

Stewardship of the Future

Using Strategic Foresight in 21st Century Governance

What is the issue?

In our increasingly uncertain and networked world, existing governance systems face unprecedented challenges. In order to manage the globalized economy, technology revolutions and volatile resource pressures of a growing global middle-class, governments must re-envisage their current command-and-control role as one of 'system-steward'¹ or platform within a wider network.

Governments need to become enablers: facilitating and guiding other actors, rather than directly providing or directing. To transition into this new structure, governments must take the longer-term into account, and build the institutional and behavioural capability of strategic foresight to do so. Strategic foresight is a critical tool for creating effective government civil

services and executive bodies of the future, and states must start implementing it now.

What is strategic foresight?

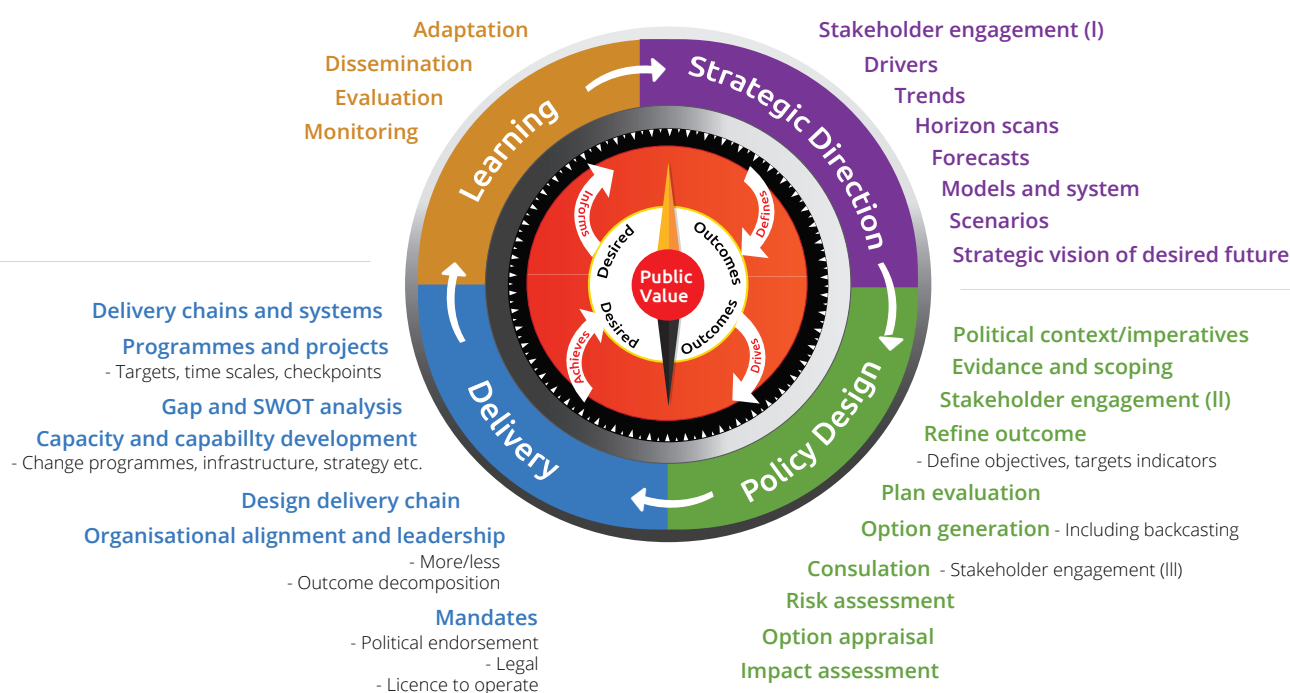
Strategic Foresight enables participants and stakeholders in a policy decision to engage and deal with the complexity and uncertainty of the environment in which they operate. It creates an explicit and otherwise overlooked step in the strategic planning process where decision-makers' assumptions about the future can be challenged. It helps decision-makers find the answer to the strategy question, "Where are we and where we want to get to?" in a way that ensures that thinking about the future is not based on blue skies or invented creative thinking, but is systematic, explicit and evidence-based.

How can we use foresight?

Two key elements are needed for a government to undertake foresight effectively. First, there needs to be a supply of

¹ This term was originally developed by WHO to describe the role of government in health care. It was picked up by the UK Institute for Government and applied to enable understanding of the role of government within a devolved system. See: Michael Hallsworth, *System Stewardship: The Future of Policy Making? Working Paper* (London: Institute for Government 2011).

Figure 2: The Strategy Compass



(Source: National School of Government, UK)

effective foresight projects and products that are seen to provide valuable insights that can aid good decision-making. Second, civil servants must have the capabilities to adopt and embed those insights.

The four key institutional capabilities for foresight include: foresight expertise, foresight friendly organizational structures, foresight champions, leaders and allies, and effective foresight communications. The full paper includes advice on how to make the most of strategic foresight in government policy, how to build these capabilities within public service professionals and therefore create an administration that is future-focused.

Why is strategic foresight important for development?

Highly complex problems can only be solved using processes that are systemic, emergent, ... and participatory.²

Responding effectively to opportunities and risks will require a transformation in the role of government to system-stewards, in order to become enablers who facilitate and guide other actors rather than provide or direct. This transition requires governments to become more accountable and open, coherent and future-focused.

If we consider the upcoming Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is clear that strategic foresight is an integral part of Goal 16: *Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.*

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UNDP can play a key role in ensuring that development efforts take the complex future into consideration, and should ensure that strategic foresight is reflected in the indicators for SDG 16. For example, through an indicator reflecting 'open, collaborative and future-prepared excellent public services'.

For a more detailed exploration of strategic foresight and its use in international development, please refer to the full paper. <http://bit.ly/GCPSEvidence>

² Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (ReadHowYouWant, 2008).



From the Manningtree Archive / Jean Peters scans the horizon in Walt Disney Pictures' *Annie of the Indies* (1950)

Bibliography and further reading

Bishop, P. *Thinking about the Future: Guidelines for Strategic foresight*. Social Technologies, 2007.

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