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Foresight as a Strategic Long-term Planning Tool for Developing Countries

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Foresight is a way to encourage innovation, strategic evaluation and the proactive shaping of the future. “As a factor in governance, the purpose of foresight is to enhance the ability of decision-makers to engage and shape events at a longer range” (Fuerth, 2009).¹ Where traditional planning has sought to prevent failure, strategic foresight—a planning-oriented sub-set of foresight—prioritises resilience, namely early detection and fast recovery.

Globalisation resulting from and combined with technological innovation has accelerated change on the political, economic and social fronts—causing events and trends in various spheres to interact with one another in unpredictable ways. Complex and ‘wicked’ problems, however, make it increasingly difficult to address individual issues without facing the risk of unintended consequences. For this reason, foresight and its resulting policy advice can be seen as a useful tool for “transmitting complexity to policy-makers.”²

Governments increasingly realise that few contemporary challenges can be confined to one policy area and that a single-issue focus is in many instances insufficient. The issue of climate change, for example, cuts across many issues of concern including water, agriculture and food security. Information silos common in highly decentralised, bureaucratic organisations can hinder ‘whole picture’ perspectives. This presents a further challenge for decision-makers tasked with formulating strategies and policies that effectively address interconnected and interdependent problems.

WHY DOES IT MATTER IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

International development is shifting from traditional normative thinking towards adaptive, complexity-aware approaches. In an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world, however, several questions arise about foresight as a tool for strategic long-term planning in the development context:

- ▶ What is the value of futures thinking and foresight in strategic decision-making?

- ▶ Can foresight contribute to better policy-making, better governance and better public service delivery?
- ▶ How can foresight capacity be built to enable lower- and middle- income countries to achieve their development goals?
- ▶ What resources can these countries leverage?

When it comes to allocating resources and capabilities, large emerging economies too often prioritise short-term issues (rapid development and infrastructure) over long-term issues like public services. Likely reasons for this include limited capacities in resources, skills and knowledge, organisation, politics and power and/or incentives. Can this be improved? Cultivating the capacity to create sustainable long-term development policies is dependent on resources and the political will of leaders to push the futures and foresight agenda.

In the low-capacity contexts of many developing countries, foresight related training, activities and exercises are too costly in terms of time and money, and research and knowledge management capabilities too limited. So how can foresight capacity be built to enable lower- and middle-income countries to achieve their development goals, and what resources can they leverage?

Foresight and its resulting policy advice can be seen as a useful tool for transmitting complexity to policy-makers.

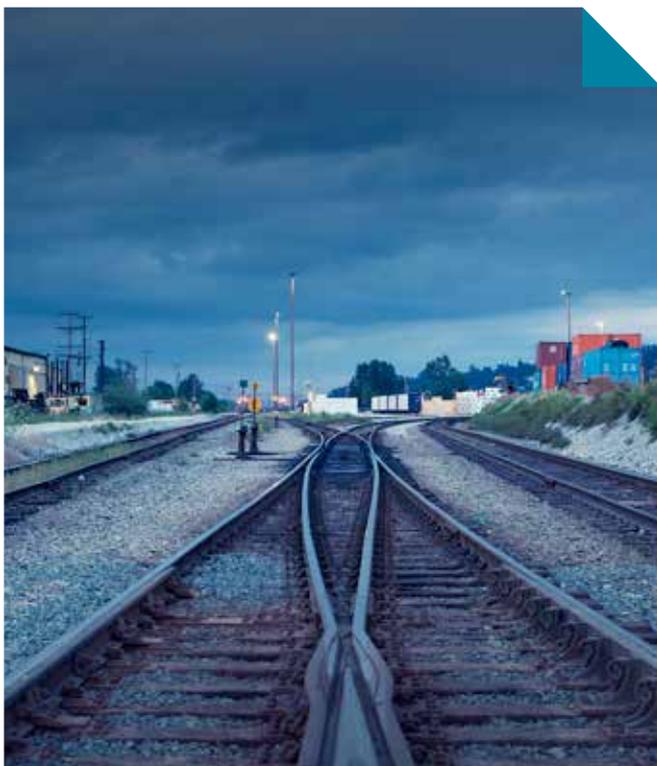
¹ Leon S. Fuerth, “Foresight and Anticipatory Governance,” foresight 11, no. 4 (2009): 17.

² Olivier Da Costa, Philine Warnke, Cristiano Cagnin & Fabiana Scapolo, “The impact of foresight on policy-making: Insights from the FORLEARN mutual learning process,” (Institute for Prospective Technological Studies Joint Research Centre / European Commission), pp. 3-4.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

There are a growing number of regional foresight activities in Europe, the Asia-Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean. These collaborations focus on identifying regional priorities for setting action agendas and cover issues as diverse as agriculture and food production, information and communications technology, climate change and water security and eco-resilience. Such existing regional collaboration allows less-developed countries to leverage the resources, experiences and information of their better developed regional neighbours in the spirit of South-South cooperation. Regional foresighting exercises are an excellent opportunity for knowledge sharing and provide a platform to boost strategic long-term planning capabilities.

The longer-term aim is to combine foresight and complex adaptive systems thinking. This promotes being anticipatory and being agile. 'Networked governance' promotes horizontal rather than vertical approaches to decision-making and is the first step towards adopting a 'whole-of-government' approach, which incorporates foresight at every level of governance.



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For a more detailed coverage of Foresight – please refer to the full paper.

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