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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 complex and often mystifying ways. 'Wicked' problems are large, intractable issues that have no immediate or obvious solutions and whose causes and influencing factors are not easily determined. They further complicate policymaking. The combination of complex and wicked problems make it difficult to address individual issues without facing the risk of unintended consequences. Foresight, and its resulting policy advice, can be seen as a useful tool for "transmitting complexity to policymakers."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 an additional 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 policymaking, 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?

Rather than making predictions based on extrapolation of current trends or frequency of similar past events, foresight cultivates the capacity to anticipate alternative futures and an ability to visualise multiple possible outcomes and their consequences. Strategic foresight helps policymakers improve the effectiveness of governments by identifying opportunities and threats that may arise over the coming years and decades, as well as possible strategies to deal with them.

In the large, fast-growing economies of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the economic model appears to be rapid development at the cost of rising inequality. Accelerated growth has come at the expense of exacerbated corruption and the prioritisation of infrastructure over public services. As Brazil prepares for the 2016 Olympics, for example, widespread citizen dissent has led to large-scale protests for "less stadiums, more hospitals."³ According to a recent study evaluating the BRICS countries on the basis of Sustainable Governance Indicators⁴, "the BRICS do considerably worse on governance indicators in the social affairs cluster, which comprises health care, social inclusion, family policy, pension policy and integration."⁵

Policymaking, particularly in developing countries where resources are limited, "is a challenging process that takes place under intense pressure and strict constraints," DaCosta writes.⁶ The ultimate aim of foresighting is to inform decision-making by exploring future trends and potential discontinuities. Forward-looking, adaptive and resilient policies allow public

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.

³ Paul Mason, "Why are the BRICs crumbling? Welcome to the permanent revolution," *The Independent* (website), 21 June 2013.

⁴ Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI) analyse and compare the need for reform in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, as well as each country's ability to respond to current social and political challenges. The Bertelsmann Foundation first published SGI in 2009 and updated it in 2011.

⁵ Helmut Reisen, *Economic Policy and Social Affairs in the BRICS* (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2013), 20.

⁶ Da Costa, Warnke, Cagnin & Scapolo, "The impact of foresight on policy-making," pp. 3-4.



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administrations to engage with and shape events to the best advantage of their citizens.

Current approaches to Futures Studies “aim to provide a systematic framework to draw out, challenge and refine, often tacit, knowledge about the future” (Berkhout, 2002).⁷ For more traditional organisations hoping to foster a culture of foresight, this requires a shift towards creating a learning organisation. In government, this means investing in and encouraging civil servants to capture knowledge and practise anticipatory thinking at every level of public administration, from front-line service delivery to top-level decision-making.

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.

The ultimate aim of foresighting is to inform decision-making by exploring future trends and potential discontinuities.

⁷ Frans Berkhout & Julia Hertin, “Foresight futures scenarios: Developing and applying a participative strategic planning Tool,” *Greener Management International* 37 (Spring 2002): p. 39.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Limited resources, skills and budgets are some factors that affect the capacity for developing countries to engage in foresighting. Effective foresight systems represent an information generation and management process that generally involves three phases: 1) collecting information, 2) interpreting the data and formulating versions of the future and 3) developing options for action.

Almost all foresight activity starts with or involves horizon scanning. Scanning is a process of looking outwards, at the trends and drivers that are currently shaping the world, including those within and outside a given context. Thorough horizon scanning that is both wide and deep produces a pool of insights that form one big knowledge base about the future. The next step, interpreting data and formulating versions of the future, generally consists of applying a combination of foresight techniques and practices (refer to Jackson's *Practical Foresight Guide*⁸ for a comprehensive overview techniques). The final and often most challenging phase is developing dynamic policy recommendations that spur action by decision makers.

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?

Fortunately, governments of low- and middle-income countries interested in adopting foresight for long-term strategic planning do not need to reinvent the wheel. Policy-relevant material is already being produced and conferences and events that bring together scholars, practitioners and policymakers are already being held around the world. These events provide a platform for networking and knowledge sharing. Properly facilitated, there is a potential for policymakers in low-capacity countries to develop long-term, sustainable development policies by collaborating with independent foresight academics, practitioners and institutions.

There are a growing number of regional foresight activities occurring globally focused on identifying regional priorities for setting action agendas. The Central and Eastern European countries, for instance, benefit from the pool of knowledge and experience generated by their regional counterparts with well-developed, well-funded foresight programmes. *FOR-LEARN* is a knowledge-sharing project of European Foresight, which operates under the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, neighbouring countries collaborate on regional futures and foresight activities that cover issues as diverse as information and communications technology, agriculture and food production, and climate change. Outcomes of these exercises include policy recommendations and regional action plans. A project of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region is similarly underway to integrate foresight for sustainable economic development and eco-resilience in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries.

Such existing regional collaboration allows lesser-developed countries to leverage the resources, experiences and information of their more developed regional neighbours in the spirit of South-South cooperation. Regional foresighting exercises are an excellent opportunity for knowledge sharing and provide a platform for better-developed countries in the region to boost the strategic long-term planning capabilities of their lesser-developed neighbours.

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.

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

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⁸ For a comprehensive description of futures and foresight tool and techniques, see Michael Jackson, "Chapter 3 – Methods", in *Practical Foresight Guide* (Creative commons license, 2013).

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