What's better than strategic foresight?



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What a professor of futures studies can teach philanthropy about its fate (and how to change it)

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Over 50 years ago I began a course of study at the University of Hawaii. The programme's focus was 'the future'.

At that time, the main argument made by leading Western futurists such as Toffler, Dator, Boulding, and others, was that the rate of change of our lived experiences was accelerating faster than the rate of our worldviews and institutions. The result was discordance; citizens stuck within 'used futures' that no longer reflected their changing needs.

Today, various examples continue this trope, from the use of 'horse and buggy' representative democracy when direct deliberate democracy is possible, to the cultural and ethical confusion arising around emergent digital technologies.

What is clear is futures thinking continues to be relevant to our personal and professional trajectories and yet many in the sector remain unfamiliar with its core tenets and the impact it has on our lives.

An introduction to futures thinking

By way of introduction, futures studies as an academic discipline has two important conceptual strands.

The first focuses on 'strategic foresight' where the goal is to get ahead – to use information to enhance one's position within a market, a conflict, or political landscape. This means asserting you can individually 'do better' within a zero-sum world.

The second favours 'deep change', a view that perceives whole ecosystem transition through relationships between self, other, nature, and technology. This means focusing not just on external, but inner change too – and expanding the pie of possibility (it is perhaps no surprise that social justice has become a key component to this strand).

Yet for philanthropic organisations – from charities to religious institutions – which paradigm to follow has often been ad hoc and reactive. For many, the aim of connecting citizens, partners, funders, and founders through purpose sounds good, but increased corporate, technological, and bureaucratic demands continue to steer towards more strategic postures.

Choosing a vessel

I've seen this piecemeal approach in my own work, including time with Jesuit Social Services (JSS) as a workshop facilitator in Australia.

In the early days, you heard practitioners describe their organisation as a small boat travelling down a steady river. Then, after changes in state social support and shifting worldviews within the Church throughout the 2000s, that narrative became one of a small yacht in a wild ocean. That transition seemingly demanded strategic foresight for survival, with the team navigating each approaching wave to stay afloat.

Since then, however, and with advances in AI and the rise in mental illnesses, the landscape has changed again, with calls not just for a self-sustaining yacht, but a wider social movement 'fleet'. This will rely on expanding relations (social, environmental, and spiritual) through the deep change strand, while holding a strong anchor to core values.

Used futures

Similarly, 'used futures' as described earlier, continue to plague nonprofit and philanthropic settings where working in silos, paternal decision-making, or competitive grant behaviours all fall within the category of practices no longer aligned with current realities.

Here, the advice is for used futures to be actively acknowledged as 'closed fist' pathways, then replaced by 'open hand'

approaches that challenge entrenched norms and create new possibilities.

This is about more than adopting a biannual tool. It is about fostering a sustained attentiveness to what is changing and what is stable; to not just 'the' future, but alternative futures; and to forging deeper narratives that move from a fixation on the present to the use of the long-term as a tool to change today.

As a nun from one social service organisation I worked with suggested, this work can replace an abstract desire to 'save the world' with a deeper commitment to 'serving the world'.

Four futures for philanthropy

Developing an understanding of deep change thinking and used futures are helpful points in an organisation's journey to true systems change, but they also force us to reckon with the fact that not all paths to futures alignment will run smoothly.

During my time as a futurist, I – with my colleague Ivana Milojevic of Metafuture.org – have developed an approach called the 'change progression scenarios method' to touch on this point and the hope is that by being aware of potential pitfalls, organisations may be better equipped to navigate true transitions.

With that in mind, here are four alternative courses we believe philanthropic organisations could take as they embark on futures work. Each scenario presents a choice and a chance to reflect not just about which future is most likely, but which story they truly wish to embody.

1. The slow fade

This is the no-change scenario where an organisation continues its good work but fundamentally fails to futures-adapt its model. It continues to rely on traditional fundraising and communication methods and considers problems 'out there'. The underlying story remains one of being a noble, omnipotent saviour, despite the organisation slipping into the discordance of 'used futures'.

2. The digital donor

Here, the organisation embraces seemingly 'future-orientated' technology with enthusiasm. It becomes very skilled at adapting to digital fundraising, social media campaigns, and using data analytics to understand its donor base. It might even use VR to give donors





Tom Lonber

Left: A small fleet of boats can find stability together.

an immersive experience of the communities they are helping. The system is more efficient, but the core worldview remains the same. The metaphor shifts from saviourism to a high-tech delivery service, like an Amazon for altruism. It survives and may even thrive for a time, but it hasn't changed the fundamental power dynamic. It's still doing things to or for people, not with them, and will be another 'used future'.

3. The benevolent corporation

In this future, the very idea of a separate nonprofit sector erodes. Large tech and consumer companies integrate social missions directly into their business models but as a core market strategy. They create platforms that are far more efficient at connecting resources to needs, often bypassing traditional NGOs entirely. The worldview is that social problems are simply market failures to be solved with better technology and business acumen. The narrative (strategic foresight) is one of efficiency and scale, where doing good becomes a narrow profitable enterprise.

4. The co-creative network

This is the most radical and transformative path. Here, the organisation undergoes a profound identity shift. It stops seeing itself as a saviour and instead becomes a facilitator and network weaver. It uses its resources not to run projects, but to empower local communities to create their own solutions. The underlying metaphor is no longer a lifeboat pulling people from the water, but a mycelial network that connects different parts of the forest, allowing them to share resources and thrive together. It moves from charity to solidarity, becoming a postcolonial catalyst for deep change rather than the agent of it.