

"Futures thinking doesn't come naturally..."

– Jukka Vahti, Senior Lead, Sitra

it's something you have to practise"



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We cannot understand the future without also knowing the hopes, fears, expectations, and aspirations that both shape our outlook and impact our decisions. It may seem like a banal point, but it remains crucial one – because we still know very little about what images of the future that circulate among the public.

To begin filling in these blanks, the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra launched the first edition of its *Futures Barometer* in 2019, revealing what sparks hope, what causes fear, and what inspires people across Finland. In 2023, CIFS followed suit with a Danish survey, taking inspiration from Sitra's effort. Now, in 2025, both organisations have released their latest versions. So how do the results from these two Nordic countries compare?

One clear similarity is also a sobering one. Just as Danes exhibit a pessimism about the future, the confidence of Finns in the future of their municipality, Finland, and especially humanity is faltering. What's behind the decline in optimism, and what gives Finns cause for hope despite it?

To explore these questions, CIFS Head of Research & Publications Casper Skovgaard Petersen spoke with Senior Lead Jukka Vahti and Foresight Specialist Sanna Rekola from Sitra.

Casper: *You started the Futures Barometer at Sitra in 2019. Why did you think surveying the Finnish public about the future was a valuable and important thing to start doing?*

Jukka: Many different surveys and barometers are done on a variety of different topics – most are trying to gather citizens' views on what is currently taking place or what has already happened. Our barometer is the only one that tries to understand how the Finns and Finnish decision-makers perceive and orient themselves towards the future in the long term, meaning in 15-20 years.

Sanna: Most often, in the public debate, the future is talked about among specialists and experts. So, the Barometer is a way to understand what kinds of futures ordinary people think about – and which futures they would prefer. At Sitra we talk about who has the power to define futures, and we work to democratise it. Our Barometer is a part of that discussion and effort.

Casper: *Finland is often highlighted as a model case for integrating foresight into governance and politics to promote more long-term thinking. What role does the Barometer play in this?*

Jukka: I would start by challenging the assumption that foresight is deeply rooted in governance in Finland. While it's true that the meaning and possibilities of strategic foresight is broadly acknowledged on different levels of the government, there is still plenty of work to be done in connecting the foresight work and data to decision making processes. We're not there yet.

When it comes to the role of the Barometer, we hope that policy makers and decision makers in different regions find its results useful and that it helps them integrate futures thinking and foresight into regional strategic work. We know that some have already done that, and we have received a lot of good feedback across Finland, especially at the county level.

On a more general population level, our findings show that the Finns do think about the future quite a lot and that they feel they have a say and can have an impact on their future. So that's positive – and in that sense I do think that Finland can be described as a futures-oriented nation.

Casper: *What are some of the difficulties you've encountered when asking people to imagine the future 10 or 20 years from now? There are inherent difficulties in doing this in a survey format. Some of them can be overcome by asking questions in the right way. But we are still limited in what level of futures literacy we can expect from people. What kind of discussions have you had about this?*

Jukka: This is true – and I would add that the difficulty exists for the public and futurists alike. You must keep reminding the participants that this is about *the future* – you’re supposed to think 10-20 years ahead. One of our main goals is to enhance futures thinking among the Finnish public and decision makers. But as you said it’s not easy for people to detach themselves from the present. It supports one of our main messages: this is something you can and need to practice – it doesn’t come naturally.

What people are *actually* answering to when you ask them something is also a crucial question. Even though the Barometer doesn’t allow us to look behind the answers, it would be an interesting topic for further study. What we did do was acquire additional expertise in data analysis to make sure the questions were at least asked (and the answers given) in a logical way. This means, for example, that the respondent used a reasonable amount of time answering and did not just choose the extreme alternatives in multiple choice questions.

Casper: *You asked the Finns about what future threats worry them. What kind of answers did you get?*

Sanna: Finns are generally concerned about wars and security issues. The threat from Russia specifically, and international instability generally. Other concerns were climate change and environmental problems, biodiversity loss, economic uncertainty, and rising prices. On the more personal side, health, ageing, and welfare services were big topics – so, really a mix of things.

Casper: *War and political instability were also prevalent topics in the responses from Danes. Although we expected these themes to be represented, we were nonetheless surprised at how dominant they were, since war and security are such volatile topics subject to constant change. It tells us how strongly present-day worries tend to be reflected when we think about the future. Civil preparedness has become a mainstream topic in Denmark in a way that it hasn’t been since the end of the Cold War. I’m sure the situation looks different in Finland, given the country’s historical relationship with Russia.*

Jukka: These are also big topics here. Finland has joined NATO. War and security are more topical than they used to be – but not overwhelmingly so. The consensus around the need for being prepared for whatever Russia might do is so ingrained here that it’s more ‘business as usual’. The ‘jump’, so to speak, hasn’t been as high as what you’re describing in Denmark.

Casper: *Since you surveyed both the public and political decision makers, are there any interesting contrasts you’d highlight between the two groups?*

Sanna: Decision makers are more optimistic about the future than citizens in general. It makes sense – they have more agency regarding the future.

Whereas citizens view Finland's weak economic development as a significant issue, decision makers (perhaps unsurprisingly) were more concerned about the public's declining trust in them. Decision makers also view AI more positively than citizens, who were generally more concerned about technological developments.

We also saw a divide in questions related to immigration and multiculturalism. A clear majority of decision makers believe these things are positive – relating to the fact that population is declining – where citizens were much more polarised on this issue.

So, in some key policy areas, decision makers see possibilities where citizens tend to see threats.

Casper: *When it comes to pessimism and optimism about the future, we saw clear differences based on income, politics, education, gender, and age. What findings would highlight from Finland?*

Sanna: The old-young divide is worth highlighting, I think. Young people tend to be more enthusiastic about the future, and they see more opportunities ahead. They also believe we can influence the future more strongly than older people.

Yet the optimism of young people is declining as well. In fact, there's been a dramatic drop in the optimism of young people in recent years.

Casper: *Another standout finding for us was that Danes exhibit low trust in the ability of the political system to handle long-term challenges. Many also believe political decisions are characterised by short-sightedness. My guess is that this would look similar in many other countries – complaining about politicians and politics is something we all love to do – but the low degree of trust still stood out. I know you've asked the Finns similar questions. What kind of results did you get?*

Sanna: Quite similar ones. We asked about whether people think our decision makers adequately consider the long-term impacts of their decisions, and whether they have inspiring visions for the future. Both questions yielded negative results on the regional level. Only 11% of Finns on the regional level are satisfied with the level of political visions. Even the decision makers themselves – we also surveyed them – tended to agree, which was interesting. For us, this really highlighted the need for foresight and long-term thinking.

Casper: *You would expect demand for visionary thinking to be lower on the local, municipality level where politics tends to be much more pragmatic. Why do you think there is such a demand for long-term visions in local politics?*

Sanna: It's a place where you need to formulate very concrete visions about the future. We know that there are many challenges ahead – one major issue is rural depopulation. So, visionary thinking becomes essential in coming up with solutions for how municipalities outside big cities can become attractive places for young people to stay in the future.

Jukka: There is a desperate need for these communities to create visions for what they want to be in the future with much fewer children, many more older people and, eventually, much fewer people in general. So, for municipalities, the question 'what is the good life in 2040?' becomes very concrete and pressing.

The sentiment among Finns is that they do not feel that they have an impact on affecting change at the municipality level, which is worrying – only 15% of Finns think they are able to influence the future of the municipality they live in.

It's a crucial challenge that underlines the need for democracy to renew itself. It can't just be elections every four years – we need to have other means to participate and have a say.



Sitra's Futures Barometer is published every two years, and the latest edition is the fourth since 2019. The results are available in English on Sitra's website.