

# Frame the Future Thought Pieces



## Anticipation: A Key Conversation for Resilience



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The action of envisioning futures has always been present in decision-making. Whether it is for guiding its people to a better place (Moses) or building a monument that will last for centuries (Keops), the dominant view of the future shapes the fates of many. Today, one of the main concepts that is part of our desired future is resilience. One definition of the resilience of nations says the following:

"A nation resilient to disasters of natural origin is that which embraces a cross-cutting resilience culture, understood as the capacities of a system, person, community or country, exposed to a natural hazard, to anticipate, resist, absorb, adapt to, and recover from its effects in a timely and effective manner in order to achieve the preservation, restoration, and improvements of its structures, basic functions and identity."<sup>1</sup>

In this context, the role of anticipation is very important, in order to foresee future situations and prepare for them, and also for detecting and understanding emergent, completely new phenomena.

It is relevant to note that the way in which anticipation is taken into account — and perhaps more relevant, in which it is not even talked about — is captured by a particular cultural vision about the future and by specific ways of approaching it. Without making any judgement about whether any particular approximation

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is appropriate or not, we can say that for being able to design resilient systems, it is preferable to know more than just one way of thinking about our collective future. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to facilitate the rigorous and responsible expansion of the foundations of this vision, making its assumptions explicit and incorporating other methodologies that are pertinent and complementary.

### Background

We are all anticipators. At all times, our decisions and actions are motivated by what we anticipate — consciously or unconsciously — is going to happen. For example, a key decision, such as the school in which we put our children, is based on an idea that we have about

<sup>1</sup> Hacia un Chile Resiliente Frente a Desastres: Una Oportunidad. Consejo Nacional de Innovación para el Desarrollo (2016)

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the factors that will allow them to have greater possibilities later on. Likewise, semi-automatic decisions, such as passing another car on a two-way road, depend on what we anticipate in terms of the speed of both cars, forward visibility, and our distance from other vehicles coming in the opposite direction, among other factors. Every decision is made based on the desire to achieve something in the future.

But anticipation is not exclusive to humans. It is present in all living organisms and is made possible by the existence of anticipatory systems. These systems are those that enable an organism or organization to exhibit anticipatory behavior, such as when the zebra tries to escape from the lion or a cell follows the concentration gradient of its food source.

What distinguishes us as humans in this context is the capacity for conscious anticipation, which allows us to build narratives about the future, share them, and make commitments with others. For example, we can agree with colleagues to have lunch in two days. On the contrary, it is useless to tell my dog that I am going to be away for the weekend and promise that he will see me again on Sunday night. He is not able to internalize that statement and calm his anxiety while I'm not at home.

Knowing which are the anticipatory systems that we are using — because even if we do not make it explicit, we are always using at least one — is essential to open up our minds to knowing and understanding other anticipatory systems and their characteristics.

### To Anticipate or to Not Anticipate, that is the Question

Without uncertainty, we would not have to do anticipation exercises; a calculation would suffice. As that is not the case, we accept that we have to make an effort to reduce uncertainty, hopefully eliminating it in everything that seems relevant to us.

However, in this permanent and sometimes unconscious exercise, we lose valuable resources in seeking to obtain precision at a cost greater than the benefit it brings us. In a universe with unlimited time and resources, this would not have major consequences. But in our world, we have to wonder if the effort and money allocated to that illusory precision would not be better used for other purposes.

A famous text that illuminates this problem is the opening stanza of the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.

This strophe has a deep anticipatory sense of its own. The meaning of the verb "to change" is "to make something different," which can only happen eventually in the future. In this sense, the intention to change something is implicitly based on imagining a future different from what we believe will happen if we do not act.

### A Way Forward

A novel approach to understand anticipation and its role in building resilience is to treat the future as an imaginative fiction; a story we tell ourselves about how certain things are going to happen. Note that the fictitious character of this narrative does not mean it does not have power. On the contrary, it has very real effects in influencing our decisions in the present. We will make different decisions if we imagine a resilient community, city or nation, compared to imagining a future where they are not.

This is why anticipation can be a powerful approach to making decisions that build and promote resilience in many dimensions. We have to be able to imagine a resilient future and work to make it happen. And for walking that path, we must expand our repertoire for imagining different futures and improve our capacity for choosing the appropriate way for the task at hand along the way. Our future depends on it.