



The Most Creative Look To The Future



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UN Global Pulse is the Secretary General's Innovation Lab. We work at the intersection of innovation and the human sciences to inform, inspire and strengthen the ability of the United Nations family and those it serves to anticipate, respond and adapt to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

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The Most Creative Look To The Future

Imagination and Creative Practice
in Service of Organizational
Transformation

UN Global Pulse
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I think the imagination is the single most useful tool mankind possesses. It beats the opposable thumb. I can imagine living without my thumbs, but not without my imagination.

– Ursula K. Le Guin, Author.

Our Common Agenda, the Secretary-General's vision for the future of global cooperation, states that “we must combine the best of our past achievements with the most creative look to the future if we are to deepen solidarity and achieve a breakthrough for people and the planet”¹. UN Global Pulse, as the innovation lab for the Secretary-General, has a crucial role to play in ensuring that we embed this “creative look to the future” within our work, as well as supporting this approach to be seeded throughout the entire UN family.

We must integrate creative practice and harness the power of imagination, in order to succeed in a modern United Nations system, rejuvenated by a forward-thinking culture, and empowered by cutting-edge skills fit for the twenty-first century: UN 2.0. The UN 2.0 vision is firmly focused on driving internal change, because stronger internal United Nations system capabilities will result in better programmatic and operational support to Member States, bolstering their capacity to thrive in the twenty-first century, and faster collective progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals².

A Crisis of Imagination

However, according to the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition, the promise of the 2030 Agenda is in peril, stating that we have entered an age of polycrisis: “The Sustainable Development Goals are disappearing in the rear-view mirror, as is the hope and rights of current and future generations³.” According to those we interviewed for this research, a crisis of imagination has contributed to this polycrisis. The world’s collective failure is not due to an absence of vision or imagina-

tive skill, as much as our collective imaginative energy has been directed towards reinforcing a status quo that continues to create climate change, conflict, inequity and human rights violations. Instead of the world harnessing its imaginative power to find the creative solutions that will deliver a sustainable, equitable future for all, the UN finds itself sounding the alarm on “the short-sightedness of our prevailing economic and political systems [and] the ratcheting up of the war on nature.”⁴

Climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.

– Amitav Ghosh, Author.

We the Peoples

We know that another world is possible. The creation of the United Nations was a bold act of collective imagination and hope in 1945, after the destruction and devastation of the First and Second World Wars; an invitation to imagine a future and way of life that was unthinkable in the years previous. The four purposes of the UN represent a vision that requires a rigorous application of creativity and imagination to make possible: to keep peace throughout the world; to develop friendly relations among nations; to help nations work together to improve the lives of poor people, to conquer hunger, disease and illiteracy,

and to encourage respect for each other’s rights and freedoms; to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations to achieve these goals⁵.

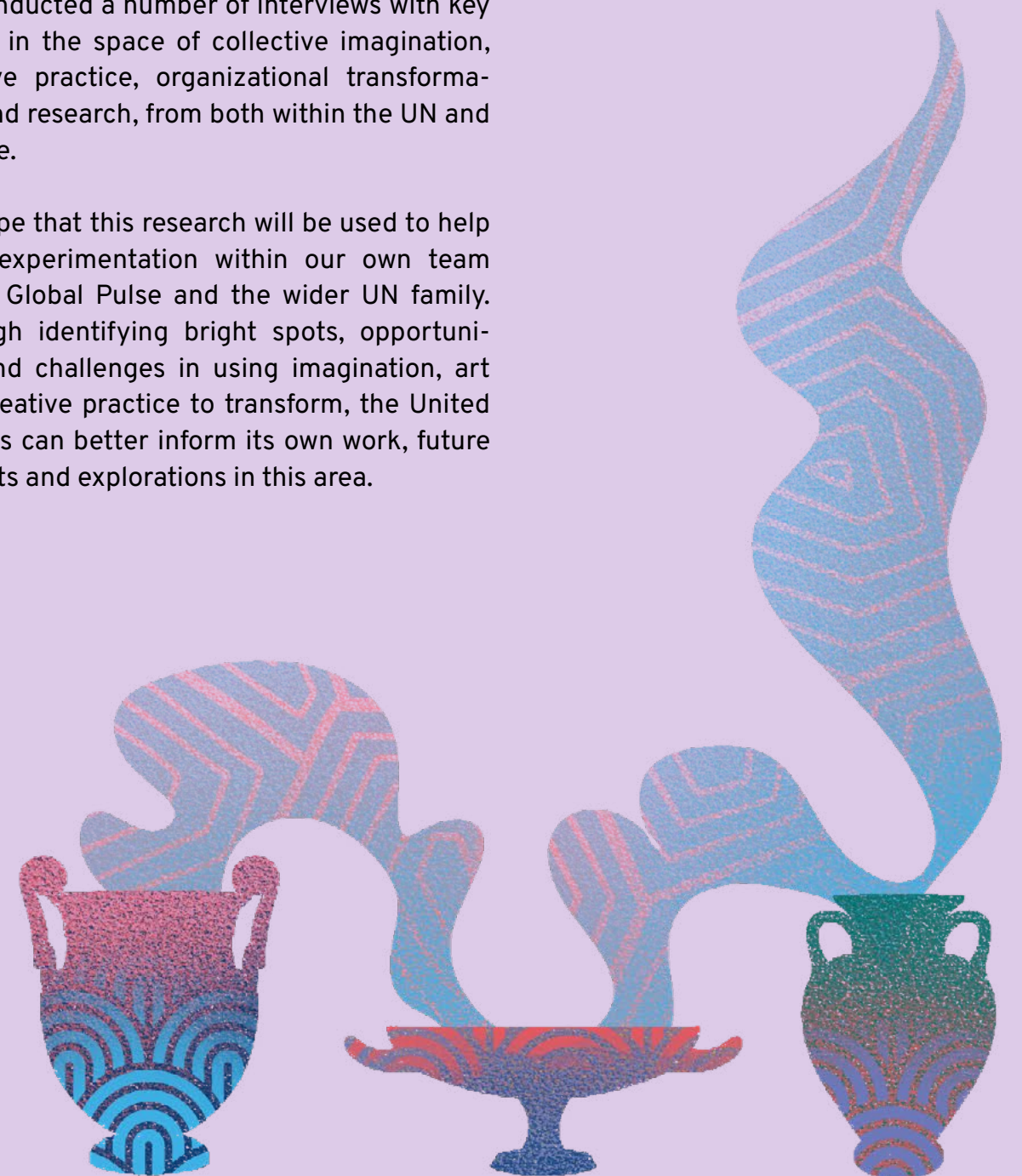
The 50 and more entities of the UN system demonstrate every day the diversity, flexibility and creativity that is needed to keep such a hope machine running. But we are calling for a broader conversation and a more radical reimagination of what it might mean to deliver “the most creative outlook to the future”, so that the UN family can better meet this moment in our history.

Methodology

We have undertaken desk research and literature review, focused on which creative methods (such as worldbuilding, storytelling and immersive experience design) are most relevant to developing visions, strategies, experiments and practices that support UN innovation for our common future. The focus has been on intergovernmental organizations and policy-led institutions, as opposed to cultural institutions.

We conducted a number of interviews with key actors in the space of collective imagination, creative practice, organizational transformation and research, from both within the UN and outside.

We hope that this research will be used to help drive experimentation within our own team at UN Global Pulse and the wider UN family. Through identifying bright spots, opportunities and challenges in using imagination, art and creative practice to transform, the United Nations can better inform its own work, future projects and explorations in this area.



Our Task as UN Global Pulse

As the Secretary-General's Innovation Lab, our task as UN Global Pulse is to ensure that we utilise new ideas and the most up-to-date concepts and tools available in order to achieve change and deliver impact. As the latest UN 2.0 policy briefing states, “stronger technical solutions alone will not deliver the change envisioned for UN 2.0. We see the faster adaptation of our culture as the critical step to bring the quintet elements to life⁶.” In this paper, we will posit that imagination and creative practice are essential to creating the novel and the new, and to scope out the alternative possibilities for the future. That true innovation is indeed impossible without imagination, art and creative practice.

In order to transform an organization, system, or culture, we must move beyond traditional left-brain ways of thinking and open a whole tool box of ways of being and understanding, taking into account the ‘weak signals’ of the world, as Ariana Monteiro, Political Scientist and Sustainable Innovation Strategist, says⁷. She suggests that an innovation strategy needs to source information from different groups in society in order to gain a full understanding of the current moment – from performances, poems and installations, to religious practices, mythologies, and popular beliefs, as well as academic papers.

Artists, writers, and other creators already furnish the world with so much boundless creativity. It is up to us to harness this, and champion imagination, creative practice, and art as a crucial part of how we respond to current crises. As well as taking inspiration from artists and creative practitioners themselves, we also want to cultivate the capacity inside all of us to tap into our imagination, using it as a tool for transformation. Every single person within the UN system has an inherent creative ability that can be of value. It is not only up to ‘artists’ to do this type of work, but all of us to be as creative and innovative as possible in order to meet the interconnected challenges of today.

Innovation without creative practice will be incremental. Innovation without creative practice is dead.

– Dr. Joost Vervoort, Associate Professor of Transformative Imagination in the Environmental Governance Group at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development.



Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of ability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.

– adrienne maree brown, Writer, Activist, and Facilitator.

We Are Not the First

Others have embraced creative and collective imagination practices to guide their strategic work for a long time, whether it's the city of Glasgow partnering with artists when developing a strategy to develop climate resilience⁸; the city of Chicago pioneering the Embedded Artists Project with civic practice artist Frances Whitehead⁹; the Artist Placement Group of the 1960s and 70s that placed UK artists at the heart of government and commerce¹⁰; or indeed, the work UN Global Pulse has already done with the government of Colombia, collaborating with the creative practice and speculative thinking of underrepresented youth, indigenous, Afro-Caribbean and LGBTQ+ communities¹¹.

Nowhere is the power and history of imagination and creativity more evident than in how the technology sector has been inspired by the imaginary worlds of science fiction. It is well documented that the Star Trek Star Fleet Technical Manual, written by Franz Joseph, helped to ‘imagine devices into use’ such as the smartphone¹². The virtual online multiplayer game Second Life is said to be inspired by Neal Stephenson's science fiction novel Snow Crash, and was used as a convening platform during Covid, according to Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Lead of CoFUTURES at the University of Oslo. Bodhisattva also told us that the vast majority of NASA engineers grew up with science fiction, planting an idea in their head to send mankind to the moon¹³.

What these first actors have realised is that creative practice, imagination, and ‘what artists know’ give us a different and essential way of understanding, then shaping, the world. If we do not catch up, the UN system is at risk of becoming stagnant – there is no greater risk to innovation than not evolving. By not engaging with imagination, art and creative practice with rigour, we risk not being able to imagine the worlds where mutual flourishing can exist or carve the pathways towards them. The world will continue to be shaped by the imaginations of the few, not the many.

Useful definitions and terms

Throughout this report, we will be using terms such as “collective imagination”, “creative practice”, “transformation” and “art”. Our working definitions of these terms are below, whilst recognising that all of these terms are contested and constantly in flux as culture develops.

CREATIVE PRACTICE

The broad term ‘creative practice’ is used here to include all professional and non-professional work which uses personal and/or collective craft skills and ingenuity to make something new, renew or reinterpret some aspect of the world¹⁴.

TRANSFORMATION

Transformation is generally regarded as being more than just the superficial or incremental. It refers to major shifts: ‘profound and enduring systemic changes that typically involve social, cultural, technological, political, economic and environmental processes’¹⁵.

IMAGINATION

Imagination is a cognitive capacity that involves not just language but prelinguistic, embodied methods for improvisation, collaboration, and anticipation¹⁶.

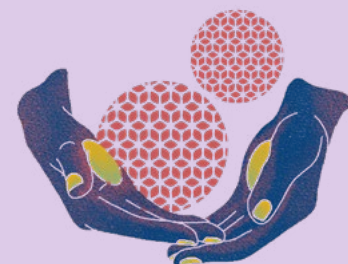
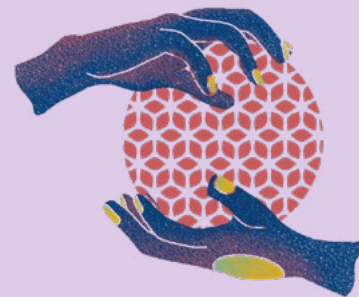
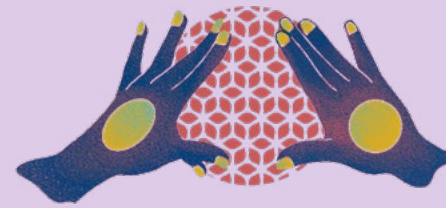
COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION

The collective imaginary / imagination is a set of propositions that have existence only in the imagination and are shared by a collective¹⁷.

ART

The word art may refer to several things: here, we are mainly referring to art as a means of communication and expression that is not possible to express by other means.

Based on these definitions, we recognise that many of the capabilities within UN Global Pulse such as data, foresight, and behavioural science already utilise elements of creative practice.



One of those we interviewed, the civic artist Frances Whitehead, created the below “knowledge claim” in 2006, describing the specific “skills, processes and methodologies” that many contemporary artists possess, and that can be of value to those fields that have been traditionally considered non-creative.

WHAT DO ARTISTS KNOW?

Beyond a wide range of material practices, histories and techniques, concepts and theoretical frameworks, artists are trained to use a unique set of skills, process, and methodologies. These include:

Synthesizing diverse facts, goals, and references – making connections and speaking many “languages”. Artists are very “lateral” in their research and operations and have great intellectual and operational agility.

Production of new knowledge as evidenced by the 100+ year history of innovation and originality as a top criterion.

Creative, in-process problem solving and ongoing processes, not all upfront creativity: responsiveness.

Artists compose and perform, initiate and carry-thru, design and execute. This creates a relatively tight “feedback loop” in their process.

Pro-active not re-active practice: artists are trained to initiate, re-direct the brief, and consider their intentionality.

Acute cognizance of individual responsibility for the meanings, ramifications and consequences of their work. (The down side of this is that artists are not always team-oriented or willing to compromise due to the high premium placed on individual responsibility and sole authorship.)

Understanding of the language of cultural values and how they are embodied and represented – re-valuation and re-contextualization.

Participation and maneuvering in non-compensation (social) economies, idea economies, and other intangible values (capital).

Proficiency in evaluation and analysis along multiple-criteria -- qualitative lines, qualitative assessment. Many are skilled in pattern and system recognition, especially with asymmetrical data.

Making explicit the implicit -- making visible the invisible.

Artists do not think outside the box-- there is no box.

Frances Whitehead 2006 ©

Section Notes:

1. See <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda>
2. See https://www.un.org/two-zero/sites/default/files/2023-09/un-2.0_policy-brief_en.pdf#msdyntrid=IN2u7fgjvva56cpR-b77Qlv_E5rkoI-jpW5Dr2EWU4KM
3. See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>
4. Ibid.
5. See <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-1>
6. See https://www.un.org/two-zero/sites/default/files/2023-09/un-2.0_policy-brief_en.pdf#msdyntrid=IN2u7fgjvva56cpR-b77Qlv_E5rkoI-jpW5Dr2EWU4KM
7. See <https://imperialtechforesight.com/finding-weak-signals-from-the-future/> See https://www.un.org/two-zero/sites/default/files/2023-09/un-2.0_policy-brief_en.pdf#msdyntrid=IN2u7fgjvva56cpRb77Qlv_E5rkoI-jpW5Dr2EWU4KM
8. See <https://www.creativecarbonscotland.com/project/clyde-rebuilt/>
9. See <https://franceswhitehead.com/what-we-do/embedded-artist-project>
10. See <https://en.contextishalfthework.net/about-apg/artist-placement-group/>
11. See <https://medium.com/un-global-pulse/sowing-the-seeds-of-the-future-in-colombia-f1d3bc8fc187>
12. Bassett, Caroline. (2013) Better Made Up : The Mutual Influence of Science fiction and Innovation. NESTA.
13. Ibid.
14. Light, A., Wolstenholme, R., Twist, B. (2019) Creative practice and transformations to sustainability – insights from research. SSRP Working Paper No. 2019-1, Sussex Sustainability Research Programme, University of Sussex.
15. Ibid.
16. Ed Finn, Ruth Wylie. (2021). Collaborative imagination: A methodological approach, Futures, Volume 132.
17. Cabanes, Benjamin & Segrestin, Blanche & Weil, Benoit & Le Masson, Pascal. (2014). Understanding the Role of Collective Imaginary in the Dynamics of Expectations: The Space Industry Case Study.



What can art, imagination and creative practice offer us?

In the first instance, art, imagination, and creative practice can create an open space for connection between previously disconnected people or elements; for emotions and values to be expressed and explored; for a different mode of continued enquiry; for multiple ways of knowing; and for something new to emerge. As Annette Mees, artistic director, creative producer and cultural strategist, says: 'I create worlds for people to think in.'



In order to find your way, you must become lost.

– Yoruba proverb.

Complexity, Uncertainty & Emergence

At this moment in history where multiple crises continue to unfold around us in complex and intersecting ways, it is critical that we learn – as individuals, organizations, and societies – to sit with uncertainty and develop the 'emergent strategies' (those that arise from unplanned actions and initiatives) that adrienne maree brown – writer, activist, and facilitator – writes of¹⁸.

The philosopher, writer and activist Bayo Akomolafe often references the Yoruba proverb, 'In order to find your way, you must become lost.' Creative practice, art and imagination offer us a location within which to lose our way; a chance to rehearse the worlds we want into being.

The concept of rehearsal came up many times in our conversations, particularly with Amahra Spence, Ben Twist and Annette Mees who are all well-practised in the world of theatre-making. A rehearsal is a commitment to the process of exploration, to uncertainty and risk. When one walks into a rehearsal room, it is often without the knowledge of what the outcome will be, which leaves the space open for generative, collaborative possibility that draws upon the skills, capacities, interests, and desires of people in the room. Those practised in the art of rehearsal – whether performers, directors, conductors, or composers – are necessarily intimately acquainted with the art of managing a complex system with variant parts and contradictory needs and ideas. A skilled artist is one who is able to hold those contradictions in creative tension. In a world that is in 'polycrisis'³, this skill is one that is ever more needed within the dynamics of the UN system.

While clarity is crucial within organizational life, we must acknowledge that the relationships within any system and the issues we deal with day to day are complex. While traditional design thinking is problem-driven and seeks to find a solution as effectively as possible, artistic ways of thinking might be better able to test new approaches, and surface that which we may not

want to know in the first instance, but have to grapple with in order to find the next right step.

One technology for describing and grappling with complex systems is storytelling. As Ed Finn from the Center of Science and Imagination says, 'stories are one of the only mechanisms that most humans have for modelling complex change.' Humans have time and again proved themselves to fall short when it comes to managing financial systems or predictive modelling, stumbling into unintended consequences. Stories are an old and effective way of giving form to abstraction, creating ambiguity and making complex interconnections that provide a common starting point for dialogue. Stories are effective 'boundary objects' that can create and shift culture¹⁹.



A New Temporality

It's crucial for humanitarian institutions, like those found within the UN system, to react and respond in a timely way to crises and conflicts. However, this reactive culture outside of humanitarian situations can also block moments of reflection that assist us with sensemaking, critical reflection and strategic action. Imagination and creative practice can offer us the ability to make a space to explore alternatives and experience an alternate temporality which engages the long term view as well as short term urgency.

In 2022, UNFPA Colombia together with UN Global Pulse and the National Planning Department of the Colombian government launched a participatory foresight project that aimed to amplify the voices of youth and empower underrepresented communities to design the future they want. The project incorporated foresight and speculative thinking with indigenous wisdom and a decolonial approach, which fostered both intergenerational exchange and an introduction into different cultural temporalities that honour the needs of generations far into the future. As opposed to replicating the urgent conditions that lead to the 'slow violence' of environmental degradation and climate change²⁰; art, imagination, and creative practice can support us to access methods of 'slow nonviolence' that are productive of alternative visions and modalities of nonviolent social relationships and interdependencies²¹.

The Long Time Project is one group already doing work in this area, creating a toolkit to help organizations focus on the long-term future, and inform strategy in the short-term²². They aim to galvanise public imagination and collective action to help steer long-term decision-making and to help us all become good ancestors.

We envision this approach being of use to the UN as a network, envisioning and planning for a future that reaches well past the timeframe that any of us currently writing or reading this report can expect to be a part of.

*The times are urgent;
let us slow down.*

– Dr Bayo Akomolafe, Philosopher, Writer, Activist, Professor of psychology, and Executive Director of the Emergence Network.



*Imagination as a team
sport – that's when
the world changes.*

– Ed Finn, Founding Director of the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University.

Imagining Inclusive Alternatives

The UN 2.0 Quintet for Change lays out the key capabilities that will be needed for the UN network to become more nimble and effective, and offer more relevant and system-wide solutions to 21st century challenges²³. These include data, digital, innovation, strategic foresight and behavioural science. This paper seeks to acknowledge the creative approaches found within these capabilities, and to call for the use of art, imagination, and creative practice as their own disciplines alongside, so that the resulting future scenarios and alternatives that we collectively imagine are more inclusive and nuanced – also argued for in UNDP's *Inclusive Imaginaries* paper²⁴. Whilst the links between strategic foresight, imagination and creative practice came through strongly in this research, we also see that data, digital innovation and other capabilities within the Quintet for Change can use these practices and many already are²⁵.

Having said that, strategic foresight has, historically, been rooted in a Western, militaristic tradition that has not always made room for perspectives from other viewpoints, particularly from the Global South, indigenous communities, young people, or the more-than-human (a term used critically to remind human geographers that the non-human world not only exists but has causal powers and capacities of its own)²⁶. It 'focuses more on scanning the horizon of what is already coming, rather than creating the conditions to imagine and construct new, alternative futures'²⁷. Art, imagination, and creative practice allow us to gather and plant knowledge in a way that is more inclusive of norms outside of Western 'best practice' (written communication in academic language, that does not take into account more traditional or ancestral forms of knowledge); they allow us to dream the new and to acknowledge the process of bold imagination that marginalised and disenfranchised communities have already been engaged in – survival.

Indeed, it is not only the responsibility of those who work in strategic foresight to ensure the

most creative look to the future, but of all of us within the UN family. Whether we work on climate resilience, emergency response, or peace-keeping, we are required to employ our creativity and imagine alternatives. It is only through imagining inclusive alternatives (or, as we might better call it, the 'pluriverse') that we will be better able to prepare for the coming future²⁸. As Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay shared with us, we often use the data and variables that we know, as well as the extrapolations of that data, in traditional methods of building future scenarios, but the people living at the centre of those scenarios, and their responses and emotions, are often left out, leading to inaccurate forecasts. Art and creative practice allow us to bring in that human dimension that can help us more accurately predict and prepare for the future.

Future fiction is one such tool that is very good at creating complex models, where other models fail²⁹. For example, when architects and urban planners model the future of a city based on an influx of immigration, they may focus on the numbers and distribution of resources and people. What they may not be equipped to do is to model for the social and cultural change, and linguistic transformation that might result. Future fiction is constantly considering these aspects of transformation, as well as the emotion and empathy that underpin them, inviting us to experience not just how we think about different futures, but how we feel about them.

Ed Finn says that imagination is the cognitive ignition system for foresight, anticipation and empathy – particularly when it comes to storytelling. Stories, through their universality, create dialogue between different groups of people – a good sci-fi story can save hundreds of hours of less creative communication, such as PowerPoints, Miro boards, or meetings. By inviting an engineer, an ethicist, a legislator and the public into the same imaginary story (as Ed has done many times with the Center for Science and Imagination) it is possible to have a much more rounded and constructive discussion about the imagined future, as well as the present day narratives and structures that we live in.



Visionary leadership is required, with the imagination to design a process that works. If Steve Jobs had designed what people wanted, he would have designed something very different from the iPhone; for the UNFCCC, we need to design what people did not know they wanted.

– Stockholm Environment Institute³⁰

A Bridge Between Ways of Knowing

Most organizations that were established in the 20th century are run in a way that values Eurocentric ways of knowing and favours linear, 'rational', data-heavy processes and communications. However, we know that this mode of thinking alone does not lead to success. As Jack Ky Tan says – an artist who explores the connection between the social, the legal and art – two thirds of companies fail and most employ abstract, linear thinking.

What would it mean for organizations, and the UN family in particular, to be more in tune with an intuitive understanding that values multiple ways of knowing? Farhana Yamin – environmental lawyer, Deputy Chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum – points out how the culture of large, international institutions can encourage us to remain remote, reducing complex emotional issues down to technical language. Her particular vision is for the meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), of which she has been a participant since its inception 28 years ago, to be comprised of safer, liberated and creative spaces. She believes these spaces would allow participants to have conversations that are more emotional, explorative and based on lived experience, in order to build the trust that is needed to underpin challenging negotiations and binding outcomes.

In order to create opportunities like these, in order to change an institution, we must start with ourselves as the first site of transformation. We know that individual transformation can lead to structural change. Creative Carbon Scotland has specialised in bringing artists together with city planners, sometimes meeting resistance from the latter, but through this approach has gradually transformed the way that local councils are meeting the challenge of climate disruption, through projects like Clyde Rebuilt in which representatives from across the Glasgow City region jointly developed interconnected projects for adapting to climate change challenges by 2030³¹.

Somatic embodiment came up multiple times in our interviews as an individual practice that

is key to implementing imagination and creative practices and supporting organizational transformation. Somatic or embodiment practices see the mind and body as intimately connected, and focus on the relationship between the two as a pathway to presence, balance, and connection, through activities such as meditation, movement, and grounding exercises. Cassie Robinson, the Associate Director of Emerging Futures at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Co-founder of the Centre for Collective Imagination spoke of the importance of bodywork as a tool for teams that work with change, since without doing the work of healing the trauma we may hold in our bodies, the harder it is to imagine other possibilities. Ivy Ross also has a well-documented track record of introducing intuitive and somatic practices in her design and innovation work at Google, Mattel and other companies³². How might it change the UN family to integrate these practices into our ways of working?

Other artistic practices, particularly poetry, visual art and social dreaming recurred in our interviews as representing a way into unconscious dynamics, themes, or experiences within the organizational system³³. As Sarah Shin – publisher, curator, and writer – says, they give us ‘the capacity to go beyond logical thinking, show up the edges of what we’re working with and, in doing so, make it possible to see how to change and adapt them.’ To put it another way, art is the medium to convey a feeling that has yet to be put into words. ‘Art is the relief from the duty of coherence,’ says Dr. Joost Vervoort, Associate Professor of Transformative Imagination at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, paraphrasing John Law³⁴.

According to Jack Ky Tan, design thinking is agile, linear, and focused on an output or product. For non-profit organizations and institutions, the term ‘art thinking’ may be more appropriate: a process that has no end product in mind aside from the social mission, that can be divergent, tangential and embodied.

Organizational transformation requires new norms, new behaviours, new ways of doing things, and new ways of creating space and of

being in relationship with others. The weaving together of different approaches – of tech-centred innovation and more artistic practices – is one way of forming those new norms, and is itself a creative act. In this paper, we are not arguing for the privileging of one form of knowledge over another, but an interdisciplinary approach that integrates and builds a bridge between them; that makes policies and processes ‘feelable’ as well as understandable; and that equally embeds the needs and rights of ‘people and planet’ as the UN Secretary-General calls for.

Sanjan Sabherwal, the Head of Policy Innovation at Policy Lab UK, has bridged the gap between creative practice and policy in different and effective ways. During one project, while working with those making anti-radicalisation policy, Sanjan used an artistic ice breaker activity to reveal some of the underlying mental models in the group. An ask to make their anti-radicalisation policy out of clay tapped into the subconscious of each member of the group, revealing different points of view: one person made a hand that reached down to help another; another

made a set of prison bars. The result led to an empathetic and supportive conversation about what their shared mental model ought to be.

Sanjan also cited SRG Bennett’s installation ‘The 20 Year Gap’, made with NESTA, which used a creative method of data visualisation in order to make visible the inequity of how ill-health is distributed across the UK (Fig 1). Displaying the data in that accessible, material way allowed a different response than a table or graph alone could³⁵.



Fig. 1 The 20 Year Gap

To Think and Act for Future Generations

In order to embody the ‘most creative look to the future’, our work must be accountable to young people and future generations, as well as be informed by their fresh perspectives and natural ability for imagination and creativity.

When we imagine future scenarios and decision making processes which will impact on younger generations more than the adult ones that precede them, it is crucial that young people are centred. Amahra Spence shared how they approach this at MAIA, a Black-led organization exploring the connection between imagination and liberation. Their YARD Youngers programme is effectively an art residency programme for 7-13 year olds, built around the idea that children and young people are the designers and architects of the present and future³⁶. Together, the children explore the power of imagination through different art practices. During the first YARD Youngers programme, they held a collective conversation around the design needs for utopia. A thirteen-year-old named Jasmine designed a utopian financial system in response, including a bank run by artificial intelligence as a way of trying to combat racial bias in mainstream banking, and where banks supported and invested in better waste management systems. Inspired by Jasmine, MAIA’s civic infrastructure programme, ABUELOS, has revisited how they approach their waste management and composting systems, as well as their governance and procurement policies, thereby including Jasmine’s perspective at the heart of their decision-making and strategic process.

Young people’s perspectives are continually impacting the innovation space in often unseen and organic ways. For example, during the pandemic, many people found themselves having to quickly adapt to remote working and collaboration, but there was one group of people who had been working in this way for decades already: gamers who, as teenagers in the nineties (like Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay) embodied different ways of connecting and working together online, and went on to shape how we converse

We’re not just having cute conversations [with children], like “what would you like to have in a dream world?” We’re thinking with them about the radical infrastructure that is needed to support climate resilience.

– Amahra Spence, Co-Founder and Creative Director at MAIA

and work with each other online, developing platforms like Discord and Second Life that underpinned many online convenings while the world adapted to the impacts of Covid-19. This begs the question, what could we learn about connecting and communicating in the future from today’s youth? The infrastructure of the future is being built, now, in teenage bedrooms. If organizations want to leap frog into a new phase of innovation and imagination, identifying trends, problems and solutions in an agile way, then children and young people – their perspectives, viewpoints, and ways of working – are critical.

Within the UN family, there are multiple initiatives dedicated to incorporating young mindsets into thinking about the future. The new cohort of the Secretary General’s Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change started its two-year term in March 2023, serving as a mechanism for the Secretary-General to hear directly from young people, as the UN works to accelerate global climate action, and drive forward all 17 Sustainable Development Goals³⁷.

And yet, children alone ‘should not bear the burden of representing future generations’, as the UN Common Principles on Future Generations states³⁸. We all have a responsibility to consider our accountability to generations not yet born. The UN has already voiced its commitment to do so, with the Secretary-General announcing his intent to appoint a Special Envoy for Future Generations, whose responsibility will be to represent and advocate for their interests across the UN system³⁹. The High Level Committee on Programmes has also proposed that the UN adopt a ‘good ancestor policy’ to help infuse strategic foresight, long-term thinking and the precautionary principle into all stages of planning and programming from design and budgeting to implementation and evaluation⁴⁰.

Implementing these initiatives will take a great deal of imagination and creative practice, and we can’t wait to see what unfolds as a result.



Imagination Infrastructures

The work of imagination, art and creative practice is not separate from the our day to day work. A sci-fi novel is one way to tell a story, but so is a spreadsheet. Our day-to-day tools and processes tell their own stories, influencing our norms and behaviours. By bringing new attention and creativity to ‘boring innovation’ and its related work areas – administration, finance, and other such systems – we can start to create new narratives that incite transformative change⁴². As Salvatore Vassallo and Balint Pataki of the UN Refugee Agency’s Innovation Service wrote, ‘ultimately we will never be able to truly become an innovative organization or sector if we cannot light up these unseen bureaucratic spaces and begin to innovate within them as well’⁴³.

As an example from one organization, Jack Ky Tan has been working with The University of Sheffield’s Centre for Equity & Inclusion to pilot a ‘visual contract’ – a partnership agreement to use with local civil society partners that decentres legal language (difficult for those for whom English is not their native language) and uplifts symbols from their partners’ cultures that honour the meaning and symbolism of partnership in a way that contract language rarely does⁴⁴. For the termination clause, in addition to the legal wording, they have collaboratively chosen to include the lotus symbol in recognition that even when something ends, there is a rebirth (Fig 2).

This kind of creative thinking can be applied to all aspects of our day to day work: governance, due diligence, policy and finance. At MAIA, when the team felt that their annual financial and company reporting was not able to tell the full story of their work, they decided to explore the development of a new practice – GRAFF – that combined art and design with accounting⁴⁵. By investigating current accounting practices whilst reviving and incorporating others – the Inca Khipu knotting system, African cornrows, Maori and Yoruba tattooing traditions, Egyptian hieroglyphics,

Like a railway network or an electricity grid, the infrastructure of the imagination requires long-term investment and maintenance for it to continue functioning well and serving its community(ies). This kind of patient, slow investment in spaces, places, relationships and the digital and social infrastructures of the imagination will build up and maintain the collective muscle of imagination, with cumulative effects that then make other things possible.

– Imagination Infrastructures ⁴¹

and indigenous Colombian beading practices – they reenvisioned the purpose of MAIA’s accounting processes, rehearsing a new way of reporting into being, and establishing a new way of thinking about accountability and evaluation.

In order to embark on experiments like these, organizations need a safe container in which to take risks. The utility of rituals were mentioned by many of our interviewees, even as simple as starting meetings with a shared breath, piece of music or poem to shift participants into a different mode of being. Clyde Rebuilt did this

over the course of their work and found it to be ‘rehumanising’ in a context where we are not often asked to be human⁴⁶.

Shared rituals can be useful for creating the communal experiences and sense of solidarity that is required to take those first steps into public, creative work; for building new and lasting connections; for building new organizational patterns and memory. As Sarah Shin says, ‘ritual is the repetition that rewires something.’

Fig 2 Visual Contract





Fig 3. Blessing the space in Colombia

Practising the Worlds We Want

‘The main thing artists can do is demonstrate possibilities,’ says the civic practice artist Frances Whitehead. By asking questions, breaking rules, designing intentional spaces and exposing people to other possibilities, artists prepare the ground for alternative ways of being and doing and provide the sense that the world we exist within is not the only one on offer.

The space they create then becomes a testing ground, allowing for different temporalities. In that way, art and creative practice serve UN Global Pulse’s mission of innovation in a fundamental sense.

There are many tools and methodologies to explore and rehearse these possibilities through prefigurative practice, particularly through writing, design, performance, and games. Dr. Joost Vervoort talked of games and live-action role play as offering the possibility of exploring ‘new worlds,

new narratives, new everything’⁴⁷. Crucially, such games are fun, creating high-energy spaces where people can come together and experience the joy of forming and inhabiting a new world.

Ben Twist, theatre director and Director of Creative Carbon Scotland identified that theatre and performance are often a collective, embodied experience of a ‘what if’ question: what if a puppet dreamt of being a real boy; what if everything that you touched turned to gold; what if a man unknowingly killed his father and married his mother.

We can apply these ‘what if’ questions to our work within the UN system, and strive to embody the answers. What if young people were at the heart of UN decision making? What if we formed a thirty year strategy? What if creative practice was seen as crucial to innovation? If we dare to imagine and rehearse a better world, we will create it.

BLESSING THE SPACE

A case study by Claudia Sáenz, Strategic Foresight Senior Analyst at UN Global Pulse

In 2022, the National Planning Department of Colombia, in collaboration with United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Global Pulse, aimed to engage young leaders, communities, and government officials in a participatory foresight initiative. This initiative, referred to as “community foresight,” sought to envision the future that the people of Colombia desired through futures dialogues. It intentionally included voices from young leaders, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, some of whom were from traditionally underrepresented regions of Colombia, such as Chocó and Amazonas. They co-created workshops using metaphors like planting trees to facilitate discussions about the future. Metaphors became our allies, and the act of planting a tree took on profound meaning, symbolising the nurturing of ideas, the patient growth of a future that might span decades, and the interconnection between time, generations and solidarity when thinking of the impact of the future – a concept these communities were already aware of, and kindly reminded me and our colleagues.

We asked the young leaders how we could shape an icebreaker activity that was engaging and help us get started on the same level ground. They were eager to share their traditions when starting any type of community exercise, which was to bless the space by setting the intentions of the exercise with the elders of their community and by ensuring that past and future generations are considered in any conversation.

Incorporating the traditions of indigenous Amazon communities into our future workshops wasn’t just a nice touch – it was absolutely crucial. We recognized that these communities have a unique wisdom and a holistic view that’s valuable when it comes to having a community focused approach to futures dialogues. By starting with what they’re comfortable with and speaking their language (metaphorically), we weren’t just being respectful of their culture and establishing trust between all participants; we were also getting eye-opening insights into how to set intentions and fully embrace a process of discussing and planning for the future (thinking about past, present and future generations)⁴⁸.

Where arts and culture are particularly great is in creating the space for other things to happen.

– Annette Mees, Artistic Director, Audience Labs at King's College London



Section Notes:

18. See <https://esii.org/>
19. See <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/storytelling-in-the-wild-a-guide-for-culture-shifting-storytelling-in-natural-settings/>
20. Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.
21. Piedalue, A. D. (2022). Slow nonviolence: Muslim women resisting the everyday violence of dispossession and marginalization. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40(2), 373–390.
22. See <https://www.thelongtimeacademy.com/toolkit>
23. See <https://www.un.org/two-zero/sites/default/files/2023-06/UN%202.0%20One-Pager%20en.pdf>
24. UNDP (2022). *Reimagining Development: Inclusive Imaginaries*. New York, New York.
25. See <https://futuringpeace.org/>
26. Jacques, Andres. (2020). *More-Than-Human*. Het Nieuwe Instituut.
27. See <https://www.imaginationinfrastructure-ing.com/imagination-infrastructure-is->
28. Escobar, A. (2017). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press.
29. See <https://www.futurefiction.org/associazione/?lang=en>
30. Klein, R. (2021). *Building climate diplomacy back better: imagining the UNFCCC meetings of tomorrow*. Stockholm Environment Institute.
31. <https://climatereadyclyde.org.uk/clyde-rebuilt-v2/>
32. See <https://in-dialogue.co/interviews/ivy-ross>
33. See <https://www.tav institute.org/news/social-dreaming-matrix-2>
34. John Law and Evelyn Ruppert (eds) (2016) *Modes of Knowing: Resources from the Baroque*. Manchester: Mattering Press.
35. See <https://www.srgbennett.com/#/20-year-gap/>
36. See <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cs4EM-M6oNkt/?hl=en>
37. See <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/youth-in-action/youth-advisory-group>
38. See <https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Advance%20Unedited%20-%20United%20Nations%20System%20Common%20Principles%20on%20Future%20Generations.pdf>
39. See <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-future-generations-en.pdf>
40. See <https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Advance%20Unedited%20-%20United%20Nations%20System%20Common%20Principles%20on%20Future%20Generations.pdf>
41. See <https://www.imaginationinfrastructure-ing.com/imagination-infrastructure-is->
42. See <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/promise-boring-innovation/>
43. See <https://medium.com/unhcr-innovation-service/a-new-compass-navigating-the-dark-matter-of-institutional-innovation-ae1188052693>
44. See <https://equityinclusionsheffield.co.uk/anti-racist-partnership-agreement/>
45. See https://www.instagram.com/p/CoGy4_o97o/?hl=en
46. See <https://climatereadyclyde.org.uk/clyde-rebuilt-v2/>
47. Joost M. Vervoort, *New frontiers in futures games: leveraging game sector developments*, *Futures*, Volume 105, (2019).
48. See <https://foresight.unglobalpulse.net/blog/experiments/participatory-foresight/>

Now What? How to Implement Our Findings

Through our research, it is clear that imagination, art and creative practice have much to offer organizations that are seeking to transform, in order to deliver higher levels of impact and innovation. The question remains: how can an organization implement these findings, and what are the obstacles that might get in the way?

Test Readiness

It is not always the right time to embark on the work of creative practice and imagination. As Franca Fubini, group analyst and organizational consultant, told us: if an organization is ‘brittle’, if they are going through a crisis, or they are lacking a certain ‘flexibility, or life force’ then the work can not go much further. Testing readiness looks like doing the due diligence and assessing the level of willingness (or indeed, resistance, or inertia) of staff to go through the process of organizational change. If the willingness is not there, there may be deeper work to do first, and perhaps on an individual level. Jack Ky Tan’s suggestion is to second each board and senior team member to art school for an education in embodied knowledge and failure, and only then regather. Whilst this represents an ideal situation that not every organization can practically implement, it is a helpful provocation that highlights how difficult it can be to get buy-in for creative or imaginative work from senior levels, when they do not have the grounding in these knowledge areas.

Establish Champions

While it may not always be possible to second senior staff to art school, it is critical that senior team members are supportive champions of any effort to integrate creative practice, art, and imagination into organizational life.

This work thrives on perceived ‘permission’ (within a wider societal landscape where art is increasingly devalued) and starts and ends with leadership signalling their intent to experiment with emergent ways of working, modelling the value of different ways of knowing (such as observation, reason, intuition, emotion, memory), and making the time, capacity and resources available to pursue new avenues.

If senior team members are not already champions of the work, then building buy-in in a deliberate and intentional manner is the next step, using language that is accessible and resonates with them.

For example, at UNHCR’s Innovation Service, the team led a 12-month Fellowship programme that brought together approximately 25 colleagues from across their operations every year. As part of workshops, Fellows were asked to rehearse how they would propose a new idea to their identified stakeholder. Each Fellow would play themselves trying to build the case for their new approach and a colleague would act out possible reactions.

The intention of the exercise was to prepare for future scenarios where Fellows might be required to earn support from critical members of their teams, and to build out their roster of “champions”. The exercise required the Fellows to understand the worldview and priorities of their stakeholder and think about what the potential for harm could be that would dissuade them from supporting such an initiative, prior to actually having that conversation. It was also the hope

that through acting out and rehearsing these situations, colleagues would be better prepared for the type of questions and concerns that can arise from introducing a new idea into a team.

Fellows were then equipped with additional tools and research undertaken by UNHCR’s Innovation Service and the Centre for Public Interest Communications on how to build support for their ideas that they could use throughout their Fellowship year⁴⁹.



Extend the Right Invitation

The barriers to entry for experimentation with art, imagination and creative practice can be high. Staff may feel scared or uncertain, nervous of what the expectations around participation might be. The right kind of invitation into the work is therefore crucial to establish the ‘new rules’ and approach. The invitation might be a little playful, to signal that the project will be a different kind of experience and that there will be some creative risk involved, without the usual professional armour. Once the invitation has been made, remember: the people that show up are the right people.

At the Center for Science and Imagination, they extend this ‘invitation’ for their workshops that gather people from multiple disciplines, in a variety of ways. Care is a central part of the ethos: ensuring that care has been taken to curate the group so that it is as diverse and inclusive as possible; that care has been taken in creating a special environment, perhaps taking the participants on a field trip, or creating ‘future fiction’ name tags, so that participants can adopt different personas during their time together. Care is also shown by providing a couple of ‘safety nets’. One is time constraints; by taking perfection off the table, it becomes more acceptable to try new things and fail. Another is a strong editorial team at the centre of any writing experiments, so that participants feel more secure; they won’t have to worry about looking bad.

Farhana Yamin starts with invitations that are small and individual, and with methodologies and tools that are ‘soft, friendly, and not too time consuming.’ Her project Letters to the Earth is one example of a contemplative writing exercise that might allow those who work in policy and diplomacy to connect with their work with a more empathetic or emotional frame⁵⁰.

Evaluate Differently

It is notoriously difficult to measure and evaluate the efficacy of creative practice, imagination, and art, and there is no straightforward answer to how an organization should try. We collected some working models from our interviewees: Favianna Rodriguez, Cultural Strategist at The Center for Cultural Power, measures three areas of impact – how the artist is transformed, how their ‘social justice partner’ is transformed, and how the culture/narrative is transformed. Sanjan Sabherwal says that the simplest measure of success is answering the question ‘do people want to do more of it?’ Claudia Sáenz considers a project successful if its insights have played a part in the decision making process; if there have been internal shifts in values and knowledge; and if that knowledge is being distributed equitably.

The CreaTures Project has sought to develop a tool for evaluating creative practices, and was cited multiple times in our interviews as a great example of a working model to evaluate the use of creative practice⁵¹.

Each of the nine dimensions of this tool provide ‘a different way of looking at a creative practice and how it seeks to engage with change. The dimensions are not meant to be understood as a single indicator or target, but rather as an entire world that can be investigated and reflected on’⁵².

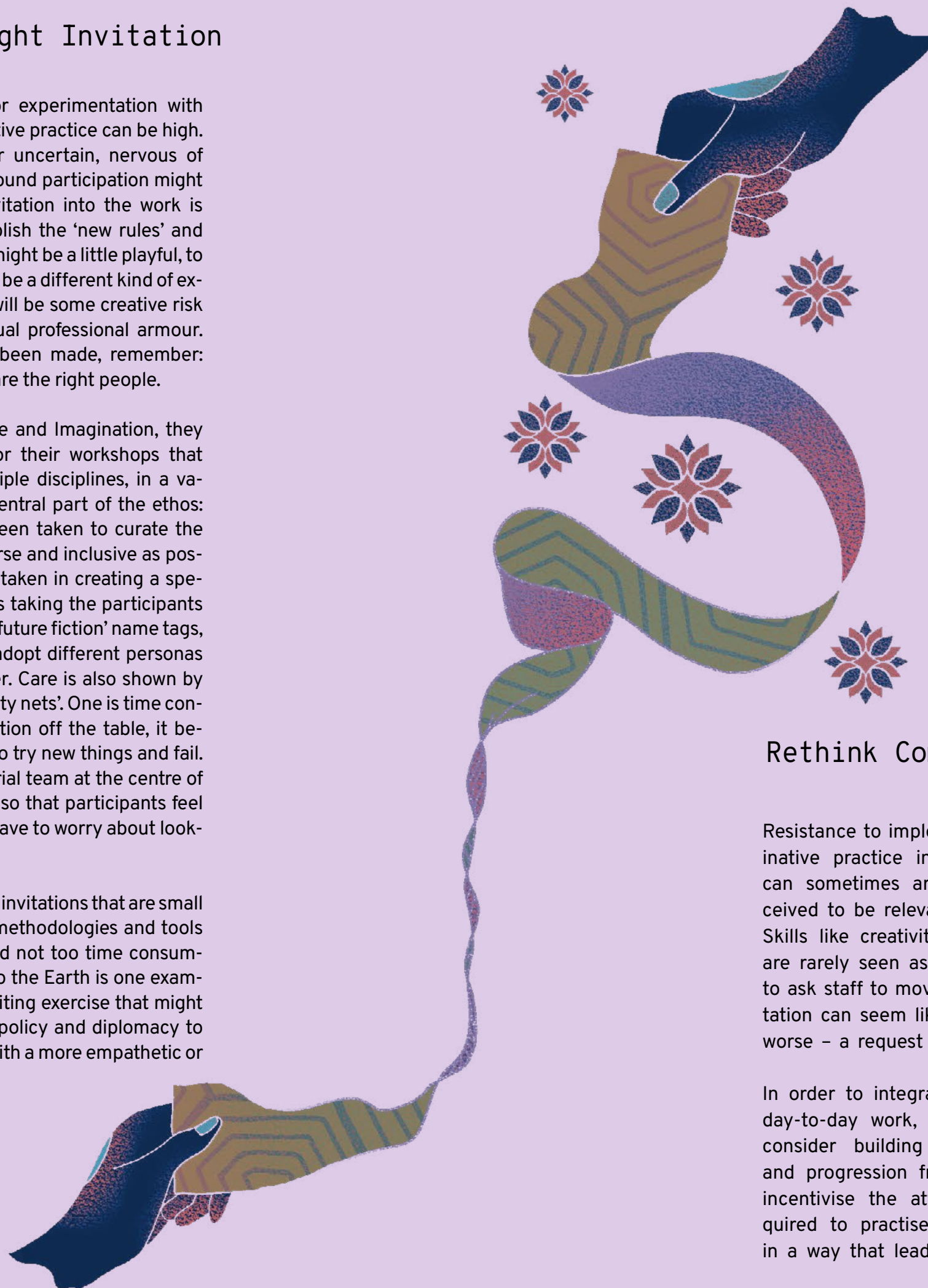
For any of these measurement and evaluation methods to stick, an organization needs to be open to redefining what is understood by ‘evidence’. As Ben Twist says, ‘the unforeseen outcomes are often the ones that are most important.’ An organization may also find that the questions of measurement and evaluation reopen questions to do with accountability. Measuring the impact of art, imagination, and creative practice may be less relevant for an accountant, a board, or a funder, and more relevant to future generations and the more-than-human world⁵³. As Amahra Spence told us, ‘Before we think about metrics and how we measure the thing, we have to get to a place of radical honesty about what we are accountable to.’

If future generations were at the centre of an organization’s measurement and evaluation model, how might

Rethink Competencies

Resistance to implementing creative and imaginative practice in an organizational context can sometimes arise because it is not perceived to be relevant to staff job descriptions. Skills like creativity or an ability to innovate are rarely seen as core competencies, and so to ask staff to move into spaces of experimentation can seem like ‘a waste of time’, or even worse – a request to put their job in jeopardy.

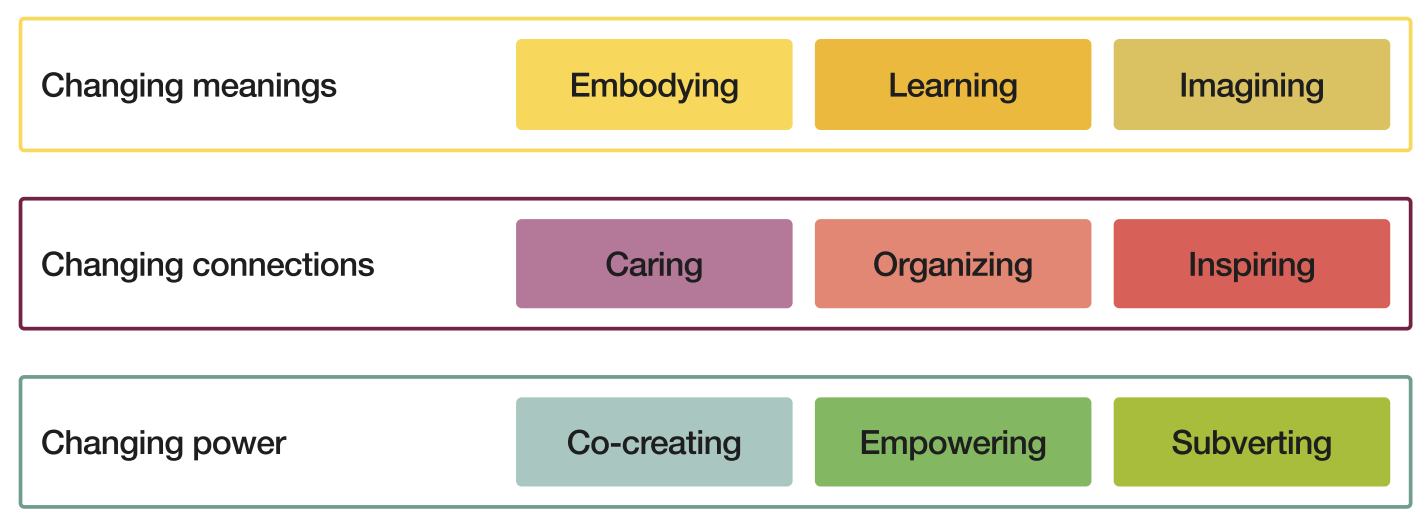
In order to integrate these practices into the day-to-day work, organizations may want to consider building new competency models and progression frameworks that reward and incentivise the attitudes and behaviours required to practise imagination and creativity in a way that leads to innovation and impact.



that change the way that an organization makes decisions and strategies? Would it make sense to take inspiration from the Iroquois Constitution that states that ‘in every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation’?⁵⁴ Or, as Senior Communications Officer for UN Global Pulse, Shanice Da Costa, suggests, could we find insights in the South Asian astrological traditions that consider the world in seven-year cycles?

An orientation towards that model might require much longer timeframes for measurement and evaluation, in order to more accurately capture any organization’s lasting impact. This approach both honours the fact that, as Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay says, ‘the effects of creative practice often take longer to seep into society’ and gives new generations, new partners and new colleagues the agency to evaluate our work with an outside eye.

Fig 4. The Nine Dimensions tool



Section Notes:

49. See <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Building-support-for-your-ideas.pdf>

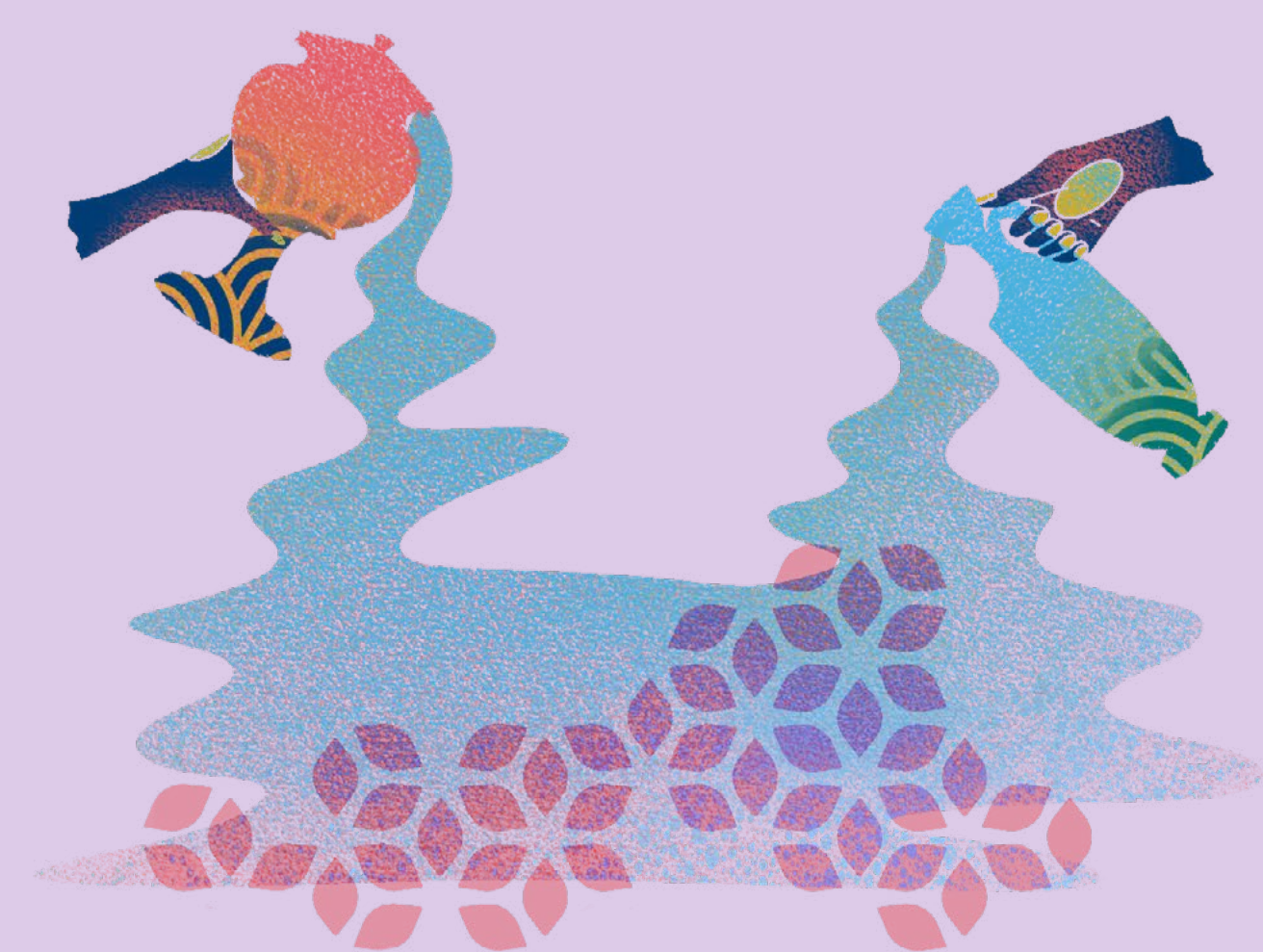
50. See <https://www.letterstotheearth.com/about-us>

51. See <https://creaturesframework.org/funding/creatures-dimensions.html>

52. See <https://creaturesframework.org/funding/creatures-dimensions.html>

53. Jacques, Andres. (2020). More-Than-Human. Het Nieuwe Instituut.

54. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_generation_sustainability



Starting Points & Pilots

If the organization is ready, below are some possible starting points that we suggest to enable wider experimentation around creative practice and imagination in service of organizational transformation and impact.

Emergent Strategy

The first suggestion is not to think too hard about the form that a pilot project takes, but to trust an emergent process, or an ‘emergent strategy’⁵⁵ as the writer and facilitator adrienne maree brown suggests – even more so if there are no artists or cultural workers in your team currently. ‘Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions’, so the first step can be to simply invite in artists and creative practitioners to help formulate a question, set a brief, and gather the right people together⁵⁶. Be open about what the outcome might be, but decide parameters by which to assess progress: a phased approach, for example, or a set of principles that will guide the work.

If you work in different regions or contexts, make that work to your advantage. Commission different groups to grapple with the same question, and document how their approach is developed and implemented in those different contexts. What sense can you make from the results? How might you use the findings to inform your next project cycle, or ways of working?

Embed Artists

Consider embedding an artist, or multiple artists within your team or organization. The point is not for them to make work in response (a crucial point of difference from the artist-in-residence) but to be an artist who can bring their worldview, questions, skills and contacts to the table during the day-to-day work, and in doing so spark a different mode of being, thinking, and working within others.

There are a number of ways of working that creative practitioners have that are not appreciated or understood even by practitioners themselves (see What Do Artists Know? on p.8). Just by placing them in decision making spaces, where they are rarely allowed, disrupts the status quo and allows rules to be broken and norms to be challenged.

For example, at ETH Zurich’s AI Center, they host affiliate artists to explore the potential of bringing artificial intelligence, art and science together and to anchor critical thinking in their work. Another example is the artists-in-labs program at Zurich University of

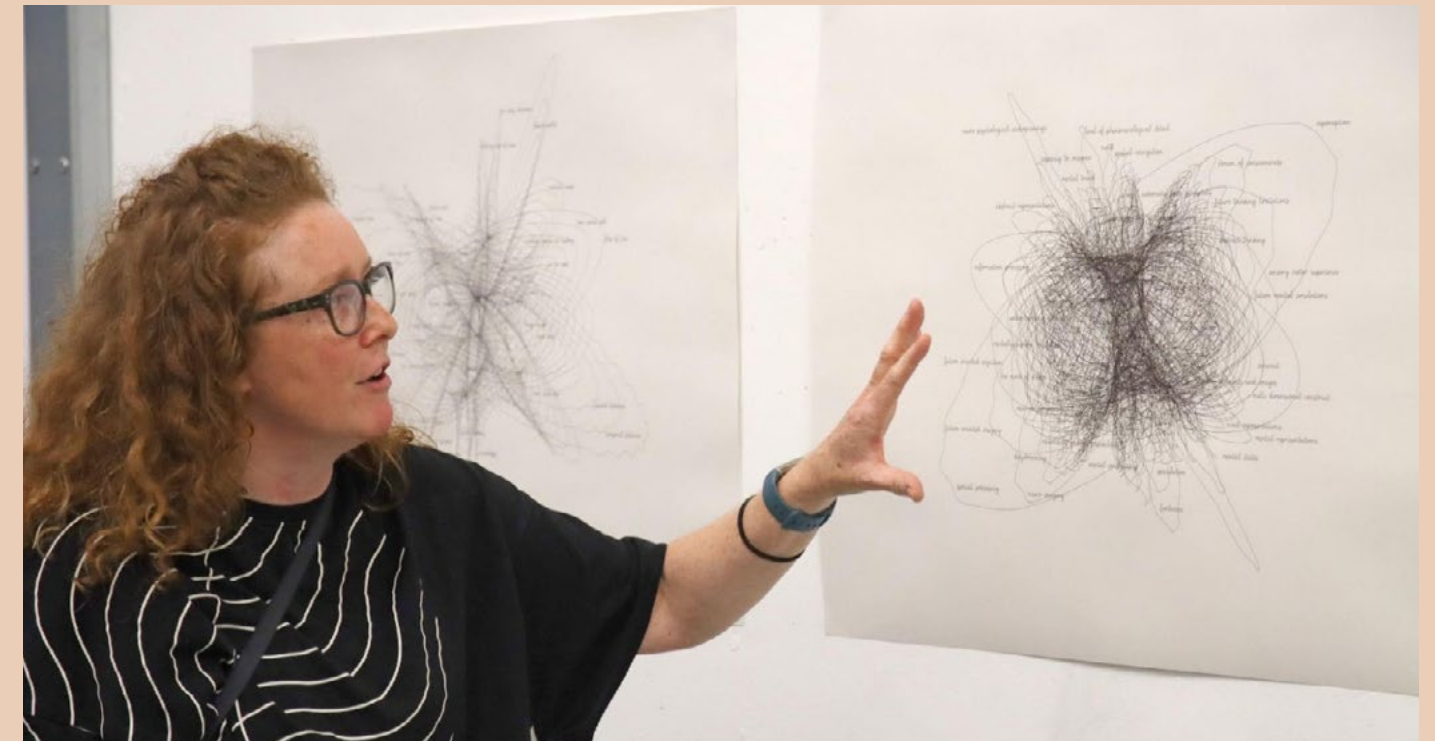


Fig. 5 Ruth Jarman of Semiconductor

the Arts, which facilitates artistic research by way of long-term residencies for artists in scientific laboratories⁵⁷. The very presence of artists, through the questions asked and daily practices undertaken, catalysed opportunities for the scientific institutions to rethink their ways of working and how they were producing knowledge.

Similarly, at UK Policy Lab, they have experimented with embedding three artists and putting them in relationship with three different policy teams, with the freedom to explore their ways of working. In a recent blog, they wrote, ‘Semiconductor (Ruth Jarman and Joe Gerhardt) were placed with the Foresight, Futures, and Emerging Technology team at the Government Office for Science, a team which focuses on the policy implications of medium-long term trends and scenarios for technology development and wider societal change. The duo developed a number of artworks which reflected upon how thinking about the long-term is incorporated into policy decisions today. This included thought-provoking maps of how humans have historically conceived of time, from a pre-industrial society who did not necessarily conceive of the ‘progress’ of time to our modern day knowledge of how neuro/cognitive processes enable future thinking. How might such constructions of time affect our approach to making policy?’⁵⁸

Whilst the initial results are promising, the longer-term results of this initiative remain to be seen. In order for programmes like these to have an impact, artists need to be given some decision-making power and authority themselves, so that they have some foundation from which to challenge norms, and have a collaborative relationship with leadership. They need time and space for transformation to occur – within individuals, and within the organization as a whole. Amahra Spence hopes that one day, MAIA can host multi year residencies in this vein, to truly allow the time for new ideas and new insights to emerge.

While the work of artists is often undervalued in wider society, it is crucial that embedded artists are properly recompensed for their work within an organization – to both recognise the wisdom and knowledge they may have built over a career and also to assure quality control. You will want to hire an artist who can hold their own and draw from their experience and expertise when in a room with people from multiple disciplines.

Multidisciplinary Residency

The purpose of embedding artists into multidisciplinary teams has the advantage of seeding a process that encourages non practitioners of art and imagination to ignite their own creativity and capacity for change.

Another method for doing this is the multidisciplinary residency, that brings people from various backgrounds together for an intensive work period to collaborate in a co-designed way, with a set of measurable outcomes.

This is how the Center for Science and Imagination approach their programmes with organizations such as NASA, throwing together science fiction writers with non fiction writers who might be economists, space scientists, or geophysicists. Over days or months, multidisciplinary teams come together to plan for the future, by collaborating and pitching story ideas. These ideas are then turned into whole worlds, complete with characters and narrative, that none of the participants could do alone, through a series of complex worldbuilding activities and cross-dialogue.

Embed Youth

We have made the case for the role of children and young people in this work, and indeed where we are writing from – the UN – already has a practice of embedding young people through fellowships⁵⁹. As Our Future Pledge: An Agenda for Futures by Youth⁶⁰, and the Lab for Teen Thinkers show, children and young people are more than capable of grappling with complex issues and tabling imaginative and creative solutions⁶¹.

We suggest that if teams and organizations want to be truly participatory, inclusive, and creative, they will consider embedding young people into their day-to-day work following a similar model to that of embedded artists (with additional and appropriate safeguards in place) and allow themselves to be changed as a result.

Prefigurative Practice

In the spirit of rehearsing the worlds that we want, we are excited by the prospect of creating new ‘imagination infrastructures’ for day-to-day work and safe rehearsal spaces to experiment with-in⁶². Perhaps a fictional team or organization is one way of ‘practising’ such new ways of working, taking inspiration from live action role play and initiatives like the Imaginary College at the Center for Science and Imagination⁶³. By situating the work in a space that is not ‘real’, we can open our minds to possibilities that might not seem to have traction in our daily life. And by rehearsing these imaginative possibilities and finding ways to implement them, we can make our fictions real and bring them into the present, building capacity and designing infrastructures for new ways of being and working.

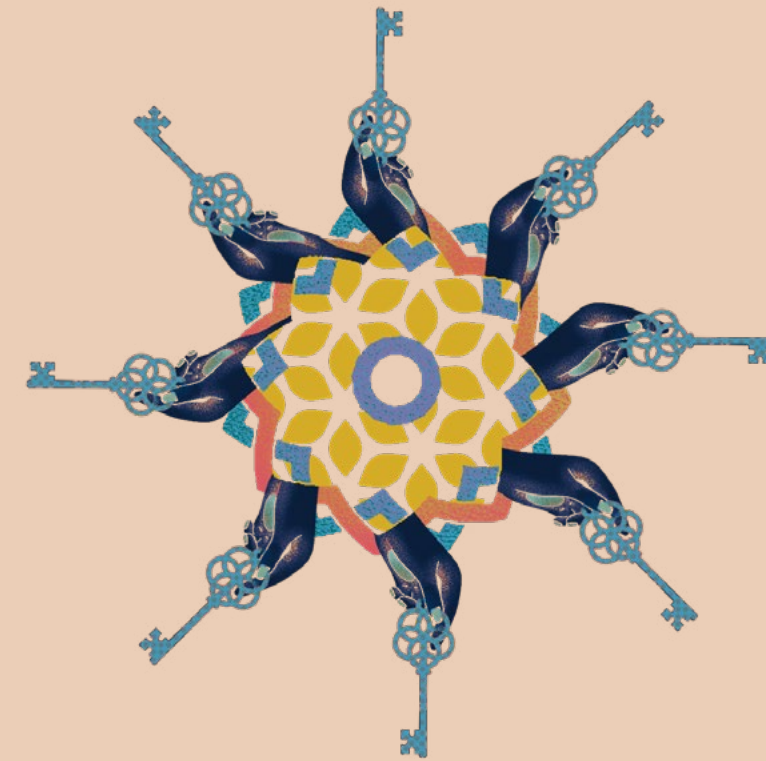
Within UN Global Pulse’s Finland team, we’ve tested prefigurative design to ‘practice the worlds we want’ and rehearse the future with our team. ‘Prefigurative design involves the manifestation of a desired future into present practices,’ and so at a recent retreat, we put the UN Global Pulse team into groups to imagine a new and improved UN department five years into the future⁶⁴. In this speculative scenario, we asked the team to develop new ways of working as well as new methods of communication and collaboration. In doing so, we began to answer the question, ‘How do you work for another world while living in the one you are trying to change?’

In this paper, we have established the need for organizations to look towards creative and imaginative practices that will help us on our journey towards a better world. At the UN in particular, we are in the privileged position of setting the scene for the rest of the world as an organization of possibility. We live in a moment in time that requires us to dig deeper into our capabilities to do things differently and we must, if we are to achieve the ambition laid out in Our Common Agenda⁶⁵.

Through our research we know that creative practice, imagination and art can assist us in embracing uncertainty and complexity; engaging in new timelines and inclusive alternatives; creating a bridge between ways of knowing (such as the rational and the intuitive) and between generations; and practising and building new infrastructures for the future.

The question now is, how will we do it? We have laid out some initial screening questions to test our readiness, some starting points for pilot projects, and accompanying workbook prompts to support our thinking and experiments. The key will be to keep in mind the visionary possibilities that creative and imaginative practices can bring to our work, to allow our minds and hearts to expand enough to hold the immensity of the challenges ahead, and the solutions that will be needed to greet them.

We have been inspired by the conversations we have held as a part of this research, where people have shared their visions for a day when our meetings begin with a piece of music; when a young person signs off on a significant programmatic decision; when our thirty year strategy is released in the form of a speculative novel; when we create safe spaces in which to rehearse uncertainty; when elders bring us together in shared ritual. Now all we have to do is make it happen.



Call to Action

If you are inspired by what you have read and would like to collaborate with UN Global Pulse on this work, please reach out to Lauren Parater, Creative Strategy Lead at comms@unglobalpulse.org.

Section Notes:

55. See <https://www.optimisticanthro.com/blog/2019/7/16/what-the-heck-is-emergent-strategy>
56. Obolensky, N. (2014) Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty, Gower.
57. See <https://www.zhdk.ch/en/researchproject/ail--artists-in-labs-program-418324>
58. See <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2023/06/21/manifest-what-we-have-learnt-so-far-from-artists-working-in-policy/>
59. See <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/youth-foresight-fellows>
60. See <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3016/file/%20UNICEF-Innocenti-YFF-Our-Future-Pledge-toolkit-2023.pdf>
61. See <https://www.bgc.bard.edu/teen-thinkers-1>
62. See <https://www.imaginationinfrastructure.com/>
63. See <https://csi.asu.edu/imaginary-college/>
64. Asad, M. (2018). Prefigurative design as an alternative approach to civic engagement.
65. See <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda>



Further Resources

Art, Fabulation, and Practicing the Worlds We Want;

<https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/art-fabulation-and-practicing-the-worlds-we-want/>

Art / Policy Matrix;

<https://www.srgbennett.com/blog/2021/02/01/the-art-policy-matrix>

Collective Imagination Practice Community;

<https://medium.com/imagination-practice>

Coordinates of Speculative Solidarity;

<https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/coordinates-of-speculative-solidarity/>

CreaTures Framework;

<https://creaturesframework.org/index.html>

Imaginative Collaboration Framework;

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328721000975>

Long Time Toolkit;

<https://www.thelongtimeacademy.com/toolkit>

Seven Foundations of Worldbuilding;

<https://medium.com/nyc-design/how-to-build-brave-new-worlds-part-one-b9dac3eed6c9>

Toronto Imaginal Transitions;

<https://weallcanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Toronto-Imaginal-Transitions-v1.0.pdf>

What Do Artists Know?;

<http://embeddedartistproject.com/whatdoartistsknow.html>





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