Report

Who's Cooking Our Futures? Reframing Development Policy and Programming Through Imagination

Virkein Dhar[1], Tiara Aurora[1], Boukje Kistemaker[2], Sophia Robele[2], Benjamin Ong[3]
Supported by: Aarathi Krishnan[2]

[1]*Poppy Seed Lab, India*

[2]*Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Development Programme*

[3]*Accelerator Lab Malaysia, United Nations Development Programme*

Abstract

In the pursuit of more just, equitable and inclusive development pathways and futures, we must re-examine the institutional frameworks and decision-making structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge or expertise over others. This includes drawing from the nuances of local context to inform the ways we "do" development. This report presents learnings from the United Nations Development Programme's Inclusive Imaginaries pilot, which aims to challenge traditional development orthodoxy in policymaking and programme design. We highlight the need for integration between creative and analytical processes, expansion of the roles we ascribe to diverse stakeholders, and rooting development futures in polycultures of knowledge that draw on history, culture and lived experience.

Keywords

Introduction

> "An imagination that is built on the perspectives of witnessing rather than experiencing, finds itself often narrow in its scope of possibility and much can be lost in interpretation." – UNDP Inclusive Imaginaries Toolkit (forthcoming)

Today, our realities include conflicts caused by climate change, pandemic-escalated debt crises, technological inequalities, rise in digital risks, and political unrest. With increasingly uncertain futures, there is a need to proactively identify emerging risks, opportunities and changing tides to ensure that development policies address not just our needs today, but also our aspirations for the future.

The sources of knowledge we generally use to inform multilateral development policy, solutions and portfolios of action however often emerge from a small set of stakeholders that have historically been in positions of power. To move from development characterized by incremental changes that fix what is broken in existing systems, to development that serves to create entirely new systems for equity and justice, there is need to test and learn from more pluralistic ways to decide, design, and deliver. Added to by an examination of institutional frameworks and decision-making structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge and expertise over others, the integration of civic imagination in planning programs and agendas can catalyze and drive just, equitable and inclusive development as well as inform meaningful systems innovation.

This article discusses the methodology, findings and learnings from the *Inclusive Imaginaries* pilot, run by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific (RBAP) from October 2021 to December 2021.

A Need for Imagination

Much of multilateral development operates according to knowledge and governance systems shaped by a limited set of worldviews and value systems, often Western in origin, that we treat as givens. No process is neutral. Be it the rationale for prioritizing certain types of development outcomes over others, to the forms of expertise and evidence we ascribe value to in developing theories of change, to our definitions of logic and rationality itself. Failure to recognize the subjectivity of existing structures and processes excludes the possibility for more culturally and contextually relevant, locally led and inclusive development.

Current mainstream processes for knowledge creation and sensemaking to formulate development agendas privilege forms of evidence that are quantitative, and which are legitimized by fitting into the logics and language of existing analytical frameworks within institutions. Reimagining development outcomes requires reflection and intentionality to generate a deeper understanding of power structures and information sources currently defining operating development architectures, methodologies and (socio-technical) tools.

The canon of modern development often measures progress in the currencies of industrial technological advancement, economic wealth or technical climate change targets. We have postulated insights and emerging methodologies to help us cope with and overcome the problems of the Great Acceleration, from Sustainable Development and Doughnut Economics, to degrowth and Theory U which draw on perspectives from non-Western traditions yet are still predominantly situated in Western-informed frameworks or ways of organizing knowledge. For example, indigenous peoples know the forest best, yet policymaking and the work of multilateral organizations still take their cue from formal knowledge sources and Western thought first.

Today, however, a growing body of research and practice (ALNAP, n.d.; Berkman-Klein Center for Internet and Society, 2019; Forum for the Future, 2022) points to the value of imaginaries as well as the need to localize futures, to reckon with history and draw from the nuances of lived experience, to influence how policy is designed, and how it shapes local developmental trajectories. Gidley (2011) discusses evolutionary pedagogical approaches that advance "postformal-integral-planetary consciousness", including the use of imaginaries in futures and foresight education to enact "conversations among the rich pluralism of evolutionary pedagogies [in support of] an adequate picture of the rich tapestry of evolutionary change that is already happening before our very eyes" (p. 50). This includes creating processes that help to surface and elevate the forms of expertise found in place-based or "situated knowledges and experiences [which] can be considered necessary foundations upon which latent forms of understanding (i.e., implicit values, meaning, biases and assumptions) are built" (Törnrotha et al., 2022).

In the practice of multilateral development cooperation organizations, the pursuit of scalable global goals risks excluding or sidelining localized nuances: what do rising temperatures mean for development or economic growth in Nepal versus Samoa? How do implications of climate change differ for Malaysia from China, and how can insights from local and indigenous knowledge, history, and social-ecological nuances provide necessary insight for futures-informed development planning and programming?

UNDP and Inclusive Imaginaries

Recognizing a need for the integration of social imagination in UNDP planning and programming efforts, the UNDP RBAP Strategic Foresight team set out to identify challenges and initial steps for the integration of imaginaries practices through an Inclusive Imaginaries pilot. This initiative aligns with a broader desire within UNDP as a multilateral development organization to institutionalize anticipatory practices—both in internal ways of working, and in what is offered to external partners and stakeholders.

To affect sustainable change, the team aims to be intentional about seeking and respecting local knowledge, through the development of tools, frameworks, and processes with local communities. Moreover, the integration of local (often tacit and informal) knowledge in formal policymaking requires both the facilitation of participation of stakeholders in policy discussions and (more) accessible integration of embodied (citizen) perspectives to ground existing policy jargon and norms and align those with the contexts of those who will be most affected.

The premise taken by postmodern thinkers that 'truth and knowledge is plural, contextual and historically produced' argues against a mono-cultural model wherein the power of inherited knowledge and social practices remains at the margins. This understanding informed the Inclusive Imaginaries approach in using narratives to

understand the lived experiences of people, and to facilitate imaginations that can support the building of more contextually relevant futures in Asia and the Pacific. It is particularly apt that the pilot originated in the Asia-Pacific, as countries in this region are among the most socially, culturally, and ecologically diverse in the world.

Accordingly, the pilot examined and challenged traditional development orthodoxy, including the epistemologies we use to inform policymaking and programme design. The pilot infused imagination as a key process in identifying points of convergence and divergence between academic futures analyses and more participatory, locally contextualized imaginations, and sought to cultivate equitable, decolonial and culturally driven futures. Further, it enabled diverse actors to explore and articulate visions of desired futures, while reflecting on previously held assumptions and biases. As articulated by futures literature on the power of speculation, this vision-building process offered as much insight into the forces of the present as it did into the possibilities of the future, offering a means to create "knowledge about [...] currently shared assumptions, trac[e] current discourses and uncove[r] the social imaginaries of the present" (Fischer & Mehnert, 2021). It enabled the identification of institutional entry points for the localization of development narratives as well as for critical reflexivity on existing norms and values. Lastly, this pilot project surfaced gaps and barriers within current decision-making models and processes guiding them by challenging institutional understandings of the sourcing, prioritization and validation of evidence.

Our approach

Inclusive Imaginaries sought to infuse imagination as a key process to support the gathering of community perspectives rooted in lived experience and local culture, towards developing alternative and more contextual visions for policy and programme development. In the project, the team additionally further asserted the need for the integration of co-creative and analytical processes, expanding the typical roles we ascribe to stakeholders, pointing to a future of development that is rooted in polycultures of knowledge.

To adapt the concept of imagination for this pilot, Inclusive Imaginaries utilized an approach that combined ethnographic research with design processes like storytelling and role playing. However, while our attempts in addressing 'needs' bid themselves as a pathway to reduce harm within communities, reducing damage is not the same as creating opportunities for mutual flourishing. The hypothesis envisioned to explore through the pilot was to identify what flourishing might look like in our futures if imagined through democratization and participation, and if these imaginaries were rooted in local culture, and lived experiences.

Tools and workshops

The pilot served a dual purpose: first, to co-develop an Inclusive Imaginaries toolkit with 'Imagination Facilitators' from Accelerator Labs of participating country offices (COs) to allow for adaptability in a variety of contexts and, second, to test and adapt the tools created through facilitated workshops with partner communities in each of the Facilitators' country of origin, in order to produce insights and visions of the future.

Virtual brainstorm sessions were held with the participating COs—Lao PDR, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, the Pacific Multi-Country Office (MCO) in Fiji, and Samoa—to co-design the Inclusive Imaginaries approach and workshop tools. The discussions and iterations presented a valuable opportunity for the team to document a range of possible use cases, learn from the process and embrace the diversity that is reflective of the region and its people. Each of the COs thus chose to integrate the Inclusive Imaginaries with either scheduled programmes or align with current themes in focus.
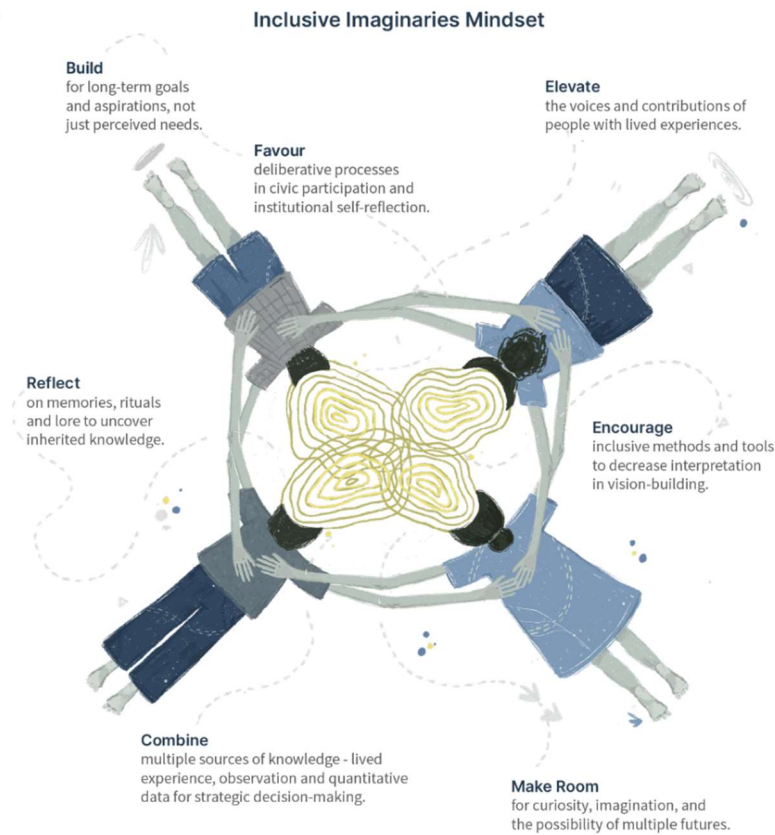
Fig 1. In developing the Inclusive Imaginaries, the team chose to be led by a mindset of thinking and doing, rather than a singular method of design. (Source: Inclusive Imaginaries toolkit)

Five out of the six COs (Lao PDR, Malaysia, Nepal, Pacific/Fiji, and the Philippines) went on to set up workshops. Criteria for selection of workshop participants included partner communities that COs had either consulted with previously or those that they wanted to connect with more deeply, and that had an interest in future trajectories and the viewpoints of diverse stakeholders. As a result, diverse visions of futures were created such as Fiji's indigenous farming futures, Philippines' youth futures, Lao PDR's future of volunteerism, Nepal's future of waste, and Malaysia's post-COVID futures spanning environment, society, and economy (Table 1).

Table 1. Snapshot of Inclusive Imaginaries pilot workshops.

Country	Thematic Focus	Profile Participants	Format
Lao PDR	Volunteerism for our Shared Futures Digital Futures Sustainability for future generations Indigenous knowledge for resilient futures A rightful future to combat injustice, corruption and strive for equal rights	21 youth volunteers and young changemakers (coinciding with International Volunteer Day) 18 to 30 years old from different part of Laos (Vientiane Capital, Sayaboury Province, Luang Prabang province)	Online
Malaysia	Domestic violence Small businesses Future of parenting	Civil society members	Online
Nepal	Workshop 1: Zero-Waste Workshop 2 emerging themes: Promotion of Electric Vehicles Quality Public School Education Inclusive Governance	Entrepreneurs working in Waste Management (Workshop 1) – 1 female, 5 male Volunteers and Students (Workshop 2) – 12 female, 5 male	Workshop 1 - Online Workshop 2 - In-person
Pacific/Fiji	Farming Futures in the Communities of Votua, Muani and Natamua. Votua: Sugarcane Farming and Aquaculture Natamua, Muani: Kadavu Kava Farming Cooperatives	Farmers between 15-74 years – 19 youth. 6 female, 24 male, 19 elderly	In-person
Philippines	Stopping the climate emergency Healthy Communities Digital Governance	Volunteers from the UNDP Youth Co:Lab – Movers Programme and interns from the CO – 5 female, 4 male, 2 non-binary	Hybrid (online/ offline)

The pilot workshops used tools of speculative design and visualization through vocal prompts and guidance, role play for sharing and storytelling, along with collective brainstorming to explore specific thematic interests of each CO. Participants were led through facilitated discussions and creative writing exercises, at the end of which groups of participants produced either a magazine cover story that depicted visions of the futures they envision(ed), or a roadmap of their imagined future ten years hence, depending on the facilitator in charge.

A variety of tools and workshop formats were further iterated upon and included in the Inclusive Imaginaries toolkit. A key takeaway from the process of co-creation was to put a range of tool types in place to support facilitators with alterative objectives, timelines, and opportunities. Encouraging the application of a combination of relevant tool types from within or outside the Imaginaries toolkit, according to needs, resources, and time available, supports a tailored approach aligning intention and outcomes.

A summary of the tools shared is provided below:

- Context-Setting – Facilitators set the context of the workshop by guiding participants to reflect on their identity, beliefs, challenges and hopes, and how these may manifest in their futures.
- Guided Travel & Sharing Travel Stories – A facilitator-guided visualization for participants to create a vivid image of a future embedded within their community context, followed by a role-play activity between pairs of participants sharing their visions and imaginations with each other.
- Unique Success Parameter (USP) – Participants reflect on the sources of knowledge, inspirations and influences that lead them to imagine success in the future.
- Looking Glass – Specific questions and thematic focus areas as lenses through which participants probe and discuss the impact of their collective visions, while exploring differing perspectives and the tensions, risks, complexities resulting from those.
- Magazine Story – Create a visual artifact of a collective future vision highlighting points of cooperation, dissonance, and diversity between personal and shared visions.
- Path to Success – Analyse and document a roadmap from the moment of success in an imagined future back

to the current moment in support of the deconstructing of visions into actional and anticipated outcomes, opportunities, threats, and roadblocks, interrogate alternative solutions and develop participant capacities to identify second order effects of their actions.

•   Share and Reflect – Collective sensemaking of the workshops' observations, interpretations, and experiences, along with a synthesis and articulation of takeaways.

Findings from the pilot

With the introduction to futures through imagination, participants recognized the immense value of deconstructing their past and present for influences and actions they wish to leave behind and identifying aspirations for all that they want to take along into their desired futures.

Despite the use of different scenarios, four areas of interest emerged as priority development pathways from the participating COs, namely 1) discourse, access and wellbeing within digital transformation; 2) equal access to quality education, well-being and healthcare; 3) inclusive governance and authentic engagement between those in power and those closest to the problem, and; 4) traditional knowledge, community and individual action to address the climate crises. These challenges demonstrate substantial intersections with current challenges related to digitisation, climate change, the future of work and the rights of vulnerable populations in the region. While the broad areas of focus emerged across COs, the challenges were rooted in imaginations that were influenced by cultural and country specific scenarios. (Figure 2).

Fig 2. A collective vision from participants of Inclusive Imaginaries workshops towards what flourishing in the future looks like for in Asia and the Pacific. (Source: Participants of the II pilot workshops)

Imaginations thus yearn for a future that is rooted in localized solutions to the diverse needs of citizens and communities, while continuing to embrace progressive thinking models and technologies. As such, participating early-stage entrepreneurs envisioned their futures considerate of the multi-faceted impacts of digital transformation. The development of advanced artificial intelligence (AI) may dramatically alter the way we live and work, but students want the relationship between AI and humanity to be harmonious; they imagined a technologically driven

future where vulnerable populations are not left behind.

To flourish in the future for workshop participants meant the inter-connectedness between well-being, the environment and long-term economic growth was understood. They underscored the need for greater access and equity in education, enriching learning opportunities, healthcare, and well-being for all. The aspiration to be debt free and safeguarded against emergent climate risks was highlighted. Further, participants asserted their right to protect natural resources and the environment, particularly that impacts their financial stability.

They envision a future that is governed by values that are more egalitarian and tolerant, wherein the processes of democratic discourse and deliberation are protected. The relationship between culture and values is a guiding force for development. They explore ideas that will shape the culture of the societies they live in and reflect on the traditions through a critical lens, such as to highlight inherited beliefs and perceptions that perpetuate patriarchal mindsets or those that normalize violence.

Moreover, young citizens affirm the interdependency of challenges and collaborative efforts required between multiple government agencies and across different levels of government. To cultivate open mindedness, there is a need to resist insular thinking and expand on community-driven solutions: "Policies should be driven by the local context, so if we include local citizens and local governments and make them see the future for their local contexts— then bring that resource to the government—then I think it would be helpful in understanding how policy frameworks can be revised, reformulated, or new ones could be made," the Head of Exploration of the Nepal CO stated.

The Inclusive Imaginaries workshops surfaced a need to interrogate social and cultural histories in order to find the origins of certain attitudes and behaviours that have proven to be roadblocks in required change, be it the beliefs that lead to normalisation of violence, corruption at multiple levels of government, or perceptions around limited career paths for students. The Head of Solutions Mapping of the Pacific MCO in Fiji affirmed that "[the workshop] broadened their [participants'] visions, they could see things better. It makes the community proactive… to better understand how to deal with challenges and bottlenecks to their development."

Learnings from the pilot workshops drew out the need for imaginaries work to be more frequent from both facilitators and participants. They felt that to become more comfortable with the process of reflection, reasoning and to imagine the future to be more malleable requires periodical engagements that help deepen imaginations. The Head of Experimentation of the Lao PDR CO, who facilitated one of the Imagination Workshops, further elaborated: "This framework can be used in different contexts. It is interesting that this can be adapted to a lot of challenges as well."

The focus on flourishing may find diverse imaginations in the voices and visions of citizens in Asia and the Pacific; though inclusivity, collaboration and tolerance emerge as key intersecting values. The understanding that change is and will remain to be the constant in the world they occupy is well understood. What needs recognition is that innovation is required not just on outcomes but also the processes that guides the path towards the choices we make, for imaginations to be rooted in existing realities, and that utilizes both fact and fiction to work towards desired goals.

From Systems 'Thinking' to Systems 'Doing': Designing for Conditions and Connections

While development and humanitarian actors are increasingly embracing complexity and futures thinking in a shift towards anticipatory governance, their go-to methods and priorities often do not begin with imagination. Although appreciative of the wisdom and insight of lived experience, development actors often struggle to leverage such forms of thinking and knowing consistently within design, planning, monitoring, and evaluation phases.

Inclusive foresight requires a different orientation to knowledge altogether. Its value and forms of rigour don't come from its objectivity or ability to predict outcomes, but rather, its ability to instigate critical reflection that expands the purview of what might be possible and to interrogate and test current planning assumptions. Moreover, its legitimacy comes from the extent to which the data captures complexity and connects a multitude of voices, experiences, and perspectives. In this, generating shared intelligence to understand systems is not simply a process of 'objective' data collection and synthesis, but equally, a process of rethinking the procedural frameworks, relationships and power structures that dictate whose intelligence, in what forms, and at what stages of development

count as rigorous evidence.

Therefore, some early thoughts of where Inclusive Imaginaries has most potential to grow in the bureaucracy of organizations include: (i) a new generation of policy papers and thought leadership that admit a more 'generous orthodoxy' of evidence; (ii) project and programme design that is rooted in co-creation with stakeholder and communities, instead of developed predominantly through rapid consultation; and (iii) creative outputs that communicate raw, lived experience, to complement the fairly established (and polished) canon of 'official' outputs included reports, technical papers, and the like. The landscape of thought leadership is changing and thought leadership can expand to include mixed-media and multimedia outputs in the voices of the communities we serve and work with.

That said, barriers remain in the effort to transform institutions to better enable systemic change. These include the multilateral world's often dichotomous treatment of structure, rigour and tangibility with development processes and outcomes that pertain more to the emergent, relational, creative, and intangible dimensions of change. Increasingly, concepts of complexity and systems thinking have made their way into mainstream development lexicon. This has often translated to more experimentation with alternatives ways of organizing programmes, such as the use of portfolio approaches over silo-ed project logics, or testing more structured and intentional processes for collective intelligence and sensemaking in order to reframe understandings of a system and means of intervening. These process shifts that support more adaptive, learning-oriented, experimental, and context-responsive interventions are important building blocks, but they only go so far without equal investment in the supportive architectures and holding spaces for practicing new patterns of relationship and collective meaning-making.

In their description of blind spots that hinder deep change, Senge et al. (2015) note that "most change efforts, which are often based on rigid assumptions and agendas […] fail to see that transforming systems is ultimately about transforming relationships among people who shape those systems." This notion is particularly apt in the context of development aspirations that invoke 'inclusivity,' 'participation,' 'co-creation,' or 'collaboration' as core principles for informing and executing action. In the words of adrienne maree brown (2017), "Collaboration can only be built on relationships and shared vision." Building collective capacities to explore and articulate alternative futures that are reflective of the diversity of people and experiences development is intended to serve is not merely a technical exercise but a social one: perceptions of possibility, and the ability for divergent views to intermix, are shaped by trust between stakeholders, structural inequities, and real and perceived balances of power, among other dynamics.

Creating the visions for and conditions to realize co-created development futures requires space, time, and intentionality. It is about the ways we hold space for building muscles in thinking together, engaging with the structural and relational barriers to this, and developing "imagination infrastructure" (Robinson, 2021). It is recognizing the distinction between individual imagination and shared imagination or intelligence, and the necessity to design structures, practices, and patterns of relationship by which the creativity, imagination, and desires of diverse communities might be systematically cultivated and harnessed in conjunction with academic or quantitative ways of understanding and shaping development.

References

Baguios, A. (2021). Localisation Re-Imagined: Localising the sector vs. Supporting local solutions, ALNAP (15 October 2021).

Berkman-Klein Center for Internet & Society (2019). Emerging Digital Issues in the Global South, Working Group..

Brown, A. (2017). Emergent strategy. AK Press.

Fischer, N. and Mehnert, W. (2021). Building Possible Worlds: A Speculation Based Framework to Reflect on Images of the Future, Journal of Futures Studies, 25(3), 25-38. https://doi.org/10.6531/JFS.202003_24(3).0002.

Forum for the Future (2021). Alisha Bhagat unpacks what history can teach us about the future, in conversation with Dr. Nandini Pandey and Nour Batyne.

Gidley, J.M. (2011). Evolution of education: From weak signals to rich imaginaries of educational futures. Futures (44), 46-54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2011.08.006 .

Robinson, C. (2021). Imagination Infrastructure – what do we mean? Emerging Futures Fund.

Senge, P., Hamilton, H., Kania, J. (2015). The Dawn of System Leadership, Stanford Social Innovation Review (Winter 2015), https://doi.org/10.48558/yte7-xt62

UNDP (forthcoming). Inclusive Imaginaries Toolkit.