

SHAPING WHAT'S NEXT:

Exploring Probable, Possible,
and Preferable Futures



This document is a practical tool and thought-prompter to support nonprofits, funders, and networks through the current transition in the global development sector. It is designed to support strategic planning, scenario testing, and dialogue at multiple levels: individual, organizational, and system-wide.

The framework is grounded in futures thinking. Instead of predicting a single outcome, it explores three pathways:

- ① futures that are **probable**, based on current trends;
- ② futures that are **possible**, if emerging shifts take hold;
- ③ and futures that are **preferable**, if principles of justice, equity, and accountability are centered.

The goal is to move us forward to intentionally create a balanced, accountable, and effective system that delivers better outcomes with equity and efficiency.



HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

The insights presented here are not a forecast or fixed prescription, but a synthesis of collective intelligence organized into a framework for reflection.

The Possible/Probable Futures Matrix distills insights into recurring themes. It's an open framework: use what resonates, adapt what is useful, and leave the rest. Its purpose is to:



Help you reflect on your own role and assumptions.



Stress-test organizational strategies against multiple futures.



Identify leverage points for collective action across the ecosystem.



Spark deeper conversations about the futures we want to build.

HOW IT WAS CREATED

This tool was created through the TIME working group – a Humentum-led initiative with individuals from diverse perspectives and skillsets including sector changemakers, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) INGOs, and Kenyan SRHR civil society organizations (CSO). Over three months, TIME working group participants engaged in structured dialogue, sensemaking, and scenario exploration. The result? The Possible/Probable Futures Matrix emerged as a way to organize recurring themes, tensions, and possibilities.

POSSIBLE / PROBABLE FUTURES OVERVIEW & MATRIX

Download [the full matrix](#) here.

PROMISING / ENABLING

Sector Reform



PROBABLE

- Some reform gains traction through modest shifts in funding models, leadership norms, and cross-sector collaboration.
- Collaboration improves in certain areas but continues to be fragmented, siloed, and uneven.

POSSIBLE

- Power begins to rebalance as local actors, grassroots organizers, and regional coalitions set agendas, shape funding flows, and lead solutions.
- INGOs transition from implementers to enablers, strengthening local systems rather than replacing them.
- Cross-sector alliances emerge, linking humanitarian, development, climate, and justice movements with shared values and mutual accountability.

Government & Funding Systems



PROBABLE

- Funding remains volatile, with austerity pressures driving short-term priorities over long-term commitments.
- Regional coalitions gain visibility and strength but remain under-resourced and often overshadowed by donor-led agendas.
- Donor strategies begin to reference justice and equity, but alignment is partial and frequently subordinated to national interests.

POSSIBLE

- Governments assume stronger ownership of agendas, with donors shifting to supportive rather than directive roles.
- Philanthropy aligns into longer-term, coordinated strategies that reflect community priorities.
- South–South cooperation expands, with regional funds and cross-border collaborations offering alternatives to traditional donor dominance.

Organizational Models



PROBABLE

- Despite cuts, many organizations retain a core of skilled staff who adapt through multi-role responsibilities and creative problem-solving.

POSSIBLE

- Employment models shift toward distributed teams, flexible arrangements, and South–South collaboration, creating more resilient and diverse career pathways.

Narratives & Culture



PROBABLE

- Early narrative shifts introduce more language around decolonization, equity, and solidarity, though changes are often symbolic rather than structural.

POSSIBLE

- Civil society is widely recognized as strategic, visionary, and indispensable to systemic change.

Experimentation & Learning



PROBABLE

- Pockets of innovation demonstrate viable alternatives, but most remain at the pilot stage.
- Learning processes are still treated like projects, rarely embedded within organizational or system-wide practice.

POSSIBLE

- Experimentation is normalized across organizations as a principle, not just as donor-funded pilots.
- Global learning networks connect communities, practitioners, and researchers, accelerating knowledge exchange.

Technology / AI



PROBABLE

- AI tools are increasingly adopted for efficiency gains and community awareness campaigns, although use remains uneven and largely technocratic.

POSSIBLE

- AI enhances efficiency, policy analysis, and real-time knowledge management in inclusive and responsible ways.
- Digital platforms expand equitable access to resources and amplify voices traditionally excluded from decision-making.

CONSTRAINING / HARMFUL

Sector Reform



PROBABLE

- The system reorganizes without transforming — same logic, new labels, little redistribution of power.
- Movements and organizations stay in conversation mode, generating ideas but achieving limited traction.
- Civil society is forced into survival mode, leading to burnout, reduced capacity, and “brain drain” as staff exit the sector.

POSSIBLE

- Reform language hardens into permanent branding, where “localization” and “decolonization” become sector buzzwords detached from practice and organizational transformation impact.
- Competing reform agendas proliferate without coordination, creating incoherence, duplication, and reform fatigue.
- INGOs retrench into survival mode, cutting field presence and hollowing out local partnerships while preserving headquarters structures.

Government & Funding Systems



PROBABLE

- Donor funding remains volatile, with austerity driving cuts to long-term investments in favor of short-term crisis response.
- National interests dominate donor strategies, reinforcing geopolitical agendas.

POSSIBLE

- Philanthropy and private contractors dominate funding flows, but in fragmented, short-term, and unaccountable ways that undermine systemic change.
- Donor retreat accelerates, with funding tied almost exclusively to national security and migration agendas.
- South-South cooperation rises but struggles with transparency and equity, leading to new hierarchies rather than genuine redistribution of power.

Organizational Models



PROBABLE

- Funding volatility drives layoffs, short-term contracts, and brain drain, particularly among mid-career professionals in the Global Majority.
- The sector increasingly relies on unpaid or underpaid labor, fueling burnout and inequity.

POSSIBLE

- INGOs collapse or merge, leading to widespread job losses and the erosion of institutional memory.
- “Brain drain” intensifies as professionals exit the sector in response to funding cuts, precarious contracts, and reputational decline.
- Local actors are overburdened with compliance demands but underfunded, resulting in dependency.

Narratives & Culture



PROBABLE

- Opposition is emboldened.
- Use of terms like “localization” and “decolonization” doesn’t progress with structural change behind the language.
- Public trust in humanitarian institutions erodes as visible commitments fail to translate into meaningful practice.

POSSIBLE

- Retrogression of human rights accelerates, particularly in gender, sexual and reproductive health, and civic freedoms.
- Civic space contracts further, with legal restrictions, surveillance, and harassment silencing grassroots activism.
- Media ecosystems polarize: misinformation and disinformation gain traction, undermining trust.

Experimentation & Learning



PROBABLE

- Innovation remains extractive, with new approaches tested on marginalized communities but not co-created with them.
- Tokenism replaces genuine experimentation; donors and INGOs showcase “pilots” for optics rather than systemic learning.
- Learning is siloed within projects and lost at the end of grant cycles, preventing collective knowledge building.

POSSIBLE

- Experimentation is extractive; pilots serve donor visibility more than local impact, reinforcing inequity under the guise of “innovation.”
- Learning cultures erode, with organizations focusing on optics over substance, producing cycles of tokenism rather than transformation.
- Risk aversion spreads: fear of failure prevents bold testing or scaling of alternatives.

Technology / AI



PROBABLE

- AI deployment accelerates without adequate safeguards, leading to misuse and reinforcing inequities.
- Misinformation and disinformation spread faster through unregulated AI tools.
- Digital tools remain underutilized, fragmented across organizations, and treated as compliance burdens, reinforcing bureaucracy instead of agility.

POSSIBLE

- AI tools are increasingly used for surveillance, monitoring, and donor reporting, often without community consent or safeguards.
- Disinformation campaigns, amplified by unregulated AI, undermine democratic processes and fuel distrust.
- The “digital divide” deepens: Global South actors are excluded from shaping governance of AI and tech, reinforcing inequities in knowledge and power.

ACTING OUR WAY TOWARD A PREFERABLE FUTURE

So how do we act our way toward what is promising, to prepare for a more just, fair, balanced, accountable, and effective system(s)? How do we mitigate futures that are harmful or constraining?

The Possible/Probable Futures Matrix shows both risks and possibilities. Acting toward a preferable future means amplifying enabling trends while actively reducing the conditions that lead to constraining outcomes. This requires intention at every level including local, organizational, and systemic.



PREFERABLE FUTURE VISION

- 1 Local leadership & agenda-setting**

Decisions and resources are led by grassroots and regional coalitions, with INGOs taking on enabling rather than substitutive roles. Harmful futures are mitigated by ensuring local leadership is tied to decision-making power and funding control.
- 2 Collaborative, ecosystem-oriented sector**

Partnerships are built on shared values, deep listening, and mutual accountability. To avoid fragmentation, collaboration is designed to connect movements across issues, regions, and sectors.
- 3 Continuous learning and adaptation**

Experimentation and reflection are embedded as normal practice. Harmful patterns like extractive or tokenistic pilots are avoided by centering co-creation and shared ownership of results.
- 4 Redefined INGO roles**

INGOs support systems for finance, compliance, and coordination while ceding power in agenda-setting. This shift mitigates the risk of INGO collapse or irrelevance by clarifying their added value.
- 5 Equity & narrative transformation**

Civil society is respected as strategic and visionary. The language of decolonization and localization is grounded in action including transparency in funding flows, shifts in leadership, and authentic inclusion. This reduces the risk of “branding without change.”
- 6 Strategic, responsible use of AI & technology**

Digital tools are applied to strengthen efficiency, accountability, and access to knowledge, while strong safeguards prevent misuse in surveillance, misinformation, or inequitable automation.
- 7 Long-term coordinated resources**

Donors and philanthropy commit to sustained, predictable, and community-aligned investments. Harmful futures of piecemeal, short-term funding are countered through pooled funds, flexible finance, and alignment with locally defined goal.
- 8 Resilient & connected systems**

Governments, civil society, private sector, and international actors coordinate more effectively. This reduces the risk of siloed reforms and reinforces collective capacity to manage crises.
- 9 Workforce culture and well-being**

Employees are valued not only as implementers but as agents of learning and change. Organizational cultures prioritize care, inclusion, and psychological safety, making it possible for people to adapt and innovate without fear of failure. This addresses risks of burnout, brain drain, and survival-mode dynamics.
- 10 Engaging the wider ecosystem**

The sector interacts more deliberately with media, policy, and adjacent systems (trade, climate, tech, finance). By shaping narratives and influencing beyond the aid silo, the system strengthens legitimacy and relevance, amplifying ripple effects across society.

“When we work together, we expand the pie — not just fight for the same slice.”

“Fragmentation is the easy road — solidarity takes work and trust.”

COMPANION TOOL: USING THE FUTURES MATRIX

Download a [reflection worksheet](#) you can edit.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Use this as a **personal reflection exercise**. Set aside at least 15–30 minutes.

- How do my current mindsets and assumptions reflect the **probable** future?
 - Which of these futures feels most probable for my work and context — and why?
 - What assumptions am I making about the future that may need to be challenged?
- What would I need to unlearn or embrace to move toward the **preferable** future?
 - How might my skills, relationships, or leadership style need to evolve to thrive in a preferable future?
- Where do I see opportunities for my own leadership and influence?
 - Where do I see opportunities to experiment and learn, even if only in small ways?
 - How am I contributing to harmful patterns (e.g., tokenism, silos, extractive experimentation), and what's within my control to change?

PRO TIP: Do this with a trusted peer. They will surface blind spots you might not see on your own.





FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Use this as part of strategy development or review exercises (e.g., alongside SWOT, Theory of Change, or risk analysis). Recommended as a half-day team session.

- Which parts of our current strategy assume the system will stay the same?
 - Which quadrant(s) do we see ourselves operating in most often — and what does that say about our current approach?
- What adaptations will help us thrive in different future scenarios?
 - How resilient is our strategy if the probable futures play out in ways that constrain or harm?
 - Where can we shift resources, power, or decision-making toward the preferable futures?
- How can we create space for experimentation and learning without drifting into tokenism?
 - How do our internal mindsets, incentives, and practices either enable or block experimentation and adaptation?
- How do we balance what is worth conserving with what must change?
 - In what ways do we need to redefine our role (e.g., as enablers, connectors, advocates) to remain relevant and impactful?
 - What partnerships or alliances could strengthen our ability to shape possible futures into preferable ones?

PRO TIP: Rotate facilitation roles. Don't let only senior staff run the exercise — different perspectives surface different assumptions.



FOR THE ECOSYSTEM / SECTOR

Use in **multi-stakeholder dialogues** (INGOs, CSOs, governments, funders, media). Works best in workshop formats with breakout groups.

- Where are we seeing early signals of possible futures taking shape?
 - What systemic patterns do we see repeated across the quadrants and what do they reveal about where change is most urgently needed?
- What role should INGOs, governments, donors, local communities, and philanthropy play in enabling (not controlling) change?
 - How do the choices of governments, funders, INGOs, and local actors interact to either reinforce or disrupt harmful futures?
- How do we strengthen ripple effects across movements, sectors, and geographies?
 - What would it take to align diverse actors around a shared preferable vision?
 - Where are the leverage points where collective action could make the biggest shift toward preferable futures?
 - What would shared accountability for a preferable future look like — and how can we track progress?
 - How can we use narratives, storytelling, and cross-sector collaboration to move from possible to preferable futures?

PRO TIP: Invite funders and government into the conversation only after local actors have shaped the baseline insights.

MORE WAYS TO USE THE FUTURES MATRIX IN PRACTICE

1. Scenario Conversations

- Map your current assumptions against the quadrants.
- Ask: *What if the probable future unfolds? What if the possible future takes hold?*

2. Stress-Testing Strategy

- Place your strategic priorities in each quadrant.
- Explore: *Would they still hold up? What risks or blind spots emerge?*

3. Mindset Shifts

- Use the preferable vision to ask:
 - *What new behaviors, roles, or partnerships would this require?*
 - *Where are we stuck in the "probable" mindset?*





HOW TO KNOW IF IT'S WORKING

Like taking care of your health, you can't always see the evidence right away. You might feel an initial boost of energy, but will this work produce results?

Signals of good use

- New assumptions are made visible in your work.
- Marginalized perspectives are included and centered.
- Reflection leads to at least one practical experiment or shift in behavior.

Red flags

- Answers sound rehearsed or generic.
- Dominant voices monopolize the space. "Hallway" or "parking lot" conversations are happening, but those voices aren't being heard in the actual discussion.
- The exercise ends without commitments for action or follow-up.

Turning reflection into action

- **Short-term (next 3 months):** Identify one small experiment or behavior shift to test.
- **Medium-term (next strategy cycle):** Integrate insights into strategy and resource allocation.
- **Long-term (systemic change):** Align partnerships and accountability frameworks with the preferable futures.

The matrix is most powerful when it becomes a living practice, like risk management or stewardship. As a sector, we're moving through a shifting landscape – we need to be agile to adapt to the current situation while staying focused on the goal ahead. If we put our heads down and one foot in front of the other to get through the storm, we'll find ways of making progress to the future we know is possible.



ABOUT HUMENTUM

Humentum helps unlock effective nonprofit management. With over 300 learning offerings, a solutions-focused membership platform, and deep consulting experience in funding and finance; governance, compliance, and risk; and leadership and strategy, Humentum has strengthened thousands of NGOs, nonprofits, and their funders across the globe to become more resilient and sustainable.



ABOUT TIME

TIME (Transforming Institutional Models for Equity) is a collaboration-based initiative led by Humentum that brings together INGOs, CSOs, networks, and funders to explore and test what transformation looks like in practice. TIME helps actors navigate disruption and possibility by creating spaces for reflection and experimentation, and by co-creating practical tools that strengthen resilience, equity, and organizational change. Its learning spreads through networks and new contexts, creating ripple effects across the sector. Through its **Working Out Loud** approach, TIME shares insights in real time so others can adopt, adapt, and apply them.

To stay connected to this work, [sign up here](#).