Workshop #2: ITU Strategic Plan 2028-2031
Strategic Foresight Workshop with ITU Council Working Group for Strategic and Financial Plans (CWG-SFP)

Background Document

UN Futures Lab/Global Hub[1]

1. About the Background Document

The **International Telecommunication Union (ITU)** and the **UN Futures Lab/Global Hub**[2] are partnering to integrate strategic foresight into the development of **ITU Strategic Plan 2028-2031.** This initiative comes at time of profound uncertainty for the multilateral system, shaped by rapid technological change, environmental challenges, political shifts, economic volatility, and evolving social dynamics. It also coincides with ITU's 160th anniversary, making a pivotal moment for reflection and forward-looking thinking.

Strategic foresight is an approach for systematically thinking and acting in a long-term and anticipatory way under conditions of uncertainty[3]. Included in UN 2.0, it enables organizations to better manage under conditions of uncertainty and better prepare for potential crises to become more resilient. ITU's engagement in this initiative represents a proactive step to updating and adapting its planning methods in response to the needs and uncertainties of the 21st century.

This Background Document summarizes results from "Workshop #1: ITU Strategic Plan 2028-2031: Strategic Foresight Workshop with ITU Secretariat", highlighting key strategic insights in preparation for "**Workshop #2: ITU Strategic Plan 2028-2031: Strategic Foresight Workshop with ITU Council Working Group for Strategic and Financial Plans (CWG-SFP)**" on Monday, 8 September 2025.

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[1] The UN Futures Lab/Global Hub produced this Background Document based on "*ITU Strategic Plan 2028-2031: Strategic Foresight Workshop with ITU Secretariat Outcome Report*".

[2] The UN Futures Lab/Global Hub (per *Our Common Agenda* proposal) was established by the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General in 2023, to build and leverage strategic foresight efforts across the UN system and beyond to use futures thinking and strategic foresight in planning, policymaking, and decision-making.

[3] UN Futures Lab (2023). *UN Strategic Foresight Guide*

2. Objectives of ITU Strategic Foresight Workshops

- Integrate foresight into ITU Strategic Plan development process to inform the development of ITU Strategic Plan 2028-2031
- Establish a shared understanding of ITU's future direction, fostering alignment and coherence
- Support the articulation of ITU's mission and vision to ensure they reflect emerging global trends, and future opportunities and challenges

3. Key Insights from Workshop #1: ITU Strategic Plan 2028-2031: Strategic Foresight Workshop with ITU Secretariat

Opening Workshop #1, Mr. Tomas Lamanauskas, ITU Deputy Secretary-General, emphasized two realities shaping ITU's planning horizon: (i) Heightened uncertainty and systemic shocks; and (ii) technology's dual-use character, which simultaneously enables progress while also produces new risks across sectors (e.g. affordability, connectivity, sustainability)

3.1. Session One: Horizon Scanning[4] Deep Dive Exercise

Participants engaged in a Horizon Scanning Deep Dive[5] exercise to identify and analyze key Signals[6], Trends[7], and Drivers of Change[8] that may shape ITU and to consider their implications for ITU's Strategic Plan 2028-2031. This resulted in the following key insights:

1) **Geopolitics and the effect on consensus-building**
Geopolitical rivalries among major powers, the emergence of blocs, and **increasing polarization** are already visible and challenging consensus building, which could be further undermined by the **decline of democracy as a governance model**. **Trust in international organizations** is eroding, and the incentives for larger states to act unilaterally or bilaterally may outweigh those of collective cooperation. Taken to an extreme, these dynamics could lead to the **collapse of the UN** as a Wild Card[9] scenario, drawing parallels to the fate of the League of Nations.

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[4] Horizon Scanning involved analyzing and identifying emerging Signals, Trends, and Drivers of Change that could impact ITU's operational and strategic priorities over the next 10 years. UN Futures Lab (2023). _UN Strategic Foresight Guide_ ("Horizon Scanning")

[5] Workshop #1 was informed by a pre-workshop Horizon Scanning survey. The survey drew on Signals, Trends, and Drivers from ITU publications, draft situation analyses, and academic sources across Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental (PESTLE). Participants assessed them by (i) relevance, (ii) time horizon, and (iii) implications, while also contributing new additions (19 in total).

[6] A Signal is a first indicator of change, with the potential to scale. UN Futures Lab (2023). _UN Strategic Foresight Guide_ ("Horizon Scanning")

[7] A Trend is an established general direction in which something is changing. Ibid.

[8] A Driver of Change is a source of change. Ibid.

[9] A Wild Card is a low-probability, high-impact event. Ibid.

2) Economic pressures and financial sustainability

Financial instability is a growing concern for the UN system. **Rising debt levels, currency reevaluation, competing priorities such as military spending, and broader fiscal stress** could create liquidity risks with a potential domino effect on ITU's budget, staffing, and programmes. Within this context, ITU faces a dual challenge: while **revenues** are **diminishing** from more traditional sources, economic benefits from technological innovation accelerate outside of the UN system.

3) The future of work and institutional adaptation

Automation and AI are expected to fundamentally reshape the nature of work and thematic focus, including ITU. **Over-governance and administrative burden** risks are diverting focus from substantive work towards more administrative functions. While ITU has demonstrated capacity to adapt, whether the institution can develop new skills and governance models that reflect evolving power relations will be central to its continued relevance. At the same time, ITU's **relatively small size** compared to other UN entities could become an advantage, enabling greater agility and adaptability if paired with deliberate reforms.

4) Technology as a double-edge driver

Technology, particularly **AI** and **quantum computing**, emerged as both powerful enablers and a source of systemic risks. Opportunities include expanding **AI literacy, democratizing access to information, and leveraging ICTs to improve accessibility and bridge inequalities**. At the same time, the **weaponization of AI**, its use in **military applications**, and the **monopolization of AI** and **quantum infrastructure** by a **small group of actors** could concentrate **power and deepen global divides**. **Sustainability** concerns are also rising, as the energy and resource demands of supercomputing and data centres grow. Some participants raised the possibility of an "**AI bubble**", which if it bursts, could shift market dynamics. Others cautioned that an **overemphasis on AI** risks crowding out attention to other critical areas of ICT governance, such as connectivity, spectrum management, infrastructure resilience and cybersecurity.

5) Social and human dimensions

Mental health concerns and **digital fatigue** are driving behavioural shifts, with some schools reducing screen time and adults reverting to simpler technologies. At the same time, persistent inequalities remain evident: youth, gender, people with disabilities, and accessibility issues are not systematically included in ICT governance. Participants also raised concerns about the cognitive implications of overreliance on AI for **human intelligence** and critical thinking. While **democratization of information** expands participation and empowers users, it also amplifies risks related to **misinformation, disinformation, and declining content quality**.

6) Environmental impact

The **rapid expansion** of digital infrastructure driven by AI and data-intensive technologies is colliding with **finite resources** such as water, minerals, and energy. This growth is also accelerating **e-waste** generation, creating additional sustainability challenges. Pressure is mounting to cap the energy consumption of data centres and AI models. In some contexts, this could force difficult trade-offs, with countries prioritizing data infrastructure over essential public services. A low-probability but high-impact Wild Card identified by participants was a **solar flare** capable of disrupting global digital infrastructure, underscoring the vulnerability of interconnected systems.

3.1.1. Signals, Trends and Drivers: Interconnections

As part of the Horizon Scanning Deep Dive Exercise, participants identified interconnections between Signals, Trends, and Drivers, which resulted in the following **key interconnections**:

- **Trust, governance, and consensus:** Rivalries and polarization erode trust, weakening consensus; ITU's small size offers agility to rebuild credibility
- **Economic pressures and institutional capacity**: Debt, currency volatility, and fiscal stress may reduce contributions, risking downsizing and diminishing capacity to deliver on its mandate
- **Technology and inequality**: Concentrated control of AI/quantum may widen divides; digital literacy and open access can mitigate these risks
- **Social resilience and technology**: Digital fatigue, mental health concerns, and skills gaps reduce adaptability to rapid change
- **Security and governance**: Cyber threats and weaponization heighten risks; sound governance can reinforce trust and legitimacy
- **Resources, environment, and inequality**: Rising demand for energy, water, and minerals from ICT/AI strains resources and increases vulnerabilities

These interconnections underscore that ITU's strategic environment is shaped by complex, reinforcing dynamics requiring a systems change perspective, identifying leverage points where targeted interventions can break negative feedback loops and amplify positive spillovers.

3.2. Session Two: Futures Triangle Exercise

Using the **Futures Triangle[10]** methodology, participants conducted a deeper analysis of the Signals, Trends, and Drivers of Change previously identified. The discussion revealed a clear tension between a perceived current structural inertia of the organization and the

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[10] Futures Triangle is a foresight tool for analyzing Signals, Trends, and Drivers that could shape ITU's plausible futures, especially on topics that have been traditionally difficult to make progress on. UN Futures Lab (2023). *UN Strategic Foresight Guide* ("Futures Triangle")

need for transformation, as well as opportunities to leverage ITU's strengths to shape a more agile and impactful future:

1) **Weight of the Past: What is holding ITU back?**
   - **Governance structures:** The federal model, long decision-making cycles, over-governance, proliferation and complex reporting requirements slow down responsiveness
   - **Internal processes:** Fragmented internal procedures (procurement, recruitment processes) reduce efficiency and make it harder to deliver results in a timely manner
   - **Financial model:** Currency fluctuations, possible uneven compliance to contribution rules by some Member States, and long-term budget cycles
   - **Organizational culture:** Risk-averse, "business-as-usual" mindset and siloed working methods
   - **Integrity and neutrality:** The transition of national experts from delegations into ITU staff roles, and vice versa, raises questions about neutrality and impartiality

2) **Push of the Present: What is shaping ITU's current focus?**
   - **Geopolitical fragmentation:** Growing polarization and the emergence of competing blocs undermine consensus
   - **Financial and operational pressures:** Possible declining contributions and limited engagement from the private sector place increasing strain on ITU's budget
   - **Technology disruptions and risks:** AI, cybersecurity, misinformation, online child protection, climate change, data governance, and demographic shifts
   - **Mandate boundaries and coordination:** ITU's engagement in multiple fast-moving domains raises questions about mandate scope, potential duplication, and intersectoral coordination.
   - **Accountability and impact:** Growing demand by Member States for clearer demonstration of results, with stronger indicators and measurable outcomes

3) **Pull of the Future: What is driving ITU forward?**
   - **Agile governance and efficiency:** Streamlined resolutions, more focused meetings, simplified administrative and procurement processes, and greater use of digital tools
   - **Empowered people and culture:** Staff mobility, digital and AI literacy, and alignment of recruitment with organizational needs
   - **Diversified and resilient funding:** Expanded partnerships with the private sector and exploring innovative financing models to reduce financial vulnerability
   - **Reaffirming ITU's values:** Neutrality, one-country-one-vote, and ITU's 160-year legacy of advancing a trusted platform to reach consensus on technical matters and driving innovation

- **Clarity of mandate and measurable impact:** Focus on areas where ITU provides unique added value, while avoiding duplication, and demonstrating measurable results through clear indicators
- **Harnessing technology for inclusive development:** Leveraging advances in AI, data, and space technologies, while addressing inequalities, fostering digital skills, and unlocking youth potential

4. Key Lessons Learned

ITU's strategic environment is not defined by single risks, but by the interplay of multiple Signals, Trends, and Drivers across (geo)political, economic, technological, social, and environmental domains. Several themes emerged repeatedly across both exercises, underlining their significance for ITU's Strategic Plan:

- **Interdependencies amplify risk and opportunity:** Geopolitical fragmentation, financial fragility, and technology concentration reinforce one another, creating feedback loops that can erode trust, widen inequalities, and strain resources. At the same time, fostering positive interconnections, such as the link between trust, security, digital literacy, and democratized access to information, can reduce inequalities and broaden participation. Addressing these dynamics requires a systems thinking approach and coordinated responses.
- **Technology's fast development requires ongoing monitoring:** Rather than reacting to every new breakthrough, mechanisms for continuous scanning and structured prioritization will be helpful to ensure focus on areas where engagement delivers the greatest value.
- **Institutional agility is a strategic asset:** ITU's relatively small size can enable faster adaptation, but only if governance, culture, and administrative and internal processes are streamlined, and if staff skills are rebalanced toward capabilities and work that are most impactful for members.
- **People and inclusion matter:** Digital fatigue, mental health concerns, and persistent gaps in participation (youth, gender, accessibility) underscore the importance of human-centred approaches.
- **Sustainability and resilience are non-negotiable:** Resource constraints, e-waste, and climate-related shocks demand that energy efficiency, circularity, and resilience planning are placed at the heart of digital and AI discussions.

Building on ITU's credibility, the challenge ahead lies in converting the foresight outcomes into actions: aligning governance, skills, and partnerships with a rapidly evolving technological landscape while safeguarding the values that make ITU a trusted organization.