United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

CEPA strategy guidance note on

Strategic planning and foresight

February 2021

The United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) has developed a set of principles of effective governance for sustainable development. The essential purpose of these voluntary principles is to provide interested countries with practical, expert guidance on a broad range of governance challenges associated with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. CEPA has identified 62 commonly used strategies to assist with the operationalization of these principles. This guidance note addresses strategic planning and foresight, which is associated with the principle of sound policymaking and can contribute to strengthening the effectiveness of institutions. It is part of a series of such notes prepared by renowned experts under the overall direction of the CEPA Secretariat in the Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

In reading this guidance note, individuals in government ministries and agencies who are less familiar with the topic will be able to understand the fundamentals. Those who have perhaps taken initial steps in this area with limited follow-through or impact will be able to identify how to adjust elements of their practice to achieve better results and to better embed and institutionalize the strategy in their organizations. Those who are more advanced in strategic planning and foresight will be able to recognize the practices which contribute to its success.

Understanding the strategy

Strategic foresight[1] is an organized, systematic way of looking beyond the expected to engage with uncertainty and complexity. It is critical to effective emergent strategic planning in volatile and fast-moving environments and is essential in moving past linear problem-solving approaches. Foresight methods can be used at all stages of policy and planning cycles in a range of ways to address different kinds of policy outcomes (see Methods of implementation). A foresight-based approach is instrumental in ensuring that strategic policies and plans, such as national strategies, regional-level visions, local development plans, or frameworks for development cooperation, are developed to ensure a more equitable future, and incorporate diverse voices and perspectives.

Instead of attempting to provide solutions for current challenges, strategic foresight encourages decision makers to explore the likely nature of future challenges.[2] Policymakers are often more comfortable projecting from the past rather than imagining the future, and strategic planning approaches often incorrectly assume that the future will be an incremental iteration of the past or the present. A strategic foresight approach starts by exploring the future, typically beyond the planning horizon, before considering implications for the present. This is a very simple but powerful reframing that disrupts and opens up new perspectives. Text box 1 outlines the key components of an effective emergent strategic planning process.

Text box 1: Key components of an effective emergent strategic planning process[3]

1. Examination of strategic context. This involves analysing trends and drivers of possible future contexts, challenging received wisdom (e.g., that trends will continue, but also understanding the systemic drivers of the past) and examining interdependencies. This needs to be done along different time horizons (e.g., one year, five years and 15 years) so it can inform, but not be constrained by, budget and operational planning decisions.

2. Open engagement of a wide set of views. This should include vulnerable and extremely poor citizens and issues should be considered through multiple lenses. Diversity and alternative perspectives are necessary for the effective understanding and identification of weak signals (early indicators of an emerging issue likely to gain significance), as well as developing common knowledge and ownership. These dialogues and relationships should form the basis of future policy adjustments. They should also form the basis for joint implementation.

3. Identification of possible alternative futures and trends. This includes trends, desired or otherwise, that can be highlighted either through complete pictures of scenarios or snapshots. Organizations must monitor and mitigate shocks and risks; pinpoint opportunities and assumptions; and identify alternative outcomes in an adaptive way.

4. Building on policy implications. This involves reviewing what genuine strategic alternatives look like, and understanding common postures, assets and capabilities that enable resilience as well as push for certain desired outcomes.

5. Adaptive approach to implementation and monitoring, and a risk-friendly approach to evaluation. This entails building the institutional capacity to learn and adapt.

[1] In this guidance note, "strategic foresight" and "foresight" are used interchangeably.
[2] Tully, C., 2015, *Applying foresight and alternative futures to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF)*. UNDP, New York.
[3] Ibid, p. 6.

Why is strategic foresight necessary?

The world is not on track to achieve the 2030 Agenda.[4] The scope of the 2030 Agenda, the level of ambition, the increasingly complex global environment and the changing nature of global public policy challenges and opportunities mean that governments need to take on a role of "system stewardship," leading policymaking processes in an emergent way, as opposed to sitting at the head of a command-and-control hierarchy.[5] In the same way that the future isn't fixed, solutions are not fixed either.

Using strategic foresight as an integral part of strategic planning in the context of the SDGs gives governments the ability to:

- Make strategic choices to shape the desired future (build vision);
- Build preparedness for possible alternative futures (manage risk, build resilience); and
- Create future-ready and alert organizations that can adapt as the future evolves (anticipation, awareness, agility and capability).

When strategic foresight is integrated into strategic planning it is transformative because it draws on qualitative, as well as quantitative, data; it takes a systemic, holistic approach based on an assumption that drivers will continue to interact with each other; and it is based on plural futures (rather than for example, a single model). The risks of *not* including an explicit space for foresight in a strategic planning or policymaking process are:

- Exclusion of externalities: focusing intently on internal organizational features and overlooking external environmental changes, which are important but harder to control or predict.
- Premature convergence: quickly agreeing (or assuming agreement) on the shape of the future (and appropriate response) due to group dynamics, which can be the result of similar points of view.
- Bias towards the foreseeable: failing to plan for the future because of present uncertainty; or deciding that the future will be similar to the present.[6]

Planning for alternate scenarios

Strategic foresight is a key component of systems stewardship. In the absence of hard data about what will happen in the future, foresight processes help answer the strategic question facing leaders: "Where are we now and where do we want to get to?" By engaging with and envisioning potential futures, communities and institutions are empowered to shape those futures while also building resilience and adaptability to external shocks. By working through

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[4] OECD, 2017, *Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets: An Assessment of Where OECD Countries Stand*.
[5] Tully, C., 2015, *Stewardship of the Future Using Strategic Foresight in 21st Century Governance*, UNDP, Singapore.
[6] Adapted from Tully, C., *Applying foresight and alternative futures to the UNDAF*, p. 4.

alternative scenarios, leaders and policymakers can develop the agility to deal with the SDGs as they interact with each other and are shaped by events.

As the stewards of the system, leaders and institutions can bring together stakeholders who can contribute ideas, solutions and authority, as well as new partnerships, capital and property, plus those who are most affected by the issues the SDGs seek to address, into the effort to leave no one behind. By supporting the co-creation among various stakeholders of joint aspirational visions at regional, national and local levels to generate new ideas, new momentum and new commitments and identify the required resources, strategic foresight can help transform our trajectory towards the SDGs. Furthermore, this contextual insight and community knowledge can be harnessed to adjust pathways over time in response to change in the external environment in a way that traditional hierarchies have been unable to.

The COVID-19 pandemic has set back efforts to reach the SDGs and has reinforced the imperative for leaders to find a systemic approach that neither denies or pretends to control uncertainty, but instead embraces the reality that humans are both environment takers and shapers, no matter how small or large a community. The pandemic is also driving an increased awareness of intergenerational equity, as younger generations seek to understand the implications of today's policy decisions for the future.[7]

There are many major drivers of change which impact the SDGs. Almost all have the potential to deliver opportunities as well as risks and should be considered from all angles. By taking a broad, systems-level approach, policymakers are encouraged to think across sectors and outside of silos and build a base of research and evidence to inform all stages of the policy cycle.

Public sector situation and trends

Strategic foresight in the public sector

Strategic foresight emerged as a field of study and an area of practice following World War II, initially in industrial and military sectors. Since the late 1990s, there has been growing interest in government foresight in many countries, particularly in relation to security issues in the broadest sense (including resource, environmental, economic, and cyber security as well as in traditional physical/military security), but also in the field of international development.[8] Many national governments have established units and capabilities to ensure longer-term thinking (for example in Canada, Finland, Singapore and the United Kingdom). Typically,

[7] See OECD, 2020, *Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience*, and OECD, forthcoming, *Global Report on Youth Empowerment and Intergenerational Equity*.

[8] In the 1990s, UNDP worked to integrate foresight methods in various African countries' planning processes. One example is the Sierra Leone Vision 2025, "Sweet Salone" of 2003. Thereafter, there seems to have been a hiatus in participatory, futures-focused systemic approaches to development challenges as a whole in terms of strategic planning, only picking up again in the 2010s.

developed countries have been more likely to engage in strategic foresight.[9] The success of these units and programmes has been erratic and has fluctuated over time.

Strategic foresight for sustainable development

The complex, adaptive, systemic framework underlying the SDGs is more compatible with a foresight approach than the more linear framework of the earlier Millennium Development Goals. The use of the SDGs as the framework for national strategic planning has facilitated the implementation of strategic foresight as a critical element of an emergent strategic planning process among an increasing number of developing countries, such as Costa Rica and Rwanda. Regional United Nations bodies have been key in supporting in-country foresight endeavours. Examples of countries actively using strategic foresight in partnership with United Nations agencies to support the achievement of the SDGs include Macedonia using foresight techniques to support broader participation, Lao PDR, Montenegro and Rwanda.[10] The March 2016 Summary brief on UN Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs) – Status, trends and next generation saw the preparation of the new DAFs as "a window of opportunity for UN Country Teams to introduce innovative approaches to strategic planning, implementation and monitoring," using "modern analytical tools such as foresight, collective intelligence, human centred design and behavioural insight techniques."[11] More recently, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Accelerator Labs network has been working to bring greater participation, collective intelligence and anticipatory governance approaches to its work in a number of countries, including Colombia and Malaysia.

Developing and networking skills, participation and capabilities

A 2014 study found over 18 countries had well-established foresight activities; over 100 institutes/research organizations were focused on foresight (some of which are listed below in Peer-to-Peer Learning and Research) and there were 16 peer-reviewed foresight journals.[12] The rise in interest in foresight within government has mirrored a diversification of interest in business, civil society and academia. The diverse range of platforms, networks, think-tanks and consultants means that governments seeking to improve their capability to conduct foresight activities can access the skills and resources to do so. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "futures literacy" is "the skill that allows people to better understand the role of the future in what they see and

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[9] Dreyer, I. and G. Stang, 2013, "Foresight in governments – practices and trends around the world," in *YES 2013,* European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, pp. 7–32.

[10] Ibid. Further examples include the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and ECLAC/CEPAL, who have been working together on foresight at the regional level since 2014. The efforts have intensified since the adoption of Agenda 2030 in 2015, and include UNECE's foresight capacity building work in Belarus, which builds on commitments to increase use of foresight in strategic planning and policy development in the 2016–2020 UNDAF for Belarus.

[11] Tully, C., Applying foresight and alternative futures to the UNDAF, p. 3.

[12] Berze, O., 2014, "Mapping foresight practices worldwide. A discussion paper." OCAD University, Strategic Innovation Lab, Toronto.

do. Being futures literate empowers the imagination, enhances our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur," and is an essential skill in an uncertain world.[13]

A 2009 study[14] found that 75 per cent to 85 per cent of mapped foresight exercises in Europe, Latin America and North America involved fewer than 200 participants. Broad participation is essential for effective strategic foresight and planning, and there is emerging evidence to suggest that some governments have been significantly more ambitious, such as the "Estonia 2035" plans, which involved 17,000 citizens.[15] An increased awareness of the need for intergenerational equity in leaving no one behind is driving a trend to include younger participants in foresight work. One example is Next Generation Foresight Practitioners, a digitally connected and regionally diverse network of young changemakers.16 The broad base of this network and others denotes a shift away from the northern bias of foresight practice and includes calls to "decolonize futures."[17]

The future of foresight

Beyond work done by the European Union,[18] few comparative studies or global/regional data sets exist outside academia.[19] According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "foresight approaches have not been systemically integrated within government contexts and there is an overall lack of awareness and capacity for strategic foresight."[20] Awareness of and capability in strategic foresight would be supported by a concerted data-gathering effort by an international body, such as the United Nations or OECD. In terms of the impact of COVID-19 on foresight capability, practitioners' views range from a perception of a significant increase in demand for foresight work to anticipate future global crises, to concerns that immediate post-COVID-19 recovery may be prioritized at the expense of long-term planning.[21] Despite pandemics being identified as a key issue in many foresight and planning exercises, there has been a failure to integrate such findings into policy. The following section identifies key elements of the foresight ecosystem, and their potential to support the institutionalisation of capacity to both detect and integrate signals about the future into policymaking.

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[13] UNESCO, 2019, "Futures Literacy" UNESCO, Paris.
[14] European Commission, 2009, Mapping Foresight - Revealing how Europe and other world regions navigate into the future, European Commission, Brussels.
[15] Republic of Estonia Government Office, 2020, Review of the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda in Estonia, Government of Estonia, Tallinn, p. 102.
[16] School of International Futures, "Next Generation Foresight Awards," SOIF, London, 2018-2020.
[17] Fonder, A., 2019, "Pupul Bisht Wants to Decolonize the Future of Design Using Storytelling," Core77.
[18] For example, studies on Mapping Foresight (see: fn 22) and work on Member States' implementation of the SDGs, which refers to considerations of the future (European Parliament, 2019, *Europe's approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: good practices and the way forward*, European Union, Brussels).
[19] For example, Greenblott, J.M., et al, 2018, "Strategic Foresight in the Federal Government: A Survey of Methods, Resources and Institutional Arrangements," in *World Futures Rev.*, pp. 1–25.
[20] OECD-OPSI, 2020, Anticipatory Innovation Governance, OECD, Paris.
[21] Interviews conducted with government foresight practitioners by SOIF during 2020.

Methods of implementation

Application of strategic foresight in pursuit of the SDGs

Research and practice show that in order for emergent strategic planning based on foresight methods to achieve a sustainable impact, it should be considered as an ecosystem of mutually reinforcing components that in combination provide the kind of anticipatory, long-term thinking required to address complex challenges, such as those represented by the SDGs. This "foresight ecosystem" is most effectively built at the institutional or system level and is meaningfully and deliberately woven into processes, structures and mindsets.[22]

However, as highlighted in Table 1, foresight can nonetheless be applied at any organizational level (sectoral, subnational, national, regional and global), and at all stages of policy and planning cycles. Examples include engaging citizens or minorities in the development of a new policy or vision; stress-testing ideas against a range of future scenarios; delivering implementation pathways; or monitoring and evaluating impact. In both cases (organizational level or single policy area/plan), it is of critical importance to ensure the necessary integration of findings into policymaking.

This section offers insights on how strategic foresight can be applied in ways that are relevant to policymakers in relation to effective strategic planning in the context of the SDGs; and in relation to building resilient, future-prepared, adaptable public administration organizations and governments that can act as system stewards for the future.

Using strategic foresight for effective strategic planning in the context of the SDGs – building vision, resilience and capability

There are many tools that can be used and applied to support strategic planning in the context of the SDGs. While in-depth, technical knowledge of these tools is not required by senior policymakers, it is important for them to know how to commission and apply the insights in a way that will inform their work and make an impact on their organization and policies. There are a number of learning models that have been developed to design a reflective, creative, participative and collaborative emergent strategic planning process that delivers impact.[23] Such a model provides the scaffolding for the user to design a foresight process that is appropriate to the topic and organization at hand, to gather information and data, and explore the future in a broad, divergent, non-constrained way (that is, unfettered by the constraints of the present paradigm), before converging around the implications for the present.

[22] Research conducted by SOIF among various case studies and clients.

[23] For example, SOIF has developed a four stage learning journey; cf. the work of Ozcan Saritas, who proposes a 7-step process in "Systemic Foresight Methodology," in: Meissner, D. et al, eds, 2013, *Science, Technology and Innovation Policy for the Future,* Springer, Berlin, pp. 83-117.

Table 1. Using strategic foresight as part of an emergent strategic planning process

Policy objective	How foresight can help this	The types of questions to ask	Example	Examples of possible tools[24]
Risk management Objective: to understand what risks may emerge or exist in different futures and the consequences for achieving policy aims.	Build preparedness and resilience, including contingency planning/ wargaming (working through a specific scenario in detail). Challenge existing assumptions and avoid unpleasant future surprises.	What happens if? What risks are arising? Tends to start from a position which is short-term and about protecting the status quo.	Developing natural resource management plans in the Caribbean islands that are resilient to different climatic changes and their associated socio-economic impacts.	analysis of drivers of change appreciative enquiry backcasting brainstorming branching scenarios conference model cross-impact analysis future artifacts futures-creative future headlines gaming generic futures (growth, collapse, decline, transformation) horizon mission
Strategic Planning for development Objective: elaboration of national/ organizational visions and development plans based on the SDGs, which reflect how interrelated policies and objectives might interact in different futures.	Explore possibilities, scenarios and options as an integral part of the standard strategic or policy planning process.	What future developments should we be aware of in planning and resourcing to succeed?	Developing participatory SDG visions for 2030 and building a policy roadmap and portfolio to that future, stress-tested against alternative scenarios, as a 5-year plan where appropriate, including the resources and indicators necessary to monitor progress, at national (Costa Rica, Finland and Wales[25]), regional (Brazil), and city (Rwanda) levels. UNICEF's work on the Child in 2030, focused on five megatrends, which represent points of convergence of multiple, underlying trends or shifts in the status quo with the potential to significantly impact the future for	

[24] This is an alphabetical list and is not exclusive.

[25] The devolved administration of Wales is the only one globally which has a legal mechanism to deliver on the SDGs. See: https://www.futuregenerations.wales/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Wales-_-SDGs-_-VNR-_-Supplementary-Report-for-Wales-_-Version-10.1-Final-w-cover-ENG.pdf

			children, UNICEF and the broader development sector.	horizon scanning liberating structures modelling PESTLE (Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental) role playing scenarios STEEP (Sociological, Technological, Economical, Environmental and Political SWOT 3 horizons trends analysis trend impact analysis 2 x 2 matrix visioning "What if?" questions
Organizational purpose/ continuity Objective: to develop and obtain agreement on an inclusive purpose for an organization in the context of a changing/uncertain environment.	Build vision and gain buy-in under conditions of change, where the environment is changing dramatically.	Why are we here and how can we achieve our goals in this very different future?	Driving organizational change within Agence Française de Développement (a development bank) to deliver its mission in a very different world as development financing needs are likely going to be very different in the future, and especially to achieve the 2030 goals. Different scenarios helped identify different products and services needed, and how their own capabilities and structures need to change.	
Innovation Objective: to develop solutions to evolving or future challenges.	Help identify new angles, solutions, resources or partnerships. Can be in response to groupthink. Help explore implications of new disruptive technology. Scan the horizon for new innovation opportunities.	What new opportunities are arising? Including opportunities to do things differently?	The food and agriculture sector is facing disruption of the same magnitude as the energy sector before it: the implications of various different technology drivers and governance responses on food security will create new solutions, new actors and new policy challenges around redistribution, access and regulation – but all with a potential to address SDG 2 (Zero hunger). The WEF Food scenarios help actors in the food space (whether local, national or business) understand the upcoming disruptions and associated risks and opportunities.	

Sector/ community vision and engagement Objective: to develop and obtain agreement on an inclusive vision for an organization, sector or community in the context of a changing/ uncertain environment.	Bring together a loose group of incumbent and new stakeholders to think collectively about an existing sector or network. Unite a community around a common future vision. Anticipate and shape the future.	What might our joint futures look like? What can we collectively do to move change in the desired direction? How can we collectively strengthen our resilience or respond?	IARAN's work on the future of aid and the role of INGOs looked at a horizon to 2030, examining regional and global trends to create four different scenarios of the geopolitical risk and crisis environment in which humanitarian organizations may need to deliver, and the form those organizations would have to take to operate effectively. Futures CoLab is an example of academic and philanthropic actors that have used foresight approaches to influence policymaking. A facilitated scenario development exercise was conducted using an online platform with more than 150 people from 38 countries representing academia, civil society, business, think tanks and government. Collectively, they identified drivers of change, developed four future scenarios, and explored the implications of those scenarios for climate action and climate philanthropy.	
Leadership Objective: to demonstrate leadership and build consensus at a challenging historical moment.	Build consensus or strategic alignment. Manage change management. Resolve conflict resolution and build peace through the transition to a new normal – driving alignment, support and accessing	Our community needs hope, cohesion and a sense of action today – can we use our future dialogue to build this?	In Barbet's Duet learning communities in East Africa, village and farmers' cooperatives used futures enabled dialogue and exchange to discuss competing priorities of pastoral and agricultural land use.	

	essential resources such as finance.			
Intergenerational Equity Objective: to ensure no one is left behind and that decisions made today reflect the interests of future generations or the future interests of current generations.	Ensure intergenerational equity. Assess the impact of today's policies on future generations.	What are the concerns of younger generations regarding the social, environmental and economic legacy they will inherit? What are their expectations of consequences of policies, which last far longer than electoral cycles, particularly in the context of the post-COVID-19 recovery? How can different generations, and their evolving interests, be included in policymaking?	Future generations will bear the consequences of today's decisions for decades to come, yet they are absent and voiceless in decision-making processes except in rare examples, such as that of Wales. A methodological framework to assess any specific policy against intergenerational fairness indicators, both at the design stage and after implementation, will enable policymakers, civil society and citizens to bring the voiceless into the conversation.	

Source: Adapted from the School of International Futures, Learning Journal

Table 1 highlights the kinds of policy outcomes public administrations can address using a strategic foresight-based approach to strategic planning and policymaking, how foresight can help in achieving those outcomes, and the kinds of questions policymakers need to ask to frame the policy exercise using strategic foresight. Examples are given where governments and organizations have addressed these policy issues using strategic foresight approaches. The final column lists a number of tools which may be used – no one tool is a best fit for a particular policy objective (they are listed in alphabetical order).

Many of the tools will already be familiar to policymakers, but the difference is that they are used in a policy process which is designed according to foresight principles (as outlined in Text box 1). Tools should be selected from a suite of options to support the design and desired outcomes of the project, and several may be used together. Popper's diamond plots these methods and others on axes of creativity (exploratory methods), interaction (participatory methods), evidence (explanatory methods) and expertise (explanatory methods) as well as typifying methods according to their quantitative/qualitative basis.[26]

Building resilient, future-prepared, adaptable public administration organizations and governments that can act as system stewards for the future

Effective systems stewardship requires governments and leaders to not only integrate foresight insights from the external environment into public policy but to also nurture the internal "foresight ecosystem." This ecosystem encompasses the institutions and bodies that act together in an emergent way and includes the legislature, the judiciary, the audit authority, public agencies and civil society. In the case of international development, it may also include financial institutions, international organizations and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). When seeking to develop resilient, adaptable organizations and systems that are able to act on, and integrate, insights which emerge about possible futures, there is no silver bullet or perfect governance foresight ecosystem. However, recent research and case studies from several different countries show that future-oriented, resilient and adaptable foresight ecosystems are underpinned by four essential capabilities: culture and behaviour, processes, structures and people (see Figure 1).[27]

These capabilities are essential for the healthy governance ecosystem needed to effectively practice emergent strategic planning. The three features of a healthy ecosystem are: i) supply of effective foresight projects and products that provide visible and valuable insights to aid good decision-making; ii) demand within the foresight ecosystem to adopt and embed those insights; and iii) the nurturing of the delicate balance of supply and demand, typically in the absence of quick, measurable impact.

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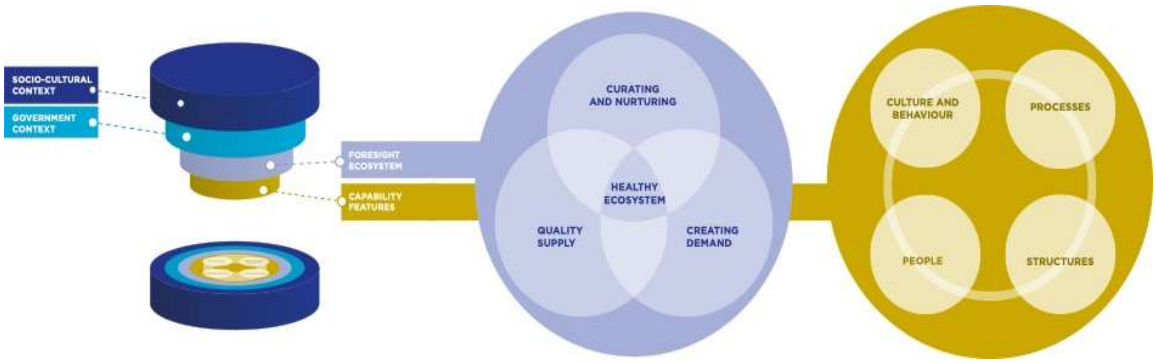
[26] Rafael Popper, "Diamond," n.d.

[27] Unpublished research conducted by SOIF. Case studies included: Canada, Finland, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, United Arab Emirates and the United States.

Figure 1. An ecosystems approach to foresight



Source: School of International Futures.

Although all capabilities are essential to support a self-sustaining, healthy ecosystem, there is no blueprint, because the systems and contexts within which they interact are different and changing. Two key contexts for any governance foresight ecosystem are the socio-cultural context, which includes history, geography and indigenous/local cultures, and the governance context, or the features of the political system (for example, executive, legislative and judicial ecosystem). A common model has a central foresight unit (such as in Finland, which is led by the Prime Minister) that is networked to foresight capacity in line ministries and local authorities (and, ideally, beyond). An alternative, or complementary, option is for foresight work to be led or augmented by a think tank that is partially or completely independent of government (such as Sitra in Finland or MIGHT in Malaysia). This has the advantage of political independence but may be less well-networked inside government. By adjusting the four capabilities to nurture the foresight ecosystem and achieve a productive balance of supply and demand within it, governments can take on a system stewardship role which suits their specific circumstances. This is the process that USAID is currently undergoing, with the creation of its new Strategic Foresight Unit, shaped through a scenario planning exercise designed to help better equip the organization to plan for a world altered by COVID-19.

An important word of caution: all of the above elements may be in place, and yet strategic foresight may not have the desired impact. Constant championing, reinvestment and training are necessary to ensure that the benefits of strategic foresight are continuously reaped, that people are engaged and developed, and that organizational cultures are shaped toward a futures mindset. In a volatile, uncertain world where emergent strategic planning processes are increasingly useful, foresight is an important skill to master, and governments need to build this institutional and behavioural capability to take longer-term scenarios into account in a participatory and inclusive way. Failure is caused by a lack of integration across the foresight ecosystem and/or an inability to act on perceived signals.

Evaluation of strategic foresight

The impact of using strategic foresight is hard to measure, because of the difficulties in attributing causality in an ever-changing context and the challenges of capturing counterfactuals, that is, evaluating something that has been avoided. However, in a fast-moving, uncertain environment, the risk of not considering the future in policymaking and strategic planning is potentially catastrophic. Often, the impact of foresight can be seen in the way in which actors engage with the present. Models have also been developed to evaluate "future preparedness" as a measure of the impact of strategic foresight practices.[28]

Strategic foresight is not easy to implement. Ongoing support and investment are required at the institutional level and across silos for foresight findings to be listened to, mainstreamed and achieve impact. Insufficient collaboration between foresight practitioners and futurists across public, private and third sectors, results in a lost opportunity for cross-fertilisation of ideas and practice, and an impact that falls short of its potential.

Strategic foresight can be a powerful tool to improve policy design and evaluate the impact of present actions on the future. This is the purpose of the European Union's first Strategic Foresight Report, published in September 2020, which uses the compass of resilience in four dimensions (socioeconomic, geopolitical, green and digital) to evaluate forward-looking policies supported by strategic foresight. With its future focus, strategic foresight can also support policymakers in understanding the intergenerational impact of their policies and develop solutions that meet both existing and future needs.

Case studies

Below are a number of case studies of how governments and organizations have used strategic foresight methods to support strategic planning for the SDGs. These build on the examples in Text box 1 and detail how actors have sought to plan in an emergent way.

Costa Rica's 2015–2018 national development plan was created in concordance with the 2030 Agenda.[29] It fed into the "National Pact for the Advancement of the SDGs", signed in September 2016, which is the national strategy for the planning, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs in Costa Rica. The Pact was signed by representatives of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the Republic of Costa Rica and a range of non-governmental stakeholders (including civil society, faith groups, universities and businesses),

[28] For a discussion of impact assessment in industry, see René Rohrbeck and Menes Etigue Kum, "Corporate foresight and its impact on firm performance: A longitudinal analysis" in *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Vol. 129, April 2018, pp. 105-116.

[29] Sanchez, O., "Estrategia y arreglos de implementación de la agenda ODS en Costa Rica", Presented at the ECLAC International Seminar: The Sustainable Development Goals and Building Futures for Latin America and the Caribbean, Santiago, Chile, 18-19 May 2016.

as referenced in the 2020 VNR.[30] Throughout the creation of the national development plan and subsequent strategic planning efforts, the central government took a deliberately participative approach, with regional governments and with citizens, in the foresight process. This enabled various stakeholders to take part in regional and sectoral consultations that were structured to include the development of targets and indicators, as well as roadmaps and plans for the 2030 Agenda. A well-designed system for cross-governmental engagement, including leadership at the executive level and external relations ministries as well as domestic departments, ensured that existing strategic plans were incorporated and opportunities for international cooperation were explored. Throughout, projects designed to catalyse an improved approach to governance (e.g., initiatives on open government, decentralisation and gender equality) on specific SDGs and beyond were incorporated. In this way, the Costa Rican national development planning process epitomises some of the best practices in effective and emergent strategic planning.[31]

In **Finland**, the process builds on previous national vision and strategic planning work and is led by the Prime Minister, ensuring buy-in from across the governance system. The Finnish approach looks broadly across the domestic and external policy horizons, internalising the SDGs as a national strategy matter, rather than an issue for developing countries. Sustainable development is seen as a means to engage the whole of society: the public sector, businesses, civil society and citizens.[32] Parliament is involved through the Committee on the Future, a standing committee which has overall responsibility for Finland's contribution to the realization of the 2030 Agenda. Since 2017, the Government included the promotion of sustainable development in its Annual Report to the Parliament and established an annual public discussion forum for measuring and taking stock of progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

In 2017, following an Introduction to Foresight for SDGs Implementation Workshop held in Lesotho in 2015,[33] the **Government of Lesotho**, the National University of Lesotho and UNDP launched the Foresight and Scenarios Project. The one-year project had three aims: i) to explore the added value of foresight in strategic planning; ii) to generate visions of preferred futures, scenarios of strategic sectoral opportunities and resilient plans for alternative operating systems in support of Vision 2066 and the National Strategic Development Plan 2 (post 2017); and iii) to identify opportunities for introducing foresight methods in Lesotho's national, sectoral, urban and local strategic planning processes.[34] This exercise took place in the context of high-level global, continental and regional agendas (SDGs, the African Union's

[30] OECD, 2019, "Governance as an SDG Accelerator," OECD, Paris, Annex D.
[31] Tully, C., "Strategic Foresight and the Sustainable Development Goals in Latin America and the Caribbean," Presentation at the ECLAC International Seminar: The Sustainable Development Goals and Building Futures for Latin America and the Caribbean, Santiago, Chile, 18-19 May 2016.
[32] Finland, 2020, Voluntary National Report 2020, United Nations, New York.
[33] Van der Pol, P., 2017, Africa and Foresight: Better Futures in Development, UNDP, Singapore.
[34] UNDP, GCPSE, 2018, Foresight Manual: Empowered Futures for the 2030 Agenda, UNDP, Singapore, p. 43.

Agenda 2063 and SADC RISDP).[35] Key drivers for Lesotho included the impact of climate change (disease caused by higher mosquito numbers and impact on water resources) and opportunities for tourism.[36] As part of the project, experiences from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Macedonia were shared, and consideration was given to aligning the national planning processes with the SDGs. According to the 2019 VNR, implementation of the SDG Agenda is operationalized through the National Strategic Development Plan II (NSDP II), 2018–2023.

By 2050, cities in the developing world will represent 95 per cent of global urban growth,[37] which will have a significant impact on the achievement of SDG 11 to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. In **Rwanda**, Kigali has been a major driver of economic and social transformation and the government has sought to support other cities to drive further transformation. Foresight exercises have envisioned the future of urbanisation and rural development to identify strategic opportunities for economic growth and basic service delivery in the secondary cities. Horizon scanning and trends analysis have enabled the development of scenarios to help understand and address the interacting impacts of urbanisation, climate change, technological innovation and migration, among others.[38]

Peer-to-peer learning and research

Many **international inter-governmental organizations** (IGOs) are becoming interested in strategic foresight and exploring peer-to-peer learning, building capacity, drafting guidance papers and hosting conferences. Such initiatives include:

The UNDP Global Accelerator Labs network started with 60 lab teams covering 78 countries and is now expanding to 90 labs covering 114 countries. This network is part of UNDP's aim to be an incubator for the future.

UNESCO's Futures Literacy programme began in 2012 and is currently working with local champions in over 20 countries to explore locally rooted anticipatory practices in co-created Futures Literacy Laboratories. It also hosts an academic network of professors.

The UNICEF Child in 2030 programme includes a number of toolkits and use cases.

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[35] The Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) is a comprehensive development and implementation framework guiding the Regional Integration agenda of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) from 2005 to 2020. It is designed to provide clear strategic direction with respect to SADC programmes, projects and activities in line with the SADC Common Agenda and strategic priorities, as enshrined in the SADC Treaty of 1992.

[36] Arndt Husar, Advancing the 2030 Agenda in a Context of Uncertainty - The use of Strategic Foresight for Adaptive and Future-Ready SDG Strategies, slide deck prepared for the HLPF 2018 UNDP, Singapore.

[37] Clos, J., 2016, "A 21st century vision for urbanisation," OECD, Paris.

[38] UNDP, GCPSE, 2018, Foresight Manual: Empowered Futures for the 2030 Agenda, UNDP, Singapore, p. 29.

The former United Nations Development Operations Coordination Office (UN DOCO, now the Development Cooperation Office (DCO) of UNSDG) commissioned work on Applying foresight and alternative futures to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

The OECD Strategic Foresight Unit is a network for governments that also supports OECD directorates and committees in preparing for the future. The Observatory of Public Sector Innovation highlights foresight practices around the world. The OECD Government Foresight Community brings together strategic foresight practitioners in the public sector from around the world at an annual event in October. The OECD has also produced guidance and collected good practice from Supreme Audit Institutions on using oversight, insight and foresight to ensure good policymaking.

Among **regional institutions**, there is a growing use of foresight processes, capacity-building and visions in support of member governments at the national level, and also to explore different views about the future among their members, such as ASEAN Blueprint 2025 and accompanying Global Megatrends Report, AU2063, ECLAC conference: "America Latina y el Caribe: visiones del mundo, miradas continentales." The planning unit of ECLAC supports a network of government and non-government foresight innovators and also develops training and offers conferences to encourage peer-to-peer learning.

The Inter-American Development Bank has conducted strategic foresight work to develop Latin American and the Caribbean: Future Scenarios 2030 at the regional level.

The Asian Development Bank is supporting Asian economies to integrate foresight into their planning and policy processes as they strive towards the SDGs.

The European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) is a framework for cooperation and consultation at the administrative level on medium and long-term trends facing or relating to the European Union. The 2020 annual conference, on Europe's Road to 2030, was held in November 2020. The European Commission is facilitating the creation of an EU-wide foresight network of European Union institutions, Member States, think tanks, academia, civil society, and international organizations.

There are a number of **international, regional and national practitioner networks, research collaborations, NGOs and think tanks** working on foresight practice, increasingly on the SDGs. These can be useful sources of input and expertise for government actors.

Examples include:

The Public Sector Foresight Network was established in the United States, and focuses on foresight in the public sector. It holds an annual international meeting.

The School of International Futures works with governments, IGOs and NGOs on foresight training as well as on developing the next generation of foresight practitioners. It is based in London.

The Millennium Project is a global futures think tank with local nodes in around 60 locations.

Foresight for Development is a resource library and network of futurists promoting the use of foresight for Africa's future.

International development cooperation

Many international development cooperation actors in the governmental, intergovernmental and NGO sectors (including UNDP, UNDCO, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, and CARE International) use strategic foresight and scenario building in developing their own policies and strategies. UNESCO's Futures Literacy programme, established in 2012, was truly ground-breaking and continues to be a successful programme of work, reflected in the High Level Futures Literacy Summit, of December 2020.

A further example is UNICEF's work on the Child in 2030. UNICEF was a catalyst for strategic foresight work which has cascaded through country offices and has been tailored to local circumstances. UNICEF analysed five megatrends with the potential to significantly impact the future for children and the work of UNICEF and its partners. These were: global health crises; inequality and the middle-income trap; the changing nature and scale of conflict; global migration; and the effects of technology on work and education. UNICEF also asked, "what if?" questions, including "What if we're wrong?" This "child-centred foresight" practice has been taken out to UNICEF locations worldwide, including in India, where a selection of the key trends was used to create three contextual scenarios presented for discussion. Seventeen important themes were highlighted and distilled into a forward-looking, medium-term action plan in the context of the country programme. A toolkit on introducing foresight to adolescents has also been produced.

The case studies and the list of peer-to-peer learning and research opportunities demonstrate an interest in strategic foresight as a tool for policymaking that has waxed and waned over time. As an example, the Global Centre for Public Service Excellence,[39] established in 2012, was wound up in August 2018. The OECD Strategic Foresight Unit was established in 2013 as the successor to the International Futures Programme, with a remit of helping OECD directorates and governments to build foresight capacity to tackle strategic challenges. Initiatives have tended to work in isolation from each other, and so far, interest in strategic foresight as a tool for donors has not translated into significant technical assistance on strategic foresight for partner countries, despite promotion of effective governance being a common

[39] GCPSE produced a foresight manual, "Empowered Futures for the 2030 Agenda" in 2018. Now concluded, the GCPSE project did valuable work in introducing, exploring, scaling and implementing foresight approaches with government agencies in developing countries, in more than 15 workshops (including in Cambodia; Cape Verde; Kenya; Lesotho; Mauritius; Mozambique; Myanmar; Philippines; Rwanda; South Africa; Tonga; Tunisia; Uzbekistan and Zambia) and the GCPSE Evaluation Report highlights tangible impact on public sector reforms in Mauritius and Myanmar. The Global Centre for Technology, Innovation and Sustainable Development, established in 2019 as a new joint initiative between the Singaporean Government and UNDP aims to identify and co-create technological solutions for sustainable development, but work on foresight is less prominent than under GCPSE.

feature of such development cooperation programmes and despite the challenge of achieving Agenda 2030.

There has been increasing recognition of the value of strategic foresight at the centre of the United Nations system, but the machinery has moved slowly. General Assembly resolution 68/1 of September 2013 recognized the lead role of ECOSOC in identifying emerging challenges and promoting reflection, debate and innovative thinking on development. General Assembly resolution 72/228 of December 2017 and ECOSOC resolution 2018/29 of July 2018 reiterate the importance of foresight for development in technology and other fields, and mandate UNCTAD to provide assessment and foresight about critical trends in science, technology and innovation. A learning event at the 2017 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development focused on the use of strategic foresight for adaptive and future ready SDG strategies.

The United Nations Development Group's joint Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) efforts are seen as a core component of bringing together United Nations agencies, governments and people into the One UN and UNSDCF planning and also contribute to a more coherent policy approach in which strategic foresight can play a beneficial role. In 2018, at its 36th session, the High-level Committee on Programmes held an exploratory discussion of the use of strategic foresight and decided to: i) pursue a pilot foresight exercise; and ii) explore options to promote and support foresight capacities across the United Nations system and foster cross-agency and system-wide collaboration on foresight. The pilot exercise was a workshop on the Future of Work in sub-Saharan Africa, held at the Committee's 38th session in October 2019, which also welcomed the establishment of the Committee's strategic foresight network, led by UNESCO. In 2019, informed by a paper by the Secretary General, the final day of the ECOSOC High-level Segment focused on "future trends and scenarios related to the Council theme, the long-term impact of current trends, such as the contribution of new technologies, in the economic, social and environmental areas on the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals." The 2019 Management and Accountability Framework of the UN Development and Resident Coordinator System, developed as part of the United Nations' reforms of the development sector, places the SDGs at the centre of the work of Resident Coordinators.

The Millennium Institute's Threshold21 integrated SDG (iSDG) simulates the trends for the SDGs until 2030 for each of the SDG indicators under a business-as-usual scenario and supports analysis of alternative policy scenarios. This approach has been piloted in four African states. In collaboration with the Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, UNDP is using International Futures (IF), a long-term modelling system for the development field. It has been used for MAPS activities including in Yemen, where four scenarios were explored in relation to the end of the war.

All of these activities are signs of a recognition of the need for a cross-agency approach on using strategic foresight to think systematically about the future and ensure no one is left behind. As ever, resources and training need to be made available to ensure that political will is translated into action on the ground, not only within the United Nations system, but also

among all stakeholders across the development cooperation landscape. The VNRs – with their strong emphasis on participation – are an important means to share and communicate not only the achievements of governments towards the SDGs, but also the means by which their strategic visions and objectives are determined, for example through the use of strategic foresight.

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