

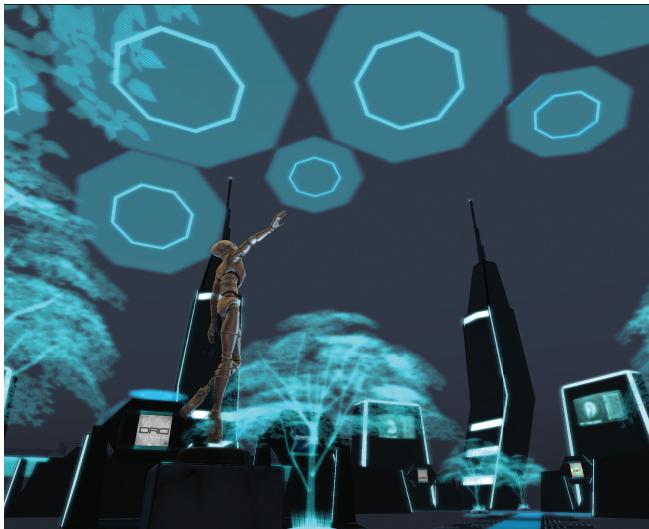
# Stewardship of the Future

## 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-envision their current command-and-control role as one of 'system-steward'<sup>1</sup> 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 longer-term perspectives 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.



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This paper assumes that the purpose of government is to facilitate the implementation of effective long-term and coherent strategies to promote citizens' wellbeing,

<sup>1</sup> This term was originally developed by WHO to communicate its role in the health sphere. It was picked up by Institute for Government and applied to understand government's role within a devolved system. See: Michael Hallsworth, *System Stewardship: The Future of Policy Making? Working Paper* (London: Institute for Government 2011).

security and prosperity, while remaining legitimate through accountability to their citizens.

### What is strategic foresight?

Contrary to some views, strategic foresight is not about prediction or forecasting the future. Strategic Foresight enables participants and stakeholders involved 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.

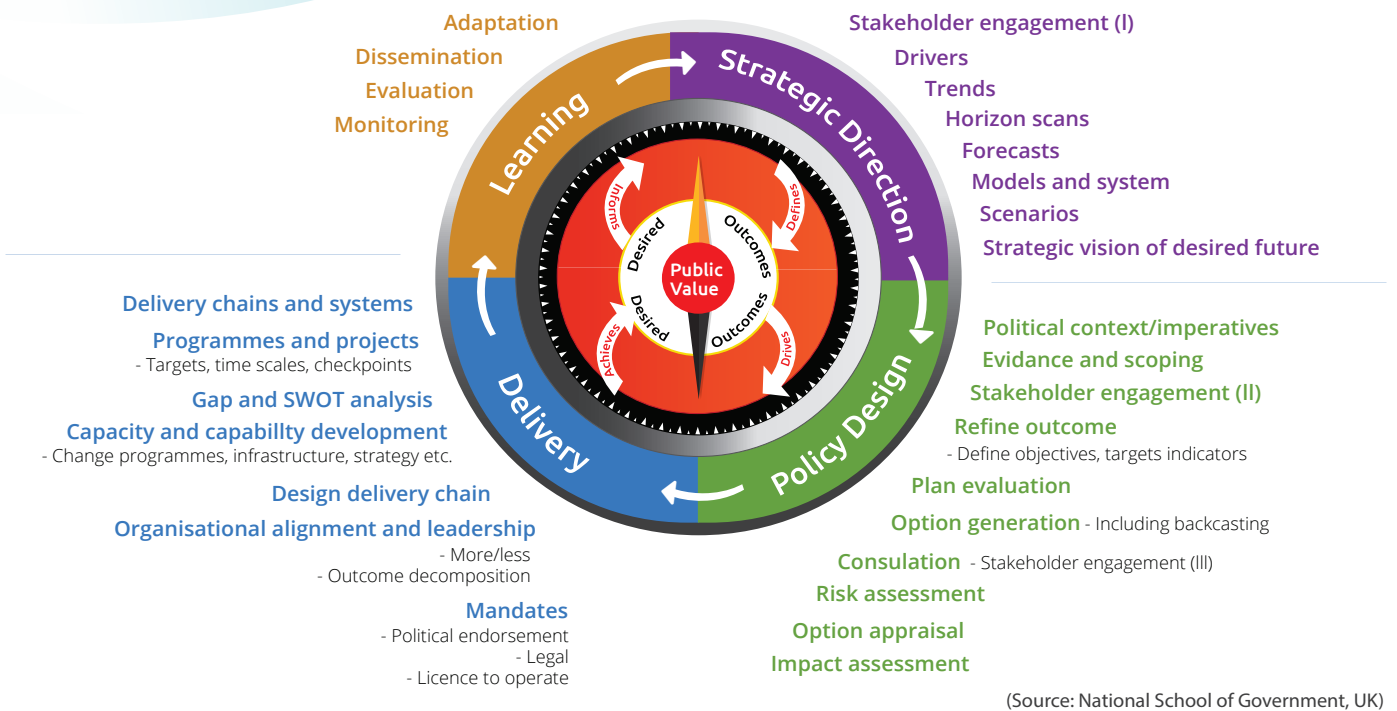
Foresight is an integral part of governmental strategic planning processes. It supports the process of strategic thinking rather than adopting a default problem-solving approach. In other words, instead of attempting to provide solutions for challenges as they are currently manifested, strategic foresight encourages decision makers to explore the likely nature of the challenge in the future. It is not about using a particular method. Instead, it is about helping decision makers think about the future shape of the complex environment within which they need to make decisions.

Strategic foresight processes help 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. As an integral part of the strategy process, strategic foresight can therefore help decision makers to understand complexity, build resilience, set direction and then implement policies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This summarizes Sean Lusk's approach to public strategy in Sean Lusk and Nick Birks, *Rethinking Public Strategy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

**Figure 2: The Strategy Compass**



(Source: National School of Government, UK)

## How can we use foresight?

Strategic foresight can be used in lots of different ways, for different purposes and to aid different types of decisions, often at the same time. One thing is for sure: an organization that is externally-focused and sensitized to possible futures can be more agile and aware of the external environment, resulting in improved responses to unexpected events.

*... Transition to 'system stewardship' requires governments to become more accountable and open, coherent and future-focused*

Some of the ways foresight can be used include: risk assessment and management (including developing mitigation and response plans); testing the effectiveness of suggested policy measures; accessing different views from actors outside of government bodies; helping choose between alternative policies to achieve a desired future; and promoting collaboration and exchange by getting different organizations or parts of government to discuss their views of the future.

Two key elements are needed for a government to do foresight effectively. First, there needs to be a supply of effective foresight projects and products that are seen to provide valuable insights that aid good decision-making. And 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.<sup>3</sup>

The world faces huge threats to future development, such as climate change. Currently, however, the governments of many states are locked in reactive and crisis-management behaviours. This is squeezing out any space for proactive engagement, innovation and risk taking. Instead of tackling issues head on, administrations find themselves in gridlock, with subsequent distrust between different arms of government.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (ReadHowYouWant, 2008).



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Responding effectively to opportunities and risks will require a transformation in the role of government to ‘system-stewards’, in order to become enablers that facilitate and guide other actors rather than providing or directing. This transition to ‘system stewardship’ 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.*

Effective, accountable and inclusive institutions delivering public value need to be future-prepared and aware. Strategic foresight is an integral part of implementation: it can support communities (at national, regional or local levels) to develop their own visions for the future. This can support changes in current ways of working as well as engaging with and making the most of new opportunities.

UNDP plays 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’.

UNDP should also continue to support participative strategic foresight exercises as part of the means of implementation of the SDGs at the national level. The full paper includes a list of recommendations for UNDP’s role in operationalizing foresight for the next development agenda.

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

***UNDP plays a key role in ensuring that development efforts take the complex future into consideration...***





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