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What does the future look like in the Eastern Gangetic Plains?

Application of Foresight for Sustainable Food Systems

Overview

While remaining one of the most densely populated and poorest regions of the world, South Asia will see very significant economic growth over the coming decades due to both population growth and an emerging middle class. This will put extreme pressure on food, water and energy resources in the region which will need to be managed in an integrated way to ensure long-term resource security and political and economic stability.

In the Eastern Gangetic Plains (EGP), the population is highly dependent on agriculture and yet the sector is currently inefficient with high risks, low returns, small and fragmented landholdings, labour scarcity and expensive energy resources. Degradation of land and water resources threatens productivity, and climate change means new techniques are needed. At the same time there are profound changes occurring in food demand and massive concerns about social and economic costs of poor health related to poor nutrition. Fundamental changes are needed to create more sustainable food systems – but which path do we take to get there?

What is food systems foresight?

Sustainable food systems are those which promote production and consumption of safe and healthy food without compromising the environment. They consider sustainability, health and economic issues from the integration of consumption, distribution and production.

Food systems foresight aims to help to provide a long-range perspective on key drivers and trends in regional and local food systems and the implications for water and energy use. Foresight is a process for bringing greater social and political awareness of these issues and for driving change through engaging key stakeholders and exploring alternative future scenarios and transformation pathways.

In terms of foresight for agriculture, the work will look at how the sector is unfolding, what the key pressures are, and what it may look like in the future under business-as-usual and other scenarios. This can help to identify preferred transformation pathways for the future of small-scale farming.

The EGP Foresight for Food Systems component is linked to a wider global initiative, Foresight4Food, being developed by a group of international organisations, research institutions, business networks and funders. It seeks to improve foresight and scenario analysis for the global food system, including strengthening the links between science and forums for dialogue.

Overall, this work aims to improve collaboration between key regional partners to strengthen understanding of longer-term food systems changes, the implications for food, water and energy security and transformational opportunities in agriculture, particularly in the context of gender and climate change. This can help to identify preferred transformation pathways for the future of small-scale farming.

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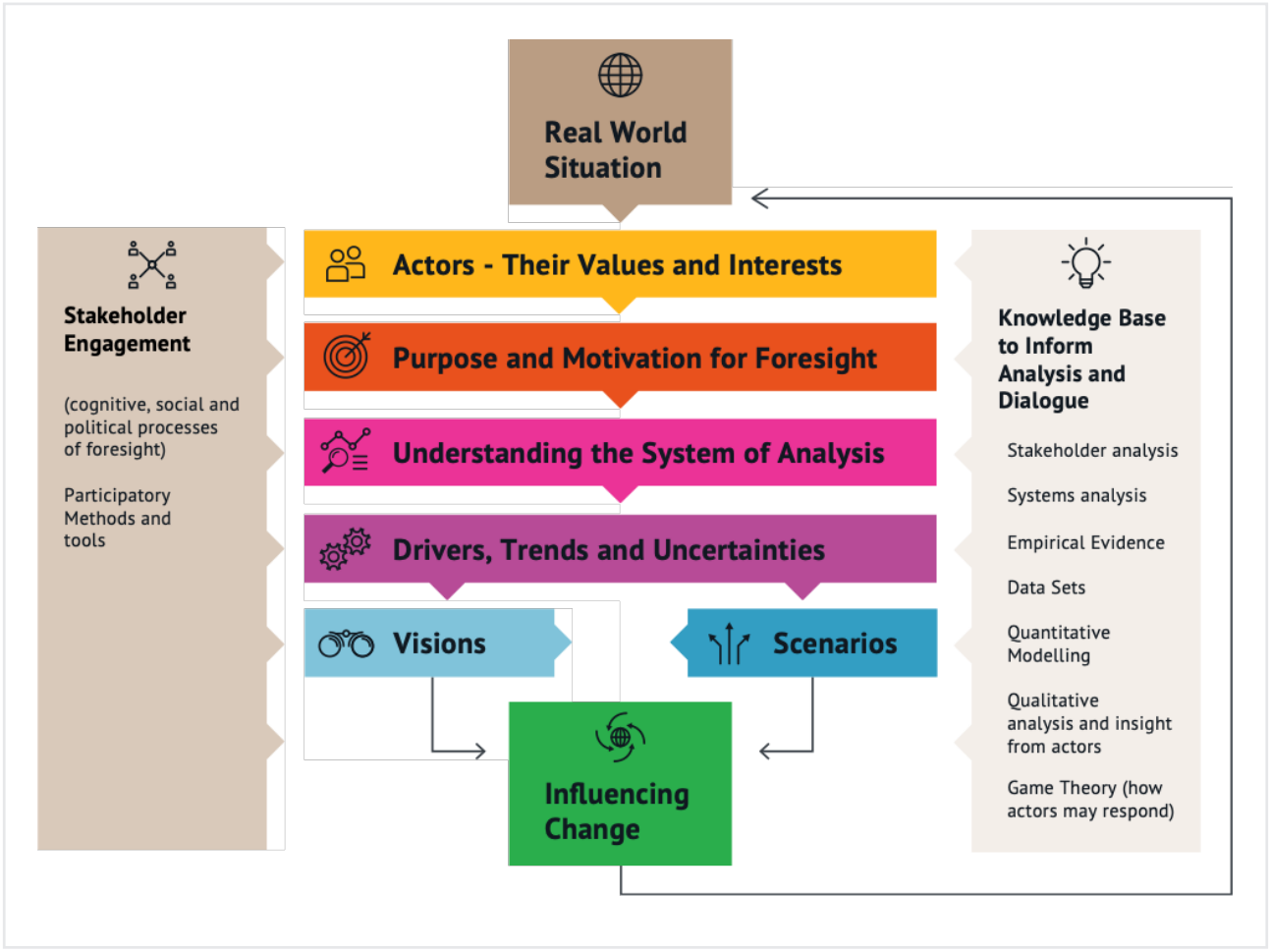
How do we do it?



The value of foresight

Foresight processes can create an opportunity for learning by bringing together different views and a breadth of intellectual enquiry that can contribute to the bigger picture of challenges in the region. Integration and synthesis of existing information, coupled with scenario planning can enhance the knowledge-policy interface.

To make this work relevant we will link with existing government plans and strategies, and try to help inform future planning incorporating food, energy and water perspectives.

Through the use of foresight processes, partners will work together to develop an analytical and policy-relevant understanding of the food systems at regional and local levels, that align with government priorities and focus on actionable change.