pushback.

Another version of the miracle question can be framed like this. 'Imagine you dream of a better preferable future. What do you see, hear and experience in your dream state regarding that future? When you wake up, you realise that the changes you dreamt of and wanted to see transpire in your own life and in that of your community or wider society, have largely taken place. What do you now see, hear and experience around you in your imagined waking state – which confirm your conviction that your preferable future has eventuated?'

EASILY ACCESSIBLE INTRODUCTORY ONLINE RESOURCES FOR FUTURES THINKING

Books and reports

Miller, R. (2018). "Transforming the future: Anticipation in the 21st century." UNESCO. A free 300 page book from the UNESCO digital library focussed on the ways to increase the forward thinking 'future literacy' of the population.

Wright, E.O. (2010). *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Verso Books.

Sardar, Z. (2010). "The Namesake: Futures; futures studies; futurology; futuristic; foresight—What's in a name?" *Futures*, 42(3), 177–184.Article

Fisher, M. (2009/2020). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Repeater Books. Book which can be read online.

UNDP RBAP Foresight Playbook (2022) a wonderful resource outlining a wide range of futures foresight approaches, methodologies, and tools. Used in UNDP's work 'with the aim of building anticipatory capacities to better respond to risk, uncertainty, and opportunities in the future.'

UNESCO (2021). *Futures Literacy: Understanding the Capability to Imagine the Future*. Downloadable book.

Mulgan, G. (2020). *The Imaginary Crisis - and how we might quicken social and public imagination.* Demos Helsinki. This free article was extended by Mulgan in the book described below.

Mulgan, G. (2022). *Another world is possible*: How to reignite social and political imagination. Hurst Publishers. Book to purchase.

SOME PODCASTS EMPLOYING IMAGINATIVE FUTURES THINKING

If you have time, listen to some episodes from a great imaginative futures podcast series created by UK based Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Network/Transition Towns movement. The series is entitled From What if to What Next? (2020-2024). A short, three minutes animated video compilation of clips from some of the episodes is available. As is a text based manifesto of preferable future development ideas entitled the Ministry of Imagination This was compiled from the 100 episodes produced for the series.

As suggested by the podcast title, UK former wildlife broadcaster Gillian Burke's podcast If I Ruled the World, running since late 2023, also uses future vision imagination in her discussions with a wide spectrum of innovative guests and preferable future thinkers.

The Accidental Gods podcast – also from the UK has been running since 2018 and contains a large number of interviews with future vision thinkers. A basic premise for the show is described as the value of connecting: *spirituality and resilience, politics, philosophy and human creativity so that together, in all our diversity, we can choose a different future.*

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