Guide to the future brief series by Ecosistema Futuro

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Introduction

"When was it that we forgot the future?" asks the video introducing Ecosistema Futuro, which calls on Italy to place the future back at the centre of politics, society, the economy and institutions. To do so effectively, it is essential to study the future and develop foresight through rigorous research and analysis—producing evidence and insights that highlight the importance of exploring and anticipating the future beyond the slogans so often—and not always critically—offered by political, commercial and even educational discourse.
This is the origin of the Future Brief series, developed by Ecosistema Futuro with contributions from universities, research centres and foundations within the network, in collaboration with foresight experts. This guide outlines the objectives, research programme, methodologies, as well as the potential and limitations of the series. Its aim is to provide a solid basis for informed debate, improve decision-making today, and inspire public institutions, private organisations and the media to engage with the future using rigorous tools.

Who are future briefs for?

Although scrutinised by an editorial committee through a detailed review process, the briefs are not academic articles but rather texts aimed primarily at public and private decision-makers. They are generally short and can be easily used by the media and a broader public. They provide a knowledge base grounded in a solid and credible assessment of alternatives and their potential consequences, stimulating debate and encouraging readers to imagine different possible futures, along with the opportunities and risks they entail.

Future briefs are an innovative experiment for Italian research

In Italy, there is no scientific series dedicated to exploring the future through scenarios. Society is evolving rapidly and is inherently complex, shaped by a vast number of interacting variables, trends and events that generate ever-changing and unpredictable trajectories. Analytical approaches, which are effective in examining specific aspects of society and informing policies and decisions, often struggle to capture this complexity, leading to uncertainty and undermining the quality of decision-making.

As a result, we often lag behind reality, reacting to it rather than shaping it. We provide sectoral responses to systemic problems, often ignoring or underestimating the drivers of change that affect the relevance and effectiveness of plans and strategies. Policies, innovations and investments that seem important today may no longer be so just a few years later, overtaken by the speed of change[1]. The ability to look to the future is therefore essential to anticipate risks and seize opportunities, but also to imagine today the aspirations and needs of future generations, as well as the opportunities created by emerging trends that are often still unexplored.

Scenario-building—one of the key methodologies of foresight and future studies—addresses the need for a long-term perspective by offering "maps" to navigate an uncertain future. Its aim is not to predict, but to outline the tools needed to achieve a desired future. In this spirit, we have developed this series of future briefs. The overall goal is to introduce the use of scenarios as a stimulus for public debate. While still relatively uncommon in Italian research, scenarios have been widely used internationally by governments and businesses since the 1960s. The specific aim of each future brief is to provide concrete topics for discussion, helping to inform decisions made today and make them more effective.

The aim is to nurture debate on the future by providing authoritative, credible and original content that encourages politicians and decision-makers to formulate and promote farsighted policies today in order to build a sustainable and prosperous future. It also seeks to guide citizens and their demands towards approaches that go beyond short-term outcomes and focus on the wellbeing of future generations, a principle enshrined in our Constitution since 2022.

Multi (inter-, trans-) disciplinarity

The concept of multidisciplinarity (including inter- and transdisciplinarity) has received growing attention in recent years, particularly in the design of major European and national research programmes[2]. At the same time, there is increasing recognition of the need to promote governance systems that harness synergies between sectoral policies and programmes. The methods and tools of foresight—and, more broadly, of future studies—are among the most effective ways to pursue these aims: the further we look towards the long term, the greater the complexity and uncertainty, but also the importance of the interconnections between sectoral trends and phenomena.

In developing this series of future briefs, we have chosen to adopt, as far as possible, a systemic approach that not only analyses the drivers of change (trends, megatrends, weak signals), but explores their interactions in the medium to long term, thus ensuring that the scenarios debated are internally consistent.

In practical terms, the future briefs combine thematic expertise with scenario-building capabilities typical of foresight. Developing scenarios requires careful consideration of the interactions between the most rigorous scientific disciplines—where trends are easier to predict and quantify, such as climate or population—and those in which qualitative aspects prevail. The evolution of society is shaped by value-driven choices, policies and directions, as well as by uncertainties and risks that are difficult to anticipate. Ultimately, it is people who shape the future, bringing with them all their complexity. Integrating these elements is essential to imagining possible futures while grounding the analysis in reality.

[1] Khan, H. 1962. *Think the Unthinkable*. Horizon Press, New York.
[2] See *Verso FP10*, A. Ricci et al. - APRE 2024.

Futures (plural)

As noted above, the future is uncertain, and the trends shaping it are numerous and complex. For this reason, we speak of "futures", in the plural, rather than attempting to mask this uncertainty behind the illusion of being able to predict what will happen[3]. The approach we have adopted, inspired by foresight[4], helps us to imagine and explore alternative futures and reflect on the pathways needed to achieve—or avoid—them.

The underlying process is outlined in Figure 1. It begins with the identification of drivers of change relevant to the theme under analysis (horizon scanning), then selects those with the greatest impact and uncertainty (critical uncertainties), and finally examines how their possible trajectories may lead to alternative future scenarios, which are then presented to policymakers and decision-makers responsible for shaping the future.

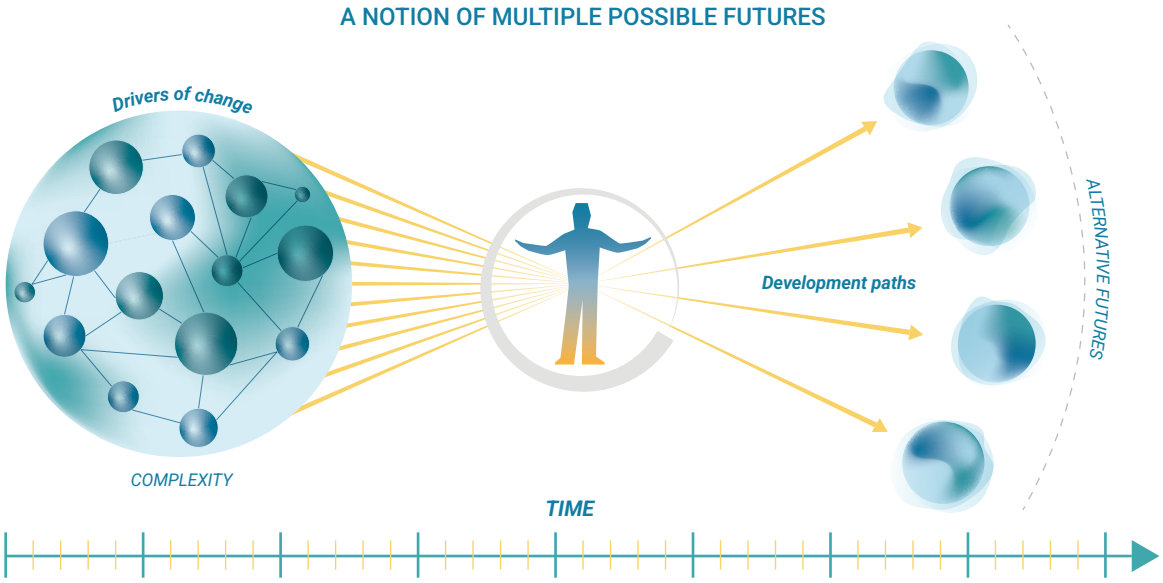

Figure 1 – Complexity and alternative futures Adapted from Society in Need of Future[5]

The future briefs present alternative, plausible and coherent scenarios in response to specific research questions. Comparing scenarios in itself stimulates debate. Authors are asked to identify a "desirable future", often aligned with one of the objectives of Ecosistema Futuro: identifying pathways to a sustainable future in which widespread wellbeing is ensured for all, within planetary boundaries (in line with the United Nations Agenda 2030 and the Pact for the Future). Even when they do not result from a full foresight exercise, these briefs are valuable in stimulating and advancing research on the future. They are intended to spark discussion and encourage reflection on key questions about the future, helping to build a culture that is forward-looking and guided by long-term ambition.

We know that there is a narrative battle over the future. We are aware that others could define their desirable future in a different way, for example one in which profit is more important, or where technology is more advanced, or where wellbeing is guaranteed to just one country or just one part of society. This battle "among possible futures" has a decisive impact on the strategic choices and investments made today. For this reason, we must never stop asking ourselves what future we want, also because, as some say, if we do not think about the future we want, someone else will do it for us. And that does not strike us as a beneficial and farsighted choice.

[3] See as example *Crise de la prévision*, essor de la prospective, M. Godet - PUF 1977
[4] The English term *foresight* has not yet found an Italian equivalent that is conceptually faithful. The translation "previsione strategica" often adopted even in official documents, actually refers to the concept of *forecasting*, which is quite different.
[5] Wilhelmer, D. (2018). *Society in Need of Future: Complementary Foresight as a Method to Co-create Transition*. In: Carayannis, E., Campbell, D., Efthymiopoulos, M. (eds) Handbook of Cyber-Development, Cyber-Democracy, and Cyber-Defense. Springer, Cham. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09069-6_27

Beyond the short term

Addressing the challenge of sustainability helps to stimulate long-term reflection and decision-making, which can also lead to major innovations, such as the 2022 constitutional reform that introduced the principle of safeguarding the interests of future generations—those yet to be born. This was followed, in October 2025, by Parliament's approval on the Intergenerational Impact Assessment for legislation. However, as Warren Buffett observed, "[...] when human politicians choose between the next election and the next generation, it's clear what usually happens"[6]. Ecosistema Futuro's first commitment is therefore to promote a genuine cultural shift towards forward-looking governance, based on a long-term perspective, the ability to "take the long view", and a commitment to overcoming short-termism[7].[8]

The bond between futures and innovation

Those who think about the future include innovators in both the public and private sectors, as well as researchers and those working to develop concrete solutions (such as young inventors and start-ups). Innovation involves imagining new solutions to real-world problems, but also anticipating future challenges that have not yet been fully recognised.

For innovation to be successful and sustained over time, it must be able to address current needs while preparing for those of the future, serving both today's society and that of tomorrow, and anticipating and guiding change. In this sense, thinking about possible futures helps to inspire innovation today, while also identifying which solutions are more likely to succeed because they respond to needs that are currently marginal. For example, in the field of industrial policy, this means envisioning the future of Italian society and understanding how the country's manufacturing sector, as well as its territories and infrastructure, will need to evolve.

Foresight developed over recent decades has played a key role in freeing the concept of innovation from a purely technological perspective.

Thematic briefs, methodological briefs

The series includes two types of publication:

- Thematic briefs respond to a specific research question. For example: What are the scenarios for public health in Italy over the next fifty years? The goal of these documents is to stimulate debate among stakeholders and decision-makers across a wide range of issues (socioeconomic, technological and value-based) that require innovative policies and strategies for a sustainable future.

- Methodological briefs focus on specific aspects of the techniques used in future studies—for example, those based on foresight or the analysis of megatrends—or address methodological questions, such as how to integrate quantitative and qualitative information in scenario building.

  This type of brief, which is aimed at a more specialised audience, seeks to increase awareness of and familiarity with the tools used in this field. Foresight, in fact, draws on a wide and diverse range of methodologies and instruments, and is a continuously evolving discipline—an evolution that methodological briefs aim to reflect.

[6] Quoted from *Intergenerational Foundation* - www.if.org.uk/2013/05/14/quote-27-2.
[7] See for example MacAskill, W. 2022. *What We Owe the Future*, Basic books.
[8] Di Donato, G, e Luca Miggiano. 2025. *Una governance anticipante per l'Italia. Disegnare il futuro anche nell'interesse delle future generazioni*. ASviS & Ecosistema Futuro.

The research agenda

Over coming months future briefs will be published on a wide range of themes.

In creating this series we obviously at first thought of drawing on existing megatrend classifications, such as those of the European Commission or of the Millennium Project. However, a more organic approach was ultimately adopted, whereby priority themes were selected based on various criteria, including the level of uncertainty (and thus the scope for meaningful debate and room for manoeuvre for policymakers and decision-makers), the potential impact of innovative policies, as well as the urgency perceived by key stakeholders and the resulting potential for mobilisation.

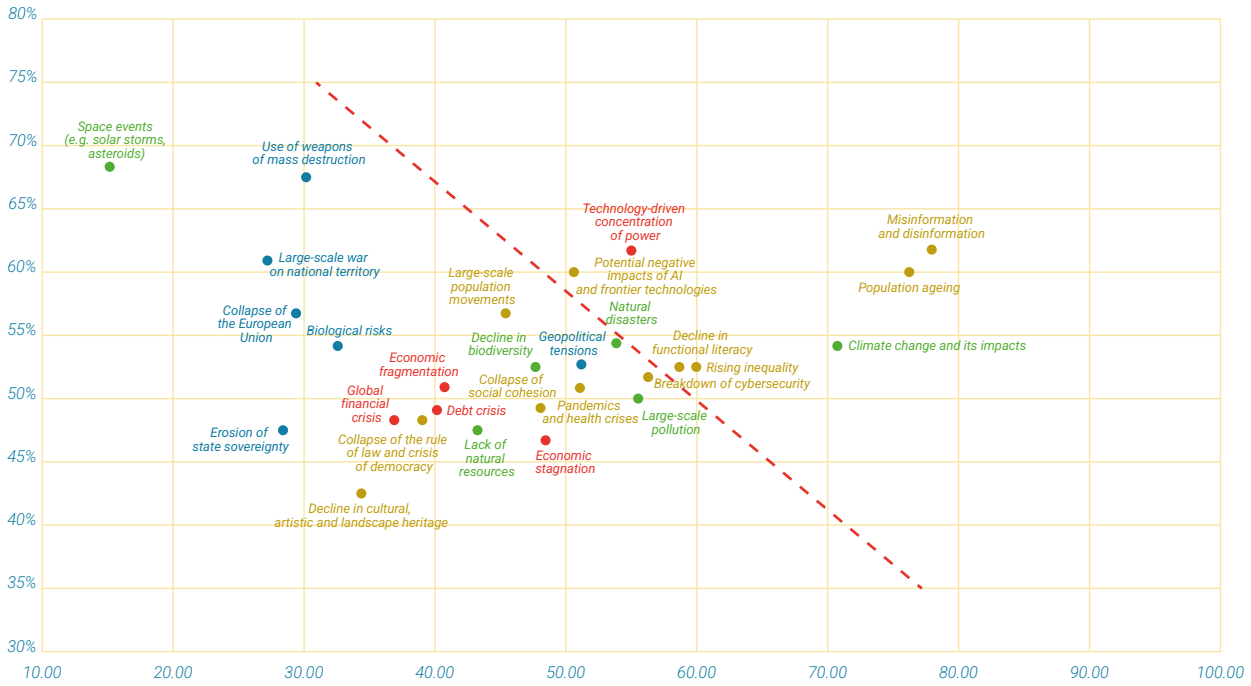

Figure 2 – Thematic mapping. The image is the result of a survey carried out in October 2025. The survey, organised in preparation for the co-creation workshop, saw the participation of around 50 experts from the institutions that are the founders of Ecosistema Futuro. The survey is inspired by the categories of the United Nations Global Risk Report published in 2025 (UN. 2025. Global Risk Report), but focusses on Italy. The image compares the seriousness of the risks (x-axis) to the country's preparedness to respond to these risks (y-axis). Although not being scientifically valid (given the limited sample), this mapping nonetheless represented a useful instrument to gather ideas for the research agenda of future briefs.

In order to define priorities, participants in Ecosistemauturo were invited to reflect on their most pressing future-related question. In parallel, the editorial committee identified themes which seem decisive for future evolution and had not been raised by the participants. Over time, the body of future briefs will form a coherent set capable of covering the most important issues, possibly with more than one publication addressing the same topic from different perspectives.

The choices made by the editorial committee also drew on the findings of the recent UN Global Risk Report, interpreted from an Italian perspective. While the severity of environmental risks (such as climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss) clearly emerges, several of the priority themes reflect the difficulty Italian society faces in addressing demographic, technological and socioeconomic trends shaped by underlying megatrends.

Limits of the series

We are already aware of some limitations of the series, and others may emerge over time. The first is that developing scenarios requires a rigorous, participatory process, often structured around one or more workshops in which experts bring their data and knowledge together to build reference scenarios using appropriate methodologies.In other words, it is a question of accessing and combining the ”collective intelligence” of a pool of experts who can look at an issue from various viewpoints. The scenarios must then be validated with Italian and international experts to provide coherence to the quantity of information and knowledge that flows into the scenarios themselves. The scenarios start from the quantitative knowledge of the past and present as an essential lever to build possible future narratives, which are then in their turn analysed and validated with quantitative instruments and models.

In the future briefs which will be published in coming months, it has not always been possible to follow this process. If in some cases it was possible to refer to scenarios offered in the literature (for example those produced by the European Commission), in others the choice was made to include only elements of scenarios, in the belief that these can still offer a methodological indication. The goal is to contribute to the adoption of a mindset based on the idea that “the future is open”. This means identifying key drivers and trends of change in society and the economy, imagining alternative scenarios—including those that may seem impossible today but are logically plausible (such as a global pandemic or the collapse of institutions in the world’s largest democracy)—and, ultimately, defining a desirable future.

Ownership and participation

In order to be able to impact on policies and strategies, investigations into futures must involve not only relevant experts, but the whole range of stakeholders concerned: researchers, public officials and managers, representatives of civil society and intermediate bodies, etc. In fact, while for a long time studies on the future were the prerogative of a small circle of experts, it is now firmly established that only through co-creation mechanisms is it possible to attract the interest of decision-makers and guarantee their adherence to the directions that emerge from the analysis. For this reason Ecosistema Futuro, through its research, promotes and develops participatory foresight, including with the operational support of the other parts of the network.

The second limitation is that future briefs are inherently “thematic” and do not address society as a whole. We might say that they shed light on the connections between one or more themes, but to consider the system as a whole it is necessary to construct complex scenarios in which these themes interact in a coherent and plausible way. This is the aim of another project within our research unit, which explores comprehensive scenarios for Italy to 2050 and beyond.

Aware of these limits, we nonetheless think that the series offers a new and important instrument in the Italian panorama. We encourage readers to explore it, to comment on the publications and to contact us with new future-related questions to be considered in forthcoming work, as well as proposals for collaboration. It is possible to do so by writing to ecosistema.futuro@asvis.net or by contacting Andrea Ricci, Senior researcher at Isinnova and editor-in-chief of the series (aricci@isinnova.org).

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