



4 scenarios for three transformative results



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The scenario development exercise discussed here is related to the global effort led by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and stakeholders to achieve the three transformative results, which are (a) ending the preventable maternal deaths, (b) ending unmet need for family planning and (c) ending gender-based violence and all harmful practices, including child marriage and female genital mutilation. This publication presents the plausible future scenarios that UNFPA and its partners may face on the path to achieving these results by 2030.



Foreword

Arthur Erken, Director of the Policy and Strategy Division

Accelerating the progress in achieving the three transformative results by 2030 is laden with challenges. We are living in a world of turbulence, uncertainty, novelty, and ambiguity (TUNA). UNFPA has realized that, in such conditions, this acceleration might not happen unless we understand what the future may look like and are prepared for it.

I am happy to share that, for the first time, UNFPA has taken a whole-of-organization approach to reflect on the future coming towards us and has integrated that thinking into the development of its current strategic plan, for 2022–2025.

The development of four scenarios for the three transformative results was a concerted endeavour. My sincere thanks go to the many interviewees, researchers, interviewers, scenario builders and learners who gave so freely of their time, energy, enthusiasm and ideas.

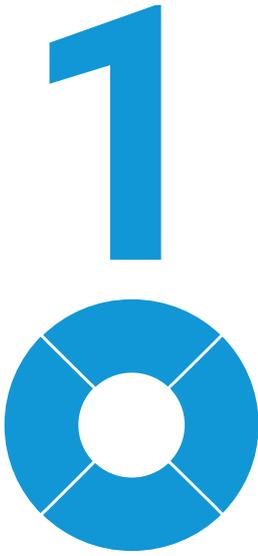
The scenarios presented in this publication are neither predictions, nor are they set in stone. Rather, they constitute plausible, challenging and evolving stories about the possible future worlds in which the three transformative results, the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are to be achieved.

For UNFPA, scenario thinking is also about collective learning, as a shared response to uncertainty. Therefore, it is important for us to communicate these scenarios to their many potential users, and especially to the broad range of our partners and allies that are working alongside us to accelerate the achievement of the three transformative results. We invite them to share their learning, insights and reflections with us.



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UNFPA becoming future-ready

UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. Its mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled. By 2030, UNFPA is committed to achieving three transformative results, known as the "three zeros":

- zero preventable maternal deaths
- zero unmet need for family planning
- zero gender-based violence and harmful practices

Strategic plans of the UNFPA are developed with a specific focus on achieving these results. When the time came to prepare the strategic plan for 2022–2025, the need to accelerate progress became evident. It also became clear that the context was changing and that UNFPA would have to become both more aware of the changes taking place in the global environment and more adaptable in the face of them.

The development of the strategic plan coincided with the highly uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic. We live in an interconnected world in which challenges, vulnerabilities, events and disturbances in one part of the world have ripple effects that can be felt across borders and regions. The pandemic is an example of such a disruption.

UNFPA has found that, in order to be prepared for an unprecedented rate of change and unpredictability it may be operating within, a more

future-informed approach to strategic planning is required. In addition to the pandemic and the already increasingly fragmented positions of governments on key ICPD issues globally, the mandate of the UNFPA is facing potential further large-scale disruptions caused by climate change, political tensions, protracted crises, and other environmental and social factors. For UNFPA to safeguard the rights provided under the ICPD, as well as to enhance its ability to reach women and girls and its support to governments to do the same, it needs to be as prepared as possible.

In the TUNA conditions, a different way of thinking – scenario thinking – lends itself well to strategic planning. It utilizes the inherent human capacity for imagining futures to better understand the present and identify new strategic options. Scenario thinking works with a set of scenarios, each of which is a plausible, relevant and challenging story about the future.

By looking at multiple scenarios of the future, each with its own characteristics, scenario thinking has offered UNFPA a broader range of strategic options to consider. The scenarios presented here are set in 2050. The longer time frame was deliberately chosen to help scenario builders reframe their thinking, challenge assumptions and develop useful scenarios that may help deliver resilient and sustainable strategies.



Institutionalizing scenario-based thinking

Scenario planning for this upcoming strategic plan will, I hope, put us in a position to be more flexible and more agile ourselves in responding to the different future scenarios, which are unpredictable but to a certain extent can be prepared for.

– **Dr. Natalia Kanem**, UNFPA Executive Director, 3 February 2021¹

UNFPA started its scenario planning journey by integrating the methodology into the development of its strategic plan for 2022–2025. It ran an organization-wide scenario planning exercise, which resulted in the development of the four scenarios presented in this publication. During this process, UNFPA realized that scenario planning had the potential to support UNFPA and other stakeholders to:

- integrate uncertainty about the future into strategic planning by developing several plausible scenarios of the future, rather than focusing on a single one
- have an explicit and flexible sense of how the future might unfold, and take advantage of opportunities that exist in contexts of high uncertainty
- map the unknowns, and work backwards to find effective risk mitigation strategies, enabling UNFPA to remain responsive to its mandate at all times
- consider strategic alternatives and opportunities that might emerge, such as identifying interesting partners and developing new focuses for programming

¹ UNFPA, "[Statement of the Executive Director to the 1st regular session of the Executive Board 2021](#)", 3 February 2021.

UNFPA will strengthen results-based management, focusing on collective accountability for results and emphasizing learning and adaptive management. It will strengthen peer-to-peer support in results-based management; strengthen knowledge management; and build capacity in scenario planning as part of larger organization-wide efforts to strengthen resilience and remain “fit for purpose”.

– UNFPA strategic plan for 2022–2025, paragraph 94

However, UNFPA was not focused simply on an output: the development of a fixed set of scenarios. Rather, it set out to instil in the organization at every level the mindset that starts with asking the question “What if?” – which is at the core of scenario-based thinking.

Therefore, the scenarios presented in the following sections are but the first step in a longer journey towards better understanding of the changes taking place and becoming more responsive. Ultimately, for UNFPA the aspiration behind this effort is to be able to better meet the needs of the individuals and communities it serves and to accelerate the achievement of the three transformative results by 2030.



Building the scenarios

UNFPA partnered with the University of Oxford and NormannPartners to introduce scenario thinking into the development of its strategic plan for 2022–2025.

The scenario development exercise became the first step in that process and was based on the Oxford scenario planning approach.² It is a purposeful, learner-centred approach in which the emphasis is not on developing a “one-off” final product or outcome but, rather, on engaging the learner in an iterative learning and perception-reframing cycle over time. As such, the approach is well suited for operating in turbulent, uncertain, novel and ambiguous conditions.

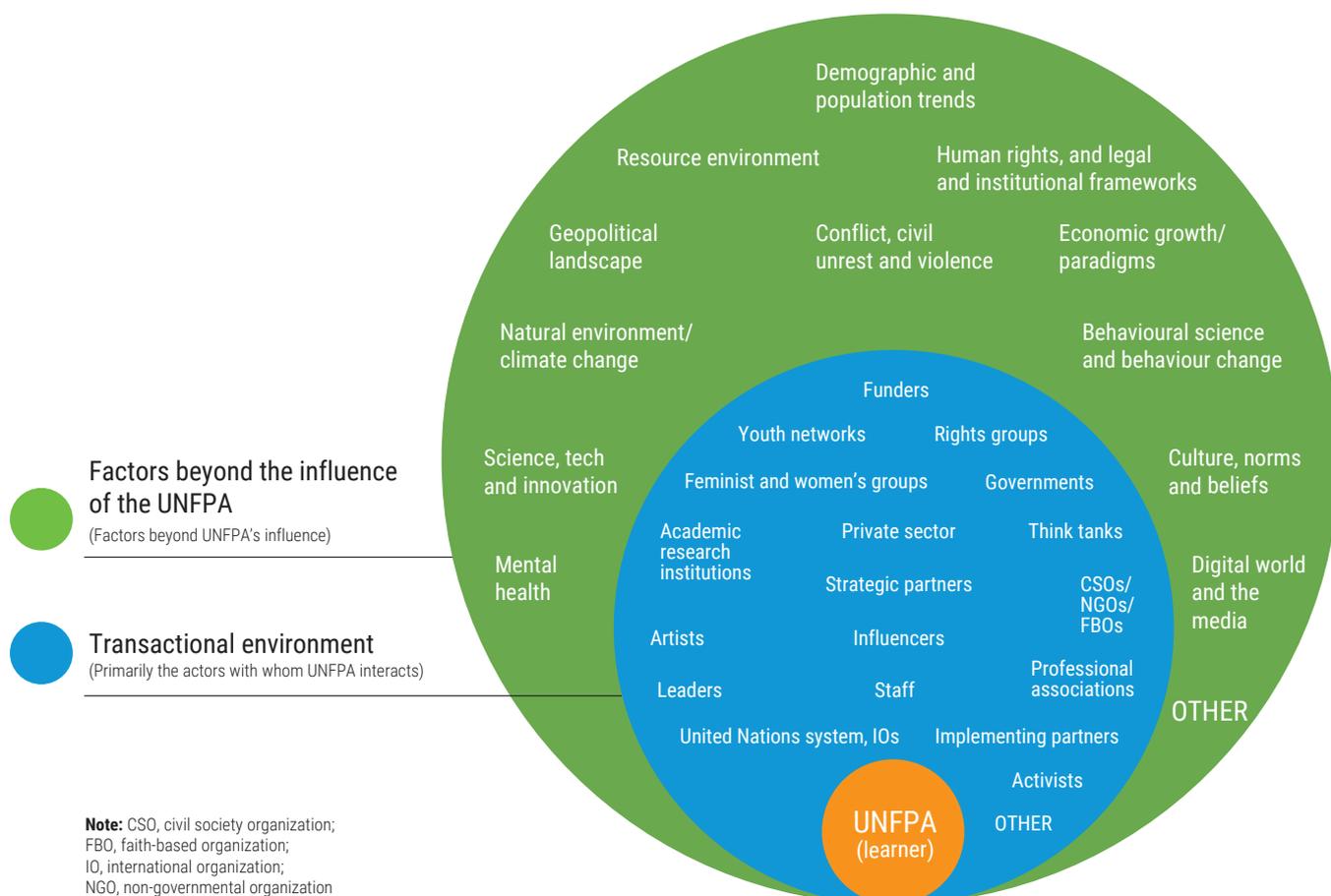
In scenario building, the organization running the exercise adopts the mindset of a “learner”, looking to examine the broader setting in which it operates. This broader setting, referred to as the “contextual environment”, comprises the factors beyond the organization’s influence. It is within this broader setting that the organization’s more immediate environment – the “transactional environment”, comprising the actors that the organization actually interacts with – is situated.

Changes in the factors of the contextual environment can fundamentally affect the configuration of actors in the transactional environment. Therefore, it is the contextual environment that scenario planners spend most of their time trying to gauge and understand. By first identifying the factors that the contextual environment comprises, and then examining how each of them might evolve and interact with other factors over time, scenario developers are able to gain a better understanding of key uncertainties and driving forces likely to shape the future.

The contextual and transactional environments identified by the UNFPA scenario builders are shown in Figure 1.

² For more information on the Oxford scenario planning approach, see Rafael Ramírez and Angela Wilkinson, *Strategic Reframing: The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018). Rafael Ramírez, Director of the Oxford Scenarios Programme at Saïd Business School, is also a co-founding partner in and the engagement leader for the chosen consultancy, NormannPartners.

Figure 1. The contextual and transactional environments of UNFPA



The first task for the core scenario development team, which consisted of 12 staff members, was to understand the contextual and transactional environments of UNFPA. The purpose of this stage was to understand the context of changing trends and dynamics; what factors were driving these changes; who were the actors involved in that; and what were their views. To do this well, it was critical that diverse perspectives and divergent views from across the different fields of expertise relevant to the work of the UNFPA were represented and heard. As part of this phase, UNFPA carried out a desk review of over 250 internal and external sources and conducted 59 in-depth interviews with external experts.

All interviews followed a semi-structured format and observed strict confidentiality and non-attribution principles, to encourage frank dialogue. The interviews were facilitated by UNFPA staff representing different parts of the organization. Among the experts interviewed were academics, civil society activists, policymakers, artists, content creators, influencers and community leaders from across the public and private sectors, including from multilateral organizations, foundations, universities and research institutions, technology companies, civil society organizations, non-governmental and faith-based organizations, and more.

After the interviews had been completed and the desk research conducted, the insights gained were sorted into 11 thematic areas, or factors, that had been identified as comprising the contextual environment of the UNFPA earlier in the process. Afterwards, these insights were used to create 75 “factor cards”, which became the building blocks for the scenario development process.

Finally, an expanded team of 30 UNFPA staff representing different areas of expertise in the organization was formed to reflect on, discuss and debate the interplay of the different elements in the factor cards and help build the scenarios, in a series of five online workshops. Four of these workshops focused on building the scenarios using the sets of factor cards. The last, fifth, workshop delved into the implications of each scenario for UNFPA and its partners and stakeholders. As a final step, insights gathered during the process were presented to the broader group of UNFPA staff, including task teams working on the development of the UNFPA strategic plan for 2022–2025, and were integrated into the plan.



Figure 2: The four future scenarios



Note

Each of these scenarios is a plausible, relevant and challenging description of a future world set in 2050. They are neither projections nor predictions of the future by UNFPA and its scenario builders. None of these scenarios is intended to represent a desirable or undesirable future.

These four scenarios are simply possible future contexts that UNFPA might have to face, and therefore they form a strategic tool that UNFPA and its partners, allies and stakeholders can use to rehearse the future.

All of the scenarios in the set could emerge at the same time in different places. Similarly, each of the scenarios could be more or less extreme.



Four scenarios in 2050

4.1 Four future worlds in 2050

The four scenarios presented here are a result of the nearly year-long scenario building process described above. Each scenario in this set offers a different view of how the future might unfold by 2050.


1

Blooming biotech

A world of widespread experimentation, where new biotechnologies have affected population dynamics and, in many ways, redefined what it means to be human.


2

Connecting poles apart

A world of geopolitical and cultural polarization, with clashing groups and communities – each with different values, norms and belief systems – vying for power.


3

Reining in the digital beast

A world where a few big tech giants, with global technological, economic, political and social power, control consumption and set global rules.


4

Tested to the limits

A world where climate change has affected the lives and livelihoods of countless people and where threats presented by natural disasters have become commonplace.

1

Blooming biotech

A world of widespread experimentation, where new biotechnologies have affected population dynamics and, in many ways, redefined what it means to be human.

Overview of the scenario

In this scenario, the world has seen major breakthroughs in biotechnologies, which have enabled significant gains in healthcare, agriculture and the energy industry and that, over time, have become accessible and benefited most people. In this world, the advancements in genetics and cybernetics, alongside the continued digital transformation, have in fundamental ways redefined how we interact with one another, including norms and practices by which we compete, form relational unions, build families, engage in sex and procreate.

Widespread experimentation in genetic engineering has set off a technological race that could redefine what it means to be human. At a societal level, population mortality rates have decreased, people live longer, healthcare has become mostly preventative and many diseases have been eradicated thanks to biotechnological advances. In this world, the power and standing of individuals and groups in a society is determined by their access to genetic enhancements and ability to alter personal traits. Practices such as voluntary eugenics, sex selection and “designer babies” have become increasingly normalised. It has become a popular personal choice to have fewer children and to invest heavily in them, in countries that allow freedom to decide.

This scenario evolved in stages. Initially, the emerging biotechnologies contributed to the widening of inequalities between and within countries, putting early adopters at a greater advantage and setting the stage for conflicts and backlash. A large coalition of actors from civil society and religious and community leaders were concerned about the ethical, privacy and safety implications of such widespread, and often unregulated, genetic manipulation. Trust in biotechnologies was wavering, as they were increasingly perceived as a tool for political and cultural dominance. However, this soon changed: by 2050, the incentive structures had evolved, competition among emerging players had reached a new equilibrium and collaboration on tackling global issues had taken precedence – with the benefits of advanced biotechnologies now acknowledged by most and shared widely, reaching almost everyone.

Potential implications for sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights stakeholders

In this scenario, biotechnologies offer great potential for realizing sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights for all. However, the normalization of genetic modification raises ethical questions and blurs the boundaries of life itself. It threatens to worsen the conditions of vulnerable populations by exacerbating racism and further stigmatizing “unwanted” traits, while also creating new groups that are left behind – such as those not having the same access, bodily autonomy or freedom to decide.

As this scenario unravels and tensions around unbridled technological diffusion grow, the national and global regulatory frameworks that will exist at the time will end up dictating the new norms around equity of access, affordability, ethics and distribution of scientific gains. In addition, it will be important that new international conventions are put in place to regulate these biotechnologies and avoid their use as weapons of mass destruction or tools for discrimination and human rights abuse.

Collaboration among all actors that work to protect the sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights of individuals is likely to be critical to shape the discourse on ethics, human rights, inclusion and the protection of vulnerable populations as biotechnologies become widespread.

Some of the other potential implications of this scenario that came up during the scenario building workshops and that may present challenges are as follows: (a) there could be abuses of biotechnologies to promote conservative and populist agendas, and

backlash against the use of new breakthroughs for the benefit of women and girls; (b) new ethical norms around sexuality, reproduction and relationships could drive communities apart; (c) biotechnology could get into the hands of terrorists, racists, populists, hackers or other disruptors; (d) new needs could arise to support the losers in this scenario, which could be countries without the economic and technological capacity and human rights protection frameworks in place to ensure access to and equitable sharing of the benefits of the new tech; people who lack the ability to adapt (e.g. elderly or differently abled people); and key populations, racial and ethnic groups, and individuals with hereditary diseases that could face increased discrimination and stigma.

Potential opportunities that could arise from the advancements in biotechnology were also discussed during the workshops. These included opportunities to (a) create new standards and frameworks to protect human rights, promote equitable and ethical use of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights biotechnology, and help prevent its unintended and unforeseen consequences; (b) promote innovative approaches that provide reliable access to rights and choices, for instance new kinds of contraception; (c) leverage the rise of biotechnology to allow more space to expand the rights of all individuals, safeguard gender equality and implement new affordable services; (d) play a strong advocacy and normative role to reduce discrimination against vulnerable groups; (e) build stronger and more agile coalitions to handle conservative backlash against the women’s rights agenda, should biotechnological advances favour populist and/or conservative forces.

2

Connecting poles apart

A world of geopolitical and cultural polarization, with clashing groups and communities – each with different values, norms and belief systems – vying for power.

Overview of the scenario

This is a world where identity politics has prevailed, ideological and identity differences have been heightened, and clashes between groups and factions have become ever more extreme. Globally, a sense of universal values has eroded and has been superseded by rules and norms unique to each group. Polarization across most societies has grown too, with multiple competing centres of power.

This world is characterized by each group's interest in dominating society and clear markers of group membership and belonging. In some communities, authoritarianism is celebrated as a way of ensuring order; in others, the distribution of power is in constant flux as no group has been able to prevail. In the latter contexts, power holders are a mix of non-state actors – celebrities and influencers, extremists and populists, private philanthropic and religious actors – that each bring together followers around ideological, confessional, ethnic, racial, gender identity or social class lines. Digital technology and communications have only further exacerbated this social divergence, with conversations in parallel digital universes happening at the same time, with no engagement or dialogue among groups. In this world, achievement of demographic growth may become the goal of some ideological groups, as a means to obtain dominance and control. With multilateralism facing a crisis and no appetite for cooperation on global issues, this world is ridden with natural disasters and conflicts, with little sense of collective accountability for a shared future.

On the path to 2050, the polarization seen in the 2020s only increased along geopolitical, social, racial, cultural, economic and ideological lines. Inequality increased, and confrontations around values, ideologies and interests intensified. As inequalities grew, the gaps in wealth, income, access to technology, power and participation, food and land became wider and deeper, creating further clashes around perceived fairness as well as a vicious circle of polarization. By 2050, we have reached a fragmented world organized into distinct geopolitical blocs.

Potential implications for sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights stakeholders

In this scenario, universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights is no longer part of a common aspirational agenda – there is no common agenda or platform for debate. Rights and choices have become even more politicized and heavily contested, with both sides becoming entrenched and communication across the divide barely taking place. Sexual dynamics vary dramatically across groups, depending on the values that each group propagates and abides by. Family and reproductive choices are highly constrained by group norms. Human rights are negotiable, weaponized, and used to further demarcate in-group–out-group dividing lines and territories of influence. Children may be seen as increasingly important in propagating the next generation of values, with educational agendas highly polarized. In this world, access to quality healthcare is also uneven.

This multipolar world is likely to be in dire need of new mechanisms and frameworks to effectively ensure that rights and choices are protected across the board. Broadening the coalition of actors working in the sexual and reproductive health space, expanding the role and value for multilateralism as a foundation for protecting the UN values and human rights in particular, and building bridges between divergent ideological and normative paradigms will become important.

Some of the other potential implications of this scenario that came up during the scenario building workshops and that may present challenges are as follows: (a) the universal values such as those adopted in the international human rights treaties may no longer be considered universal; (b) access to rights and choices is likely to be distributed highly unevenly across groups; (c) overall, there may be less space for dissent within groups, which could lead to radical scapegoating and silencing of civil society as “part of the problem” in some contexts; (d) widespread inequalities may be used as fault lines and leveraged by groups to gain control; (e) state functions may be increasingly taken over by private philanthropic and religious actors, with official development assistance channelled through group-affiliated institutions, resulting in fragmented access.

Potential opportunities for action in a polarized world were also discussed during the workshops. These included opportunities to (a) highlight the voices and needs of those who fall through the cracks of state and group support; (b) create and foster impartial platforms for dialogue, treading a fine line as connectors and protectors of rights and choices for all; (c) educate public opinion by providing evidence-based information; (d) partner with youth activists who care about global issues, and also leverage more widespread women’s leadership to promote the rights agenda; (e) develop ways to ensure that development aid reaches places where official development assistance access is fragmented, and (f) advocate for safety nets.

3

Reining in the digital beast

A world where a few tech giants, with global technological, economic, political and social power, control consumption and set global rules.

Overview of the scenario

This is a world in which a handful of tech giants with technological, economic, political and social power set the global rules. Their strong influence on channels of information and big data enables them to anticipate and cater to almost every human need. Some organizations have become obsolete, disrupted by technological progress, while governments and other traditional powerholders are challenged to think outside the box. The effects of digital technology on mental health and mental integrity have become more visible, as a result of digital platforms exploiting the vulnerabilities of human psychology to influence behaviours, norms and consumption patterns. For many, life has become more insecure, as people's movements and identities are exposed, making some populations ever more vulnerable.

In 2050, power lies in the hands of those directly involved in the advancement, regulation and use of technology. Technology itself has evolved, with artificial intelligence and machine learning, automation, quantum computing, blockchains and the gig economy presenting major opportunities for society, not least by making great advancements in preventative healthcare a reality. More labour market shifts have taken place, as new ways of working using digital technology have become the norm rather than the exception. Access to data and technology have made individual lives fully transparent, with new forms of oppression of identity commonplace. Cybersecurity in this world is a major issue. Inequalities and opportunities are determined by the digital divide: the world is split into those who have access to technology and the rest. There are stark differences geographically, with access to digital technologies not evenly distributed even by 2050 and only half of Africa connected to the internet.

This scenario unravelled gradually, with clashes taking place between states and the private sector to determine who would control technology; cyberattacks became commonplace, and loss of privacy and self-censorship were aggravated for a while, at first. Albeit without success, pushback against technological advancements, for example by anti-technology groups, became more pronounced in the years before 2050. However, by 2050 contests for power have ceased, as a new equilibrium and more global agreements have been reached, and trust in technology has become normalized.

Potential implications for sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights stakeholders

In the world of big tech domination, sexual dynamics are individualized, tracked and mediated by technology companies. Digital access is ubiquitous and human rights are likely to be undercut by lack of data safeguards due to extreme platform transparency. Overall, however, there will probably be more winners than losers in this scenario, if defenders of rights and choices are able to ensure that basic human rights are respected – and that new human rights are defined and observed as new waves of technology hit the global markets. An unprecedented wealth of real-time data could also help sexual and reproductive health actors to reach and programme for left-behind populations, if those actors become direct users of this data.

The relationship between actors in the sexual and reproductive rights space and technology companies is likely to be of vital importance in this scenario. Those working to ensure that rights are respected will need to work side by side with big tech to ensure that minority groups that may face more stigma and discrimination due to data transparency are adequately protected, empowered and supported, and to promote individual choice and equitable geographical access to technology worldwide.

Some of the other potential implications of this scenario that came up during the scenario building workshops and that may present challenges are as follows: (a) there may be

geographical exclusion from opportunities and access (including access to healthcare), with populations left behind the digital wall; (b) a monopoly on information and too much control in the hands of big tech could be dangerous and create the possibility that something could go terribly wrong; (c) digital platforms may increasingly exploit human psychology to influence behaviour and keep individuals connected online; (d) the future of population dynamics could be influenced by the personal perspectives of a handful of big tech billionaires; (e) in a world where governments and global convenors have less power, there is a risk of certain development organizations becoming marginalized too; (f) living in a world of radical transparency brings with it new risks.

Potential opportunities to promote rights and choices in the world of big tech were also discussed during the workshops. These included opportunities to (a) ensure regulation and normative frameworks are in place to promote equity and human rights in the new paradigm; (b) raise awareness of new dimensions of inequality, advocate for the rights of left-behind groups to cross the digital divide, and find ways to support equity and choice; (c) be direct users of new real-time data and technologies to improve programming; (d) take a seat at the table alongside big tech to protect rights and choices against discrimination; (e) take advantage of advancements in healthcare to support access to sexual and reproductive health; (f) leverage new means of making connections and reaching people online.

4

Tested to the limits

A world where climate change has affected the lives and livelihoods of countless people and where threats presented by natural disasters have become commonplace.

Overview of the scenario

This is a world in which natural disasters have become commonplace and climate change has affected the daily lives and livelihoods of countless people. Living with uncertainty has become normalized and internal displacement means that food, water, resources and physical security issues are a daily concern for many, while for others the threat of being in this situation looms large.

In this world, tested to the limits, there are more pandemics, conflicts and natural disasters than there are today, and humanitarian needs are greater than ever. Climate change has driven displacement and undermined efforts to address inequality. Crises have become interrelated, with climate change leading to conflicts, the impacts of which have seriously affected food systems worldwide. Many countries have begun to close their borders and protect their resources. As governments look inwards and interest in global affairs wanes, funding for multilateral and global agencies becomes more precarious. New funders – including tech giants, philanthropists and start-ups that promote climate consciousness, as well as private sector organizations and investors that have invested in climate change mitigation and renewable energy – step in, often with conditionalities.

Gradually, by 2050, the subregional and regional dimensions of displacement and climate impacts have led to dramatic shifts in national power, with some countries disappearing and inequalities increasing, particularly around access to resources. The climate crisis has meant that there are too many losers, including small islands, the most vulnerable communities, small businesses, fragile health and social protection systems, vulnerable women, climate refugees and displaced persons. Trust has become increasingly fragile, with large swathes of humanity living in uncertainty and in crisis mode.

Potential implications for sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights stakeholders

In this scenario, humanitarian issues and immediate acute health concerns take precedence over rights-based approaches and sexual and reproductive health needs. There are also increased risks of violence, including sexual violence. The risk that basic rights will not be upheld is constant. Healthcare has become more insecure in a context of shrinking resources, and even basic levels of care are not guaranteed. There are also large inequalities in access to healthcare between those immediately impacted by climate change and those with more security. Death has become more routine and expected, and family planning options are limited.

The abilities of actors in the sexual and reproductive health space to strategize and create effective solutions together, to operate on limited resources and find ways to mobilize them, and to continuously leverage technology breakthroughs to deliver reproductive health services to the last mile in crises could be essential.

Some of the other potential implications of this scenario that came up during the scenario building workshops and that may present challenges are as follows:

(a) limited resources make it difficult to ensure equity and fair access; (b) planning for the longer term in the face of immediate disasters is challenging; (c) state borders may be sealed and outsiders made unwelcome, leading to exclusion issues; (d) the ability of governments to provide services to their citizens is likely to decrease; (e) the provision of basic healthcare will become a challenge, with cold-chain management becoming a critical issue in affected areas.

Potential opportunities to promote rights and choices in this world of commonplace natural disasters were also discussed during the workshops. These included opportunities to (a) strategize today on how to protect those left behind in a world that is tested to the limits; (b) advocate to keep attention on rights and choices; (c) support governments in the creation of social safety nets; (d) promote the use of new technology to deliver products and services to remote areas; (e) retain cross-border cooperation, which will become critical as states may become less outward-facing; (f) plan for the potentiality that the importance of civil society organizations in providing access to services may grow; (g) provide timely evidence on linkages between population dynamics, climate change and conflict issues, and promote collaboration.

4.2 Comparing scenarios

The strategic value of the scenarios lies in looking across the set. It involves exploring the characteristics of the worlds in greater detail, comparing what the consequences of each scenario might be, and considering what other actors and stakeholders might choose to do to promote particular interests or mitigate certain extremes.

For instance, **Blooming biotech** is typified by the belief that human progress can be achieved through science, technology and collaboration but that there are different ways to go about this. Here, trust is firmly in the rational scientific and technological sphere. **Connecting poles apart** is a world where groups coalesce around a set of values and create clear markers of group membership to maintain these. There is limited tolerance of dissenters or outsiders. Trust is limited to people who have shared values or determined by the politics of social status. In **Reining in the digital beast**, the digital sphere is all-important as the new arena of soft-power competition. There is enforced digital dependency and a climate of underlying distrust. In **Tested to the limits**, environmental disasters have led to communities and states turning inwards. There is a revival of ethnic awareness and religion, with many missionaries working to alleviate the human tragedies that play out. In the face of calamities, trust is in short supply, with many questions raised about what and who lies behind these conflict situations.

These four scenarios illustrate the different ways in which the world of sexual and reproductive health could evolve, as illustrated in the previous section. Each world represents a series of trade-offs that will be made, and each has winners and losers and advantages and disadvantages.

In **Blooming biotech**, the interests of bio-innovators are paramount. They try to find new ways to push the limits of science, which often trump ethical and societal concerns, with major consequences for rights and choices. In the world of **Connecting poles apart**, sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights dynamics are determined by the degrees of dominance of the groups united by their values, together with their strength of conviction and ability to influence the debate; the losers are those forced unwillingly to comply. In **Reining in the digital beast**, issues around access, cost and availability are juxtaposed with those of privacy and choice, as this world has the potential to benefit many while also leaving many others behind. In **Tested to the limits**, the focus on life and death as disasters become

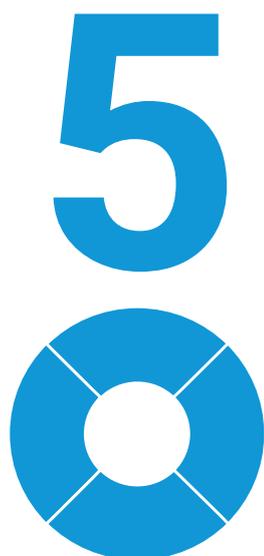
commonplace and resources are overstretched threatens to completely overwhelm issues related to reproductive rights and choices.

None of these worlds is entirely positive or negative – they all have positive and negative aspects of varying degrees of intensity. However, by looking ahead and rehearsing for the future, it is our intention to collectively mitigate the worst aspects and enhance the best aspects of each scenario.

Ultimately, as scenario developers we are left with many questions; this calls for further efforts to understand these possible futures and for strategic conversations with our partners and allies. Table 1 provides a snapshot of some of those questions, which we invite users of these scenarios to consider.

Table 1. Some critical questions to consider for each scenario

CRITICAL QUESTIONS			
Blooming biotech	Connecting poles apart	Reining in the digital beast	Tested to the limits
<p>How will new biotechnologies affect ethical norms and practices around sexuality, reproduction and relationships?</p> <p>What will be the impacts of new biotechnologies on women's rights and gender equality?</p> <p>How can we protect rights and choices in an increasingly volatile world where the pushback against these rights may become more vocal and prominent?</p> <p>Who are the new groups that may be left behind, and what support will they need?</p>	<p>How can we protect and advance universal human rights in a polarized world?</p> <p>What normative role should the United Nations and its partners play and what new frameworks/ governance structures need to be put in place to protect the sexual and reproductive health agenda in a world of extreme normative relativism?</p> <p>What are the new coalitions of actors to be explored to protect rights and choices across the lines of division?</p> <p>How can the "outsiders" within groups, and those who fall through the cracks of state and family support, be protected?</p>	<p>How can populations left behind the digital wall be protected?</p> <p>What are the best ways to support women's empowerment and rights using digital technology and platforms?</p> <p>What does the rights and choices paradigm look like in a world where big tech both has control over information channels and possesses an ability to track, predict and influence human decisions and behaviours online and offline?</p>	<p>How can we protect women, girls and other vulnerable groups in the new paradigm of large-scale climate disasters?</p> <p>What will sexuality, reproduction and relationships look like in a context of high chronic volatility?</p> <p>How do people cope with chronic volatility and what are the repercussions?</p> <p>How can we plan for the longer term in the face of immediate disasters?</p>



Lessons learned from the scenario development process

Scenarios are a flexible, adaptable tool with as many uses as imagination allows. These uses depend on the requirements of the users and the contexts that they are exploring. Like any other tool, if they are not used they are simply a waste of resources. With a small investment of time, as well as the courage to ask awkward questions, it is possible to rehearse the future, thus becoming more adaptable, more alert to new opportunities and more aware of potential unintended consequences.

In developing the scenarios, UNFPA found great value in the following.

- **Gaining a more explicit and more flexible sense of the future** helps in anticipating opportunities, mapping unknowns and back-casting more effective risk mitigation strategies by embedding learnings into strategies.
- **Dialogue.** Talking about differences allows stakeholders with diverse perspectives and interests to build a shared understanding and find common ground. Strategic conversations that acknowledge different worldviews and perspectives create a more accurate picture.
- **Shared language for exploring multiple possible futures.** The power of scenarios lies in the shared language they impart, which allows differences to be explored as an asset instead of a liability. They can be used to create and provide information and insights, as a strategic tool to prepare for the future.
- **Collaboration.** Using scenarios is usually a collaborative process, as the power of scenarios lies in finding common ground, forming shared values, exploring diversity and turning differences into a source of strength.
- **Rehearsing the future.** “What if?” is much cheaper than “if only”. Using scenarios makes it possible to anticipate events and prevent mistakes and their consequences, and thus to build strategies and policies that are more future proof.

- **Who else?** Future success in changing environments will require cooperation and collaboration. This may involve starting a strategic conversation and determining who else to involve (i.e. who else is needed to co-create the future).
- **What happens to...?** As contextual factors change, actors in the transactional environment also have to readjust and reconfigure. Therefore, stakeholders are likely to react differently in the different scenarios. Their priorities, interests and roles are also likely to change.
- **Another scenario?** A useful conversation is whether there might be a missing scenario, a world that is currently not on the radar of policymakers. In turbulent environments, it is essential to continually scan the horizon for early warning signals of an unfolding scenario and to update thinking accordingly.
- **Exploring strategic tensions.** Scenario planning allows us to explore strategic tensions relevant for the future of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and use the benefits of foresight to shape strategy today.

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In conclusion

Foresight is expensive, but hindsight is much more so. UNFPA found that scenario planning provides a safe space to think about the future, and, for us, the purpose of putting this into the public domain is to give other organizations and stakeholders the opportunity to do just this.

For UNFPA, the development of scenarios is the beginning of a multifarious process of becoming future-ready. These scenarios have created a framework with which UNFPA can test the relevance of plausible futures that might unfold over time, an additional strategic resource suitable for planning and thriving in turbulent times. Currently, UNFPA is working to adapt these scenarios for use at multiple levels in the organization. For us, they are also intended to be used as a starting point for many more contextualized discussions, with a particular lens on achieving the three transformative results – including learnings for country programming and examining how global-level implications translate to specific country situations.

Because of resource and time constraints, the priority of this scenario building was to link the scenarios with the immediate needs of UNFPA and the development of the strategic plan for 2022–2025. Its focus was to explore unknowns about the future and expand our perception of ourselves, our relationship with the external environment and our options, and to inform internal strategic conversations.

As learners, we acknowledge that this set of scenarios is simply the first step in an iterative learning and perception-reframing cycle over time. We recognize that there are gaps in the scenarios that need to be addressed. For example, the scenario planning workshops were structured to look at trends and challenges in various disciplines from a fresh and holistic point of view, and some group exercises were built around the four scenarios. As a result, the scenarios do not focus on unpacking the future from an angle that we are more familiar with, such as gender or youth. However, this does not mean that the things that were not explicitly presented in the four scenarios can be ignored. On the contrary, users of these scenarios, inside and outside UNFPA, are invited to fill in the gaps and engage in conversation with us.

As next steps, UNFPA is institutionalizing scenario thinking and is building capacities to advance foresight across the organization. As one of the first United Nations agencies to utilize scenario thinking, UNFPA is looking forward to promoting the benefits of this approach for inter-agency learning in the United Nations system, and to learning jointly with others.



