



Article

Intergenerational Fairness: What Should Our Futures Methods and Practices Look Like?

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Abstract

Futures methods and practices, coupled with youth engagement in decision-making and the promotion of future generations, converge to create a pivotal moment. This article explores this critical juncture, at the core of intergenerational fairness. It explores how futures methods and practices can serve as guides for youth in their quest to become “good ancestors.” What kind of futures methods and practices should forward-looking youth adopt to showcase their successful navigation through an era marked by unprecedented uncertainty, fostering conditions for a more sustainable and equitable world? Despite barriers in imagination, present urgencies, and limited access to decision-making, the resilience of youthful optimism, coupled with human interactions and community-building, represents crucial forces for envisioning and mobilizing transformation. By charting the seed pathways for transformation and embracing a critical realism approach, guided by responsible processes, the journey to empower young individuals and youth collectives in becoming good ancestors takes a significant step forward.

Keywords

Intergenerational fairness; Youth; Foresight Methodologies; Practices; Action-oriented

Introduction

“*Are we being good ancestors*”? This question asked by Jonas Salk (1992), the inventor of the vaccine against polio, resonates profoundly in the intricate and evolving challenges that define our contemporary era. It emphasizes the responsibility we bear to ensure a sustainable and equitable world for generations to come, as agreed at the multilateral level since the Brundtland report (1987) and frequently mentioned later in international legal documents (Fülöp, 2021).

In today’s rapidly changing world, from grassroots politics to global power structures, there is a growing consensus across different generations and spaces of debate, policy-making, and power. We live in an era of complex, varied and overlapping sets of challenges, where the references to concepts like “polycrisis” (ING, 2023; UNICEF, 2023; WEF, 2023) or “interregnum” (Borrell, 2022; Robinson, as cited in Peper, 2020) are rapidly gaining popularity and advancing in different spheres, both public and private. Such advancing has resolved into the mainstreaming of organizations craving for (better) learning to adapt to change and a renewed need for adopting futures methods and practices. If the pandemic and the Russian aggression against Ukraine accelerated such resolution, the symptoms of the death of the old world, taking up Gramsci’s description of the 1930s infamous fascist sequence as cited in Žižek (2010), have been framing for several decades now. The new world, in the meantime, still struggles to be born.

Growing up in this era defined by critical global challenges, younger generations face declining job opportunities and purchasing power. Their material conditions are likely to worsen when compared to previous generations, leading to evolving worldviews and a surge in youth activism, driven by frustration and idealism. Youth movements

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advocate for various causes, particularly the right to inherit sustainable ecosystems. These causes are amplified by technology, which offers youth activists greater access to multiple channels of influence. Policymakers and organizations recognize the need for youth participation in decision-making, especially in fields where their voices resonate most. Similarly, to futures methods and practices adoption, such a focus on youth engagement has become a component of the relatively new priorities within institutional settings of decision-making.

For instance, the United Nations (UN) emphasizes youth engagement and promotes Strategic Foresight as a methodology to nurture proactive mindsets and explore future scenarios (UN, 2023a, 2023b). Its commitment to safeguarding the interests of future generations (UN, 2023c) positions the UN as an outlier in the enterprise of building narratives and action around the safeguarding of the future, beyond the research and advisory functions, primarily located in Europe and North America (Dirth & Kormann da Silva, 2023). As youth activism and futures methods and practices continue to flourish, with the UN Declaration on Future Generations on the horizon, intergenerational fairness (SOIF et al., 2021) takes a renewed center stage. However, a compartmentalization still persists. Various groups, from the elderly to indigenous communities and youth, advocate for the rights of future generations to inherit sustainable ecosystems (Future of Climate Cooperation, 2023) without necessarily adopting futures methods and practices. And while distinguishing future generations from youth is vital, it is undeniable that the former will inherit the world from the latter, making youth the essential bridge and responsible ancestors.

Research Question and Methodology

Futures methods and practices, youth engagement in decision-making, and the promotion of future generations are together creating a window of opportunity. This essay delves into the heart of this critical juncture, at the core of intergenerational fairness. How can futures methods and practices guide youth in the pursuit of becoming “good ancestors?” What kind of futures methods and practices should forward-looking youth adopt to demonstrate to future generations how they successfully navigated an era of unprecedented uncertainty and helped to create conditions for a more sustainable and equitable world?

Such questions are the result of collective reflections launched in February 2023, as part of a project “Foresight for Intergenerational Decision-making” led by the authors of this article. As of September 2023, sixty members have participated in different instances of this project, mostly from the Majority World. The project was selected to be pitched during the second Big Brainstorm, an initiative of the UN Foundation supported by the Unlock the Future Coalition, a high-ambition coalition with and for all young people and future generations.

Under the “Future generations” action group of the Big Brainstorm, the project aims at designing a practice-oriented foresight toolkit for younger generations to build meaningful interactions with various stakeholders. To do so, from April to June 2023, we conducted 20 virtual interviews with individuals and launched a survey to gather youth perspectives on their relation to decision-making. The Journal of Future Studies Call for Paper to young and emerging futurists (under 35) arose as an opportunity to read these insights in the light of the corpus of literature.

The interviews and survey results help us examine our initial hypothesis about the necessity of adapting futures methods and practices to address the disconnect young people feel with the future. This disconnect stems from various challenges they face and a sense of limited opportunities to shape their own futures, including the barriers for youth engagement in decision-making processes. The number of participants to our interviews and survey can not constitute a representative sample, and the results may be biased by the sample we targeted. However, we can depict tendencies among our panel.

We first interviewed 20 young people individually, selected from the networks of the members supporting the initiative, based on criteria of availability, geographic representation (two from Argentina, Burundi, Canada, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, two from Kenya, two from Mexico, Nigeria-Benin, Palestine, Peru, Turkey, two from Uganda, United States) and gender balance (10 male, 10 female). Ages of the interviewees range from 15 to 32 years old, with a mean age of 24.8 years, a median age of 25 years, and a mode age of 21 years (three participants). The interview guide was divided into two main parts aiming at (i) understanding our interviewee’s perception and feeling about their future (individual and collective) and (ii) their perception of their capacity to shape their individual and collective futures.

This first round of interviews informed the conception of a second testing. We designed a survey, structured in

three parts: (i) understand how the respondents perceive their capacity to imagine and shape their futures (individual, collective), (ii) grasp the respondent's ways to engage with decision-making (or not), (iii) make respondents assess how they would like to interact with decision-makers (or not). A group of 72 young individuals, different from the interviewees, responded to the survey.

Most of them (60) consider they participate at least in one political or activist activity at the local, national, or regional/international level, including community-based initiatives, youth councils, movements, networks, and political activities. Twelve of them consider they do not engage in any kind of these instances. All respondents fall within the age range of 15 to 35 years old. The predominant age groups are between 25 and 29 years (26 respondents) and between 19 and 24 years (18 respondents). Most of them live in the Majority World (West Africa (20), Eastern Africa (13), Asia-Pacific (10), Latin America and the Caribbean (6), Central Asia (1), and Southern Africa (1), followed by the European Union (16) and US, Canada (4). To understand the biases linked to their social conditions, we also asked questions around their perceived living conditions. Among the respondents, there are two main social categories represented: (i) people in vulnerable conditions (22) and (ii) middle class (39). There are three main occupational situations: unemployed or in precarious contracts (20), employed in a long term-contract (20), and students (32).

The analysis encompasses findings derived from both the interviews and the survey. Specifically, responses from the interviewees were utilized to further elucidate and voice trends identified and validated through the survey.

Results and Discussion

The status-quo: from realistic optimism to barriers

In line with the answers from interviewees, the majority of young individuals in the survey approach the future with a tempered optimism. Forty-six of them believe that the world they will inherit will be "better". This optimism is grounded in a multifaceted outlook that encompasses technological advancements, improved environmental conditions, enhanced living standards, expanded employment opportunities, and a more active role in decision-making.

In describing their ideal future, many express optimism for positive social change, inclusive governance, and technological advancements. They emphasize global goals like peace, unity, and equality, focusing on eliminating social and economic disparities. Their vision includes meeting everyone's basic needs, youth involvement in decision-making, and environmental sustainability. A common theme is the need for collaborative global efforts to achieve a more harmonious and just society free from discrimination and violence, with a commitment to animal welfare and improved inter-species relations. They also desire improved living conditions, including work-life balance, affordable housing, accessible healthcare, and public transportation.

These powerful "images of the future" (Polak, 1973) showcase the capacity of youth to produce positive social expectations that are radically different and preferable, and inspire progressive movement in societies. This optimism is not faded by their realistic understanding of current challenges, or their "today-centered realism" (Ibid). In candid interviews, they speak of confronting short-termism of decision-making, governance deficiencies, grappling with the overpowering influence of economic and geopolitical forces, combating the scourge of misinformation, and the great pressure on funding for public services and privatization of some services, like healthcare.

Imagining better futures: warning signals

Yet, within this optimism, some individuals find themselves grappling with the challenge of envisioning what could be ahead. The respondents (25) of the survey for whom it is difficult to imagine better futures put forward a combination of several reasons. However, most answers feature the option "It is difficult to imagine better futures when we need to solve urgent issues in the present and face different kinds of barriers." When asked about the images of her preferred future during the interview, a 19-year-old Argentinean, active member of Jóvenes por el Clima (Youth for Climate) and in charge of its relations with the social movements rooted in informal

neighborhoods, points out to the fact that she “usually focuses a lot on the present” and that, when it comes to climate change, “we need to act because the monster is approaching.”

If the monster is approaching, it is not that easy to imagine better futures and frame action around them, even less within systems locked in unequal structures. The trade-off between present urgencies and imagining better futures is even more clear in difficult contexts. The reflections of a 21-year-old Jordanian interviewed on the images of his preferred future are unquestionable:

“Right now, all I can see is foggy. Imagining a better world? My country is a cemetery for youth. Everyone is trying to escape from this mess.”

Such a description contrasts to the one given by the 30-year-old Palestinian interviewed, who has not participated in an instance of dialogue with decision-makers nor engaged in activism neither, when asked about the images of her preferred future: “The first thing that came to my mind is what Palestine will look like without occupation and how my life will be when I am free. I imagine a liberated, strong, beautiful country.”

The capacity (or not) of imagining better futures does not depend exclusively on differentiated basic conditions or access to politico-activist spaces. As these three diverse perspectives express, present urges and barriers impeding can be found in different cases. As Polak (1973) puts forward, it is not easy to build images of the future, especially in a constrained ecosystem and cultural settings that value utilitarian and daily life experiences over creative leadership. However, it remains a shared capacity among humans that can be activated. The young people we have interviewed provide clear insights on how to activate it.

Present and future interests: a potential dilemma?

When analyzing the results from the survey question “Would you accept doing something today if you knew it might be damaging for future generations?”, a majority of respondents (37) recognize that “we need to think first about the potential impacts of today’s decisions and if they are negative, then rethink them” or at least (23) “openly discuss the tensions between both present and future interests of today’s decisions.” However, some (11) still consider that “sometimes we need to do some things that might not necessarily be the best for future generations but might resolve an urgent matter or provide an answer to a difficult issue (e.g., poverty).” A diverse range of youth (e.g., in terms of politico-activist engagement) tend to agree with the first two options, as evidenced in the interviews. Some defend the two options at the same time, hinting at a potential conflict unsolved between the need of weighting impacts and the moral obligation of defending the interests of future generations among younger generations. It is the case of a 27-year-old Burundian who is part of several youth networks and is involved in a Canadian-based NGO working on peace-making:

“While the present impacts are important, it is also crucial to think about the impact on future generations. As a society, we do not always consider the long-term impacts of our decisions, especially when it comes to global issues like climate change. If I knew that a decision made today might be damaging for the future, I would not accept it. I believe that everyone wants to be treated well and have decisions made with their best interests in mind.”

Interestingly, all those defending the possibility of taking decisions today in detriment of future generations in the survey share a common trait: an active engagement in politico-activist instances. In contrast, those who do not mention any kind of politico-activist participation had more diverse views on the issue of present and future interests. Do the passionate voices of youth activism risk being tempered by the pragmatic realities of political engagement, where the urgency of immediate change begins to overshadow long-term visions?

Coming back to the above-mentioned fragments of the interview with the 19-year-old Argentinian who has shared spaces of dialogue with national candidates to the presidency and believes that “truly significant things through politics” can be done, the matter of imagination will always be a critical juncture in the relation between youth activism, decision-making, and futures that cannot be overlooked.

Navigating the tensions between present and future interests is a challenge young people in our study seem ready to undertake. This highlights the need to extend beyond current approaches of futures methods and practices designed for traditional decision-making spaces, aiming at helping overcome obstacles such as short-term thinking. But it is also true that such navigation remains a challenge as young people engage with the pragmatic realities of political engagement.

Access to decision making spaces: constraints and instrumentalization

Our survey findings shed light on how young people perceive their access to decision-making spaces, and the impact they can make in these instances. While young individuals acknowledge the importance of participating in traditional channels of decision-making, a significant proportion of them (27) experience a disheartening sense of powerlessness in their pursuit of collective impact. They attribute this sentiment to the frequent disregard of their initiatives and a perceived lack of recognition by adults and decision-makers who often question their experience and competence.

Participants also voice their frustration with the absence of effective feedback mechanisms. Despite their contributions, they often struggle to discern the tangible impact of their ideas and initiatives. As the Argentinian climate activist puts it : “Our ideas were supposed to be taken to a summit and considered for young people in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe, but sometimes they turn out to be empty promises.” When presenting her project to her school, the 15-year-old American student says she “was not sure if they were really going to take what I said into consideration: I knew they were listening, but I am not sure what action followed through with that.” This lack of clarity regarding the outcomes of their contributions contributes to their sense of disillusionment and concern about tokenism, apprehensive that their involvement may be symbolic rather than substantive.

In decision-making spaces, futures methods and practices are often depicted as a vehicle for empowering young people, extending beyond conventional and often tokenistic approaches: they enable young individuals to convey innovative policy messages rooted in creative and transdisciplinary systems thinking while facilitating the establishment of partnerships crucial for developing effective policy strategies (Cruz et al., 2022). We concur that these methods and practices can actively cultivate and harness the enthusiasm demonstrated by many young people in recent years. In a moment in which organisations are advancing actions both in terms of futures methods and practices adoption and youth engagement promotion, going beyond diversity as a matter of transdisciplinarity (Gerhordt, Neuhaus et al. 2022) or cultural background (Wildman and Inayatullah, 1996) and including a criterion of age/generation, rarely mentioned in futures studies, is more than ever needed.

Very few respondents consider that there is no way for young individuals to actively take part in decision-making. These observations expand the horizon of the possibilities behind the partnerships between young individuals and decision-makers through futures methods and practices. However, the majority of them embrace advocacy as the most effective way of engaging, over traditional voting and working methods garnering far fewer endorsements. Those expanding their answers confirm such a willingness to engage politically and socially at the grassroots level, advocating for youth involvement in decision-making processes and leadership roles, using their voices to raise awareness and form youth movements to represent their interests. In that sense, futures methods and practices cannot only bolster youth engagement within decision-making spaces. They should also serve as catalysts for cultivating collaborative partnerships that transcend conventional boundaries.

The status-quo: from realistic optimism to barriers

One striking finding from the survey beyond the initial hypotheses is the role of human interactions, both with close and distant people. Respondents identify key sources of inspiration for imagining better futures in personal experiences, talking and taking action with friends and family, and the experiences and opinions of inspiring figures over other sources (for example arts). This highlights the profound impact of human connections and relationships in shaping one’s images of the future.

Community-building: broadening horizons, shaping action

The potential role of community-building as a vehicle for expanding the horizons of imagination is described by many of those expanding their answers on youth participation in decision-making.

As the 25-year-old Burundian rightly reminds, mental health is a prerequisite to community-building as the nurturing soil where imagination of better futures can find its foundation and the vehicle through which the transformation of aspirations into tangible realities can be put into practice: “We need to educate people on how to handle mental health issues for a better future. When individuals are mentally strong, they can envision, plan, and build their future.”

However, a challenge arises around community-building, as the critical juncture between individual and societal futures might become, instead of a driver, an impediment. An important part of the respondents of the survey (23) believe their influence extends only to shaping their individual futures, implying a lack of agency in shaping broader societal outcomes. Community-building is not just about broadening perspectives, it is also a potent tool for mobilization. As a 21-year-old Kenyan reflects during the interview:

“We need to understand the role of communities. When communities come together with a shared vision and actively communicate, engage, and collaborate, they can help positive change to materialize. (...) By staying optimistic, staying connected, and working towards common goals, we increase the likelihood of creating a future that brings well-being, and fulfillment.”

Hoffman’s (2019) cross-cultural study on young people and future visions, particularly among students of different origins in a Taiwanese university, prompts us to compare its findings with our research. While distinctions may exist, issues related to perceived powerlessness and limited agency remain a significant concern. To address these challenges, it is crucial to foster positive agency roles and harness the potential within youth activism and community-building efforts. Customizing methods and practices to accommodate not only the barriers, but also leverage the opportunities behind young people’s interactions is essential. Futures methods and practices should cater for the possibilities behind community-building for broadening imagination horizons and shaping action. In any youth engagement intervention, the diversity of profiles is a fundamental prerequisite. In a futures framework, diversity is not only about representation and inclusion but also about the potential for new opportunities that emerge from enhanced agency and the synergistic effects of multiple youth interactions that methods and practices should cater for.

Community-building: beyond activism, building coalitions

Interactions with traditional politics still seem an exception rather than the norm, as per our results. Such a divide of the political and the activist spaces represents a major challenge to one of the respondents of the survey. Having first answered that the best ways for youth to actively engage in decision-making is by advocating for changes and radical reforms, a respondent from the survey expands then her answer: “I think it is not enough just by advocating from civil society communities. Young people should be involved in the system itself to outgrow their perspectives so that the system will be changed from within”.

However, the way the 19-year-old Argentinian engaged in the gateways between political and activist spaces describes the tortuous relation of youth engagement, futures, and community-building beyond activism is revealing:

“I think sometimes we find ourselves at a point in which we wish for many things, but we doubt that they will come true due to politics and various interests. Sometimes I feel that our wishes become mere miracles, even though there are logical reasons to cooperate for achieving different goals, as well as to collaborate between parties in order to protect all of us.”

The expansion of community-building beyond activism constitutes a major challenge. As stated by a 31-year-old Ugandan in the interview, “Overcoming today’s challenges and creating a better future require a collective effort, both at the grassroots level and within institutions.” But, at the same time, the trust crisis and disenchantment with traditional politics impacts the possibilities for youth activism to expand community-building and structure coalitions for transformation beyond its closer environment.

The possibilities for community-building beyond activism are well portrayed by some respondents’ open answers on how they would create a space of dialogue with decision-makers designed by and for young people: “A dialogue session that brings together young people and decision-makers to discuss, understand and build relationships for positive action toward their lives and communities” or “two sessions: the first informative session to discuss current issues and concerns. The second session should be able to discuss feasible solutions and plans/strategies. Ideally there would be a proper system of accountability.”

The role of action-oriented partnerships and further community-building between young people, activists, organizations, and decision-makers, even beyond traditional spaces, cannot be overlooked and must be facilitated through futures methods and practices. This implies going beyond today’s agendas around them within youth engagement interventions, framing and advancing in different institutions, including UNDP, UNICEF, or the Directorate-General for International Partnerships of the European Commission. Concrete feedback mechanisms

should be established to guide the interactions of these communities effectively and ensure joint action beyond the loop of workshops. Such an agenda implies a transformative approach to current patterns of relationships, both within youth individuals and groups and in their interactions with decision-making spaces and other actors. Inclusivity, in Dhar et al. (2023) terms, as a way to enhance collective intelligence and understand systems beyond collecting multiple points of view, should define the core principles of futures methods and practices if we want young people to become “good ancestors.”

Community-building: merging local and global

The inclusion of “international partnerships” into the “comprehensive and holistic approach involving governments, civil society organizations, and private sector entities” sets the question of the relation between community-building at different levels, as defended by the above-mentioned Ugandan interviewee. Survey respondents expressing the importance of grassroots action emphasize that real change often begins locally and can lead to global impact, “creating long-lasting movements by mobilizing commitment at a local level.”

Taking up the metaphor of movement, the local is from where an initial vibration occurs. But the global also carries the possibility to learn from others’ actions in other locals. Vibration might also originate in these other locals. The case of the Indonesian interviewed, who defends the Palestinian cause, is revealing. Or, as the case of the Burundian interviewed participating in the activities of a Canadian NGO indicates, creating movement at the local level in the face of the complexities of an unequal structure of economic and power systems might require activating an initial vibration within a global interaction.

Social media plays an incredible role in catalyzing such movement at the local level through an initial vibration activated within global interactions. The description the 31-year-old Nigerian-Beninese details on the awareness of African youth on community-building favoring action oriented towards shaping the continent’s own destiny is revealing:

“I think there is a general awareness of the problems we face as a country, a continent, and as global citizens. The international order is being shaken due to the kind of injustice that has been going on. This line of reasoning is not specific to me or Nigerians or Beninese young people. Social media has really opened up ways of seeing things that we could not before. We hardly received news of what was happening in Europe because we did not have access to European media. But with social media, we can see what is happening in the world and see how similar problems are being faced by different people.”

Community-building represents not only a vehicle for expanding the horizons of imagination, but also builds constant movement between the local and the global. In opposition to the current global contentious politics, youth harbor a belief in the potential for dismantling entrenched inequalities through dialogue and collaboration across geographic boundaries. Futures methods and practices should allow young people to build on their initiatives and inspirations as seeds of more sustainable and equitable futures. For these seeds to flourish and catalyze profound changes in international politics, futures methods and practices should enable them to lead the engagement of multiple actors with emotions, beliefs, and the complexity behind our unequal structures of power. They should also enhance community-building at all levels, cross-sectorally and cross-regionally, bridging perspectives between the Majority World and the Global North.

Seed pathways for transformation

The results above present an extremely rich image of the relation of youth to futures and decision-making, providing intuitions that go beyond, and even confront, the initial hypotheses of the study, especially in terms of the cruciality of community-building. Such a focus brings broader perspectives when thinking about what our futures methods and practices should look like for helping youth to become “good ancestors”, and thus fostering intergenerational fairness.

Constructivist and pragmatic approaches are gaining prominence in organizations and decision-making spaces, with the aim of fostering consensus among diverse stakeholders and addressing predefined issues. Such approaches are also driving the way we understand the possibilities behind futures methods and practices for improving youth engagement. Expanding the horizon of possibilities and taking advantage of the current window of opportunity

already described implies scaling up the ambitions for our futures methods and practices, which should prioritize deconstructing the underlying meaning of systems and power structures. A critical realism approach (Boonmavichit and Boossabong, 2022), while acknowledging the role of human agency within existing frameworks (differentiating it from a post-structuralist one) should serve as the guiding principle for our efforts. If we intend for these methods and practices to effectively assist young people in navigating this era of unprecedented uncertainty and lead, by overcoming its challenges and leveraging its opportunities, the systems transformation required towards more sustainable and equitable futures.

The initial step toward enabling genuine systems transformation is the envisioning of positive futures (Pereira et al., 2018b). As discussed, the matter of imagination plays a pivotal role in the relationship between youth activism, decision-making, and futures. The seed pathways for transformation methodology (Pereira et al., 2018a) adapted for degrowth futures by Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) presents an interesting framework to understand how our futures methods and practices can guide youth to become “good ancestors”, if framed under a critical realism approach. Perceiving the “scaling out” phase as a moment for replicating the seeds that the initiatives and inspirations from youth represent to influence the dominant regime is tempting. However, we should see it more as a phase during which sharing and confronting these seeds enhance young people’s capacities to imagine alternative futures and their sense of agency through the possibility of further community-building. It is less about replicating, and more about unveiling the transformative power to unlock laying behind the recognition of several seeds that can build on one another while envisioning better futures if these seeds grew to become part of the dominant models.

The “scaling up” phase aims at addressing institutional and systemic roots in this framework. When applied to our question, it implies building strategic alliances and creating policy alternatives, while detecting the systemic points of intervention in the face of both the current challenges and opportunities this polycrisis and/or interregnum presents. These alliances and policy alternatives should be framed in the face of those signals of change framing, advancing, and resolving that should be detected and spotted as part of collective exercises. It is at this point that futures methods and practices could become a vehicle for building coalitions with other actors, beyond activism. They should eventually articulate a space for discussing the supposed and/or potential tensions between future and present interests of today’s actions towards preferable futures.

The “scaling deep” phase presents a complex challenge, raising the fundamental question of how futures methods and practices can effectively bridge the initial conversations of young individuals, among them and with other actors, with broader systemic influences at the macro-level. This intricacy prompts us to contemplate the feasibility of such a connection. To navigate this terrain successfully, it is imperative to delve deeper into the evolving landscapes of geopolitics, multilateral forums, and international financial structures. By doing so, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the external forces shaping our futures. It is within this intricate web of global dynamics that we may discover the key threads that can link the aspirations and ideas of the youth, the actions of decision-makers, and the systemic pressures that represent challenges and opportunities in our way forward.

While we will not extensively explore the discussions around them within this article, we have compiled a comprehensive table summarizing the insights presented above as well as a series of tools and resources that we believe can prove instrumental in achieving the objectives of each phase:

	Objectives	Who	How	Potential Tools and Resources
Scaling out	Enhance young people's capacities to imagine alternative futures and their sense of agency through community-building	Young individuals, youth collectives and local communities from different regions	Sharing and confronting seeds that unlock transformative potential of alternative inclusive and sustainable futures, enhancing agency through the possibilities of community-building at youth-level	Creative visioning, Inclusive Imaginaries (UNDP, 2022), Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah 1990; Boonmavichit, 2022; UNDP, 2022), Futures Wheel
Scaling up	Build strategic alliances and policy alternatives to address institutional and systemic issues in the face of current challenges and opportunities	Young individuals, youth collectives, local communities, policy experts	Identifying systemic points of intervention and fostering community-building beyond youth activism	Drivers mapping, Futures Triangle, Three Horizons, Back-casting, Wind-Tunneling, Road-mapping
Scaling deep	Establish connections between seeds of alternative futures, decision-makers , and systemic pressures at the macro-level	Young individuals, youth collectives, policymakers, and diplomats	Engagement with geopolitics, multilateral spaces, and international financial architecture	Scenarios, Campaigning through future artifacts

Fig 1: Seed pathways transformation for youth to become good ancestors

From “responsible futures” to responsible processes

As van der Duin (2019) rightly defends, responsibility of futures methods and practices is not only about “responsible futures” but also responsible processes. The level of “openness/closure” is inherently determined by the overall dynamics within futures methods and practices (Urueña, 2021). To truly serve as a means for fostering responsibility, these methods and practices must themselves be subject to responsibility throughout the entirety of their operationalization phases.

The role of expertise is pivotal in fostering inclusive dialogues among young people and with other actors, while creating authentic spaces for exploring alternative futures and challenging existing wisdom (Jae, 2023). Wilkinson's (2017) taxonomy of Foresight expertise roles, including the storytelling coach, window cleaner, map maker, psychoanalyst, and learning facilitator, offers valuable guidance. In that sense, experts, not limited to futurists, should possess a diverse set of personal characteristics, including emotional and spiritual intelligence, as well as mindfulness (Inayatullah, cited in Jae, 2023). To ensure such mindfulness, experts are often evaluated using sociological criteria (Mauersch, 2020). Such a criteria carries the risk of imbalances of power, class, and age. Futures methods should therefore actively prioritize fostering expertise throughout the process.

Language plays a central role in shaping perceptions and future constructions. A comparative study (Abdullah et al., in press) across Taiwan, Mexico, and Guatemala underscores language’s pivotal role in authentic expression, influencing attitudes toward uncertainty, agency, and resilience. Recognizing language’s impact, along with cultural and knowledge influences, enhances our understanding of diverse backgrounds in navigating future complexities. Practitioners should consider adapting technical aspects of futures language to different languages and cultures.

Futures practices truly begin ex-post, after the loop of Foresight workshops. This continuum of practice post-workshop participates in feeding community-building among participants. When considering responsible futures processes, the actions to be implemented after the loop should be continuously questioned at the light of intergenerational fairness. Furthermore, a futures loop should also bear the responsibility of creating feedback mechanisms, being part of a broader sustainable space for discussion and action implementation. A question remains open for the actual implementation of concrete actions that benefit the communities built during a loop: Where to find the resources allocated to the emerging and innovative solutions? How to actually put into action the key takeaways from the process? In the case of an organization, can the balance of power bear the conduct of change implied by the creation of this newly created ecosystem?

We have compiled another table summarizing key insights, some of them presented above, as well as a series of

tools and resources that we believe can prove instrumental in designing responsible processes when engaging with young people through futures methods and practices.

<p>Before the loop (ex-ante)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the diversity of lived experiences and seeds : age, disciplines and areas of expertise, gender, geographical and social background • Ensure equity in participation : Reunite proper material conditions for marginalized youth to participate (travel expenses, compensation...). 	
<p>During the loop (ex-dure)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium/Moderation: the role of a moderator/practitioner is essential in overseeing a good balance in speaking times. • Sustain effective communication: adapt futures languages to other languages beyond English or French • Delegate power to youth • Mental health support: How are participants actually ready to imagine futures? • Sustain a high focus on action-oriented workshops by incorporating tailored “Now what?” landing phases in the workshops. 	<p>Inclusive Imaginaries Toolkit (Dhar et al., 2023)</p> <p>Framework for assessing intergenerational fairness (SOIF, 2021)</p> <p>Futures consciousness (Ahvenharju et al., 2018)</p>
<p>After the loop (ex-post)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create feedback mechanism : ensure the continuity of actions after the loop. Foresight actually starts after the workshops. • Allocate resources to effectively implement the recommendations coming from the loop on feeding community-building and achievable joint actions between the participants (between youth, and between youth and decision-makers) 	<p>7 steps back-forward-aside (Decolonial Futures, 2023)</p>

Fig 2: Ensuring responsible processes for youth to become “good ancestors” through futures methods and practices

Conclusion

The survey and interviews unveil a complex tapestry of realistic optimism, barriers, and possibilities among young individuals when envisioning and shaping futures. They engage in various forms and levels, and advocate for their right to inherit sustainable ecosystems, building on their acute knowledge of the current and forthcoming systemic challenges while navigating the paradoxes between present needs and the preservation of future generations’ interests. However, most of them point out to the lack of the proper setting to integrate traditional forms of decision-making systems and highlight the inadaptation of these systems to their participation. In opposition to this hurdle, most of them express the cruciality of community-building, in which they find both inspiration for imagining better futures and energy to structure action in a dialectic relation of the local and the global.

As we unravel the seed pathways for transformation, a critical realism approach guided by responsible processes uncovers an intricate web of connections that threads together the aspirations of youth, their actions and those of decision-makers and other actors, and systemic pressures inherent in shaping our futures. This framework, when applied, offers a blueprint for young individuals and youth collectives to not only envision better futures but also build action-oriented partnerships and coalitions actively transforming the patterns of relationships and partake in the creation of more sustainable and equitable futures. Ultimately, the evolving landscapes of geopolitics, multilateral reforms, and international financial architecture present an opportunity to harness the diverse potentials that the fusion of critical realism and responsible practices can unlock.

Bearing in mind these findings and conclusions, we will now pilot futures tools and lead futures cross-regional processes to empower young people and youth collectives from the Majority World in their aspiration to shape the future and become “good ancestors.”

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Notes

- 1- “Majority World” refers to all regions and countries designated as “Global South”. The authors acknowledge the challenges behind such a concept but recognize its objective of challenging the West’s rhetoric of democracy (Alam, 2008) in the face of unequal structures of global power, as well as the urgent need of reforming multilateralism and the international financial architecture.
- 2- The remaining participants (11) preferred not to answer.

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