INCLUSIVE AND PLURAL FUTURES: A WAY FORWARD

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MASTERS IN DESIGN, STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND INNOVATION
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The following is a detailed overview of just the proposed Lotus framework in my masters research, and to provide a window into what an interactive framework could look like once it is dynamic and online.

A copy of my research can be found online [here](#).

What is the framework?

The Lotus framework is a culmination of research that included expert interviews with 13 practitioners around the world, an anonymous online survey also directed at practitioners, and my own futures practice the past few years. It is a dynamic and interactive framework intended to guide practitioners (old and new) who want to design an inclusive futures program. The framework aims to challenge pre-existing systems of privilege that practitioners might be unintentionally taking with them into their work, having them reflect on themselves and their practice. The framework aims to push practitioners in the field to reflect on and create opportunities for **axiological** (how we prescribe value/worth), **epistemological** (how we conceive, transfer, validate knowledge), **ontological** (what we consider a part of the field) and **methodological** (how we engage with our concepts) plurality.

Collectively, the model aim to ask us, as practitioners, to self reflect on and question our own mental models, biases, and worldviews. They also attempt to move us away from [unintentionally or otherwise] defining 'the other' within our own terms [of definition].

Who is the framework for?

Any practitioner or group of practitioners (current or new) who wants to be more authentically inclusive work and feel they could use some support in the process.

To help practitioners make a strong case for the need for inclusivity to clients, donors, employers, and haters.

What 'accepted principles' is the framework intentionally challenging?

The Lotus framework is intentionally modelled as it is. The framework is-

- conceptually inspired by the Lotus flower's metaphoric meaning in Hinduism and Buddhism

- visually modelled as a Lotus flower to offer an alternative framing to Western visual norms. We must note Western cultural heterogeneity and dominance exists not just over the tools, techniques, and epistemology of our field, but also our visual communication;

- the entire Lotus plant and not just the petals as a nod to holism vs reductionist thinking;

- intentionally not to be a static, linear or 2d diagram. In this I am led from my firm belief that inclusion, equity, anti-colonialism are all very deeply nuanced, complicated and complex topics. As such, I wanted to create a framework which is dynamic and reflects the capacity to absorb that complexity, and the nimbleness to be able to grow and change as my/our collective knowledge on the issue deepens and necessitates this flexibility;

- to be more widely accessible online as a tool once it is ready to be shared there;

- envisioned as a community asset - where it will link as additional resources to the work, research, frameworks of other practitioners across fields who are dedicated towards advancing our thinking on inclusion, equity, de/anti-colonialism, holism, etc., I see this as a collective act of resistance and new path forward, not my singular one.

The Lotus flower, as seen in Hinduism and Buddhism, as inspiration and metaphor.

My framework uses the whole flower/plant, not just the petals.
This is a nod to holism.

1. The lotus always grows in murky waters, but rises above it, just as inclusive and plural images of the future can offer us an alternative path away from negativity and divisiveness of today, towards more preferable futures.

2. The Lotus stands for faithfulness, which in the framework stands for the commitment that generating truly plural, inclusive and anti-colonial futures really requires of us. The framework aims to ask questions that require reflection, intention and honesty on part of the user.

3. A lotus flower fully bloomed and open represents full enlightenment and self-awareness. While the framework does not, by any means, promise any enlightenment, the petals do seek to generate a critical self-awareness at multiple levels.

4. The leaf of a lotus can offer a barrier between the muddy waters and the flower. Here it represents the political and social space needed to just be able to even openly discuss the need for more inclusive and alternative images; the desire to rise above the (current) dystopia. One can argue, without this self-acknowledgement and public space to discuss the need for something else, we cannot effectively do plural and inclusive futures work in a community. This is particularly relevant in a political environment where dissent has no room.

5. The lotus appears delicate, but is both flexible and strong, securely anchored under the water, with its roots planted in the soil and in the framework the roots represent certain key anchoring principles to doing inclusive futures work.

6. In Buddhism, even the mud has a meaning, representing our messy human lives; and in this case an analogy for the negativity around us, forming the motivation to work hard to bloom above it.

It is said that rising above the mud to bloom requires great <u>faith</u> in oneself, along with practice and intention, and there is a reason why not every plant can do what the lotus can, but just by existing as it does, the lotus offers us hope, and in this framework represents what we could achieve if we choose to commit to working towards a more inclusive society.

Lastly, a pink lotus represents the Buddha and the history and succession of <u>Buddhas</u>, and in this framework, the proposed movement forward for Futures Studies from its own history of exclusion to a new anti-colonial, and inclusive normative.

The Lotus flower as a visual statement

Other than the alignment of the lotus to the conceptual framework, I also wanted to intentionally use it as an alternative visual framing.
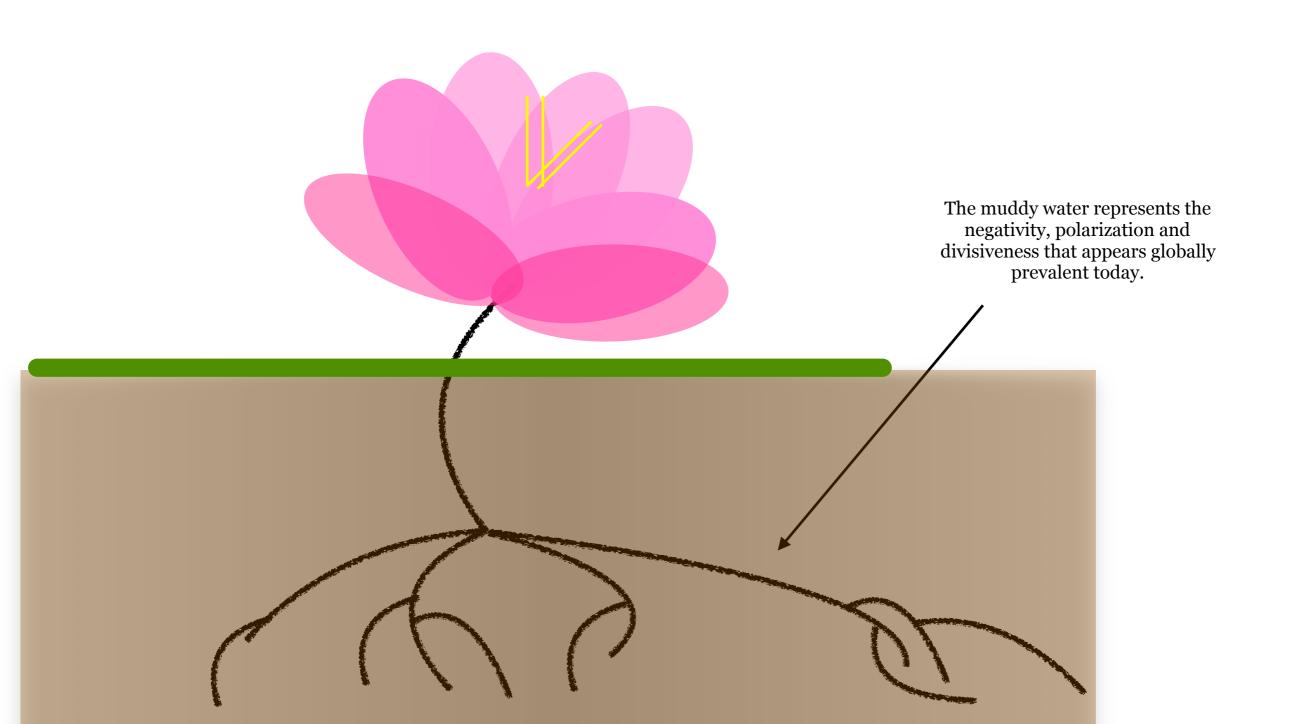
We must note Western cultural heterogeneity and dominance exists not just over the tools, techniques, and epistemology of our field, but also our visual communication.

To be truly inclusive as a field, we must also visually 'decentre' from dominant Western influences.

Please note - I am not a trained graphic designer, so the images in the following deck begin with my own visuals, and very clearly transition to that of a trained graphic designer, Reji George :)
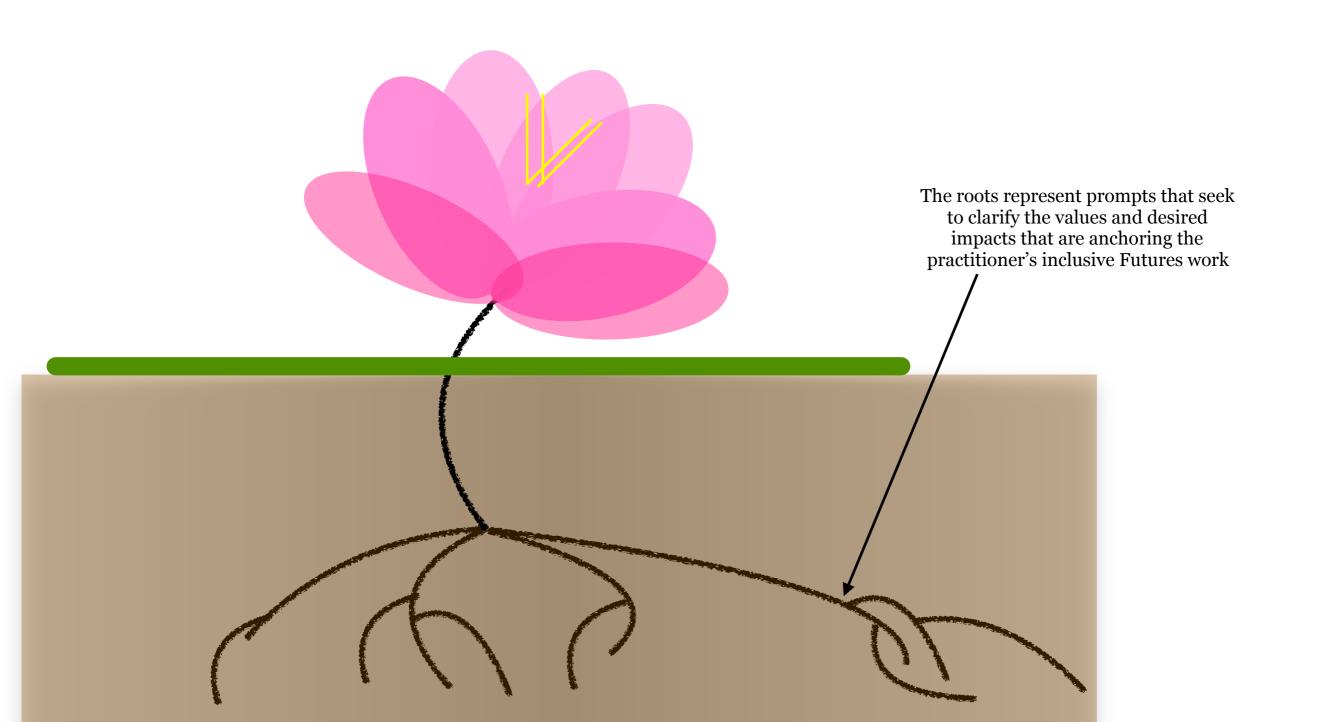
A step by step of the framework. Beginning with the water…

The muddy water represents the negativity, polarization and divisiveness that appears globally prevalent today.
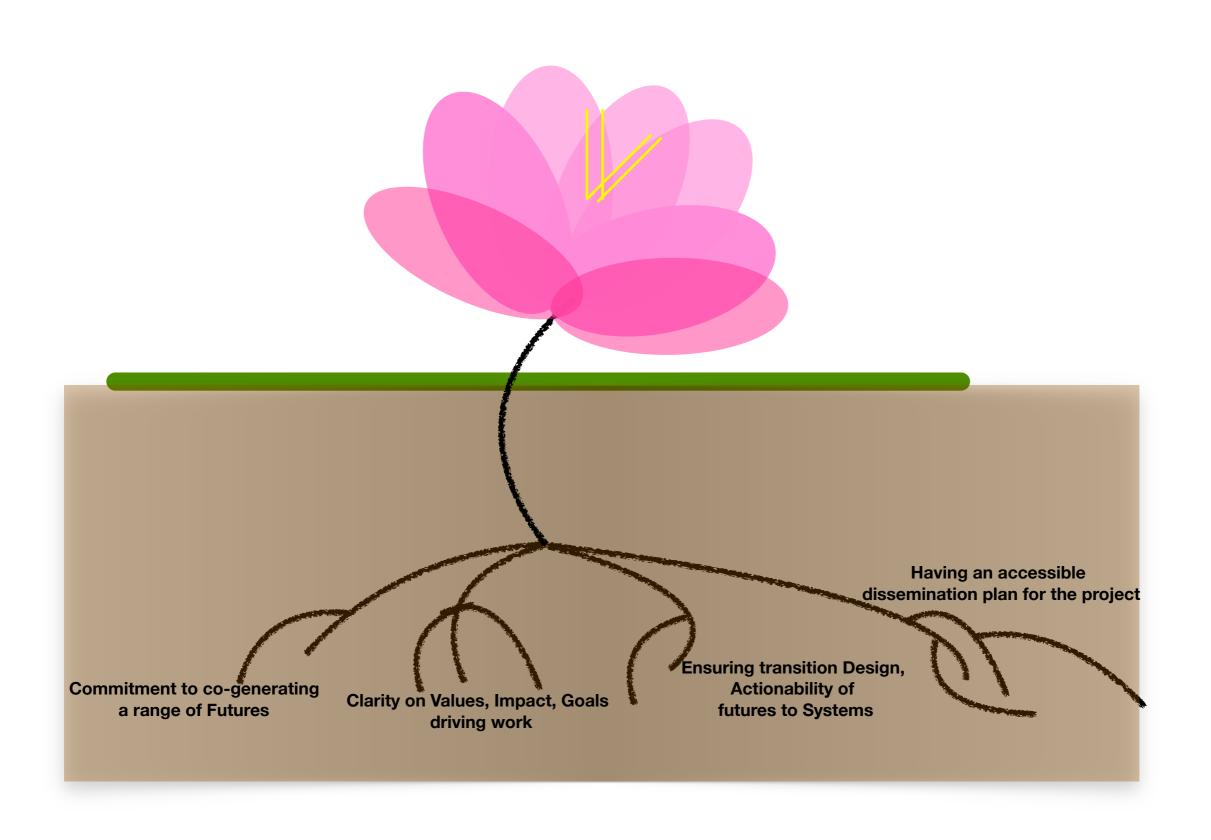
A step by step of the framework.
The root of the Lotus
(see page 83 in graduate research study for further details)

The roots represent prompts that seek to clarify the values and desired impacts that are anchoring the practitioner's inclusive Futures work
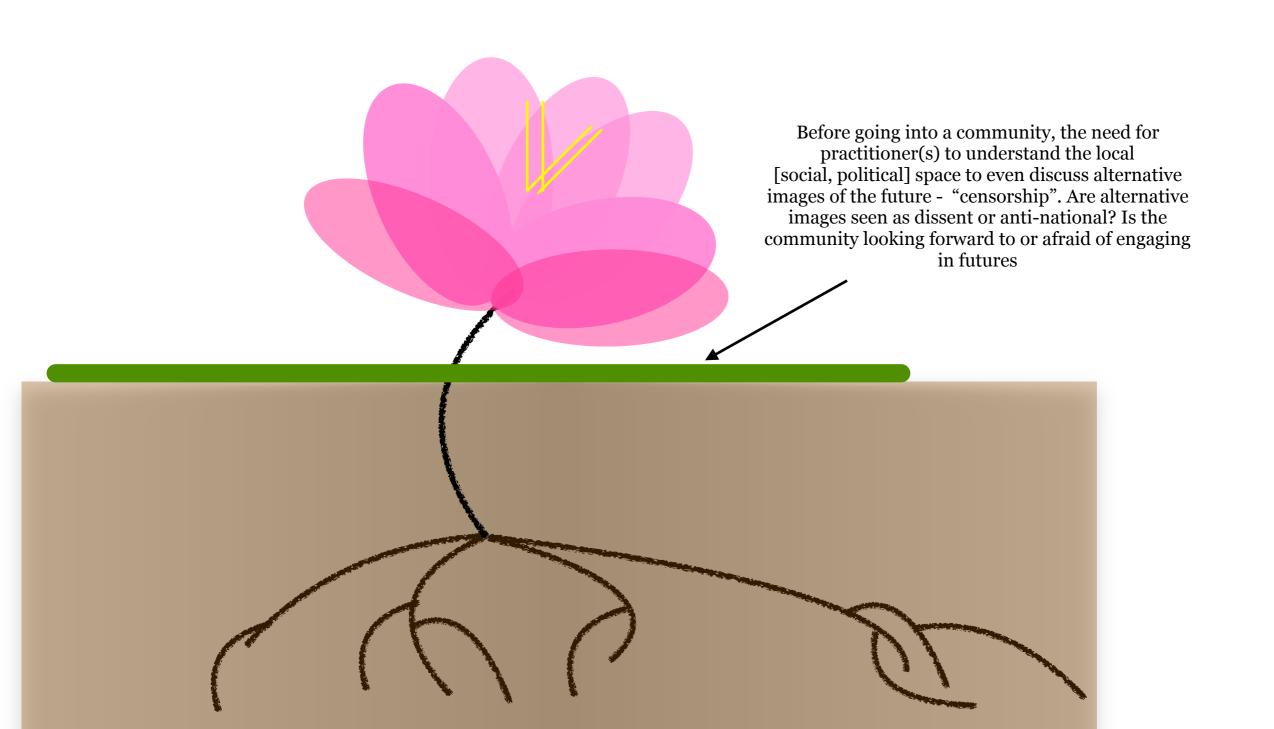
The roots- contain 4 clarifying questions

(see page 83 in graduate research study for further details)

Commitment to co-generating
a range of Futures

Clarity on Values, Impact, Goals
driving work

Ensuring transition Design,
Actionability of
futures to Systems

Having an accessible
dissemination plan for the project
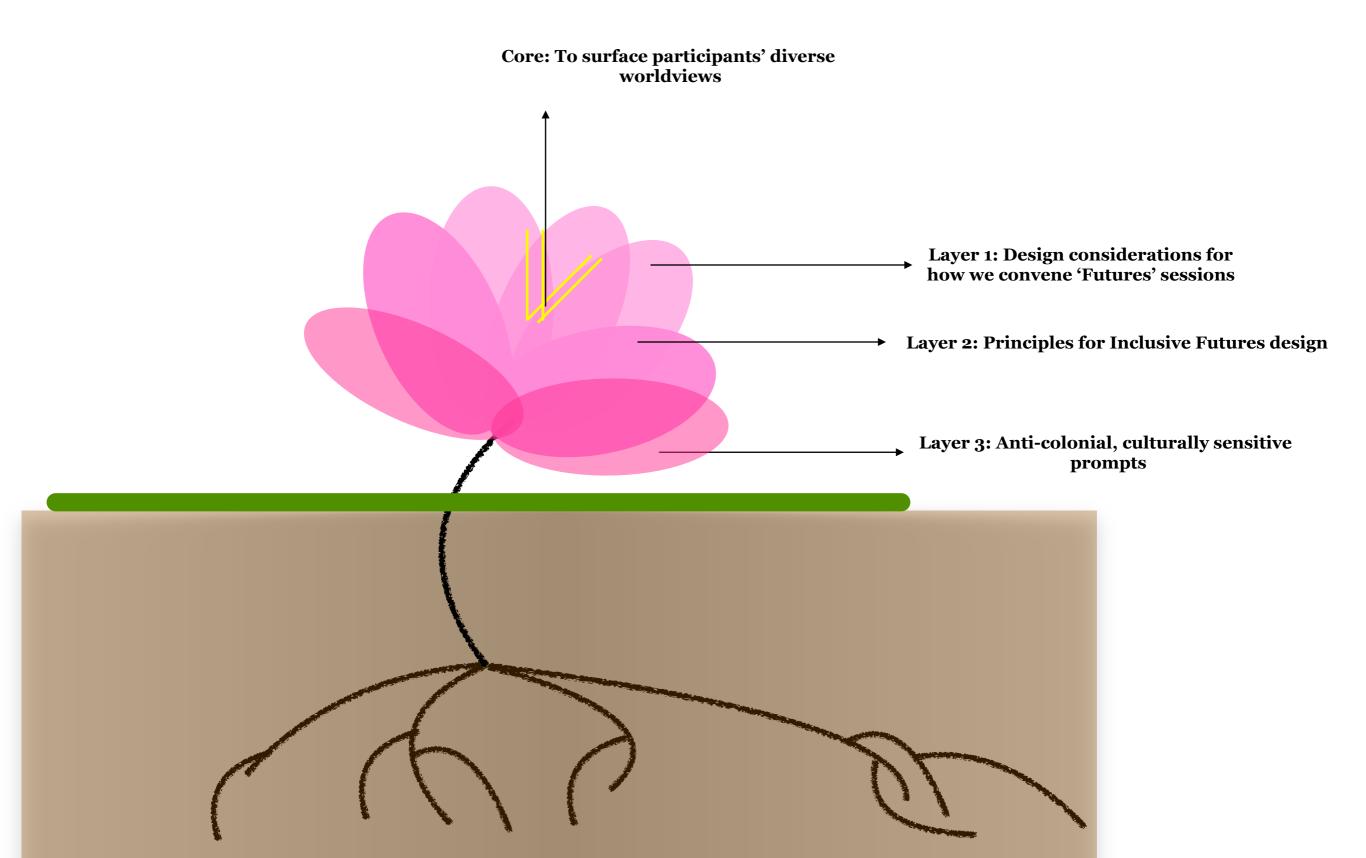
The leaf in the framework represents…

Before going into a community, the need for practitioner(s) to understand the local [social, political] space to even discuss alternative images of the future - "censorship". Are alternative images seen as dissent or anti-national? Is the community looking forward to or afraid of engaging in futures
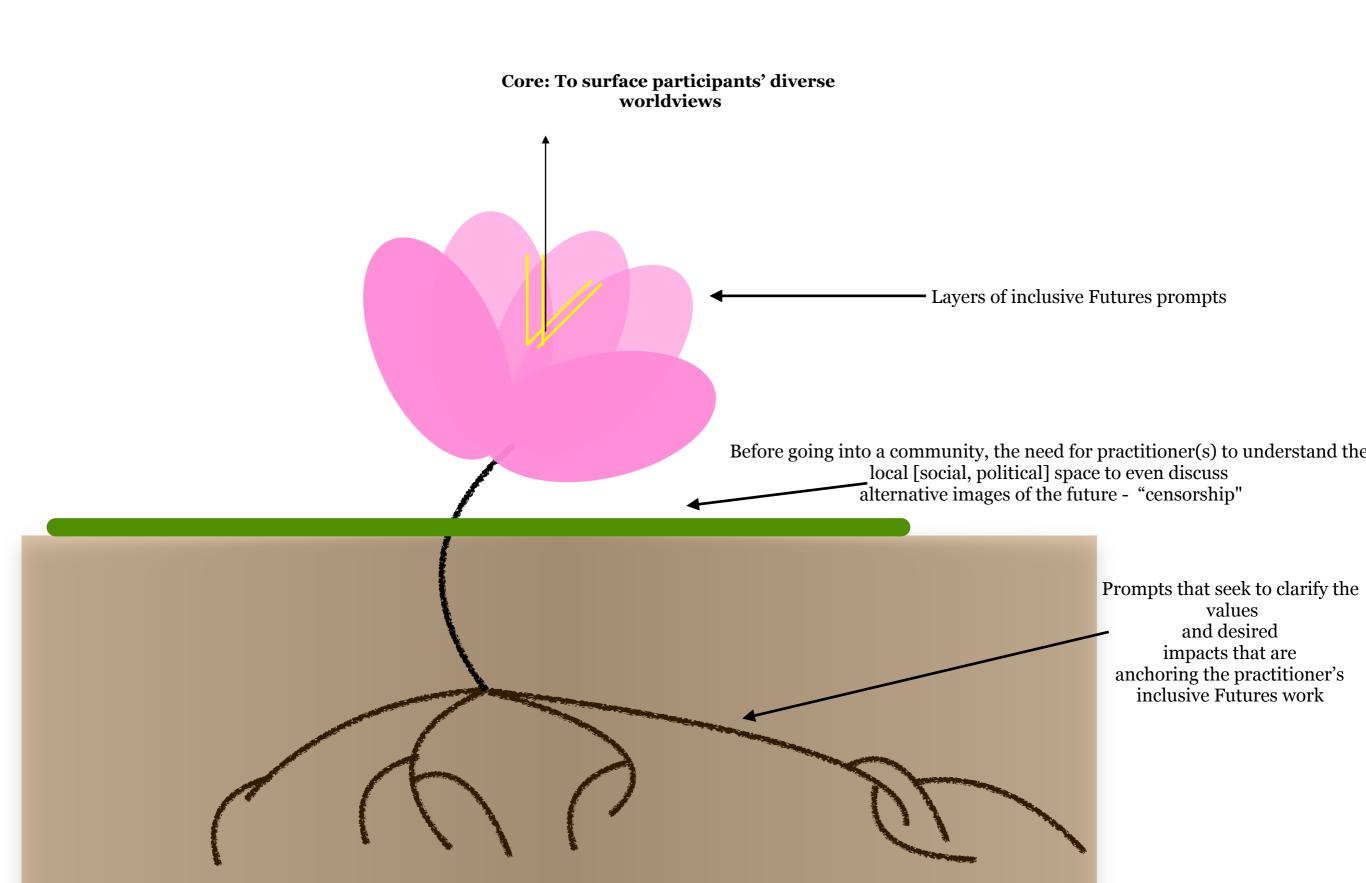
The petals

Please see additional details of the petals in both the attached graduate research study, and the other attached documents
(see pages 65 - 80 in graduate research study for further details)

Core: To surface participants' diverse worldviews

Layer 1: Design considerations for how we convene 'Futures' sessions

Layer 2: Principles for Inclusive Futures design

Layer 3: Anti-colonial, culturally sensitive prompts
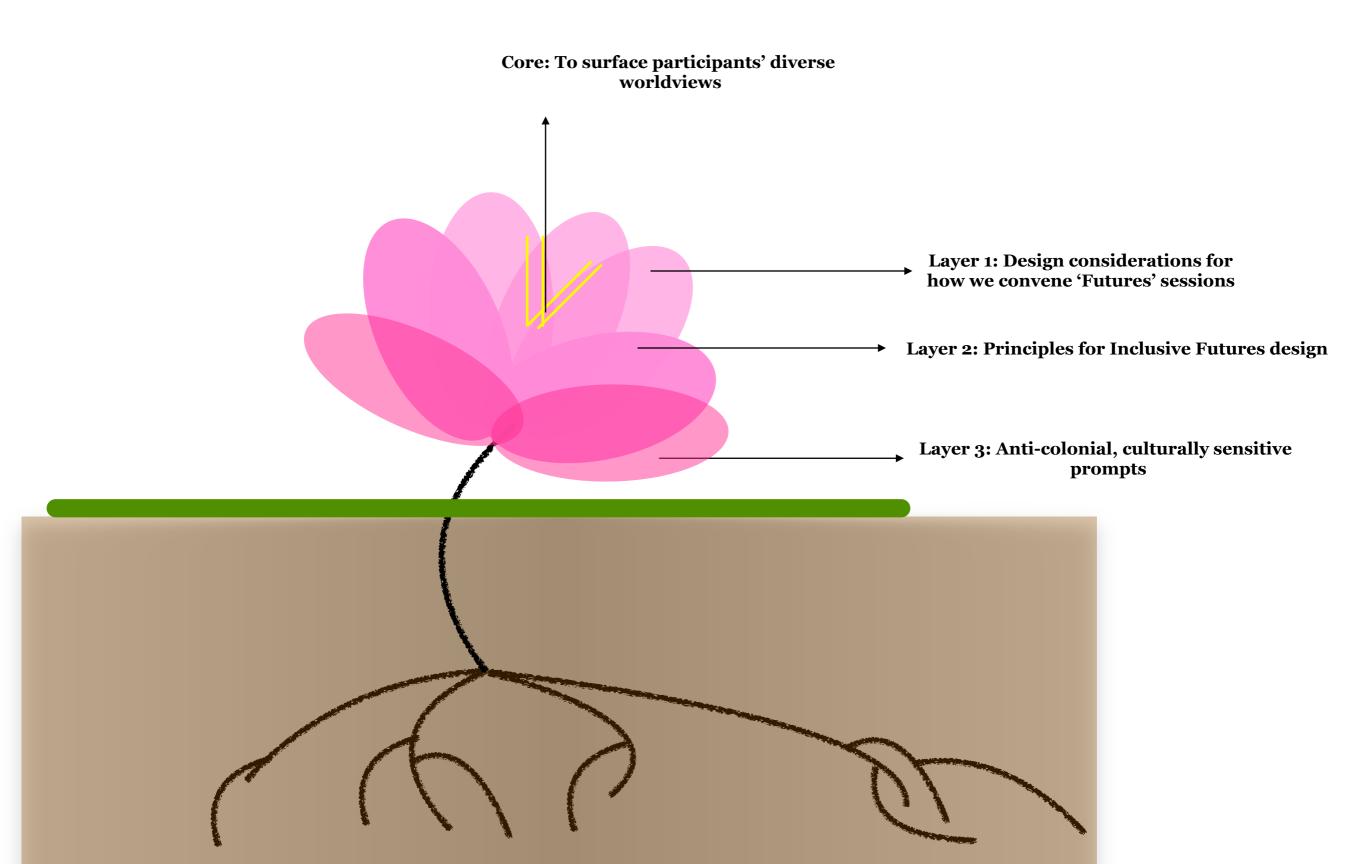
In summary, the framework seeks to create truly inclusive futures, surfacing the diverse worldviews present in the room

Core: To surface participants' diverse worldviews

Layers of inclusive Futures prompts

Before going into a community, the need for practitioner(s) to understand the local [social, political] space to even discuss alternative images of the future - "censorship"

Prompts that seek to clarify the values and desired impacts that are anchoring the practitioner's inclusive Futures work

The petals in detail…

Please see additional details of the petals in both the attached graduate research study, and the other attached documents
(see pages 65 - 80 in graduate research study for further details)

Core: To surface participants' diverse worldviews

Layer 1: Design considerations for how we convene 'Futures' sessions

Layer 2: Principles for Inclusive Futures design

Layer 3: Anti-colonial, culturally sensitive prompts

Layer 1: Design considerations for how we convene 'Futures' sessions

Practitioners are asked simple questions to unpack how they are planning for their 'Futures' sessions with communities.

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

Which other disciplines are involved?

How- which tools, methods used?
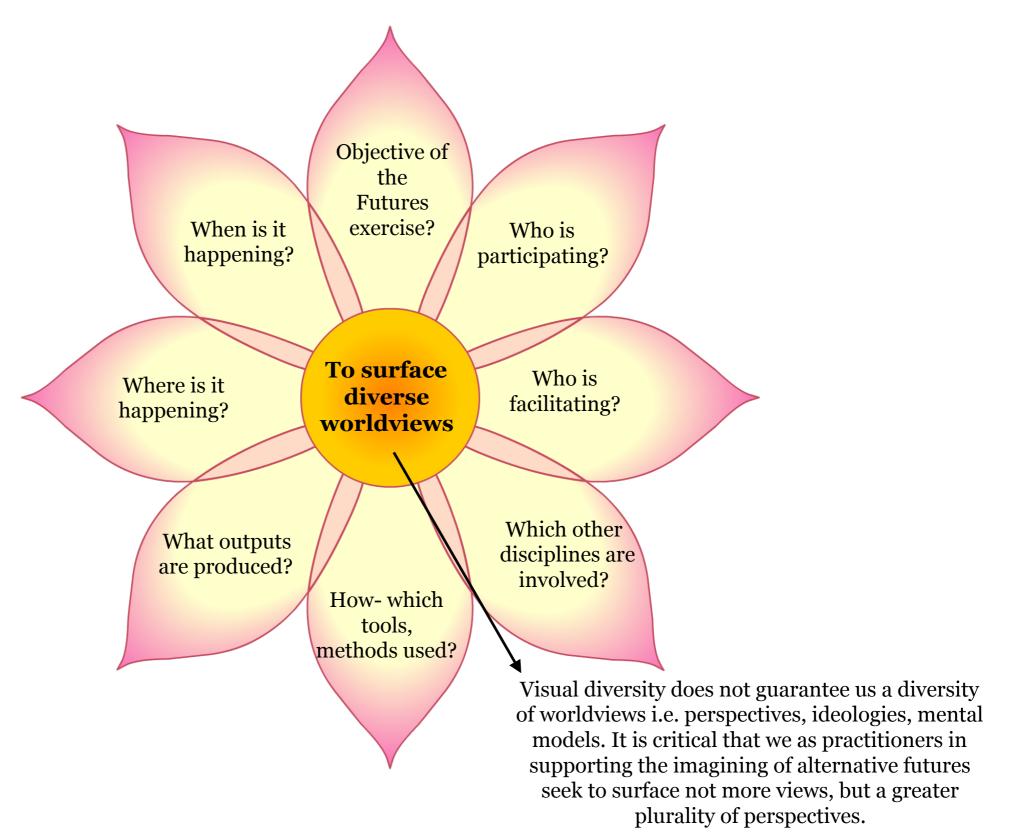
How we convene sessions, amongst other things, translates to how we construct power in our sessions

Where can power and privilege imbalances emerge in this layer?
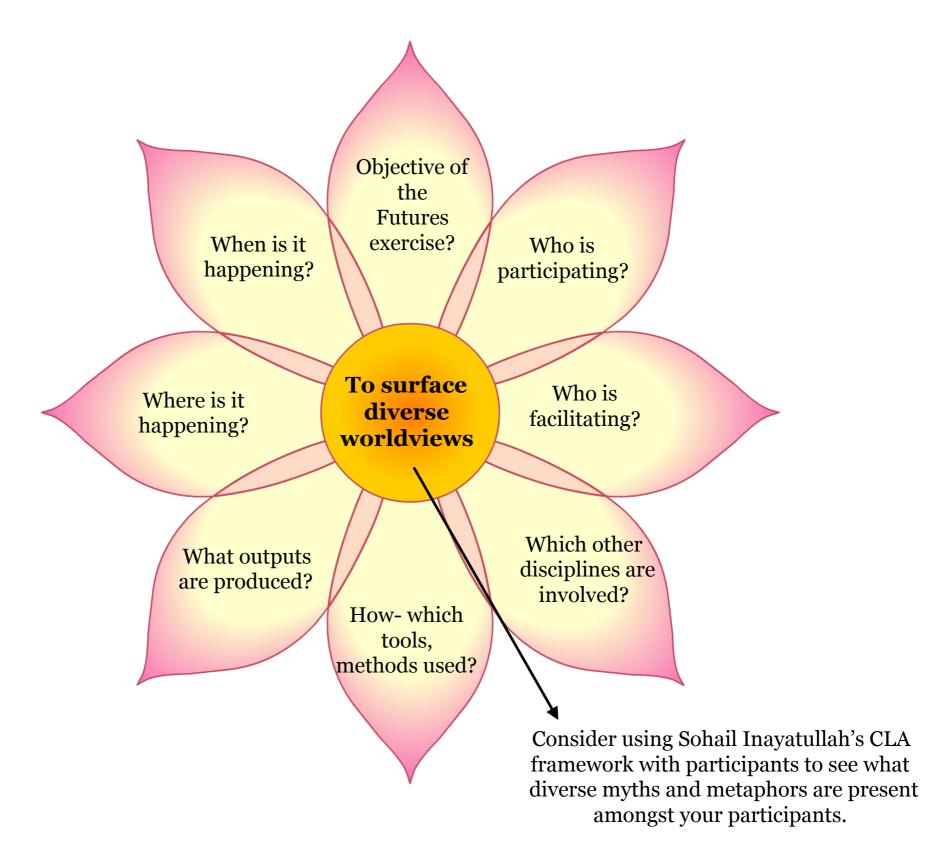
#1 As the Futures practitioner we set the purpose/objective of the 'Futures' session

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

To seek diverse Worldviews

Where is it happening?

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

#2 As futures practitioner we can create power and privilege imbalances based on who we involve in the session

#3 As futures practitioner we can create further imbalances in how we decide to organize the session
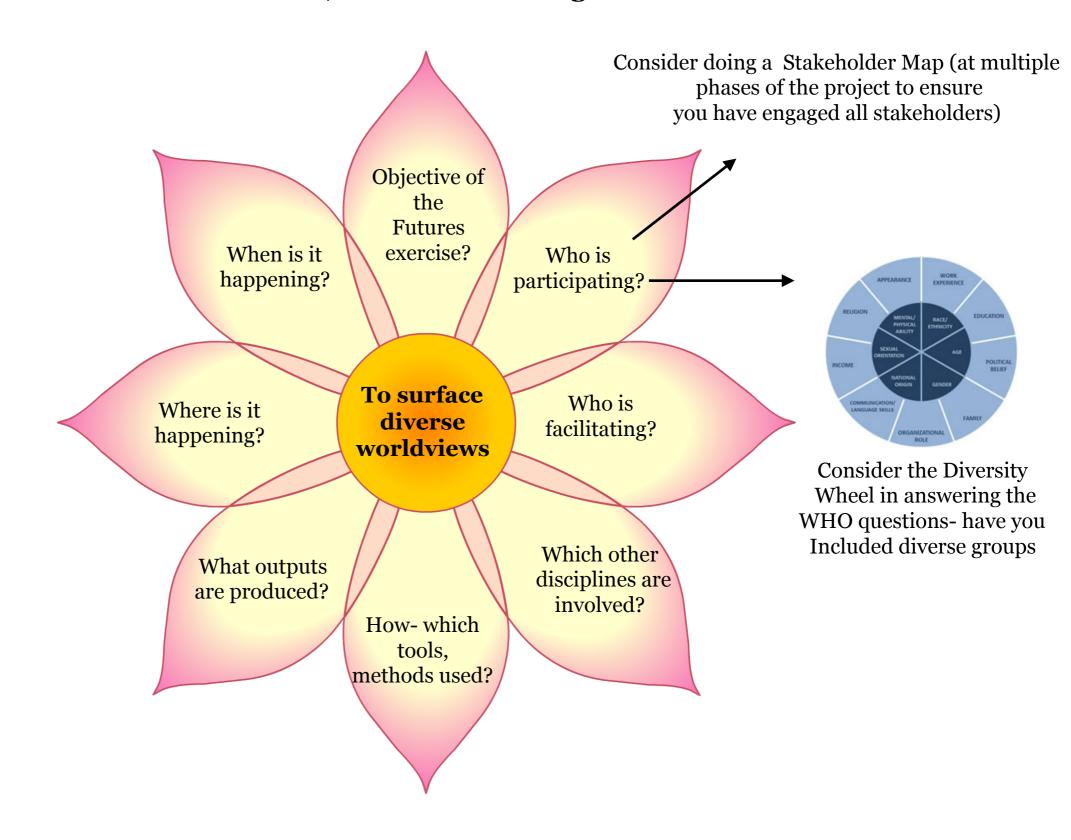
In the interactive model - as a user would click on each petal they would be offered additional details (example below)

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

Which other disciplines are involved?

How- which tools, methods used?

Visual diversity does not guarantee us a diversity of worldviews i.e. perspectives, ideologies, mental models. It is critical that we as practitioners in supporting the imagining of alternative futures seek to surface not more views, but a greater plurality of perspectives.

They would even be directed to other pre-existing frameworks from the Futures field that address that specific petal's topic -ultimately creating a communal hub of our fields inclusive futures efforts.

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

Which other disciplines are involved?

How- which tools, methods used?

Consider using Sohail Inayatullah's CLA framework with participants to see what diverse myths and metaphors are present amongst your participants.

Practitioner might also be offered additional inclusive design tools/references that draw from other fields, outside of Foresight.

Consider doing a Stakeholder Map (at multiple phases of the project to ensure you have engaged all stakeholders)

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

Which other disciplines are involved?

How- which tools, methods used?

Consider the Diversity Wheel in answering the WHO questions- have you Included diverse groups

Depending on the petal they might even be offered additional explanations/ideas
(these could be contributed to by practitioners)

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

Which other disciplines are involved?

How- which tools, methods used?
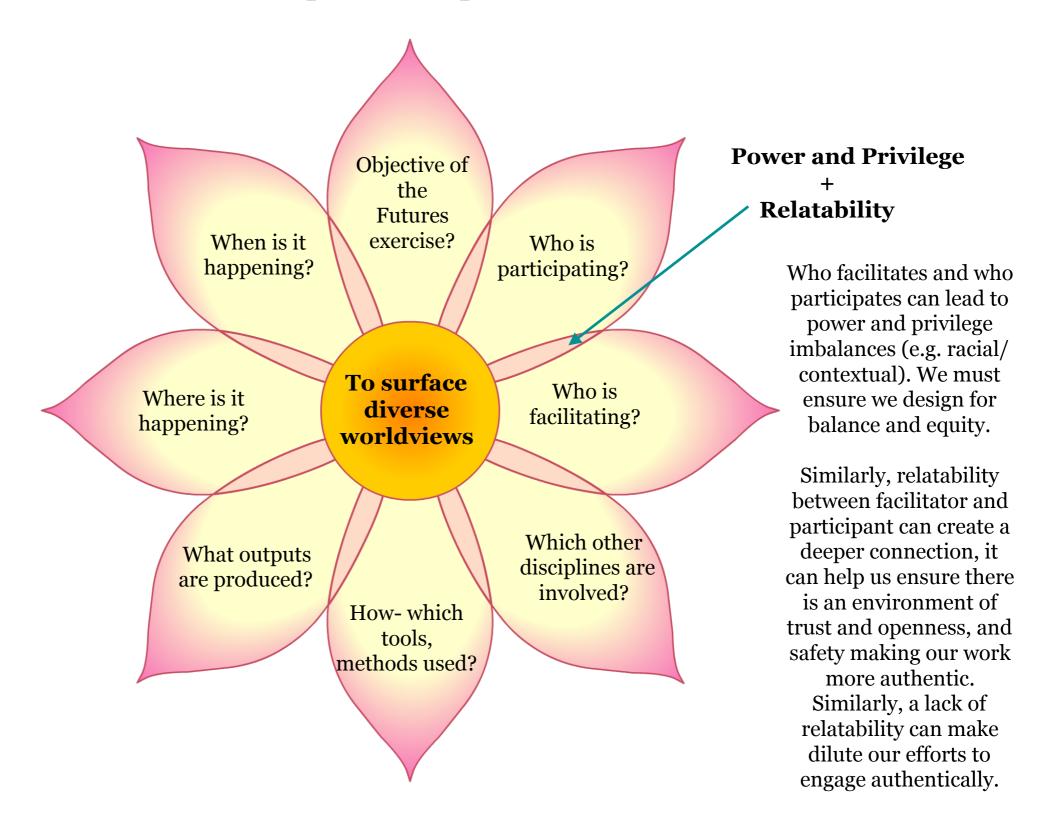
In addition to written reports, consider a wider range of options for possible outputs:

- Experiential Futures
- Virtual Game
- Interactive tool
- Community movie
- Podcast series
- Futures Curriculum Design

Additionally, each petal overlap highlights a key inclusive Futures lesson/concept- these would come up as a user hovers over the petal overlaps in the interactive model

Nothing about them, without them

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

Which other disciplines are involved?

How- which tools, methods used?

When designing your sessions- Who are your 'end users' or 'key constituents'?

Are you hearing 'about' them or 'from' them in your sessions? Ensure you design for direct and meaningful participation on their part.

Additionally, each petal overlap highlights a key inclusive Futures lesson/concept- these would come up as a user hovers over the petal overlaps in the interactive model

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Power and Privilege
+
Relatability

Who facilitates and who participates can lead to power and privilege imbalances (e.g. racial/ contextual). We must ensure we design for balance and equity.

Similarly, relatability between facilitator and participant can create a deeper connection, it can help us ensure there is an environment of trust and openness, and safety making our work more authentic. Similarly, a lack of relatability can make dilute our efforts to engage authentically.

Showing all overlapping petal concepts -
For greater details see attached graduate research study (page 71)

Ensuring maximum participant engagement

Nothing about them, without them

Power and Privilege + Relatability

Setting up for maximum accessibility

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

Designed for diversity-collaborative richness

Maximizing range of output possibilities

What outputs are produced?

Which other disciplines are involved?

How- which tools, methods used?

New epistemological knowledge production
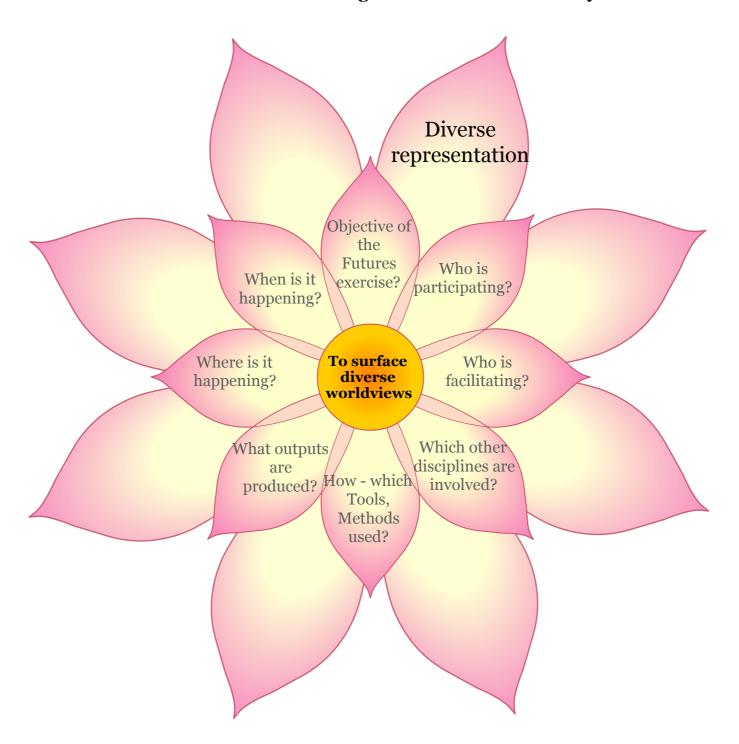
Social accessibility of outcomes

In the interactive version, users can shift the order of the petals and explore new concepts that emerge. See example below. I exchanged "Who is participating?", and "Where is it happening?" 4 new concepts came up.
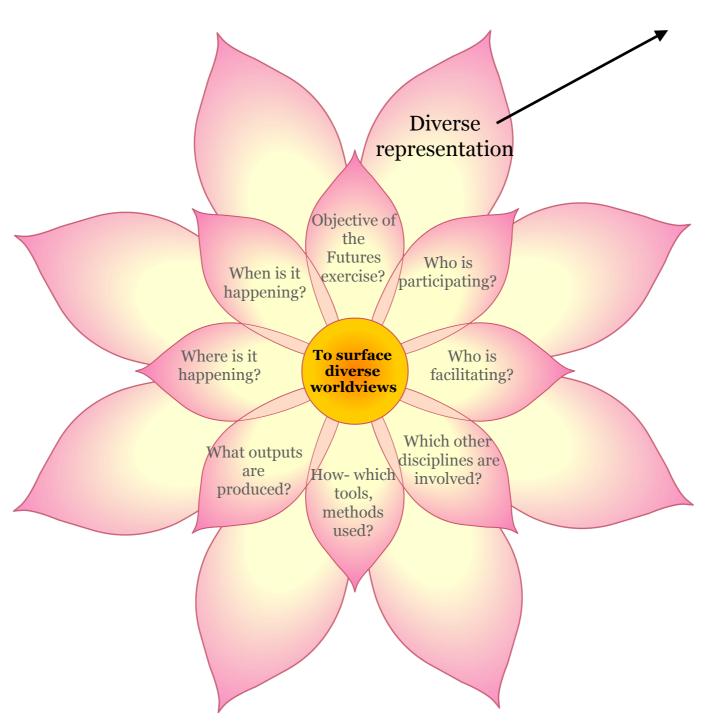
Ensuring maximum participant engagement

Meeting your audience where they are

Design with cultural, religious, economic considerations
e.g. If engaging muslim participants, make sure it is not happening during Ramadan (month of fasting)

Exploring partnerships with local facilitators who have local context

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Where is it happening?

Who is participating?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

Opportunity to broader capacity and skill building in the community
e.g. learning podcast techniques, Art, filmmaking skills, craftsmanship, set design

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Designed for diversity-collaborative richness

Social accessibility of outcomes

New epistemological knowledge production

Overlapping petal concepts

1. **Nothing about them, without them** - are your primary constituents/end users in the room? Are you hearing what they want for their futures direct from themselves OR from others who are representing them?

2. **Power and Privilege + Relatability** - There are many circumstances that can lead to power and privilege imbalances in who facilitates and who participates. Have you designed for equity, power balances, and relatability (particularly when working in underrepresented communities and different cultures than your own)?

3. **Designed for diversity - collaborative richness** - the lack of true, cross-disciplinary collaboration in Foresight is very real. This overlap is a reminding to explore that and design for that diversity intentionally. Have you designed for radical collaboration?

4. **New epistemological knowledge production** - We need new ways to conceive our knowledge, and this can happen in many ways, particularly when we combine different disciplines, different groups, creating different frameworks and methods. Are you open this?

5. **Social accessibility of outcomes** - Have you designed your project's outputs such that they make outcomes accessible and understandable by the communities in which work was done? Communities must be able to own the knowledge they generate.

6. **Maximizing range of output possibilities** - This is to emphasize being creative in what we can generate as outputs.

7. **Setting up for maximum accessibility**- Where and when our sessions are held can either be an enable or barrier. Have you considered all the ways your sessions can be more accessible?

8. **Ensuring maximum participant engagement** - When something happens, directly impacts engagement. Have you determined this with the community directly, or in consulting local partnerships?

Layer 2: Inclusive Futures principles

Layer 2 petals exist at the intersection of petals from the first layer, and highlights a key inclusive Futures principle that is related to those design considerations from layer 1.

Diverse representation

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

How - which Tools, Methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Layer 2: Inclusive Futures principles

Hovering on the petal, more details might emerge

1. Diverse representation is about ensuring you have (a) multiple community stakeholder groups present, and (b) within those stakeholder groups, as much diversity as possible (ages, races, genders, abilities, education levels, religions, etc). This is where tools like the diversity wheel can be helpful guides in designing for inclusion.

Diverse representation

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Layer 2: Inclusive Futures principles

Layer 2 petals exist at the intersection of petals from the first layer, and highlights a key inclusive Futures principle that is related to those design considerations from layer 1.
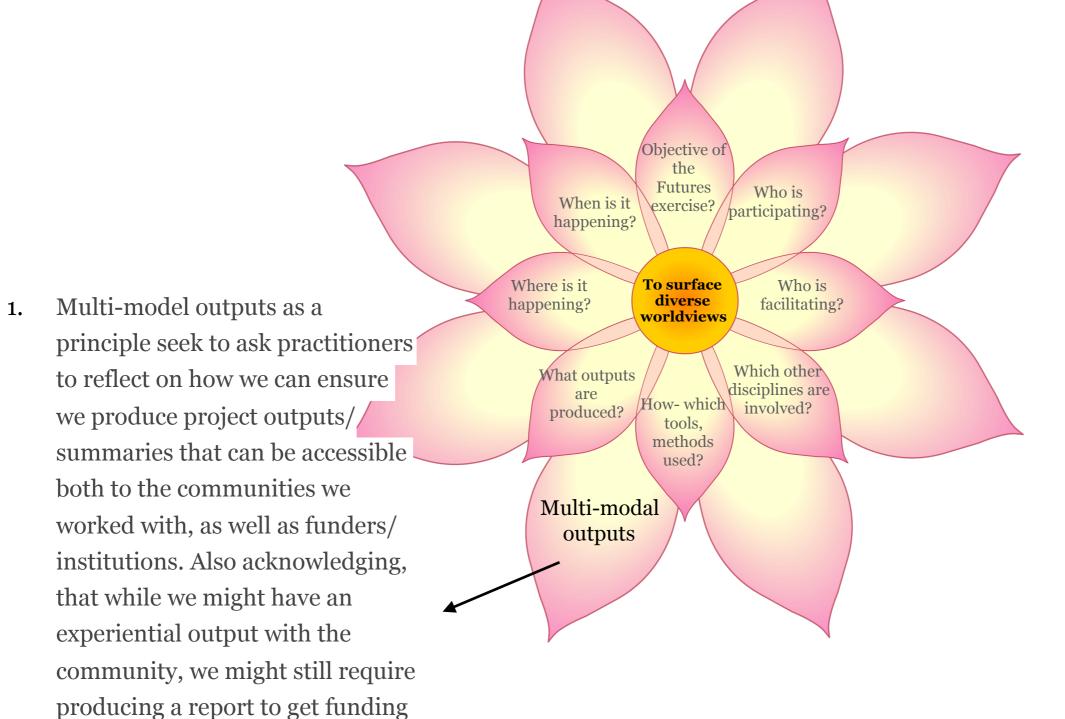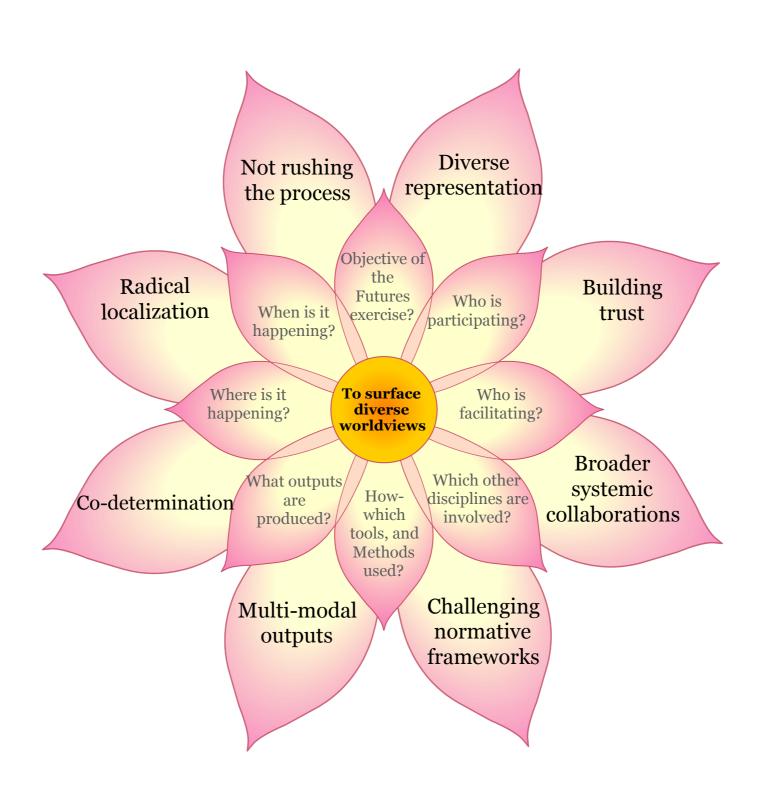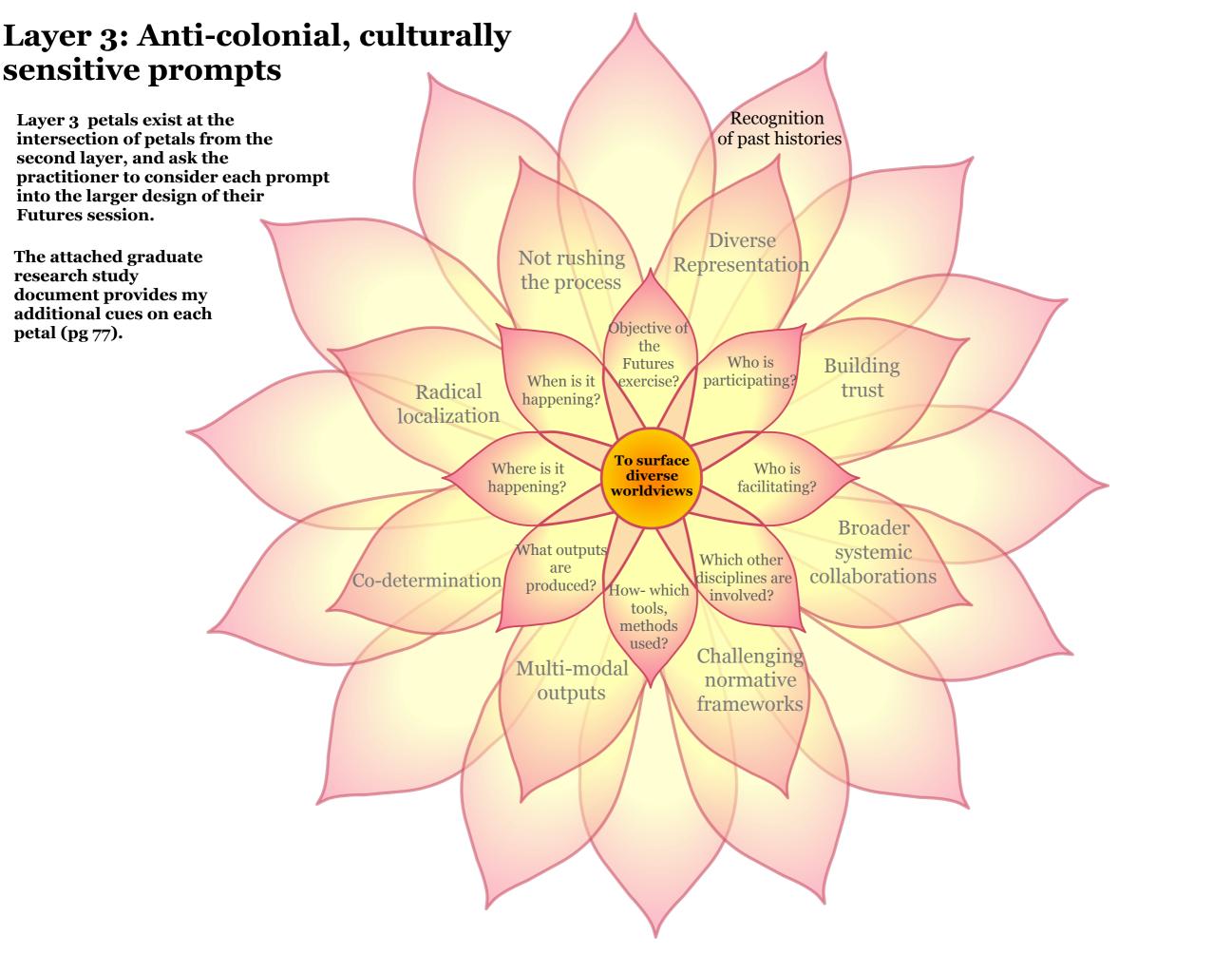
1. Multi-model outputs as a principle seek to ask practitioners to reflect on how we can ensure we produce project outputs/ summaries that can be accessible both to the communities we worked with, as well as funders/ institutions. Also acknowledging, that while we might have an experiential output with the community, we might still require producing a report to get funding for a project. This may require
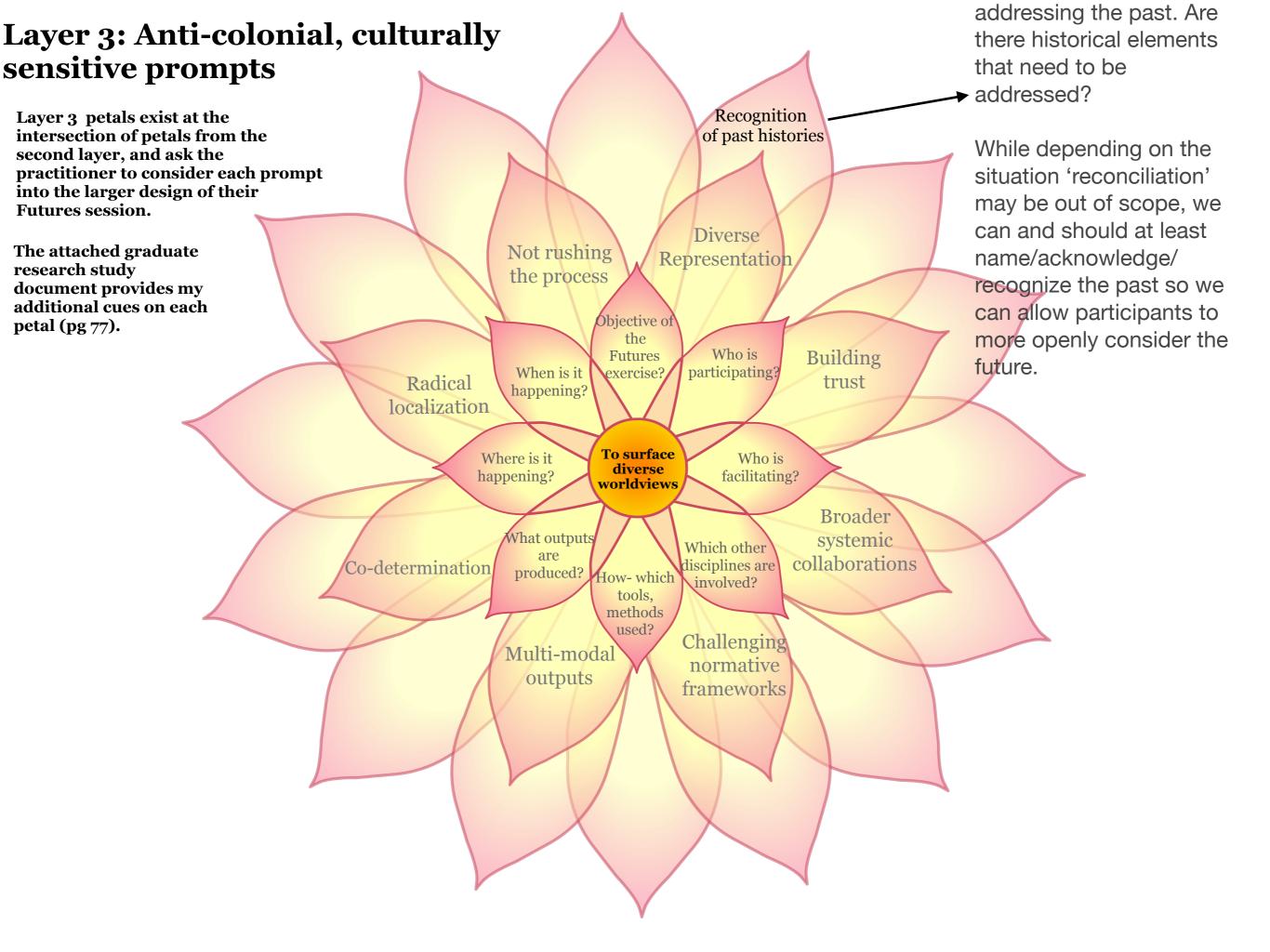
Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Multi-modal outputs

Layer 2: Inclusive Futures principles

The attached graduate research study document provides my additional cues on each petal
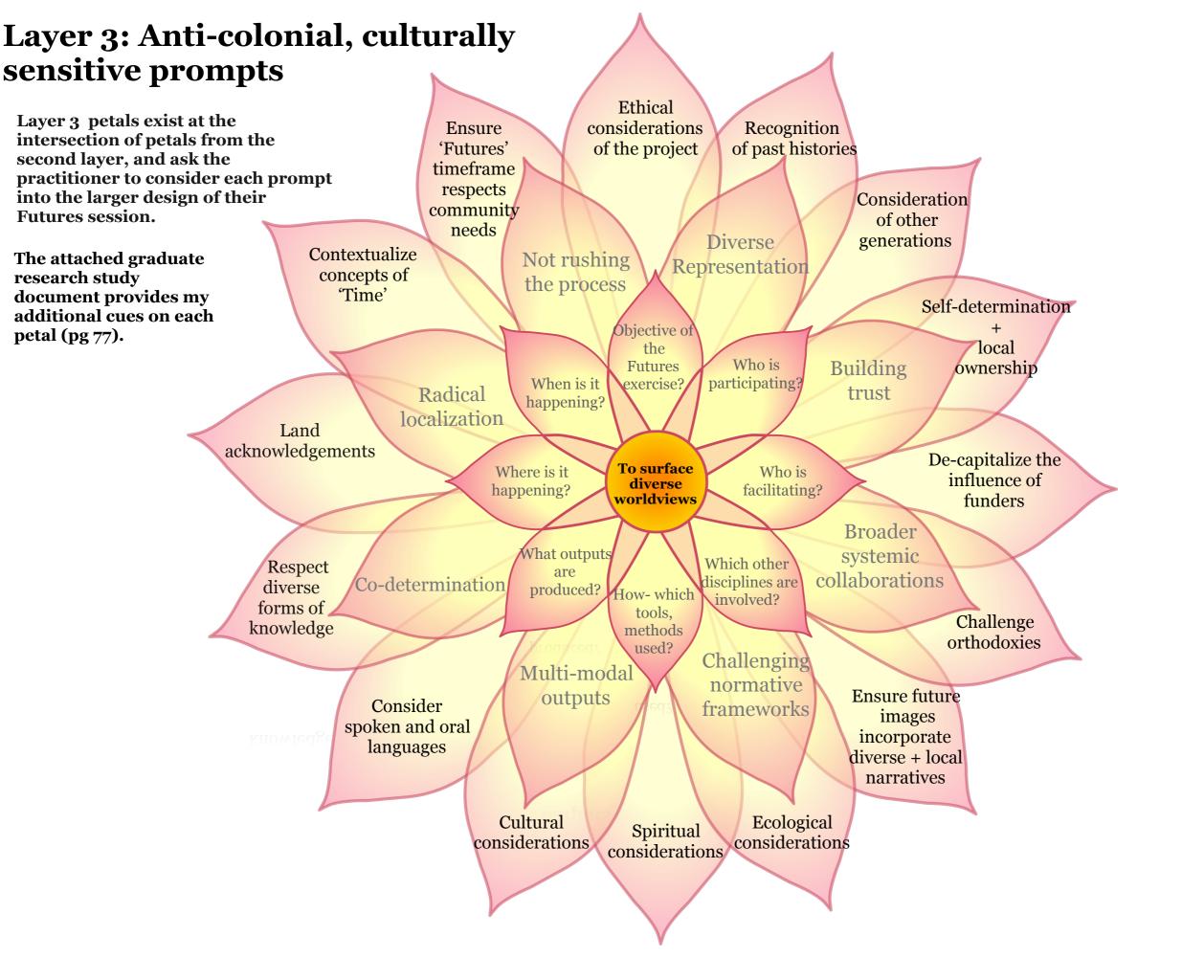
Layer 2: Inclusive Futures principles

These principles allow us to move closer to designing with communities as partners.

1. **Diverse representation** is as the name suggests about ensuring we have (a) multiple community stakeholder groups present, and (b) within those stakeholder groups, as much diversity as possible (ages, races, genders, abilities, education levels, religions, etc). This is where the diversity wheel (mentioned in step #3), above, can be a helpful guiding tool.

2. **Building trust.** How might we do this given our fields' largely consultant model where we are used to 'going in and out' hosting short workshops and sessions with clients. This transactional model does not translate over when working with broader communities, particularly vulnerable communities. Building trust takes time and/or relationships with pre-existing local organizations, however, our current funding, and professional models tend to be driven by shorter cycles.

3. **Broader systemic collaboration** points to the need to ensure any necessary local, national, international systemic collaborators are present and part of the process with the community where possible, and when applicable.

4. **Challenging normative frameworks**, is a key part of inclusive futures, in that it asks us to be as pluralistic and inclusive as possible by challenging the dominant and limiting frameworks we use almost exclusively.

5. **Multi-model outputs** as a principle seek to ask practitioners to reflect on how we can ensure we produce project outputs/ summaries that can be accessible both to the communities themselves, as well as funders/institutions. This may require additional work in that these outputs take different forms, thus, being multi-modal.

6. **Co-determination** is the working together of the community in self-determining critical factors related to the futures exercise in partnership with the facilitators. I intentionally suggested co-determination (vs. self-determination here) because there might be certain funding, futures process, timing constraints that need to be negotiated between community and facilitators. It is noted that designing with our end-users real-time invites more ambiguity and bravery into the process.

7. **Radical localization** has to be with ensuring we adapt and customize our projects to the needs of the local community in partnership with local community expertise.

8. **Not rushing the process** - refers to the need for us to acknowledge that our futures work might require more time than a funder/project/collaboration might allow. This principle requires us to be honest about the needs of the community and our project and to design, ask, and plan for what is needed in the best interest of the community.

Layer 3: Anti-colonial, culturally sensitive prompts

Layer 3 petals exist at the intersection of petals from the second layer, and ask the practitioner to consider each prompt into the larger design of their Futures session.

The attached graduate research study document provides my additional cues on each petal (pg 77).

Recognition of past histories

Diverse Representation

Not rushing the process

Building trust

Radical localization

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

To surface diverse worldviews

Where is it happening?

Who is facilitating?

Broader systemic collaborations

Co-determination

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Multi-modal outputs

Challenging normative frameworks

Layer 3: Anti-colonial, culturally sensitive prompts

Layer 3 petals exist at the intersection of petals from the second layer, and ask the practitioner to consider each prompt into the larger design of their Futures session.

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Recognition of past histories

Diverse Representation

Not rushing the process

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Building trust

Radical localization

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

Co-determination

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Broader systemic collaborations

Multi-modal outputs

Challenging normative frameworks

addressing the past. Are there historical elements that need to be addressed?

While depending on the situation 'reconciliation' may be out of scope, we can and should at least name/acknowledge/ recognize the past so we can allow participants to more openly consider the future.

Layer 3: Anti-colonial, culturally sensitive prompts

Layer 3 petals exist at the intersection of petals from the second layer, and ask the practitioner to consider each prompt into the larger design of their Futures session.

The attached graduate research study document provides my additional cues on each petal (pg 77).

Ethical considerations of the project

Recognition of past histories

Ensure 'Futures' timeframe respects community needs

Consideration of other generations

Contextualize concepts of 'Time'

Not rushing the process

Diverse Representation

Self-determination + local ownership

Objective of the Futures exercise?

When is it happening?

Who is participating?

Building trust

Radical localization

Land acknowledgements

Where is it happening?

To surface diverse worldviews

Who is facilitating?

De-capitalize the influence of funders

Respect diverse forms of knowledge

Co-determination

What outputs are produced?

How- which tools, methods used?

Which other disciplines are involved?

Broader systemic collaborations

Challenge orthodoxies

Consider spoken and oral languages

Multi-modal outputs

Challenging normative frameworks

Ensure future images incorporate diverse + local narratives

Cultural considerations

Spiritual considerations

Ecological considerations

Layer 3 petals- concepts

1. Ensuring 'Futures' visioning timeframe respects community needs - refers to the balance between 'pushing people out of their comfort zone' and 'understanding the community and their desire and ability to think ahead and by how much'.

2. Ethical considerations - prompts practitioners to acknowledge that all projects are ethical statements, and to thus ask themselves questions such as-

   A. Am I clear on the ethical implications of doing said project?
   B. Have I addressed the considerations from Layer 1 and 2 as best as I can?
   C. Can I affirm that my work in the community is about exchange and co-creation and not (knowledge) extraction?
   D. Do my good intentions match the actuality and potential impact of the project?
   E. Am I/we advancing a particular agenda?
   F. While I really want to do this project, am I/we right for this project?

These questions become particularly relevant and critical when working with vulnerable communities or dealing with very fragile environments.

3. Recognition/Acknowledgement of the past - this prompt seeks to remind practitioners that engaging in Futures work inherently requires our addressing the past. And, while, depending on the situation 'reconciliation' may be out of scope, we can and should at least name/ acknowledge/recognize the past so we can allow participants to more openly consider the future.

4. Other Generations - this prompt seeks to ask if other generations have been considered in the scenarios/images generated and if they have not been how they can be. These different generations are from ancestors to future generations and include different generations that are currently alive from youth to elderly. This is also to remind practitioners that certain communities naturally involve different generations, and to be aware and supportive of this process.

5. De-capitalize the influence of funders - this prompt seeks to name any pre-set agenda by a funder/client that might be influencing how the Futures activity is done, and what images of the future are being generated. Acknowledging a lot of funding for transnational projects originates in the global North, asking ourselves how might we break this pattern of privilege based on access to funds? How might we use our privilege strategically? How might we de-emphasize monetary privilege? (Barndt, Reinsborough, 2009)

6. Self-determination and local ownership - speaks to the need for local communities to self-determine how they want to work with their images of the future, and to ensure there is local ownership of the process and results. This also entails the building of futures process capacity within the community (vs. the consultant model).

7. Challenging orthodoxies - refers to the need to ensure an environment where difficult conversations amongst diverse stakeholders are being encouraged so the deeper rooted issues/orthodoxies/myths/belief systems are being surfaced and discussed versus having hegemonic narratives trump without discussion. We may have a 'diverse' room of participants, but we cannot achieve inclusive and plural futures without such conversation.

Layer 3 petals- concepts

8. Ensure futures images include diverse and local narratives - this is two-fold. One about ensuring we as practitioners are emphasizing diverse narratives (vs the dominant and limiting narratives of capitalism, economic growth, technocracy, etc), and second about ensuring we push our participants to go further if they do not represent certain contextual inevitabilities - e.g. scenarios of the U.S. that do not consider multiculturalism, scenarios in Europe that do not consider
an ageing population or negative population growth, scenarios in Asia that do not a younger and urban demographic. I would include the environment and climate change vulnerabilities for everyone.

9. Cultural considerations - refers to the need to understand and contextualize to cultural norms such as gender dynamics, verbal/non-verbal communication, food considerations, etc. These might seem trivial but can have an immense impact on the process.

10. Ecological considerations - this prompt is centred on how communities view this ecological relationship and consider for them in the scenarios and images of the future, and to ensure we as practitioners are making space for these narratives.

11. Spiritual considerations - we do not often hear of spirituality in Futures, but in many communities around the world, including Indigenous communities, spirituality is a very important aspect in this discussion, and we as practitioners should understand this further and include for this in our processes and methods accordingly.

12. Considering spoken and oral languages - seeks to emphasize the need to be more flexible in how we view, define, and incorporate language into our work. It is also to point us that practitioners should understand the linguistic limitations of where they are going. In my interview with Dr. Dator, he spoke about how in countries like China, South Korea, Japan (and I would India), there is no word for 'futures' (plural), making it very difficult to think and talk about alternative futures as a concept.

13. Diverse forms of Knowledge - This is to acknowledge forms of knowledge outside of intellectual and academia, which could, for example, include indigenous, traditional, and embodied forms of knowledge held by the community. What opportunity is there to learn from, incorporate, merge these different knowledge forms in the Futures process.

14. Land acknowledgement - in naming colonization and the taking of lands from indigenous communities, it is critical for us as practitioners to start our engagement with the community by understanding this history and naming it and acknowledging the true ancestral owners of the land where we stand. This is particularly relevant in settler colonial geographies/territories.

15. Contextualizing concepts of 'time' - What conceptual definition of time is influencing your project design? Time as a linear, one-directional or one that is circular? How does the local community view the concept of time? How might you adjust your methods/tools/processes to their concept of time OR create space for whoever is attending to choose the concept of time that they relate to most e.g. In Hinduism reincarnation and other mythologies reflect a circular concept of time, however, not every Indian is Hindu, nor does every Hindu view time this way.