



LONGTERMISM AND GLOBAL EXISTENTIAL RISK

PROJECT OVERVIEW



Strategic Foresight Unit | Office of the Secretary-General

Longtermism and existential risk in global public policy

A collaborative OECD strategic foresight project



OECD Strategic Foresight Unit

The Strategic Foresight Unit leads the adoption of futures thinking across the OECD, strengthening the ability of Directorates and Committees to provide governments with future-ready policy advice. As part of this mandate the unit leads collaborative initiatives to apply foresight approaches to key global issues and shared public policy priorities.

Summary

Throughout 2022 the Strategic Foresight Unit is undertaking a project to identify how the OECD can best contribute to the management of long-term risks, in particular emerging global catastrophic and existential risks. The Strategic Foresight Unit is working with a number of areas across the OECD to produce a report assessing how the OECD could best support Members and Partners in managing these risks. This assessment will include: consideration of the policy rationale for action to manage emerging global existential risks, potential obstacles to action, an overview of the current state of knowledge of the risks and approaches to managing them, a summary of existing relevant work at the OECD, and an identification of key areas where the OECD could best contribute to the management of these risks. The project is being conducted in consultation with OECD delegations, relevant external experts, relevant organisations outside the OECD, and the global foresight community.

Background and rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic has given the world's governments a renewed appreciation for the importance of managing high-impact risks through long-term planning. It is important that in the wake of this crisis, governments plan not only for similar future crises, but the full range of risks with the potential for extreme impacts. More broadly, policymakers, academics and civil society are increasingly aware that policy institutions need better approaches to managing transnational and intergenerational risks.

As humanity has become more technologically advanced, we have become capable of posing risks to our own continued survival. In the last century, we have seen both fossil fuel-based technologies and nuclear weapons pose this level of risk. These risks have required global efforts to manage, and, despite these global efforts, they still pose a substantial threat. But it would be irresponsible to assume that additional risks of this magnitude will not emerge over coming decades. Indeed, when we look to the experts, it appears that risks from engineered pandemics and artificial general intelligence are strong candidates as potential emerging existential risks.

Managing these existential risks effectively is essential for governments, but systems and best practices to manage these risks are often lacking. Since the development of nuclear weapons, humanity has had access to technology capable of destroying human civilisation, but its institutions are struggling to keep pace with the new risks being created. Developments in the area of artificial general intelligence and biotechnology, for example, could give rise to new catastrophic risks through either accidental or malicious use or through their structural impacts. A number of factors create a bias to short-termism in public policy and result in a systematic neglect of these risks. Solutions to such short-termism exist but must be further developed and applied to government policy making at the national level as well

as at the international level where global collaboration is required to identify and address shared existential risks.

The OECD could support Members and Partners by developing novel policy tools, approaches, forums, and recommendations to bridge this gap. The OECD has already highlighted that traditional approaches to future-oriented policymaking are no longer sufficient (Anticipatory Innovation Governance, OECD 2020). Successfully managing these emerging risks will involve all elements of society including business, scientists, media, civil society and citizens. However, governments have a particularly crucial role as the locus for mediating among competing legitimate interests and taking collective action.

The OECD's Strategic Foresight Unit (SFU) is contributing to the management of these risks as part of its overall mandate to strengthen futures thinking within the OECD and its Members and Partners. Based in the Office of the Secretary General, the SFU is dedicated to advancing and supporting futures related work within and across OECD Directorates, and contributing to high-level dialogue and strategic discussions on the future direction of the Organisation. The unit has identified global catastrophic and existential risks as a potential emerging priority for the OECD and its Members and Partners. The unit will draw on its experience in leading foresight exercises with OECD colleagues, delegations, committees, external stakeholders and senior officials. It will also draw on the expertise of the OECD's global Government Foresight Community composed of over 200 senior foresight experts and futurists in public policy from governments and international organisations around the world. The SFU's work in this area builds on its recent publication [Global Scenarios 2035](#), which includes a *Vulnerable World* scenario highlighting the need for organisations such as the OECD to develop a stronger capacity to serve the global community in confronting threats to humanity's shared future.

Process

The Strategic Foresight Unit will lead the OECD project team composed of representatives from the Governance Directorate; Science, Technology and Innovation Directorate and others. The paper's content will rely on a synthesis of literature, institutional evaluation, interviews and focus groups. The final product will be built through a participatory process that includes consultations, discussions and events.

Project Outputs

The project will produce a summary report that outlines the policy rationale for action to manage emerging global existential risks, potential obstacles to action, an overview of the current state of knowledge of the risks and approaches to managing them, a summary of existing relevant work at the OECD, and an identification of key areas where the OECD could best contribute to the management of these risks.