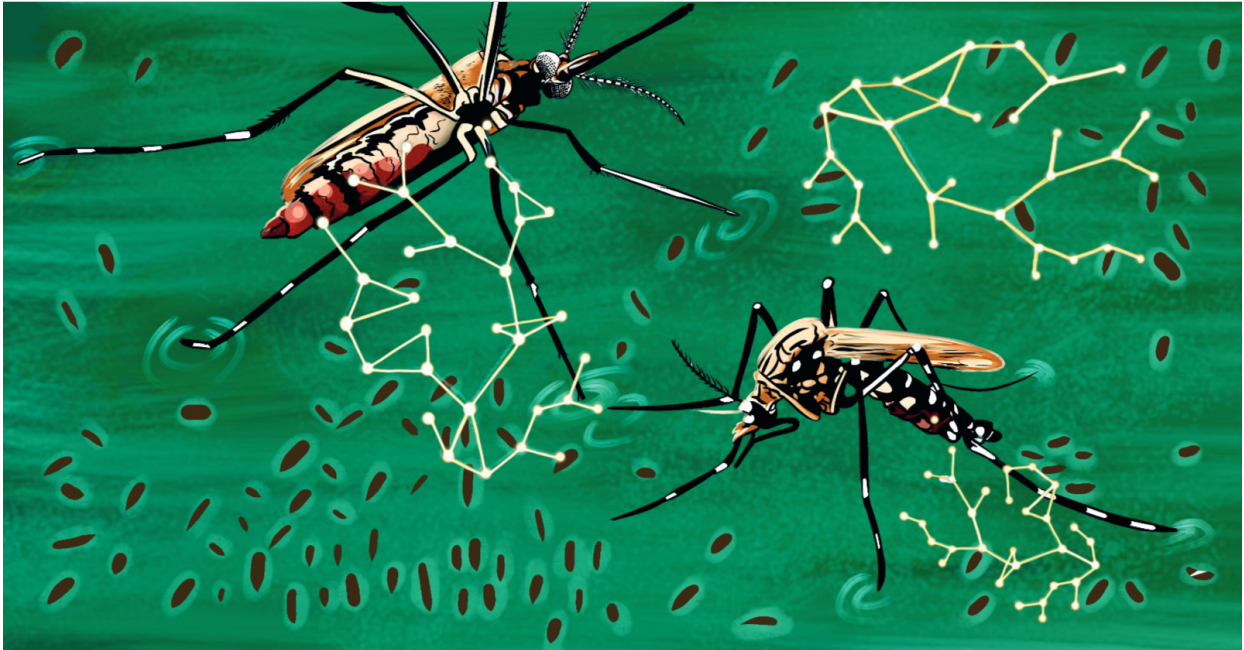


Early warnings and predictable surprises

Preparing for the future



How to prepare strategic responses to future challenges and opportunities however surprising they are

The *Long Food Movement* report is one recent attempt to think through and lay out some of the elements that could help food movements serve up meaningful change in the next 25 years.

A Long Food Movement
Transforming Food Systems by 2045

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ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

etc GROUP
monitoring power
tracking technology
strengthening diversity

#LongFoodMovement

A typology of the future

Sudden and seemingly surprising real-world events can shift the tides of history and politics in immensely powerful ways. Even when such events have been predicted as something that might happen in the future, they still come to almost all of us as a shock. The Covid-19 pandemic is an example of this. We need to pay attention to these predictable surprises just as much as expected events.

Expected events: Some initiatives are planned and designed to drive change one way or another. For example, regular political elections, UN conferences, long wars and large public protests etc. Social movements promoting human rights, justice and the protection of our planet, often work to build, create or influence these predictable events – as our opponents do.

Predictable Surprises: But there are sudden and extraordinarily disruptive events that seem to come out of nowhere with the potential to change the fundamental dynamics of societies, whether locally, regionally or globally. Examples include military coups and terrorist attacks, massive storms or floods, pandemics, economic bubbles, supply system failure, technological disasters or crop failures. These are futures that are bound to happen individually or together during the coming century, possibly on a huge scale.

When they happen, such world-changing events seem to catch everyone by surprise, even though later analysis shows that we already understood their roots and origins. Perhaps some studies' results had already predicted their likelihood. But they were surprises, predictable surprises.

Early Warnings/Early Listeners: History provides many examples of early warnings when nobody was listening – perhaps, nothing was in place to hear and respond to the warnings. One could include the rise of the far-right in politics, glyphosate poisoning of living systems, the ecocide caused by herbicide-resistant GMOs, zoonotic disease risk from intensive farming and the scaling up of corporate land-grabs. In each case civil society raised the issue but couldn't find an audience soon enough (often including civil society itself).

Predictable surprises are virtually always multi-sectoral: the suppression of populations can lead to wars, which leads to pandemics. Both together guarantee a famine; wars also allow new paths for the powerful to grab land from the communities who are deriving their livelihood from it. In most cases, “food” may not be the first moving factor in the cascade of crises. And the raise of the alarm may come from the health movement, women, racialized and other dispossessed communities, the peace activists or the environmentalists. The social movements working to intervene these events may be a critical part of how these crises evolve. And it is clear that civil society needs to build systems that can provide ‘early warnings’ for these events. But still, food will be a critical part of the response.

Because these crises can drive massive social, economic, cultural and environmental disruption and change, we need to build capacities for ‘early warning’ systems. There are extensive implications of ignoring ‘predictable surprises’. As we approach the mid-2020s we appear to be living in a time of escalating unexpected events, to the extent that the word ‘permacrisis’ has become commonplace. If civil society can collectively anticipate upcoming shocks and opportunities in the coming years, we stand a better chance of being collectively prepared.

As part of our preparation for these likely scenarios, we may want to draw on at least two ways in which civil society has responded before:

1 **Surprise parties**, where civil society orchestrates initiatives intended to catch corporations or governments off guard. This enables us to capture ‘first mover advantage’, as occurred in the Terminator campaign at the CBD in 2000.

2 **Sleepover surprises**, where civil society initiatives are put in motion but may not bear fruit until later, where ‘later’ might mean a predictable surprise or act as a surprise party for which we are prepared.



An analogy: black and grey swans

Black swans: In 2007, financial researcher Nassim Nicholas Taleb published *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. In it, he argued that unexpected low probability events can nonetheless have a very high impact. He called these low probability, high impact events 'black swans' (the name is based on European colonialists' discovery, upon arriving in Australia, that not all swans were white, as their naturalists had previously assumed).

The grey swan: While Black Swans are, for all practical purposes, an unpredictable event, predictable surprises take people unaware, but are not really so unexpected. These are events which have in fact been predicted or warned about as likely to occur – but at some unknown point in the future. Drawing on Taleb's analogy some have called these 'grey swans'. A clear example is the Covid-19 pandemic. Governments had agreed that a potentially disastrous human pandemic would hit at some time and that it could come in the form of a respiratory virus. And yet...

Sometimes, coming events are more certain, like climate change, but seem far away, meaning that urgent action is deprioritised. Sometimes events are ignored by policymakers (for example, the mid-term impact of agrochemicals provoking a pollinators collapse). Others aren't acted on because we don't have the capability to detect them until they are too close to be averted.

Predictable surprise: an event that is high impact, unpredictable in timing, place or form and that we really should have seen coming!

Understanding predictable surprises, some factors to consider...

Horizon scanning: We can identify possible predictable surprises and prepare for them. Identifying 'predictable surprises' is something our movements can do right now – with a bit of research, particularly using 'horizon-scanning' approaches. Horizon-scanning refers to a range of ways of thinking about different possible futures. It requires a deliberate and sustained effort to think outside our usual immediate areas of focus in order to notice and identify bigger trends, concerns or opportunities normally at, or beyond, the limit of time over which we normally think.

Fragility: Predictable surprises can arise out of fragile, complex systems. While disruptive events have happened throughout history, these days the best place to look for and expect significant large scale predictable surprises in which human interventions have become ever more complex such as hi-tech food, financial or governance systems, especially where they are interacting with equally natural-systems, such as ecosystems, climate systems, social systems or the human body.

Pivot points: Predictable surprises may be a threat – but also an opportunity. While examples of predictable surprises include large 'problems' for society, such as pandemics, dangerous climate change, large-scale wars or financial collapse, it is also possible to envisage positive surprises – like the emergence of ethical consumption movements, or the self-organized neighborhoods rescuing and reconstructing the cities after an earthquake. Sometimes a predictable surprise may be a threat that carries the seeds of a positive opportunity (such as the rapid growth of mutual aid networks that grew out of the Covid-19 pandemic).



Opportunity: We can look for opportunities that might arise from predictable surprises. Well-resourced problematic industries may put in place just-in-case plans to capitalize on disruptive events when they happen. One clear demonstration of how corporations can be opportunists came just days after Russia launched a war on Ukraine. With global grain and fertilizer stocks suddenly in jeopardy, groups representing industrial agriculture companies were already petitioning the European Union to drop its recently-approved sustainable farming plans in order to ramp up chemical-based industrial food production. It was a classic of the genre that Naomi Klein has called 'disaster capitalism'.

Scenarios: We have tools to think through how predictable surprises may play out. Business, governments and movements alike can use 'scenario planning' tools to think through how a predictable surprise might play out and to imagine different intervention strategies to change the direction of events. There are several methodologies, including use of theatre and other art-forms, that can provide a helpful approach to thinking through scenarios ahead of time.

Foreshadowing: We can use predictable surprises to change the conversation before they happen. We don't have to wait until a predictable surprise occurs to take advantage of it. Cultural storytelling and foreshadowing can be a powerful way of showing people how a predictable surprise might upturn lives and what could be done now to either forestall it (if it's high risk) or hasten the changes it might set in motion (if it's likely to be beneficial). In the old days this was THE way for peoples to prepare for the unknown, to educate the little ones.

History and its rhymes: we can learn lessons from the past. Mark Twain said: "History never repeats itself, but sometimes it rhymes". If we look at episodes in the past that were surprising but predictable, and that changed power relations, we can look for their rhyme in our present circumstances, because beyond the particular vicissitudes, the individual lives, history shows an underlying structure that we seek to understand.

What predictable surprises might be on the horizon for food systems?



In the past

Looking back 40 years some of examples of predictable surprises relating to food systems, in addition to the recent Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, include:

- The beginning of life-forms patenting
- The epidemic of land grabs linked to a biofuels bonanza and the consequent 2008 food riots
- The rise of metabolic diseases
- Logistics logjams in the global food supply
- Global consumer and smallholder resistance to GMOs
- Emergence of the food sovereignty movement

Some of the *surprise parties* that turned the wheel unexpectedly included:

- Introducing the seed issue in FAO conferences in the early 1980s
- Pesticide Action Network's 'Dirty Dozen' campaign around the same time
- GRAIN's revelations about land grabs in 2007

And examples of the longer timescale sleepover parties exemplifying the need for long-run planning:

- Pressure on Western governments to accept the formation of CFS during the 1974 World Food Conference – a structural initiative that was immediately neutered but was later brought forward by civil society in 2008 – 09 when the circumstances were right
- FAO Seed Treaty
- Cartagena protocol and the Nagoya protocol
- Rights of Peasants and Indigenous Peoples initiative.

In the future

Drawing on the early warning systems we have available at the moment, and the trends that are apparent right now, some examples of likely predictable surprises in the next 25 years that could disrupt food systems include:

- More pandemics
- 'Multi-breadbasket failures' where more than one major food commodity growing region has failing harvests
- Collapse of data infrastructure or cyber attacks
- Extreme weather events from climate change
- Partial or total collapse of pollinator and other insect populations
- Problems arising from artificially engineering the climate
- Geopolitical changes in the financial system (de-Dollarization of economy?)
- Open war between US and China

We cannot just horizon scan for food crises per se – we need to be working with others to scan the horizon for every kind of crisis and then see what role the food movements and other struggles for the web of life can play. While food movements should prepare for predictable surprises and plan surprise parties specific to the movements, they must also prepare/plan how to participate in surprises that originate in other sectors, prioritising cross sectoral collaborations with other movements from the outset.

These are some ideas for thinking about the future collectively and systematically. We invite you to ask other questions, imagine other scenarios, especially what we could propose thinking on the future generations.

