UNDP Youth Futures Fellowship: Insights from a Participatory Futures Learning Journey

UNDP Arab States Innovation and Youth Teams
& Dr. John A. Sweeney

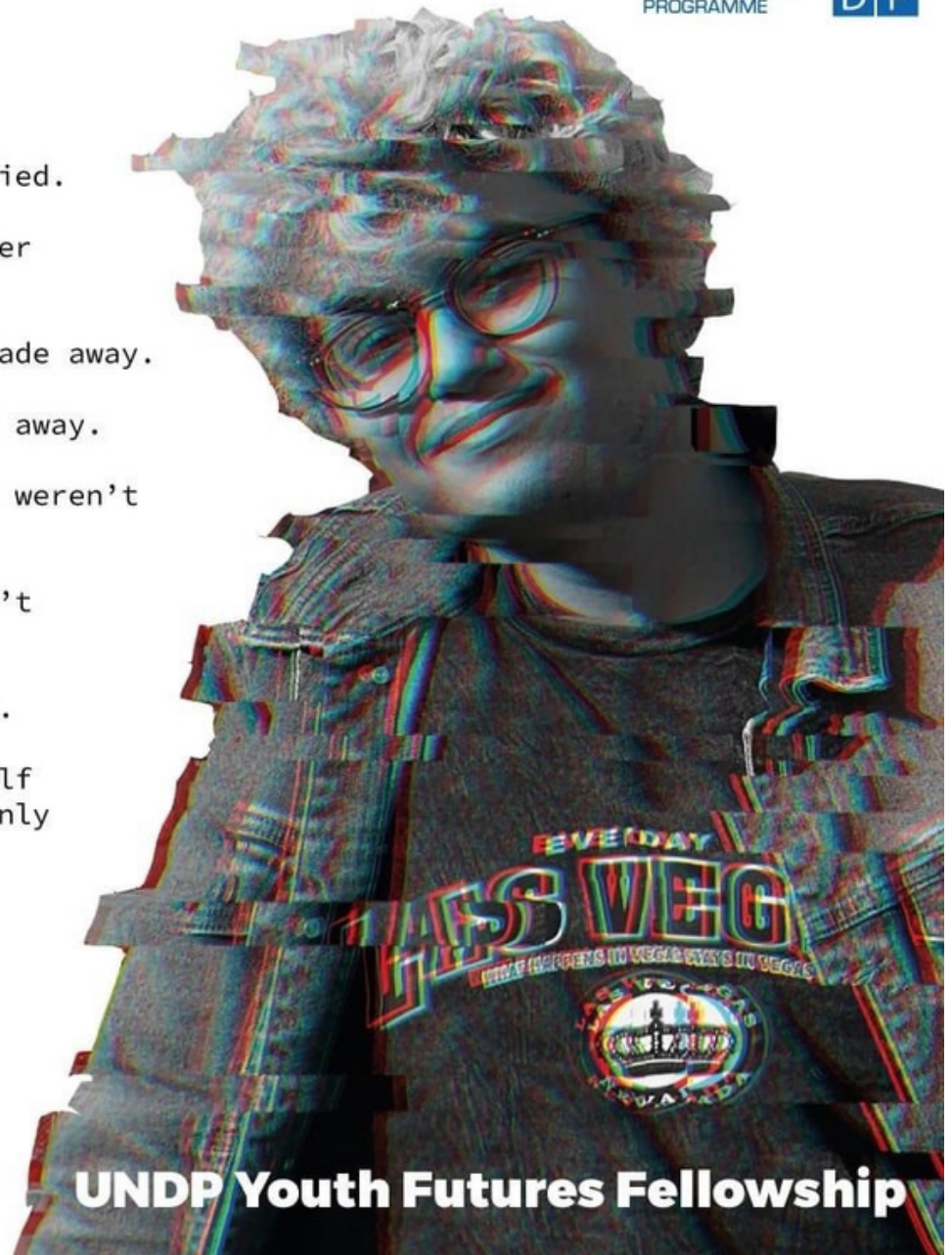Some of us caved.

Some of us escaped.

But we relentlessly tried.

I imagined the day after
this battle.

Our problems did not fade away.

Our worries did not fly away.

But I saw streets that weren't
full of sad faces.

I saw skies that weren't
constantly raining.

I saw youthful spirits.

And I admitted to myself
that only the young, only
the dreamer, only the
rebellious, can run.

And we did.

**- Koussay Hazami,
Tunisia**

UNDP Youth Futures Fellowship

OUTLINE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Why think about the future?

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a powerful and tragic reminder that "the" future does not exist...meaning it is not singular and pre-determined but rather evolves from the present in an always complex and sometimes chaotic way and has the potential to take us by surprise. If there is no such thing as "the" future, then it is by definition a space of possibility - it embodies a multitude of options, what some call a pluriverse. Turning "the" future into *futures* is important as it reminds us that "the" future is ultimately what we make it.

If futures are spaces of possibility, then *futures thinking* is a critical skill for anyone and everyone seeking to navigate the complexities of life in a fast-changing and uncertain world as well as those seeking to create better futures for all. As a proven and powerful tool that is often used to enhance and strengthen policy, planning, and strategy development processes, futures thinking can also create a greater sense of agency and even hope, especially for those typically left outside of such processes. Futures thinking provides a direct and tangible means to participate actively in reimagining the futures for oneself and one's community. As both a mindset and a practice aimed at generating insights; seeding transformative changes; and creating opportunities to forge more preferred futures for all, futures thinking is an essential skill for life in these complex times.
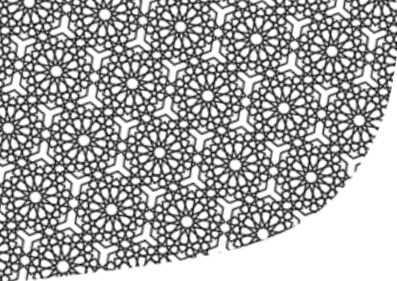
In the Arab States, young people certainly indicate readiness to reimagine their futures. According to the [Arab Youth Survey White Paper 2020](), young people in the region "started this decade longing for change to build a shared prosperity and a better future", with the majority of youth in countries affected by protests expecting these to generate real positive change.

> " How has UNDP been creating and curating spaces for youth to imagine and enact better futures for all? "

> " How can and might youth be supported further in creating the futures they want? "

It was these questions that the UNDP Regional Hub for the Arab States had in mind when launching the Youth Futures Fellowship, an exercise designed to capture the narratives of young people across the region on the futures of climate action and civic engagement, and to provide them with tools and methods for engaging their own communities in thinking about futures. Throughout this report, we share key insights from the fellowship programme and what we learned about the value of applying participatory futures thinking in sustainable development practice. If you're interested in applying futures thinking in your own context, we encourage you to refer to the accompanying participatory futures game for practical tools that will help you get started.

At the outset of the fellowship, we asked young people across the region about their greatest hopes and fears for their communities in 2030. Key words from their responses are shown in the Word Cloud.

A Note on Participatory Futures

There are many foresight and futures methods, from more quantitative, data-oriented approaches to more qualitative, narrative-based tools. Oftentimes, these rely on inputs from technical experts alone when they could be enriched by more diverse perspectives, particularly those of younger generations who will be most affected by the decisions being made.

How might we design more imaginative and impactful futures engagements that are inclusive and participatory?

With this question, we are not asking **what** "the" future could be, but rather **how** to engage a diverse group, especially young people, in imagining possible futures in a participatory way. In many, if not most, cases, futures thinking is an exclusive enterprise carried out by a small group of people in a one-off "workshop" setting. In recent years, participatory futures has grown to encompass a range of practices and approaches aimed at putting different forms and types of participation at the very heart of futures tools, methods, and processes. For instance, the Our Futures Game, co-developed by John A. Sweeney and Jose Ramos in collaboration with NESTA, mapped five broad approaches that are commonly taken when designing and delivering participatory futures engagements:

Create

Involves making and engaging with physical objects that represent the future.

Immerse

Uses immersive physical or virtual environments and experiences like digital simulations, interactive exhibitions or immersive theatre.

Sense

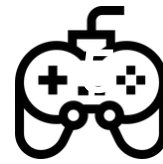Employs collective intelligence to scan, sense, explore and forecast.

Deliberate

Brings together diverse groups for interaction and decision-making.

Play

Uses gamification to experiment with different possibilities.

A version of the Our Futures Game, customised by the UNDP Youth Futures Fellows, is available as a separate document. Download it and play to design your own participatory futures engagement!

In the context of sustainable development programming, participatory approaches to futures thinking can be particularly important for ensuring that visions of the future reflect communities' aspirations and values, and that people feel ownership in shaping those futures.

> " A huge benefit of participatory futures thinking is that it brings in diversity ... development doesn't belong to any single generation, organization, or sector. "

Sarah Poole

Deputy Regional Director, UNDP Arab States,
speaking during the Arab Sates Futures Series

Participatory futures approaches can also be a powerful means of influencing decision-makers, whether through the political clout of crowdsourced aspirations of citizens, or by involving decision-makers themselves in such exercises. For example, virtual reality and other tools can enhance solution-orientation by allowing for vivid pre-mortems of what the planet might be like by 2050 should climate change mitigation efforts fail. Using experiential approaches to futures can actually create "memories from the future" that can affect how options are planned and future decisions are made.

The UNDP Youth Futures Fellowship

In this section, we share some of the recurring points that we heard from young people throughout the fellowship journey, particularly those points that emerged during group discussions. We have grouped these into "Reflections" - interesting perspectives on familiar trends in the region - and "Re-imaginings" - areas where fellows identified potential to radically rethink development practice.

Reflections

1. Technologies are a double-edged sword and are not a guaranteed pathway towards a better future or a default "solution" to challenges such as the climate emergency.
2. Young people are yearning to lead new conversations around long-running questions of identity.
3. Young people feel hopeful about new opportunities for civic and economic participation.

Re-imaginings

1. What if "ethical imaginaries" were created locally and leveraged to explore the future of communities?
2. What if governments implemented a "well-being" approach to sustainable development?
3. What if the "next pandemic" is a digital pathogen?
4. What if the shift to "go green" leads to new regional tensions?

Reflections

1 *Technologies are a double-edged sword and are not a guaranteed pathway towards a better future or a default "solution" to challenges such as the climate emergency.*

The fellows' visual brainstorming on probable futures (depicted in the graphic below) was dominated by images of high-tech (AI, robotics, etc.) "green" scenarios. A tension was identified between the opportunities promised by new and emerging technologies, especially those seeking to mitigate the worst effects of climate change, and the risks associated with those same technologies.

How are new technologies creating spaces for dialogue and inclusion but also new forms of surveillance, social control, and exclusion? Throughout the fellowship, the fellows highlighted the importance of transparency, citizen consultations, and access to information as governments begin rolling out green (and other) technologies. Regulation and addressing communities' concerns were considered essential, especially at a local level.

Probable "Imaginings of the future"
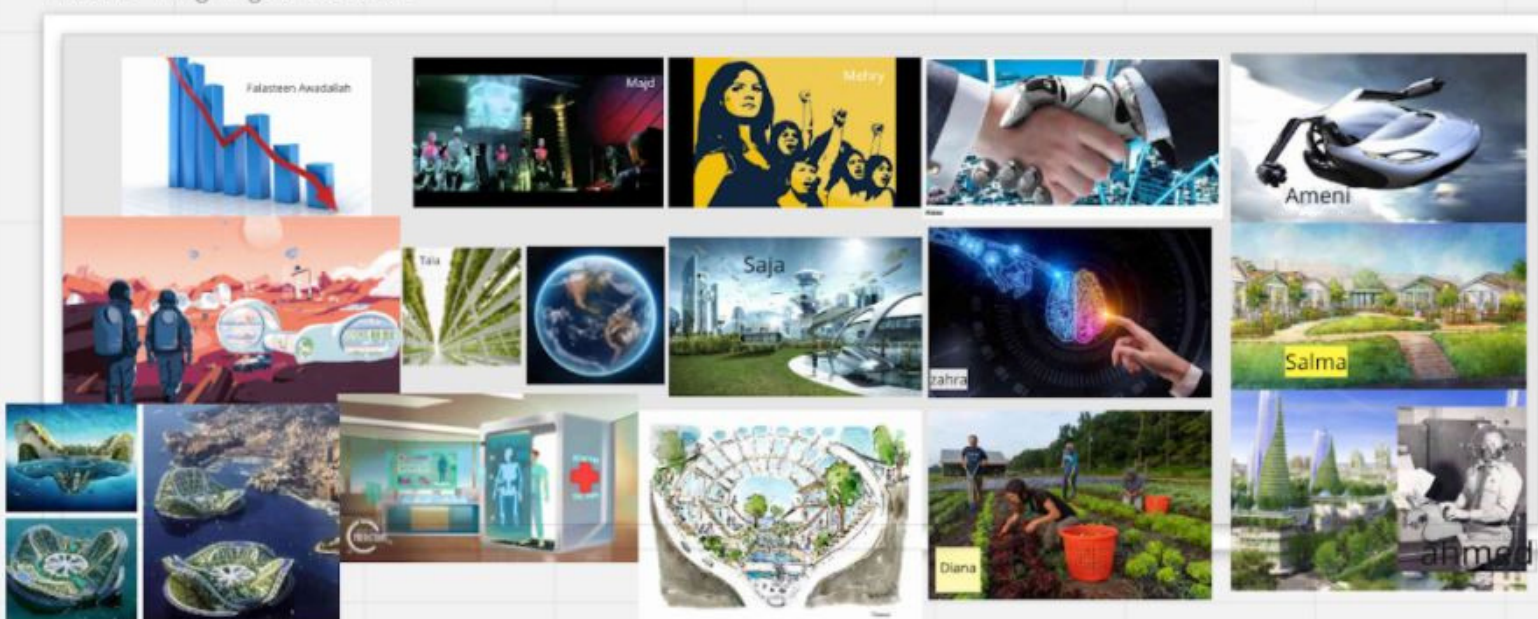
② Young people are yearning to lead new conversations around long-running questions of identity.

From those young people seeking opportunities abroad, to those displaced by conflict and the effects of climate change, to those looking to freely express their gender identities, questions of self and belonging are at the forefront and have been exacerbated by the mental health impacts of the pandemic.

What does it mean to be from an indigenous or non-Arab ethnic group in the "Arab" States? What impact do colonial terms like "Middle East" have on regional identities? How is identity politics affecting the space for civic engagement? Fellows grappled with these questions throughout the programme, as shown in the visual moodboard below.

③ *Young people feel hopeful about new opportunities for civic and economic participation.*

Covid-19 was seen to have opened new doors for young people to engage civically and politically as solution-holders, as well as opportunities to learn, maybe even work, online, and to exchange more easily across countries. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of the local community in fulfilling needs not provided for by the government.

To what extent could these effects and lessons be sustained beyond the pandemic? Fellows expressed the hope that young people could continue to leverage these openings to drive intergenerational action on climate change, inequality, and other areas of priority to youth.

"SCATTERED PEOPLE ARE LIKE SCATTERED MUSIC NOTES. ONE VOICE TYPE CREATES A MELODY. BUT IT'S A MATCHMAKE WITH THE REST OF THE VOCAL RANGES THAT CREATES HARMONY"

From a YFF submission by M. Ephrem

Re-imaginings

(1)

What if "ethical imaginaries" were created locally and leveraged to explore the future of communities?

Science fiction, particularly its globalised pop culture manifestations, plays a significant role in shaping imaginaries of the future. During the fellowship, concerns arose that these imaginaries are not culturally sensitive and may ignore context-specific ethical considerations.

Fellows pointed to the need to foster more localised and complex pop narratives about the future, and to accompany these with localised discussions about ethical implications (e.g. of artificial intelligence). Futurist Leah Zaidi further emphasised this point in a webinar organised as part of the UNDP Arab States Futures Series. Stressing how the future should be a space to enliven diverse views rather than collapse them, Leah spoke of the importance of seeing science fiction and foresight as "entangled," which is to say that both can (and should) enable radical imaginings for things to be otherwise. To go beyond simplistic dichotomies of utopia and dystopia and capture the complexity of challenges like climate change, "good" science fiction should find itself at the intersection of foresight, design, and systems thinking.

Amidst homogeneous, simplistic or fear-inducing global popular narratives, how can we open the space for narratives that expand the realm of possibility?

"Do you think some of the science fiction movies lack the ethical aspects that communities need?"
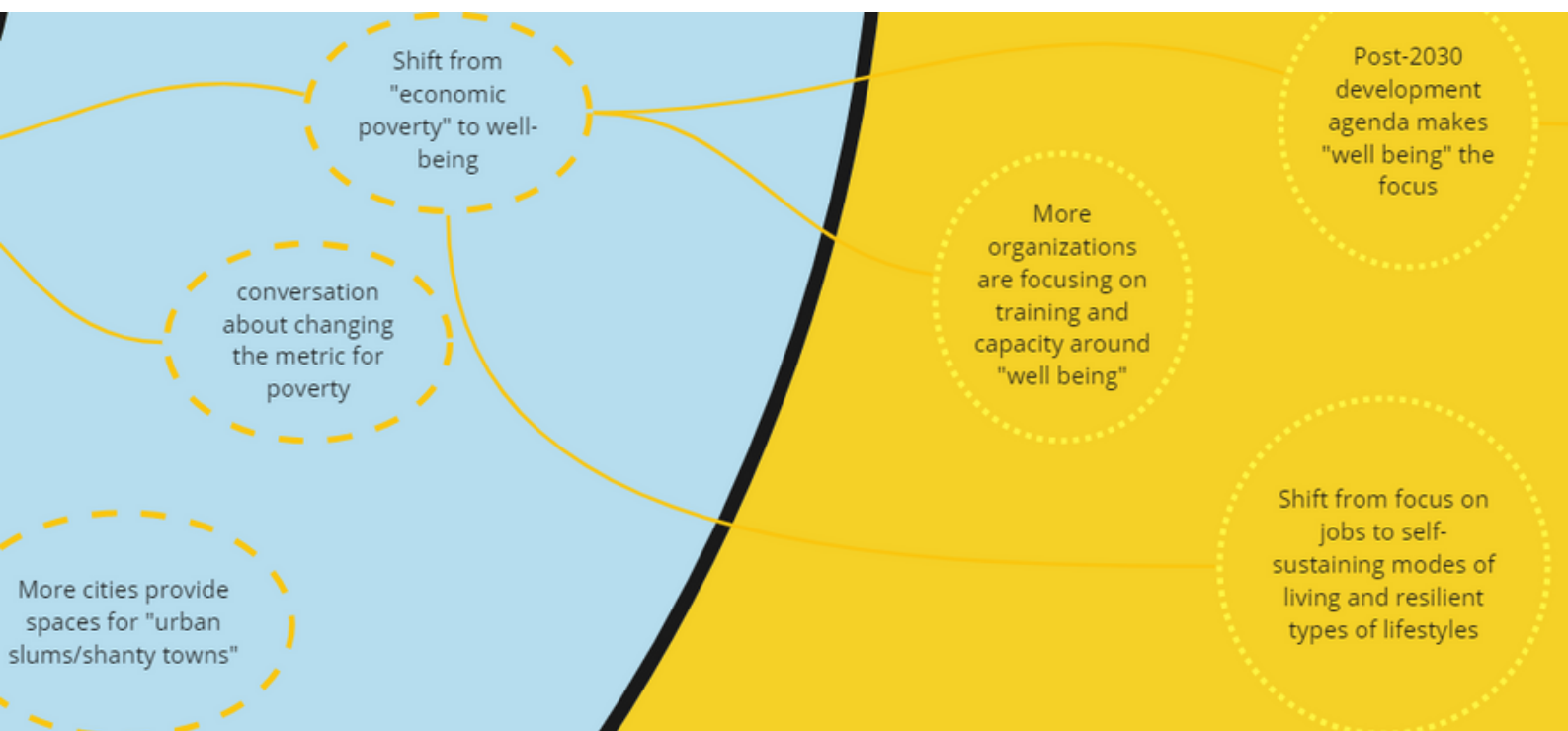
② What if governments implemented a "well-being" approach to sustainable development?

The fellows explored multiple order effects of inequality, extreme poverty, and urbanization. From shifting the metrics to explore poverty, they crafted a causal chain that introduced the possibility of more governments investing in well-being approaches, such as those articulated by the UAE through its National Strategy for Well-being 2031.

Rather than focusing on GDP, well-being-based metrics and measures look at broader categories of development with a specific focus on environmental sustainability, which is a major concern across the region. While these approaches have been under discussion for some time at a global scale, they have only recently begun to be put into practice.

What is behind these gaps between public discourse and policy development and between policy and practice? And how can we use participatory futures to close these gaps?

Shift from "economic poverty" to well-being

conversation about changing the metric for poverty

More cities provide spaces for "urban slums/shanty towns"

More organizations are focusing on training and capacity around "well being"

Post-2030 development agenda makes "well being" the focus

Shift from focus on jobs to self-sustaining modes of living and resilient types of lifestyles

❸ *What if the "next pandemic" is a digital pathogen?*

One of the issues the fellows looked at in the context of civic engagement was online exploitation and abuse. In their mapping, cybercrime was seen as increasing, but there was insufficient action taken to protect society, which ultimately leads to cybercrime and privacy violations being normalized.

This points to the issue of digital divides, including fair and equal access to digital literacy, and ultimately questions surrounding control, especially if governments take measures to restrict access in the name of cybersecurity.

How might national digital strategies best prepare for scenarios like these?
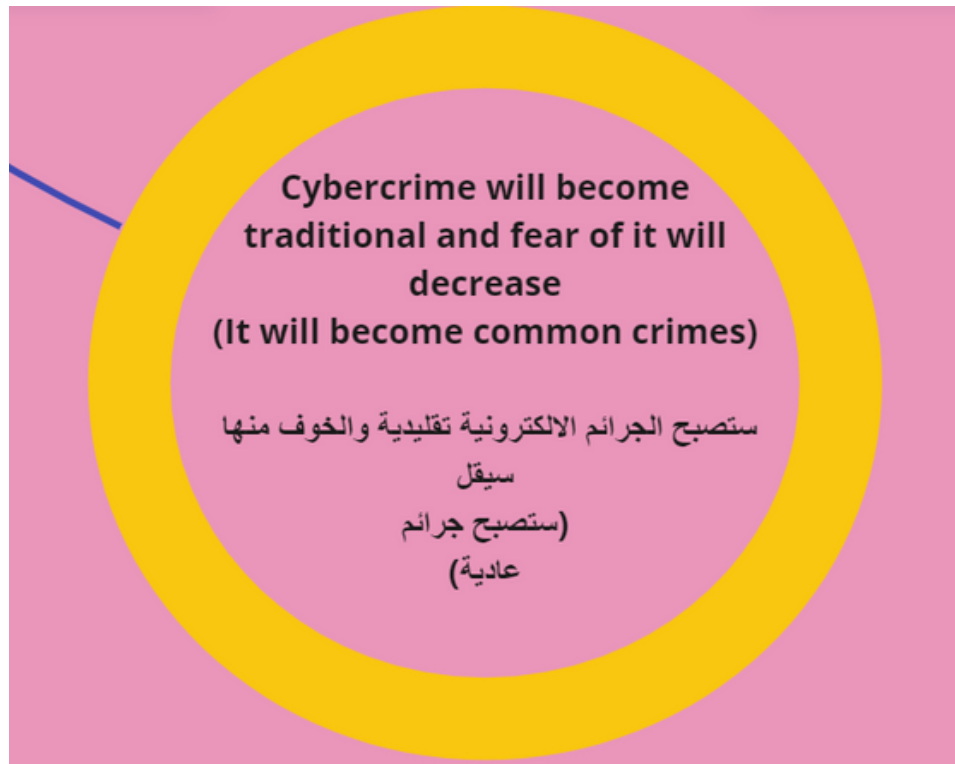
4 *What if the shift to "go green" leads to new regional tensions?*

Inequity among countries more and less able to lead on the transition toward "green" economies could spur tensions and conflict. In a mapping carried out by the fellows, social movements boycotting unsustainable businesses/industries and protesting energy insecurity were seen as a major force within the Transitional Future (10-30 years), during which the old collides with the new (i.e. the push for sustainability).

More directly, the shift to renewable energies could drive conflict in several ways, whether by scarce food resources being redirected to the production of biofuel, communities becoming displaced for the construction of large-scale renewable energy infrastructure projects, or fear of competition over renewable energy sources (such as ongoing tensions between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia over hydropower and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam).

How might we do better at enhancing the conflict sensitivity of environment and climate-related programming?
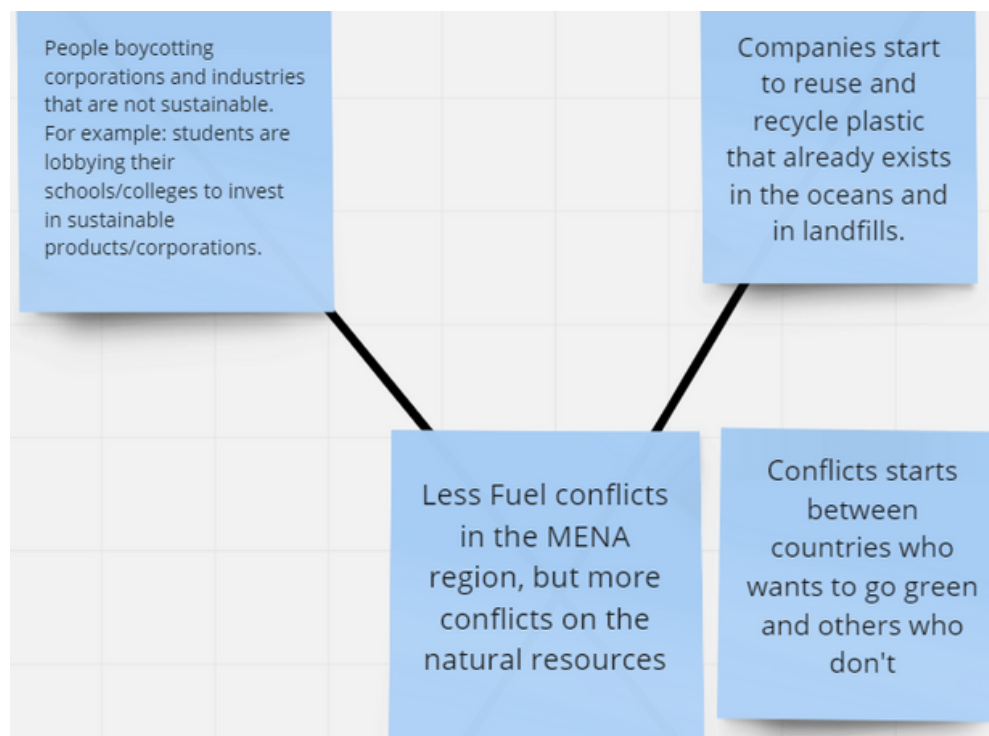
The Fellowship Learning Journey

Designed as a participatory futures engagement seeking to capture young people's narratives on the futures of climate action and civic engagement in the Arab States, the UNDP Youth Futures Fellowship also sought to develop and enhance the *futures thinking* skills of youth across the region, enabling them to envision and contribute to their preferred futures. The fellowship not only focused on futures thinking tools and methods but also on how young people could use and apply these approaches within their own communities and for challenges and opportunities of importance to them.

As a way to engage "unusual suspects" and tap into alternative modes of self-expression, the fellowship kicked off with an open call for participation that required a creative submission (poetry, artefacts, music, art, dance, essay, or other) rooted in one or both of the themes of climate action and/or civic engagement - the twin themes of UNDP's regional Youth Leadership Programme in 2020. The choice of themes reflected a recognition of the importance of young people's role in the realization of SDGs 13 and 16 in a region that has long been suffering the dire effects of climate change on livelihoods, food security, and a whole range of interlinked factors that in turn undermine peace and societal trust and disproportionately impact young people. For more information on the design of the call for participation and on the creative submissions, see Annex 1.

From over 400 creative submissions, 31 young people from 15 countries were selected to participate in the virtual Youth Futures Fellowship programme. The fellowship, running from November 2020 to January 2021, was a multi-session learning journey organized around activities and exercises delivered on Miro. Its key steps are shown on the next page.

1 Introduction to Transformative Futures

2 A Systems Approach to Mapping Signals

3 Scenarios: Stories about Alternative Futures

4 Participatory Futures Gaming Session at the UNESCO Futures Literacy Summit

5 Introduction to Participatory Futures

6 Participatory Futures Projects

In addition to the above workshops, the fellowship convened a public webinar series featuring leading futures thinkers from around the world:

- SIGNALS: The Signals are Speaking!, feat. Abril Chimal, Michael Mogensen, Nadia Ben Ammar

- SCIFI: World-Building and Experiential Futures, feat. Leah Zaidi

- SCENARIOS: Exploring Futures, feat. Shar Shahfari, Zahara Chetty, Daniel Riveong

- SIMULATIONS: Games and Epic Wins for a Better World, feat. Jane McGonigal and Sarah Poole

- STORYTELLING: Empowering Narratives about the Future, feat. Pupul Bisht, Zahra Abdihagi Mahamed, Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad

Click to access the UNDP Arab States Futures Webinar Series.

UNDP Arab States Futures Series

Join our webinar series between 24 Nov – 22 Dec!

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                  >>> SIGNALS, 24 Nov
Our               >>> SCI-FI, 2 Dec
sessions:         >>> SCENARIOS, 8 Dec
                  >>> SIMULATIONS, 16 Dec
                  >>> STORYTELLING, 22 Dec
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See the recordings: https://bit.ly/3mfMczD

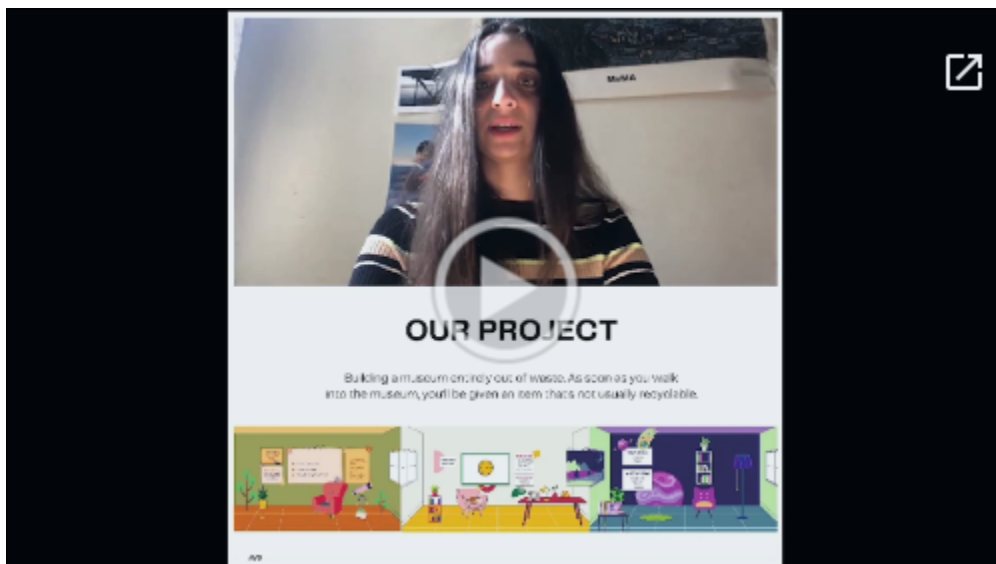@UNDP_Innovation @YLP_UNDP @UNDPArabic

Participatory Futures Projects

With the support of mentors from UNDP Country Offices and the Action Foresight Global Swarm, the fellows worked in teams on capstone participatory futures designs. These included, for example:

1

A museum built entirely out of waste that uses VR technologies to immerse audiences in different scenarios linked to linear as opposed to circular economy models, and to demonstrate the life cycles of different kinds of products.

OUR PROJECT

Building a museum entirely out of waste. As soon as you walk into the museum, you'll be given an item that's not usually recyclable.

2

A game titled "The World as I See it" featuring informational quizzes about the environment & climate change and allowing for joint play with other community members in envisioning various futures. Points collected through the game can be used for access to cultural events and engagements with local NGOs.
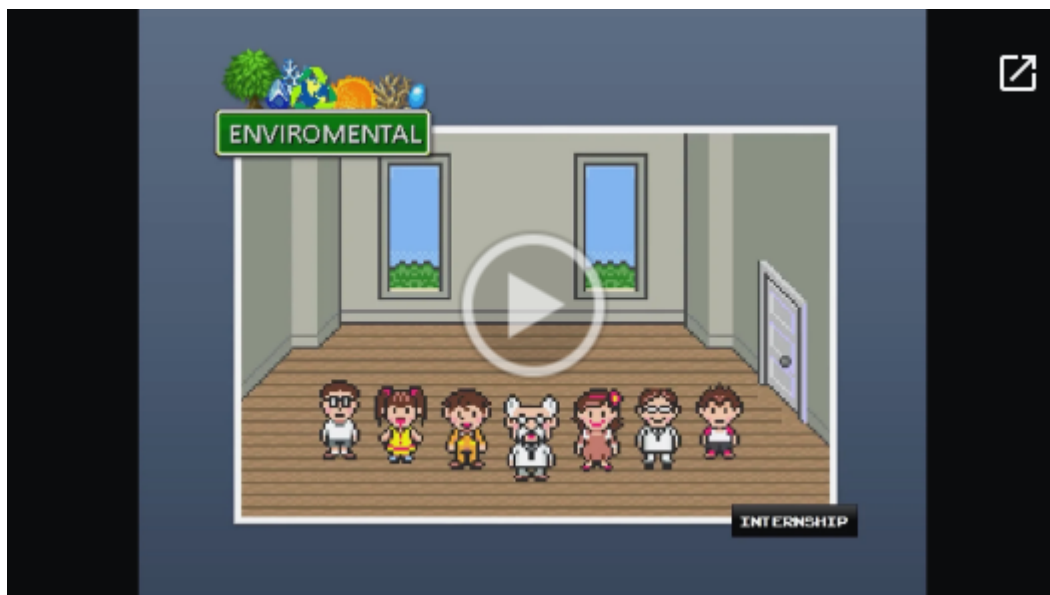
Impact of the Programme on the Fellows

Surveys conducted before and after the fellowship programme showed that fellows expressed feeling more prepared when thinking about their personal role in shaping the future. Fellows were also more likely to think on longer-term horizons (10 years or more). They found that uncertainty, even though uncomfortable, actually ensures that the future is not predetermined and increases the sense of agency.

> The fellowship kickstarted my professional transition from marketing to foresight.
>
> *Majd Assi*
> *Syria*

> Being able to put my ideas all together using the Verge framework helped me stretch, to be strategic, focused, and to go beyond the boundaries.
>
> *Nourhan Badr*
> *Egypt*

> These kinds of opportunities are so helpful for young people like me to provide a sense of belonging. I was a bit nervous in the beginning as I never even knew futures thinking existed before. I became excited after the first session, which turned fear into curiosity and wonder.
>
> *Zahra Shakarchi*
> *Iraq*

> The fellowship has gotten me thinking about the legacy that I will leave behind.
>
> What stood out to me the most is how this group of professional futurists don't have a clear answer for what the future looks like. It's a blank canvas. What I'm trying to say is that [it is so true] that "future studying" doesn't mean knowing what the future holds.
>
> *Salma Khalaf*
> *Lebanon/Palestine*

Annex 1: Creative Submissions

As a way to engage "unusual suspects" and tap into alternative modes of self-expression, the fellowship organized an open call for participation that required a creative submission (poetry, artefacts, music, art, dance, essay, or other) rooted in one or both of the themes of climate action and/or civic engagement. The submissions also had to be based on one of four alternative "imaginings of the future". The four imaginings come from the work of Jim Dator, who is one of the founders of the field of futures studies and a long-time advocate of futures thinking. The imaginings are:

Growth
is more than just a continuation of the present. In this future, the trends of today keep accelerating...both good and bad. Imagine everything that is exciting, worrying, hopeful, and scary about the here and now keeps going and growing!

Disciplined
is not just an attempt to avert a worse-case scenario. In this future, society is tightly managed and highly structured. Whether through citizen-driven sustainability or top-down control, discipline is seen as the only way forward!

New Beginnings
is a restart. In this future, there is a chance to start over. Many things from the past are no longer available, and resources may even be limited.

Transform
is the birth of a new world. Whether driven by technology or spirituality, an awakening leads to a time of artistic, educational, and civic renewal.

427
Applications

32%
Growth Imagining

30%
New Beginnings Imagining

Of the 427 applicants, the majority focused on the Growth (32%) and New Beginnings (30%) imaginings, with men primarily opting for the former and women for the latter. Close to half of all applicants focused their submissions at the intersection of the two themes, seeing civic engagement as an integral enabler of climate action.

Many of those who selected the "new beginnings" imagining acknowledged the importance of learning from failure. "No matter what you did in your previous story there is always a chance to write a new one". Some of those who selected the "transform" imagining seemed to do so because they saw imagining a new world as a therapeutic process in overcoming the fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

When asked about their greatest fears (and hopes) for their communities in 2030 applicants referenced a broad range of factors linked to environment and climate change (waste management, climate migration, water scarcity, desertification, renewables, urban planning and green spaces). Hopes and fears were "mirrored", in the sense that applicants held hope that significant progress could be made in these areas, progress that they saw as non-negotiable and the non-achievement of which would also be their greatest fear. Applicants concurred on the importance of improving school and university education, including civic education on environment and climate. Inequality and corruption were among the most frequently cited concerns, as was lack of progress (or even regression) in realizing basic freedoms and human rights (including gender inequality and homophobia).
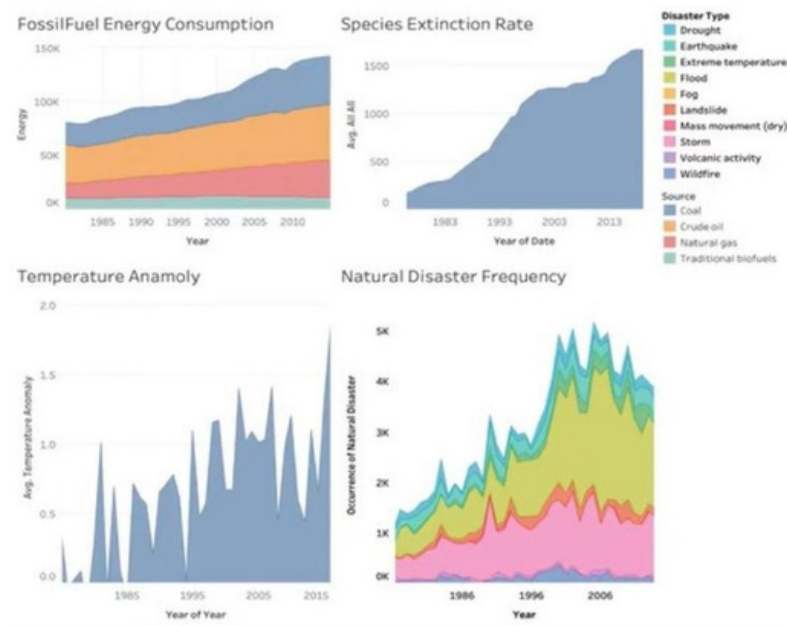
Examples of creative submissions

Based on the creative submissions, 31 young people from 15 countries were selected from among the applicants to participate in the virtual Youth Futures Fellowship programme. An Airtable gallery featuring the creative submissions of the selected Fellows is available [here](#). Three examples are included below.

Duaa AlBalawi, Saudi Arabia
In her <u>submission</u>, Duaa shared her own data visualizations mapping the overlapping trends between fossil fuel energy consumption, species extinction rates, temperature anomalies, and natural disaster frequency. "I asked my father how often he ate meat in his village and I kept hearing it was a celebratory meal, consumed maybe once or twice a year … and yet, he still doesn't see my point … our meat consumption has gone from once or twice a year to nearly every meal". "Maybe even my generation, the one I have the most hope for, will learn to become a part of this world, instead of trying to dominate it".

Examples of creative submissions

Abdullah Qais, Iraq
Abdullah submitted the cautionary pixel art piece, "The Midnight Sun". The lack of a green belt around Baghdad causes the metaphor "the midnight sun" where the sun gets so hot that midnight doesn't exist anymore.
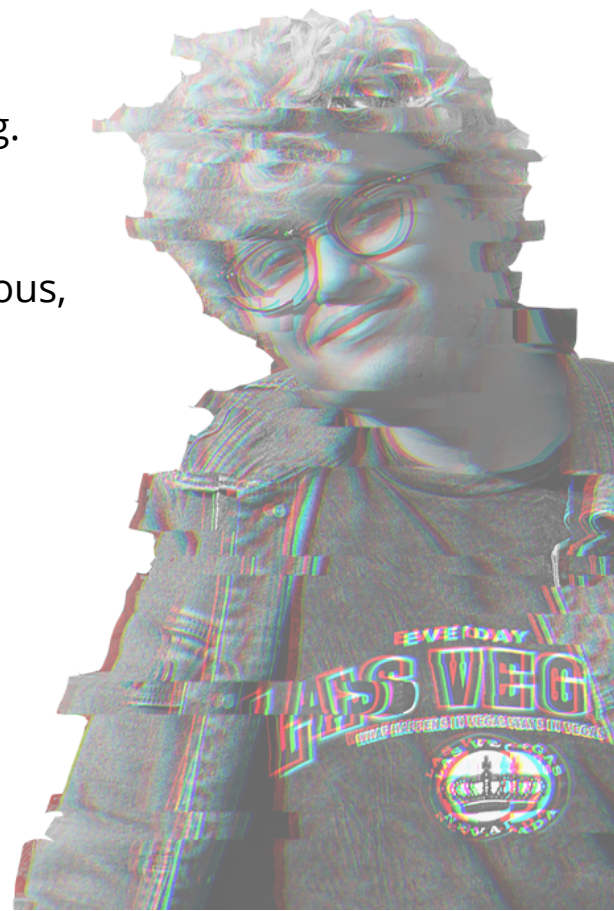
Examples of creative submissions

Some of us caved.
Some of us escaped.
But we relentlessly tried.
I imagined the day after this battle.
Our problems did not fade away.
Our worries did not fly away.
But I saw streets that weren't full of sad faces.
I saw skies that weren't constantly raining.
 I saw youthful spirits.
And I admitted to myself that only the young, only the dreamer, only the rebellious, can run.
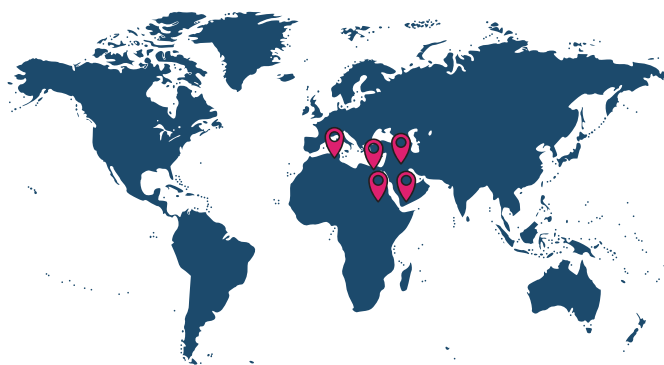And we did.

- Koussay Hazami, Tunisia

Annex 2: Futures Thinking in the Arab States
UNDP Country Office Initiatives

Iraq

- UNDP Iraq examined emerging trends using signals mapping, a key tool used in futures thinking to identify indicators of change, with a focus on disruptions to education delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of the exercise led UNDP to develop a roadmap for supporting blended learning, in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

Sudan

- In Sudan, UNDP partnered with the Institute for the Future to begin a local process for envisioning Sudan in 2030. Sudan 2030 was a long-term project to develop local visions of possible futures for Sudan to help facilitate dialogue between fragmented groups, build agency over the future, and influence sustainable development. Sudan 2030 used a new futures thinking process designed specifically to meet the needs of building peace and creating sustainable social change.

Tunisia

- In Tunisia, UNDP has applied a range of futures thinking approaches to inform the development of its Country Programme Document, including unconventional approaches such as a speculative design exercise on post-pandemic new normals, or digging deep into the implications of jellyfish blooms on Tunisia's shores.

Egypt & Yemen

- In Yemen, UNDP applied the International Futures (IFs) model (a forecasting tool developed by the University of Denver) to analyse the impacts of the war in Yemen across human, social and economic dimensions of development, and to explore the potential of key interventions to mitigate these impacts. IFs has also been applied in Egypt to map the country's development path as well as the potential outcomes and trade-offs from different development scenarios.

Annex 3: Further Resources

- UNDP Foresight Manual: Empowered Futures for the 2030 Agenda

- NESTA Report "Our Futures: By the People, For the People" and accompanying Game

- UNDP YFF Miro Templates for Designing a Participatory Futures Engagement

- Participatory Futures Gaming session at the UNESCO Futures Literacy Summit

- Airtable: Youth Futures Fellows' creative submissions to the programme

- Vlogs prepared by the fellows about their experience:
    - Part 1 by Diana Ishaqat
    - Part 2 by Saja Sallam