

Reimagining Healthier and More Equitable Futures: Reflections from a Collective Conversation

How do we build a healthier, more equitable future - one that genuinely considers the wellbeing of generations yet to come? At a recent interactive roundtable session, as part of the Prevention Research 2026 conference, researchers, practitioners and policymakers came together for an open and unconventional “fishbowl” conversation to explore exactly that. The “fishbowl” discussion structure combines the principles of a roundtable discussion with an interactive engagement approach. The core concept entails convening participants in a circle in the middle of the room, symbolising equality, inclusiveness and sharing, rather than positioning speakers as “experts”. The “open” aspect introduces an additional layer of structure – those in the audience can join as speakers, and speakers merge back into the audience.

What unfolded was a rich, honest, and energising discussion about the forces shaping our future and the actions we must take now to influence it. Chaired by Prof Petra Meier, Glasgow Changing Futures Challenge Lead for Healthy and Equitable Futures, the discussion surfaced a range of ideas and perspectives that are summarised here.



Why Future Thinking Matters More Than Ever

We’re living with the consequences of decisions made decades ago. Today, climate change, biodiversity loss, geopolitical instability, widening wealth gaps, and rapid technological change are reshaping the landscape in ways that will profoundly affect future generations. The message from the room was clear: we cannot afford to wait for crisis to force our hand. We need long-term, anticipatory thinking built into our research, policies, and everyday practices.

“Future health equity is just not going to be possible once the climate has reached the tipping point or the far right has won.”

What Gives Us Pause — and What Gives Us Hope

Learning from the Pandemic

Several participants reflected on the COVID-19 pandemic as both a warning and a catalyst. The inequalities it exposed - whether around ethnicity, income, disability, or chronic illness - were entirely predictable. The fear is that political will fades as memories fade. But there is also hope in the collaborations, innovations, and community mobilisation that emerged under intense pressure.

“Hope Is Not a Strategy”... or Is It?

Some argued that hope and fear are unstable foundations for strategy; what we need are tangible options and catalysts for change.

Others - particularly younger voices - argued powerfully that *hope itself* can provide a strategic narrative when it's grounded in action. Especially in places facing existential threats from climate and economic instability, hope can counter paralysis and enable prevention.

“Hope can be a strategy to combat the fear that we all feel... once we ground it pragmatically.”

Putting Young People at the Centre

Young people featured prominently in the discussion. They will inherit the consequences of today's decisions, yet their voices often remain peripheral in policymaking. Surprisingly, many young people aren't deeply pessimistic about the climate future - they're undecided, uncertain, and navigating a world that often overlooks them. A continued theme throughout the conversation was that to create a future that better serves the needs and addresses the challenges of today's young people, we need better mechanisms to amplify youth perspectives and build their agency.

Rethinking What Counts as Evidence

A recurring frustration was the demand - especially from industry - for “perfect evidence” before action can be taken, even when the harms are clear. Participants called for bolder policymaking that recognises “good enough evidence” and prioritises long-term population health over short-term political cycles.

Confronting the Systems That Hold Us Back

Many participants highlighted systemic barriers:

- Short-term, fragmented funding that makes long-term planning almost impossible
- Risk-averse policymaking that results in solutions that are “just enough” rather than transformative
- Institutional inertia in academia, slowing the pace of innovation
- Social media ecosystems that amplify division and undermine trust
- Technology and AI shaped without equity at the centre, risking future inequalities.

Yet people also pointed toward emerging opportunities: new research collaborations, improved data infrastructure, and innovative community-powered models that help bridge the gap between research and lived experience.

The Power of Community Connection

Perhaps the strongest theme was the value of trust, connection, and authenticity. A community mobiliser, who works outside traditional academic structures, described how much faster and more effectively they can respond to emerging needs when they are embedded in communities and empowered to act. Their message: meet people where they are, with no agenda, and with genuine respect.

This raises important questions about what knowledge counts, who produces it, and how research institutions might evolve to better reflect the world they study.



Looking Ahead: What Future-Focused Research Must Consider

When asked what research is needed to prepare for 2040, 2050, and beyond, several ideas were offered:

- Examine the health impacts of emerging technologies and AI
- Study the political and social conditions that enable change - not just the problems
- Investigate how young people form their priorities and identities in a complex digital world
- Understand what motivates policymakers to act boldly rather than incrementally
- Design evidence practices that support future generations, not just short-term cycles.

“We need research on the conditions that make change happen, not only research on the problems themselves.”

Above all, participants emphasised the need to question our assumptions. The world is changing rapidly, and we cannot rely on the continuation of existing patterns or outdated narratives about what communities need and how young people think.

A Collective Call to Action

The session closed with a shared sense of responsibility. We already know much of what is required to build healthier, more equitable futures. The challenge now is to:

- communicate evidence boldly and accessibly
- embrace innovation and take risks
- build partnerships that cross traditional boundaries
- centre communities and young people
- act with courage, not complacency.

As one participant put it, “the ultimate danger lies at the extremes - being either totally pessimistic or naively optimistic”. The real work happens in the space between.

And in that space, there is plenty we can do.

If you would like to find out more about our work in this area, please visit:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/explore/glasgowchangingfutures/>

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