A Glossary of Terms commonly used in Futures Studies

Short Version
**Anticipation:** The sense of expectation of an occurrence, predicting it and occasionally the act of preparing for it.

**Backcasting:** The process of working backwards from the definition of a possible future, in order to determine what needs to happen to make this future unfold and connect to the present.

**Baseline:** A set of reference data used as a basis for comparison.

**Black swan:** A metaphor describing an extremely low-probability/unforeseen, high impact event that takes everyone by surprise.

**Breaks, Ruptures, Disruptions, Discontinuities:** Abrupt, major changes in the nature or direction of a trend.

**Business as usual:** A path towards a future considered as the continuation of the current path.

**Causality:** A logical link between events where a cause precedes an effect and altering the cause alters the effect.

**Complex systems:** Systems which are made up of multiple interacting components exhibiting emergent macro-behaviour and interacting dynamically with their wider contexts.

**Delphi:** An anonymous survey method using iterative structured feedback to pool expert opinion on the future.

**Drivers, Driving forces:** Factors causing change, affecting or shaping the future.

**Emerging pattern:** A novel situation/new trend created by unforeseen recurrent events.

**Expert:** A person who has a special skill, knowledge, insight, or ability in a particular domain based on research, experience, judgment or occupation.

**Exploration:** An anticipatory inquiry that investigates a wide range of possible future developments, considered from a variety of perspectives.

**Extrapolation:** Application of a method or conclusion to a new situation assuming that existing trends will continue or similar methods will be applicable.

**Forecast:** A statement that something is going to happen in the future, often based on current knowledge and trends.

**Forecasting:** The process of making a forecast.

**Foresight:** A systematic, participatory and multi-disciplinary approach to explore mid- to long-term futures and drivers of change.
**Future**: The time yet to come.

**Futures Studies**: A field of studies focusing on a methodical exploration of what the futures might be like.

**Horizon scanning**: A systematic method for gathering new insights on issues which may impact the future.

**Knowledge**: Information about what the future could be before it exists, acquired through the practice of Futures Studies.

**Mapping**: A process seeking to display how factors that have created the present and/or can create the future are inter-connected.

**Model**: A simplified representation of an object, an event or a process.

**Narrative, Storyline**: A coherent description of a scenario (or a family of scenarios), highlighting its main characteristics and dynamics, the relationships between key drivers, and their related outcomes.

**Normative**: Describes a preferred scenario, or future.

**Outlook**: A description of a future state or development or conditions that is considered likely (or at least plausible) given clearly defined logic and assumptions.

**Pathway**: A trajectory in time, reflecting a particular sequence of actions and consequences against a background of autonomous developments, which leads to a specific future situation.

**Plausible**: Judged to be reasonable because of its underlying assumptions, internal consistency and logical connection to reality.

**Predictability**: The degree of confidence in a forecasting system based either on laws derived from observations and experience or on scientific reasoning and structural modelling.

**Proactive**: Oriented towards acting in advance of a future situation, averting undesirable futures and working towards the realization of desirable futures.

**Probability**: The likelihood of something happening or changing.

**Projection**: An expected value of one or more indicators at particular points in the future, based on the understanding of selected initial conditions and drivers.

**Prospective**: Refers to the French foresight method “La Prospective”, which is based on the principle that the future is not written, but is to be built as a collective endeavour.
**Qualitative:** Characterizes something that can be observed but not measured numerically.

**Quantitative:** Characterizes something that can be observed and measured in magnitude and multitude.

**Roadmap:** A description of a set of time-bound strategic milestones along a pathway that is expected to lead to a prioritized or desirable future.

**Scenario:** A description of how the future may unfold according to an explicit, coherent and internally consistent set of assumptions about key relationships and driving forces.

**Simulation:** Assessment of system behaviour undertaken by building and using models that are designed to behave in a manner analogous to a real system.

**Strategic planning:** Preparing for, or achieving, some future state.

**System:** A set of interconnected elements that is coherently organized in a pattern or structure.

**Systemic:** Relating to or affecting the whole of a system, rather than just some part or parts of it.

**Time Horizon:** The farthest point in the future that is being considered in a Futures Study.

**Time Frame:** The complete period (past-to-future) considered in a Futures Study.

**Transition:** A shift of a system from one state to another.

**Trend:** General tendency or direction of a movement/change over time.

**Megatrend:** A major trend, at a large or global scale.

**Uncertainty:** A state of having limited knowledge about the future.

**Vision:** A compelling image of a (usually preferred) future.

**Visioning:** The process of creating a series of images or visions of the future.

**Weak signal:** An early indication of a potentially important new event or emerging phenomenon that could become an emerging pattern, a major driver or the source of a new trend.

**Wild Card:** A surprising and unpredictable event that would result in considerable impacts (or consequences) that could change the course of the future.

**Worldview:** How people see the world, with an emphasis on their unconscious assumptions, and the principles that they do not call into question.
Our future is unpredictable but we are not powerless to confront it. The future can be anticipated, explored, and its course can be changed. This is what the field of Futures Studies deals with.

People can engage in thinking about the future through different means, with different objectives, in order to reduce uncertainties and prepare for what might happen.

Futures studies allow us to navigate the past, the present and the future and inform us about the options, the choices we can make, and the actions we can take.

This glossary can be used to help both readers and writers to better understand the meaning of each term and how to use it when applied to Futures Studies in food, agriculture and rural development. It contains concise, easily understandable definitions of the most common terms used in Futures Studies. It will help make your conversations about the future more shareable.

This short version has only definitions. The full digital glossary is available at http://bit.ly/FTPglossary. It provides also Illustrations/References and additional Notes.

GFAR
Produced by the Forward Thinking Platform and supported by the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) - www.egfar.org
Contact: robin.bourgeois@fao.org