

GLOBAL PRIORITIES PROJECT 2017

Existential Risk

Diplomacy and Governance



GLOBAL
PRIORITIES
PROJECT

Future
of Humanity
Institute
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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Executive summary

The 2015 Paris Agreement represented a huge global effort to safeguard future generations from damaging climate change. But climate change is not the only serious risk to humanity. Our collective commitment to our children and future generations needs to extend to all existential risks — those with the potential to permanently curtail humanity’s opportunity to flourish. These risks include nuclear war, engineered pandemics, and other catastrophes resulting from emerging technologies.

These disasters could cause an almost unimaginable loss. They would lead to immediate harm, but in their most extreme forms, they have the potential to wipe out humanity entirely.

Such risks may seem unlikely and distant. Indeed, in any one year they are improbable. But small probabilities accumulate - and because disaster risk reduction is a global public good individual nations will tend to underinvest in it. Nuclear weapons and climate change themselves would have once been unimaginable. It may be that emerging technologies introduce new risks that are even harder to manage. Managing existential risk may prove to be the decisive geopolitical challenge of the 21st century.

The first half of this report offers an overview of existential risks. The second half presents three opportunities for humanity to reduce these risks. These were chosen with the help of over 50 researchers and policy-makers out of more than 100 proposals emerged from three workshops at the University of Oxford and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Helsinki.

For each of these opportunities, humanity will require increasing levels of trust and international collaboration in order to face the challenges that threaten us all. Moreover, these risks are constantly evolving, and understanding them will need deep and sustained engagement with the global research community.

We hope that this report will go some way to advancing the discussion about the management of existential risks, and inspire action from well-placed individuals and institutions.

DEVELOP GOVERNANCE OF GEOENGINEERING RESEARCH

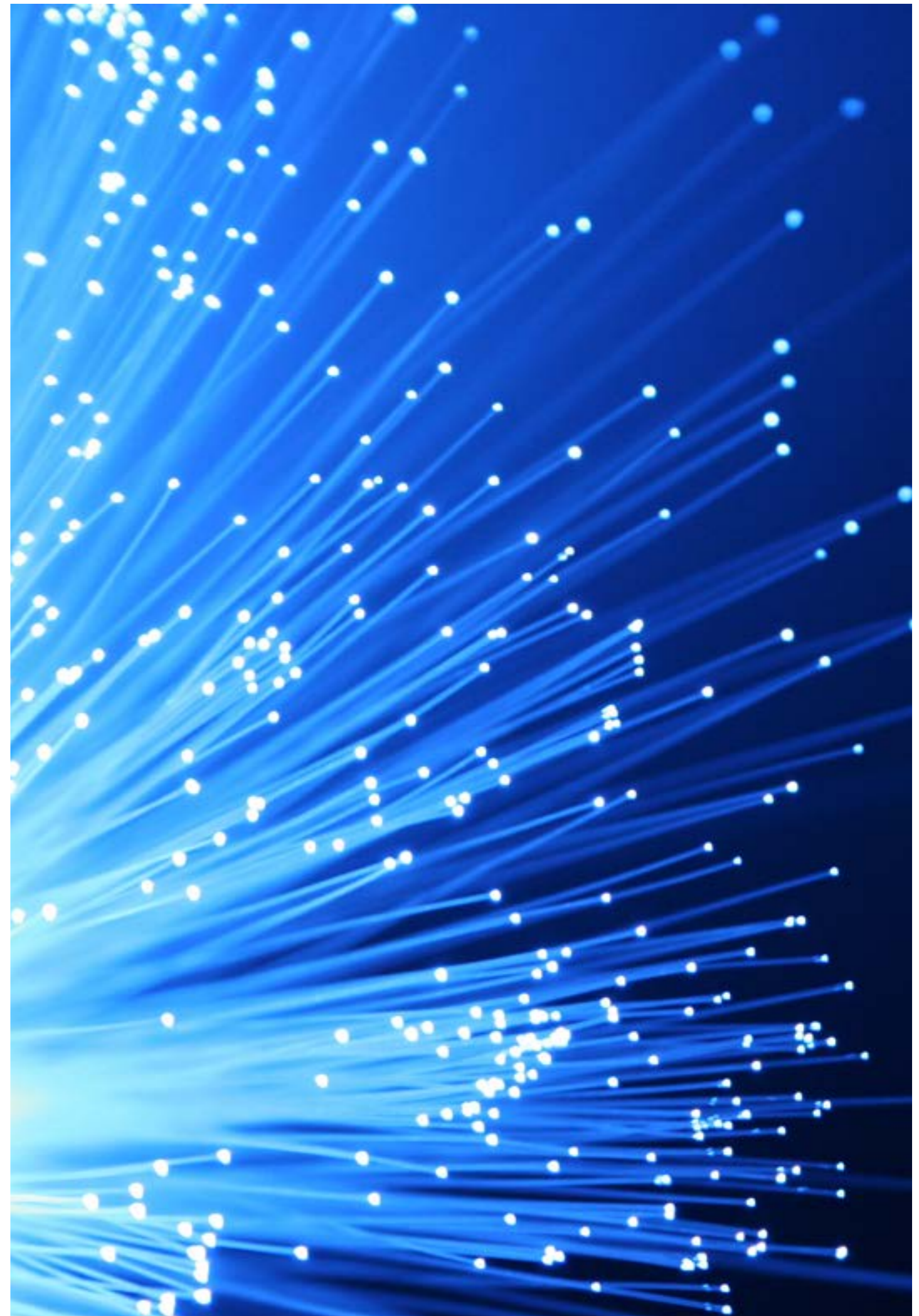
Geoengineering technologies like Solar Radiation Management have the potential to mitigate risks from climate change, while at the same time posing risks of their own. The current lack of international norms on acceptable research practices may well be holding back safe exploration of climate engineering options.

ESTABLISH SCENARIO PLANS AND EXERCISES FOR SEVERE ENGINEERED PANDEMICS AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Existing scenario planning focuses on modest outbreaks at a mostly national level. As the 2015 Ebola outbreak showed, nations do not respond in isolation. Planning must become increasingly international, and should prepare for low-probability high-impact scenarios of pathogens synthesised to be more harmful than any naturally occurring disease.

BUILD INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION AND SUPPORT FOR EXISTENTIAL RISK REDUCTION

Existential risks are typically transnational and intergenerational. Overcoming them will need creative solutions to collective action problems, and shared political will. This will require the international community to build international capacity and draw the attention of national governments and international organisations to existential risk.



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