

# Our COVID Future

The Long Crisis Scenarios

Highlights – May 2020

Prepared for

**Local Trust**





Part 1

# The Scenarios

COVID-19 puts us in **uncharted territory**. It's a public health emergency. An economic disaster. A polarisation and insecurity crisis. All at once.

At all levels, we face choices between **collective action** and **polarisation**.

Millions of lives, billions of people's futures, and trillions of dollars depend on whether we act collectively in the face of crisis or instead polarise when under threat.

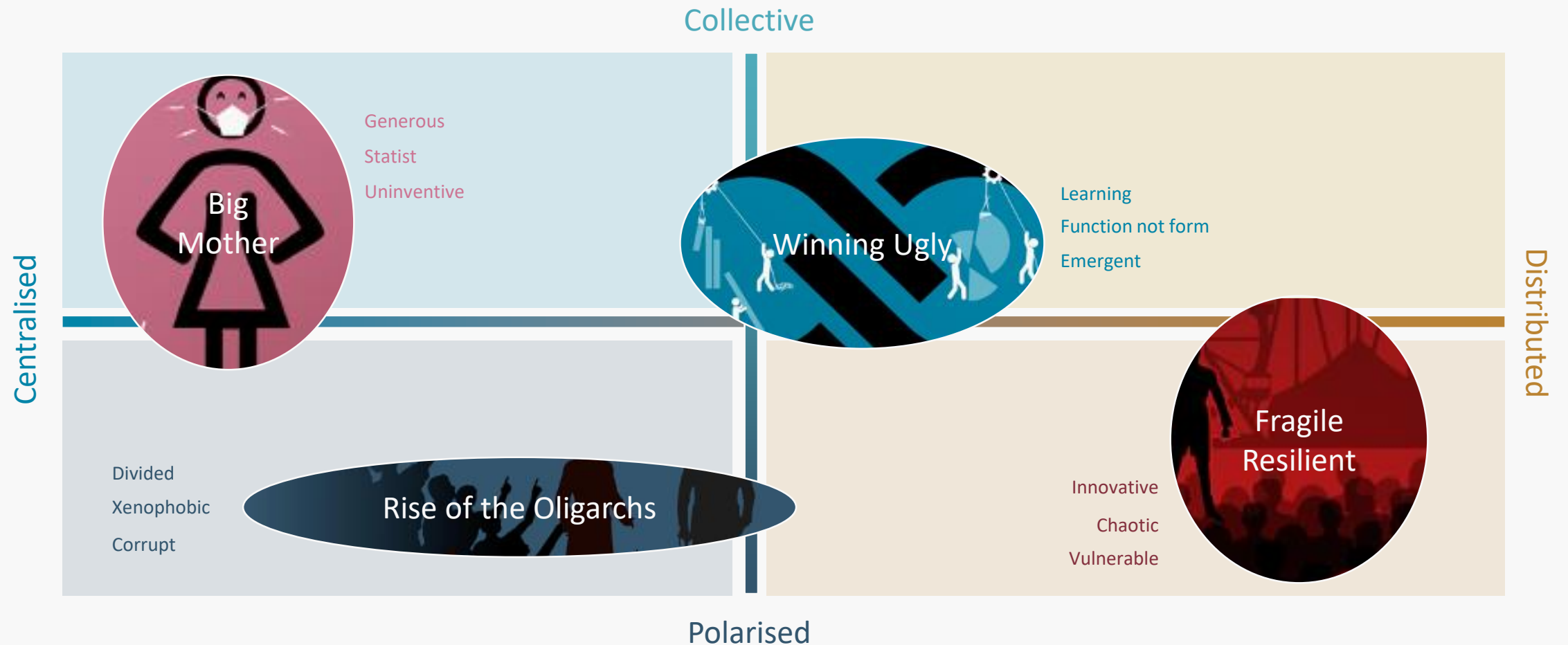
The response can also be **centralised** or **distributed**. In the rapids, does the captain steer the ship alone or does she also empower everyone to row?

The Long Crisis Network has created **four scenarios** about different futures, creating a foundation for decision makers, campaigners, and communities to **influence the process of change**.

**“It's extraordinary how quickly things move and turn... It sometimes feels like a game of whack-a-mole.”**

UK Government Official

The Long Crisis scenarios are shaped by two **drivers of change**, but the **future is complicated** and our scenarios do not fall neatly into the quadrants. Governments can be more or less focused on **delivery** or holding onto **power**. People can play a **local role** or be active at **all levels of society**.





## Scenario 1

# Rise of the Oligarchs

Like a dark phoenix from the ashes, the winner from COVID-19's crises is a government of the few. It's inequitable, illiberal, corrupt, opaque – and ineffective.

No-one thought that it would be this bad: the spread of the pandemic, the economic pain, or the damage to people's lives. But through it all, the powerful – in politics, business, and the media – protect their own.

People are angry, but also scared and compliant. Stranded between apathy and the latest conspiracy theory. Risk takers live at the bottom, not the top of the pile.

International co-operation withers and geopolitical tensions proliferate. In a world of closed borders, racism and xenophobia flourish.

*Divided*

*Corrupt*

*Xenophobic*

In the Rise of the Oligarchs, power and prosperity are centralised and monopolised by elites, who adopt classic tactics from the populist playbook. Inequality is high, civil society is browbeaten, and communities are under pressure.



### Power

A new breed of 'big man' politicians has close ties to the national security establishment and a pliant media. Internationalists lose influence. Independently-minded civil society groups find that government and the media make life difficult if they don't toe the line. Young, poor, and marginalised people are more excluded than ever.

### Prosperity

Big business and government play the game of patronage and mutual enrichment. The government panders to its power base – older and richer voters. Independent businesses, start-ups and entrepreneurs struggle. Wealth leaves local communities. There are few opportunities or prospects for young workers.

### Places

Public space is constrained by a new surveillance state. The capital recovers fastest, but the countryside benefits as the government plays to its base. Devolution goes into reverse and local authorities lose autonomy. Regional inequalities increase and there is little investment in community resilience.

### People

National solidarity has a Them and Us flavour. The government and its media clients fan apathy and fear (especially of 'outsiders'). Trust is low and inequality deepens, between and within communities. Fake news corrupts mutual aid networks. They wither away – or take on a darker hue, fighting crime or resisting immigration.

As the oligarchs rise, they erode the basis for collective action, blurring boundaries between public and private, right and wrong, and fact and fiction. To understand why someone is doing well, trace lines of allegiance and see where they lead.



### Local

Well-connected communities lobby powerbrokers to protect their privileges. 'Robin Hood' civil society plays an influential role, delivering social goods informally, based on whim, connections or patronage. In less fortunate neighbourhoods, a few resilient people work long days to help the vulnerable with little support or pay.

### National

Public service is an opportunity to receive and dole out patronage. Businesses use political connections to build monopolies they can exploit. Some subnational leaders try to forge a different path, but are fiercely resisted. Campaigners are ignored, harassed, or depicted as fronts for foreign influence.

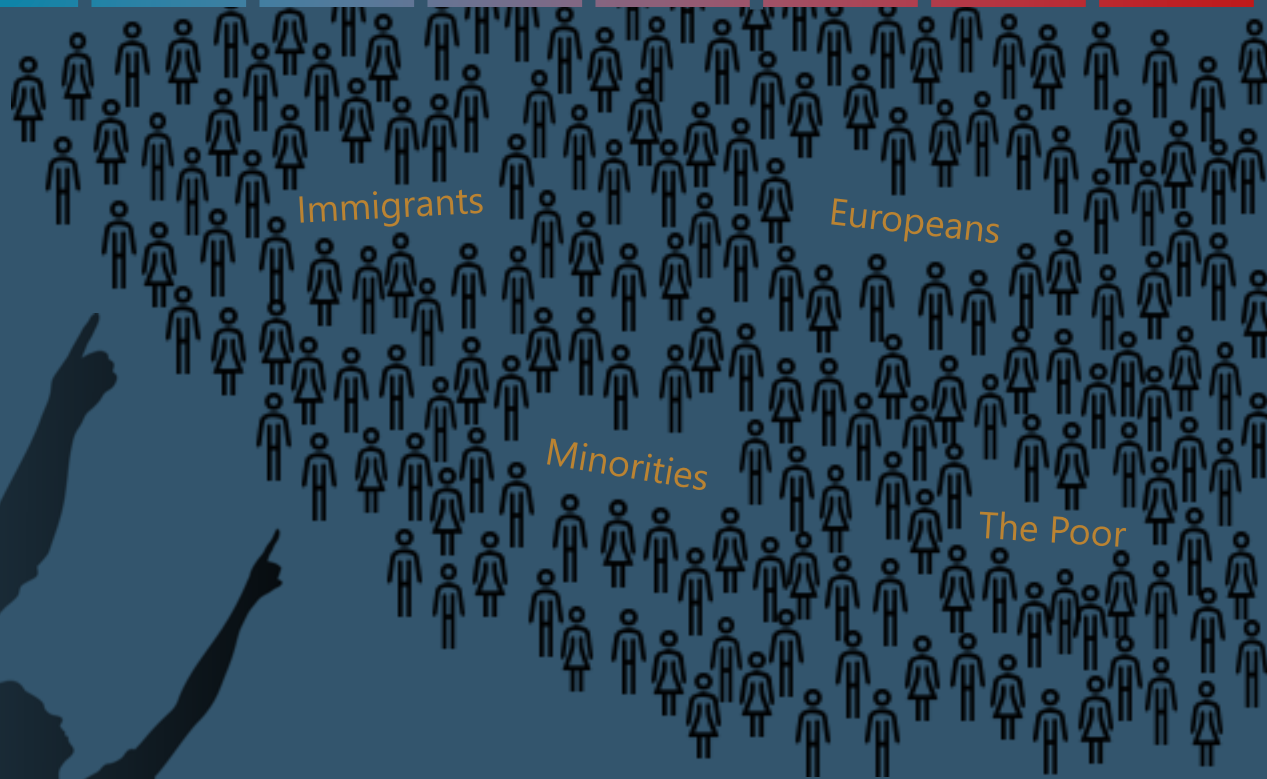
### Global

Hard security threats predominate as major powers clash over power and resources. COVID-19 shuts down borders and trade, with no route for globalisation to recover. While the UN was born from the ashes of the Second World War, it does little more than shuffle listlessly through this new global cataclysm.





**The Blame Game of the Many**



# The Rise of the Oligarchs



## Scenario 2 Big Mother

Government is BACK and *it's here to help.*

Politicians are expected to deliver: *a vaccine, an income, a future.* To keep the lights on both literally and figuratively. People are told what to do by a state that promises to look after them. Lockdowns are sporadic but behaviour is constantly *monitored and regulated.*

The social contract is clear, but the strain is showing. The government has plenty of answers, but *seldom the most imaginative ones.*

And it continually increases expectations while elbowing others aside. When it gets it wrong, people feel betrayed and *anger surges.*

*Statist*

*Ambitious*

*Uninventive*

**Big Mother** centralises power and prosperity, but in the public interest. Society is regulated and rewards conformity. **Inequality declines** with the poorest are looked after. But **few have influence** over the country's direction, making people less willing to take action in their communities.



### Power

The party that wins an election has unprecedented power, as do civil servants. Big business and large NGOs wield influence if their lobbyists are good enough. Voters have power – but only every five years, not as active citizens. Local government loses out, as do community organisations.

### Prosperity

If they survive the crash, big businesses do well. Public sector workers and pensioners benefit, as do the poorest as safety nets become more generous. There are fewer opportunities (but better benefits) for the young. Life is tough for small businesses – and anyone with assets they can't hide away.

### Places

Communities are a focus for ritual and celebration more than social or political organising. Peripheries feel excluded, threatening social cohesion. Places are regulated but below the radar, rebellious youth subcultures flourish. A libertarian 'awkward squad' provides sporadic challenge.

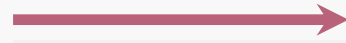
### People

There's strong national cohesion, with a sense that 'we're all in this together' – and that sacrifices need to be made for the future. As people expect more from the state, volunteering declines and more charities become insolvent. Non-conformists and radical voices find themselves excluded.



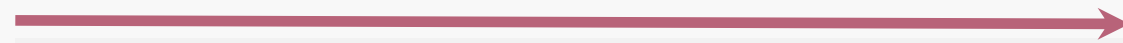
**Big Mother** privileges the national over the local. One – generous – size is expected to fit all. At the global level, the focus is on ways back to business-as-usual, but it's hard to find common ground with countries that have plumped for a different model.

### Local



With so much commerce online, the high street has all but disappeared. Big businesses use branding, technology, and logistics to dominate. Smaller players struggle. Lots of money flows through local government, but the decisions are made centrally, with little leeway to tailor decisions to local needs and preferences.

### National

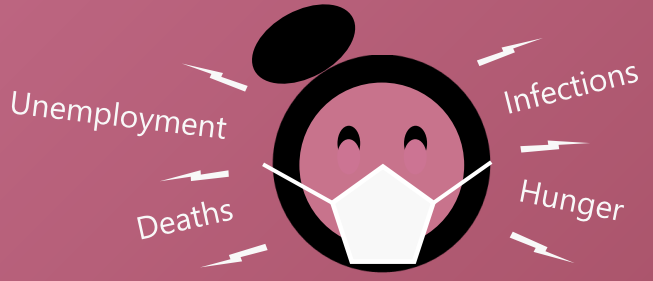


The grown-ups have taken charge. On Zoom interviews, biographies of Angela Merkel feature prominently on ministerial bookcases. Top tier public servants fancy themselves rulers of the COVID-era world. The government has a five-year industrial policy and it matters. Larger civil society organisations thrive, but as a public sector service provider.

### Global



The international system plays a medley of greatest hits from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – aspirational goals, landmark summits, and strongly worded declarations. The United Nations is taken seriously, but with the Secretary-General on a tight leash. Money is spent on resilience, but critics warn we're preparing for the last war, not the next one.



**The COVID-19 Manifesto**  
Lockdown  
Surveillance  
Furloughs  
Basic income  
Bailouts  
Nationalisation

**Big Mother**

*Policies unsuccessful and are seen to fail*

*Policies work and are seen to succeed*



**As expectations of government grow, does it have more right than wrong answers?**



## Scenario 3

# Fragile Resilient

*Chaotic*

*Vulnerable*

*Innovative*

Repeated waves of COVID-19 – and a financial crash, food system crash, climate crash, energy crash, trade crash – **overwhelm the capacity of a state** that finds itself in the latter, more frenetic, stages of a game of Tetris.

Amid intensifying levels of **drama and chaos**, national politics increasingly becomes a competition for what is left of the spoils. Bubbles inflate and burst. Fortunes are made – and lost.

At the grassroots, there's a **surge of innovation** as communities fend for themselves. Like **Italian towns facing the Plague** – or developing countries today – people are fantastically inventive when making the best of a bad job.

In a future that is Fragile but Resilient, **islands of innovation** emerge from a tempestuous sea. Power is **diffuse** and often **illusory**. Society **as a whole** is poorer, even if **some** are richer.



### Power

Politicians may look powerful in the new politics-as-soap-opera but the reality is that government can't solve much. Organised crime is ascendant, as are conspiracy theorists and charismatic leaders of new movements. Communities fend for themselves with whatever resources they have to hand.

### Prosperity

There's space for entrepreneurs – both benign and malevolent. The informal sector grows and is a powerful source of invention and enterprise. Businesses reliant on globalisation do badly. There are fewer steady jobs. Retired people suffer as their savings are wiped out.

### Places

Neighbourhoods can prosper – *if* they're able to self-organise and they have access to assets. Those that can't, do badly. Regional inequalities surge and many communities fall ever further behind. Black market and bartering economies grow. Cities are no longer the hubs they once were.

### People

Horizons shrink. There's more emphasis on extended family and sometimes more community solidarity, but there's also more polarisation and tribalism together with growing distrust of 'outsiders'. Crime and corruption spike, and there's growing political unrest.

Where you live matters – as some communities self-organise and others fall away. Politicians promise stability and strong national government, but **no-one is listening**. Globally, it's all against all, as international co-operation wanes.



### Local

Communities with assets thrive as they nourish local economies, organise informally, and collect resources to pay for it – but have little influence on national or global challenges. Communities without assets suffer as life expectancy falls and education worsens. Levels of abuse are high as the powerful prey on the weak.

### National

Government teeters from crisis to crisis – and the spectacle is compelling. Media and social media are platforms for shouting heads and for telling people what they want to hear. Formal institutions become zombies – refusing to die, staggering forward, never getting far, unable to connect with the struggles of people and communities.

### Global

The global gravy train shudders to halt, as few countries refuse to pay their annual contributions. Every so often, a coalition of the willing will pop up to try and fix a global challenge, but without much success. The UN Secretary-General is well-known and liked. She is often seen on television failing to broker another ceasefire.



Fragile...

On the radar



UNEMPLOYMENT  
HUNGER  
DEATH  
DISEASE  
RIOTS

"The plan is to default on public problem solving, and then prevent the public from understanding the consequences of that default."



Local assets



Community organisation



Informal economy



Below the radar

"Looking after our own...  
at least in some places and some of the time."

...Resilient



## Scenario 4 Winning Ugly

*Distributed*

*Function not form*

*Learning*

*Emergent*

No-one said **it was going to be easy**.

No obvious sign the battle was won. No heroic moment of victory. Instead, an extended – and at times seemingly endless – attack on the pandemic. One that started in hospitals, moved into communities, and was driven by **a collective willingness to learn and adapt**.

The economic trauma was profound, but institutions held. Not just the organisations, but **our ability to organise**. To draw on reserves of community cohesion. To replace failed leaders with a new generation.

At first, we just threw money at the problem. But over time, this created space for smarter approaches to proliferate – and for the emergence of a **narrative** that promotes collective action to tackle other urgent risks such as **climate change**.



The pandemic creates a willingness to consider **radical change** and **big ideas** – but also to take on the hard work of building alliances capable of solving the hardest problems. Winning Ugly means being **ambitious**, but **pragmatic** – and doing whatever it takes to achieve a result.

### Power

A different kind of state emerges – a platform for enabling, connecting, collaborating, and catalysing. The leaders that flourish excel at storytelling and building shared awareness and common purpose. Those that are slow to adapt or won't collaborate get left behind.

### Prosperity

Business sectors – healthcare, logistics, technology – flourish if they build resilience, but the 'new frugality' is bad news for airlines, tourism, and high-end retail. Low carbon innovators also do well. Global just-in-time supply chains are displaced by local economic clusters.

### Places

Life becomes more local. The virtual is the new norm as physical travel seems daunting. The most connected places are also the more vulnerable, as cities with hub airports find to their cost. Communities become more liveable and better at mutual aid, but we're still wary of public spaces.

### People

This is an age of uncertainty. But as people accept that much won't go back to normal, they find new reserves of cohesion, determination, and shared purpose. A growing number of people act as agents of change, with risks and responsibilities widely shared.

When you're winning ugly, **platforms matter** – as a stage on which actors **collaborate**. They can be informal and dissolve when a problem is solved, semi-permanent where networks work together over a prolonged period, or architectural as a new institution or mechanism is created.



### Local

COVID mutual aid networks evolve into essential assets in most places, balancing flexibility and informality, even providing hardship funds and peer-to-peer loans. Local government is transformed. It doesn't always have the resources it needs, so it's often a facilitator of local action, rather than the sole provider of public services.

### National

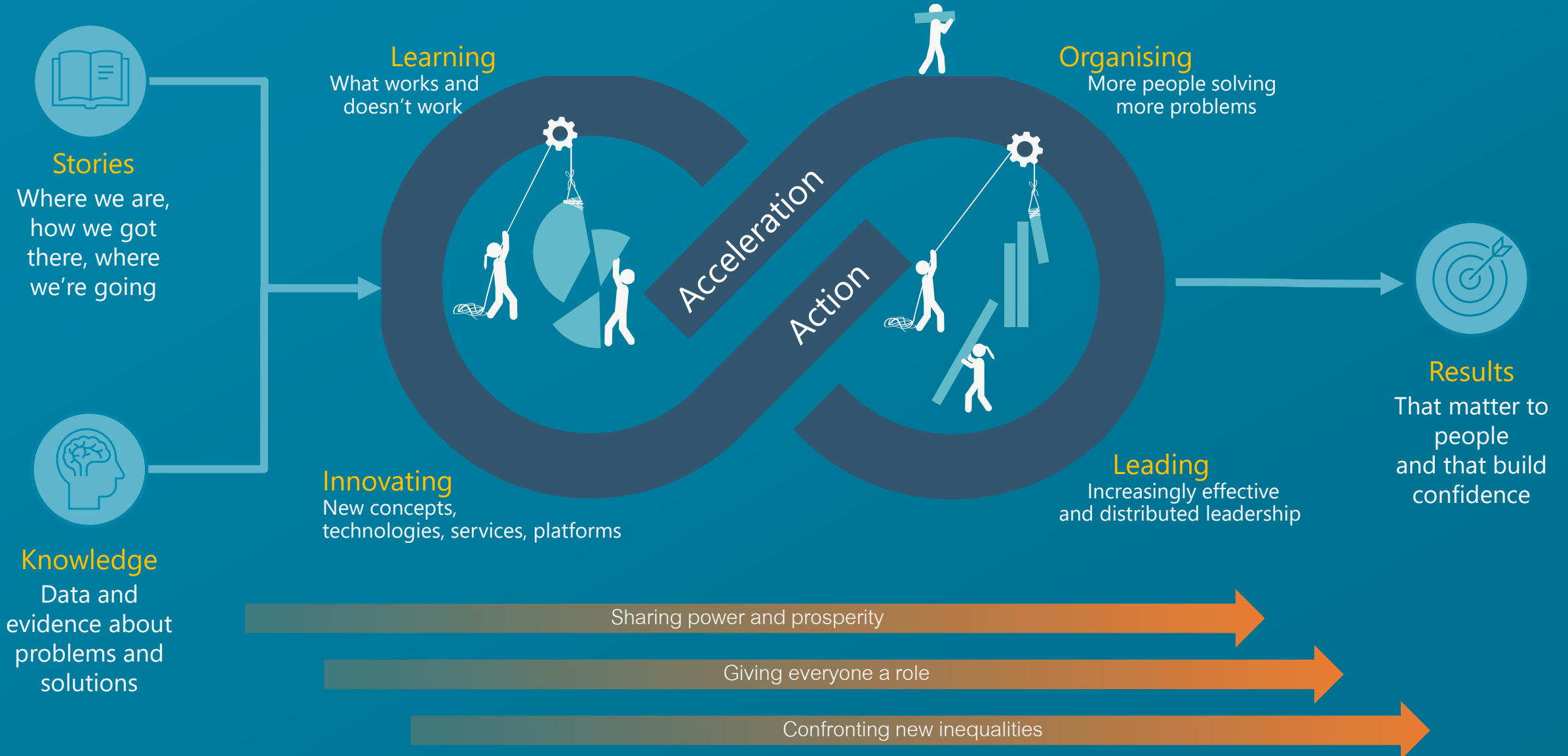
Government puts people and their needs at the centre, building partnerships between state and citizen, public and non-governmental actors. Data and evidence grease the wheels of change. Civil society is a platform too, as big networks of activists reach into communities and then share and scale innovations.

### Global

An international system emerges that gets the basics right – firefighting COVID, helping societies and people to feel secure, and protecting the critical global infrastructure on which we all depend. It also offers hope for the future, through a new deal for a new generation that promises education, jobs, and climate protection.

# Winning Ugly

"means not worrying about how it looks and leaving no resource unearthed in order to accomplish the goal"



Part 2

# Towards A Larger Us

Thirty years ago, a group of South Africans used scenarios to “think **creatively** about the future of their country.”

The Mont Fleur scenarios created a **shared language** for understanding possible futures, identifying dangers while mapping out what success would look like.

They were explicitly designed to help people who didn’t agree to find **common ground** and a **shared direction**.

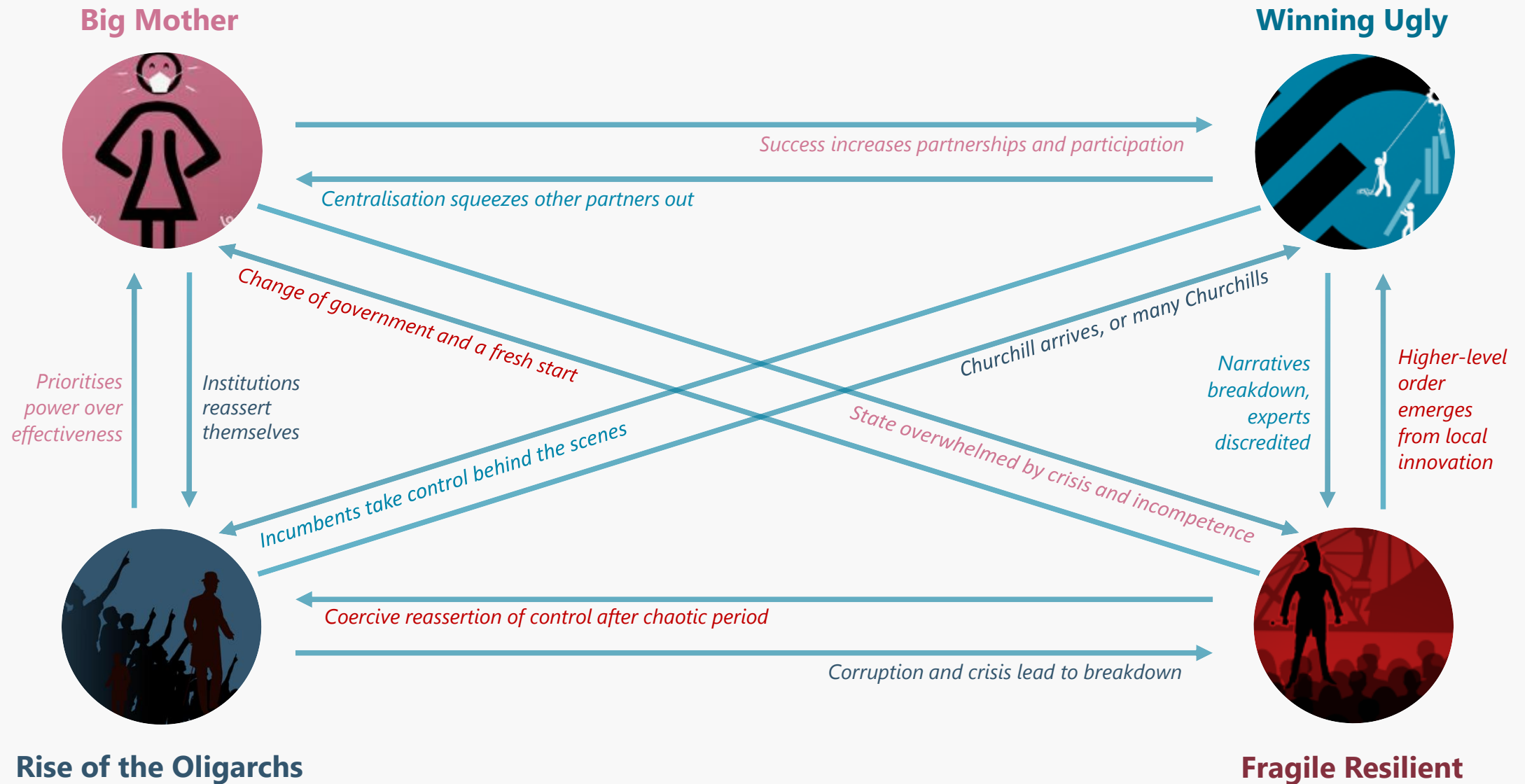
Now, we are at another point at which **the future is up for grabs**. **Them and Us** thinking could drive us further towards breakdown – but a **Larger Us movement** still has everything to play for.

A future where the toll of the pandemic is still heavy, but our capacity for **collective action** grows.

“We captured the way forward of those committed to finding a way forward.”

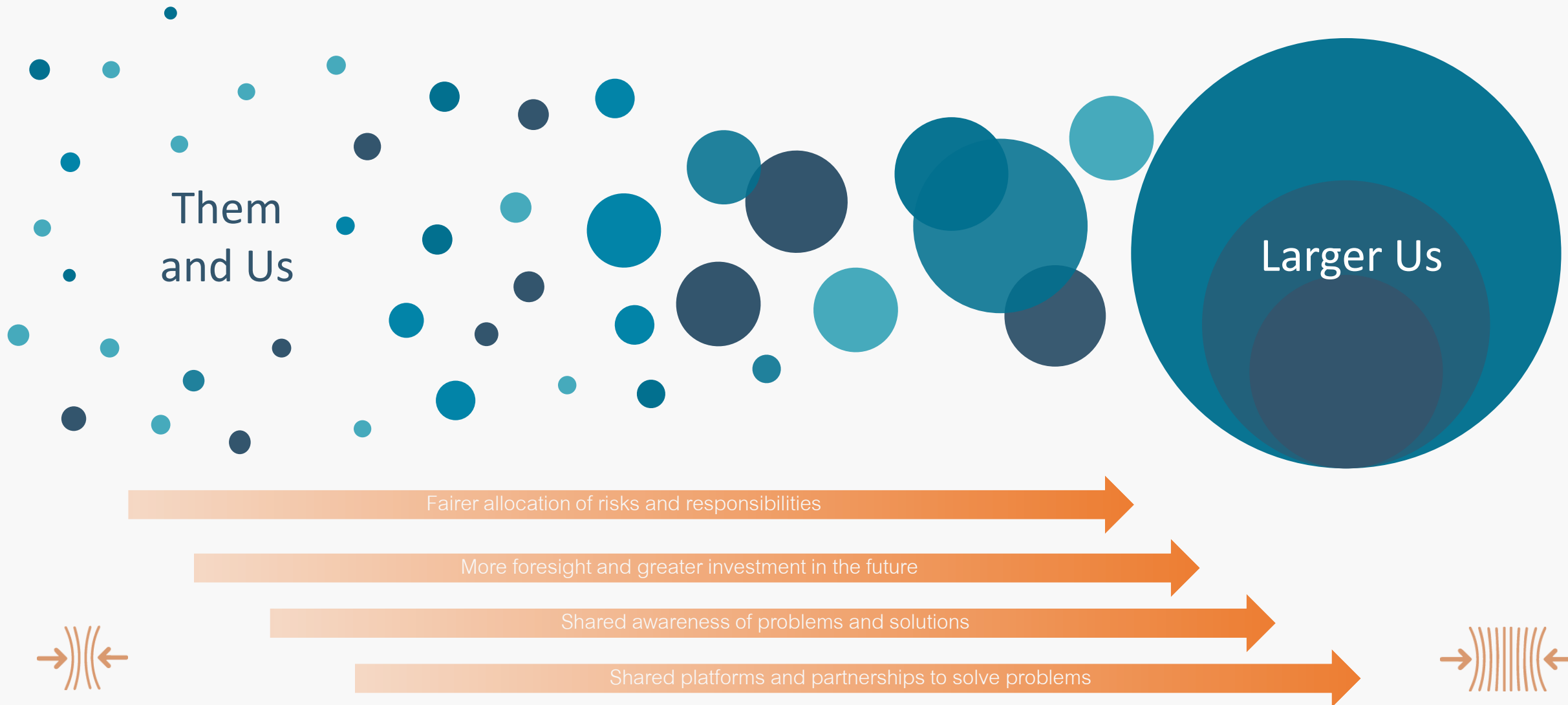
Mont Fleur participant

No future is immutable. There are always **opportunities** to promote collective action and broaden participation, and **threats** that increase polarisation and exclusion.





Transformative strategies will only be possible if we build the foundations for **collective action** and **broad participation** from across society in creating a better future. This is the shift from **Them and Us** to **Larger Us** mindset, strategies, and alliances.



Different **strategies** will be needed in different futures, building on **what is going right** and confronting **what is going wrong**. Locally, priorities may range from **protecting communities** from economic and political failure to enabling them to play the **fullest role** in building a better future.



Local



### Big Mother

Lobby for decisions to be taken by and with the communities they affect. Build strong links between local authorities and citizen groups. As investment in public services grows, promotes alternatives to one-size-fits all approaches.



### Winning Ugly

Build a narrative demonstrating the power of collective action at the grassroots and position communities as drivers of transformative change. Invest in community leaders, linking them to government at all levels, and to business and civil society networks.



### Rise of the Oligarchs

Provide a platform for mayors and other subnational leaders to show that better alternatives exist. Lock in power at a local level, strengthening networks and helping communities take control of their assets. Defend grassroots activists who face attack.



### Fragile Resilient

Foster innovation at local levels and knowledge sharing between communities. Build skills in governance and local partnership development. Scale more successful community businesses. Build the asset base in left behind communities and support their change makers.

The pandemic has placed governments and other national decision makers under the microscope – resulting in a mix of **panic**, **error**, and **innovative action**. As leaders dig in for the long haul, the priority will be to create pressure, incentives, and space to act in the **public interest**.



National



### Big Mother

Use data to monitor whether new government programmes are delivering results to people and communities, including groups that are left out. Advocate for accountability and transparency. Build openness to new approaches and partners.



### Winning Ugly

Create a narrative that brings people together and amplifies marginalised voices. Provide platforms for problem-solving and participation. Celebrate successes and the people who made them happen. Actively reduce polarisation and marginalise disruptive actors.



### Rise of the Oligarchs

Support islands of public sector effectiveness and showcase any new models that emerge. Keep civic space open and invest in change makers from outside government. Call out corruption and abuse. Protect human rights defenders.



### Fragile Resilient

Withdraw from national politics if it's not making any difference. Create national networks of local activists, providing them with resources and the 'backbone' they need to be effective. Support humanitarian efforts and harm reduction strategies.

COVID-19 respects no borders. It demands that countries act in concert to **defeat** the virus, **rebuild** economies, **protect** the systems on which we depend, and **create hope** for a better future. But different levels and types of co-operation will be feasible in different futures.



Global



### Big Mother

Build coalitions of countries who are prepared to invest in collective action. Focus international institutions on more ambitious responses to fewer priorities. Minimise investment in set piece summits that deliver declarations and not much else.



### Winning Ugly

Implement global approaches to controlling and eradicating COVID-19. Prevent insecurity and violence. Protect critical global infrastructure. Offer a new deal to a new generation (education, jobs, and climate). Invest in multi-stakeholder platforms for action.



### Rise of the Oligarchs

Invest in hard security and de-escalating tensions between major powers. Target international flows of illicit assets. Use global pressure to protect national and grassroots human rights defenders. Work with coalitions of the willing to create global public goods.



### Fragile Resilient

Maintain humanitarian expenditure. Grow global networks of resilient communities. Develop models for rebuilding international co-operation in case a window of opportunity opens.

# Local Trust

[www.localtrust.org.uk](http://www.localtrust.org.uk)

LONG CRISIS  
NETWORK



[www.longcrisis.org](http://www.longcrisis.org)  
[info@longcrisis.org](mailto:info@longcrisis.org)