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FORESIGHT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Models for Foresight Use in International Development

Alun Rhydderch

Abstract This article sets out the components of the foresight approach that has been adopted by many governments in the developed world, and identifies elements of this 'dominant' approach that may hinder its uptake in developing countries. Instead, it suggests that a less rigid, more exploratory and normative approach may be better suited to many developing country contexts. With reference to the writings and practice of the creator of '*la prospective*', Gaston Berger, it argues for an attitude that combines bold and inclusive thinking about how to create better futures with the pragmatic engagement with political and administrative systems that can help bring these about.

Keywords: prospective, horizon scanning, normative, participative.

1 Introduction: foresight practice and discipline

Foresight has been defined as 'the ability to judge correctly what is going to happen in the future and plan your actions based on this knowledge' (see dictionary definition in Box 1). We recognise this instinctively as a useful life skill. We all have it, to some degree. It helps us survive, avoid trouble, and achieve our goals.

The practice of foresight requires scaling up this ability from the individual to the group level. By engaging more people to judge what might happen, we fill knowledge gaps, and can draw on a wider range of understandings of the factors that will shape the future. Foresight practice often includes oral exchanges in the form of interviews, group discussions and workshops. These enable the surfacing of underlying assumptions and the sharing of tacit knowledge – intuitions as well as facts. Such exchanges provide a rich source of new ideas while expanding the collective knowledge pool.

The discipline of foresight, through its tools and techniques, provides a structured and systematic way to harness a range of knowledge, experience and intuition located in different people and places. This is useful to generate better judgement – through a collective process – on what might happen in the future and how to prepare for it.

This kind of judgement has an obvious outlet in strategy formation and policymaking. When carried out in a government context, the term 'strategic foresight' is increasingly used to call attention to the role foresight can play in improving strategic planning and policymaking processes.

The dominant foresight method that has evolved during the past 60 years in the government and corporate domains has demonstrated its value and is increasingly accepted (see Section 2). It has done so by integrating existing sources of knowledge and generating new knowledge and insights. By bringing these different sources together, foresight enhances strategic policymaking and planning processes.

Box 1 Definitions of 'foresight' and 'horizon scanning'

Foresight (dictionary definition of common meaning): 'The good judgment to think and plan before an event, so that you are prepared for whatever may happen.'¹

'*Horizon Scanning* is the systematic outlook to detect early signs of potentially important developments. These can be weak (or early) signals, trends, wild cards or other developments, persistent problems, risks and threats, including matters at the margins of current thinking that challenge past assumptions.' (Cuhls 2015, drawing on 2005 definition by UK Horizon Scanning Centre)

'*Strategic foresight* is the ability to create and sustain a variety of high quality forward views and to apply the emerging insights in organisationally useful ways; for example, to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy; to explore new markets, products and services.' (Slaughter 1997)

Scenario: 'an internally consistent view of what the future might turn out to be – not a forecast but one possible future outcome.' (Porter 1985)

Source: Author's own.

This article argues that this dominant model of foresight is also responsible for the limited application of foresight in a number of other fields. Taking examples from the field of international development, it will consider why foresight has had difficulty establishing itself in some fields. By looking at successful projects in international development, the article will then make the case for alternative foresight approaches. It will conclude by suggesting further avenues for the expansion of the use of foresight in international development as well as in other fields that have so far attracted less foresight interest or success.

2 The dominant model of foresight

Although many developed countries include foresight as one of their planning or policy tools, even in these countries the role of foresight is

still often contested, and national foresight units or programmes rarely benefit from stable institutional support or budgets.

2.1 Characteristics of the dominant foresight model

With this important caveat, the foresight model practised most widely at the national government level in developed countries is outlined below. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider why this model has become dominant.² The model does, however, present two characteristics that make it a ‘good fit’ for developed country governments. First, it lends itself to the creation of risk or threat scenarios, the analysis of which can lead to the development of policies for dealing with these risks or threats. One of the reasons for the prevalence of this characteristic is the influence of long-range planning approaches used in the defence sector (for procurement or force development), and the military (scenarios in military strategy), which tend to be threat-focused. Second, it adopts a neutral, detached, ‘evidence-based’ and ‘objective’ stance towards the data that form the basis for its analysis. The influence here is ‘technology foresight’ – a relatively stable strand of foresight practice in some developed country governments since the 1970s – which tends to take a probabilistic and deterministic approach to forecasting, using tools such as Delphi studies and roadmapping.

The first of these characteristics may reflect a sense that developed countries have ‘more to lose’ than developing countries. Their citizens, and therefore their politicians are likely to have a more risk-averse, protective attitude than those of developing countries. The second characteristic, viewed positively, reflects the penetration of the sciences (social and natural) into the policymaking processes of governments in more developed countries. Foresight, if it wishes to play a role in the policymaking process, is expected to meet these high (scientific) standards.

Viewed negatively though, the requirement to produce evidence, and the mistrust of judgements or opinions construed as value-laden (‘biased’) can be seen as part of a strategy of risk avoidance on the part of civil servants. In a culture that rewards clear, well-founded advice, the official charged with foresight activities is from the outset on shaky ground. ‘Evidence of the future’ is hard to come by, while facts and data from authoritative (scientific) sources provide a crutch that can help him or her navigate this terrain more surely.

2.2 Structure of the dominant model

Most foresight exercises contain the following three elements:

- A scoping or horizon-scanning stage
- A stage of analysis and ordering of the data from the first stage, often involving scenarios
- An ‘implications’ stage: what does this analysis mean for the topic being investigated?

A fourth element, important for ensuring both the impact of foresight projects and the stability of the foresight function, is a stage of 'embedding' or 'integrating' foresight into the organisation once the exercise (or series of exercises) has been completed.

These elements, except for the last one which is often neglected, are common not just to 'developed country foresight'; they can also be found in one form or another in approaches that are more open or 'normative' (see Section 5 for more on the normative approach). The particularity of the dominant model lies rather in (a) the types of data considered valuable to collect at the scoping/horizon-scanning stage; and (b) the way this data is analysed and ordered at the second stage.³ Specifically, developed countries tend to have a preference for authoritative data sources that can be extrapolated or modelled into the future, and, where such data are not available, for consensus among experts in specialist fields, generally from academia. Also, at the analysis and ordering stage, there is a tendency in developed countries to commission or produce scenarios that present future risks and threats, rather than opportunities.

2.3 Participation in the dominant model

In developed countries, participation in foresight processes is often restricted to experts from academia and policy officials. The private sector may be invited to join (generally through industry bodies such as trade associations), while civil society is less often represented.

3 Foresight in developing countries

It is an attractive idea that foresight should help guide a country's development. As described above, there are enough common elements in the foresight approaches used by developed countries to constitute a 'package' that can be proposed to developing countries.⁴ In the past, international organisations have played a role in sharing foresight experience and expertise with the developing world (for example, UNDP and UNIDO⁵ supported several developing countries in the 1990s). More recently UNDP, through its Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE), has begun to provide support for foresight activities as part of its mission to improve public sector capability.

Singapore's rapid transition to developed country status, as well as its widespread and effective use of foresight, helps explain why UNDP chose the country to host the GCPSE. Foresight exercises supported by GCPSE have recently been conducted in Tonga, Rwanda and Turkey. The activity of this unit is likely to receive a boost from the recent adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): foresight has been identified as an approach that, if adopted more widely, could contribute to achieving SDG 16 (governance).

However, Havas, Schartinger and Weber (2010) point out that 'foresight is costly in terms of time and money in general, and this can be a decisive factor for emerging economies, in particular'. And in a section on 'the political economy of foresight and development', Van de Pol *et al.* define the challenge of implementing foresight in developing countries:

While most countries apply futures thinking and strategic planning to some extent in their national policies, there is little evidence to suggest any widespread use of foresighting at the national level in most developing countries. Likely reasons for this include limited capacities in resources, skills and knowledge, organisation, politics and power and/or incentives. [...] Conditions are even less conducive in fragile states (2014: 16).

One way to increase the use of foresight would therefore be to improve economic management to enable investment in the missing resources, skills and knowledge; reduce reliance on foreign aid; and increase political legitimacy. Such steps might be accompanied by a transfer of know-how from developed countries where ‘vigorous regional futures and foresighting activities are ongoing’ (*ibid.*: 17).

But this is a challenging list of requirements and begs the question, is there an alternative to the state-led and government-funded foresight approach that might be less costly and more flexible? An alternative is raised in the UNDP paper:

Where less formal or institutionalised regional foresighting is being conducted, research and practice continues to be carried out by independent organisations, academics, practitioners and global communities (*ibid.*: 17).

This introduces the key observation that not all foresight is state-supported. Given the challenge in developing countries of directing state funding towards long-term goals when there is pressure to address current needs,⁶ alternative approaches may be required. Specifically, the independent organisations, academics, practitioners and global communities undertaking the less formal or institutionalised foresighting may be of particular value. Such activities are often supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or foundations, and the foresight approach taken tends to be different from that supported by government in ways that, we will argue in the next sections, potentially makes it more suitable for addressing some developing country challenges.

4 Constraints of the dominant foresight model

Here, with a particular focus on its use within international development, some limitations of the dominant model of foresight are identified. Alternatives approached that address these limitations are set out in Section 5.

4.1 Method, evidence and the pull of the sciences

Loveridge, Keenan and Saritas (2010) describe foresight processes as being ‘method-bound’. This attachment to method, and an array of tools and techniques, can be understood in part as a response to the need to make foresight ‘rigorous’ and to produce reliable evidence. The New Public Management (NPM) approach⁷ had a strong influence on governments throughout the world during the 1990s; from an NPM perspective, policymaking is (or should be) a rational activity that processes well-defined inputs (i.e. evidence) to reach clear conclusions.

To contribute to these policy processes, the expectation is that foresight should provide such inputs.

Yet the use of any foresight approach, given the irreducible uncertainty of the future and the infinite number of factors that will influence it, must rely to a considerable extent on discernment and judgement. Despite this, it has been hard to resist the pull of standardised methods when justifying and using foresight in policy settings.

A second temptation has been to make the case for foresight in the language of science. Foresight is an integrative discipline that uses information, data and evidence from a number of different disciplines and sources. Many of these can be categorised as belonging to the social sciences, but some – for example, environmental data, demographic forecasts and economic projections – incorporate precise measurement and data-driven modelling, associating them with the 'hard' sciences and giving them particular currency in the policy world.

Not only is this science 'badging' often misleading, it has arguably also constrained the scope of enquiry of some foresight programmes by scaling back exploratory, hypothesis-driven projects in favour of exercises that resemble academic research projects (and that therefore could be funded under regular academic programmes).

4.2 Neutrality and objectivity

In government organisations in particular, and in many other settings in which foresight exercises are carried out, neutrality (or lack of bias) is either expected or mandated. This expectation applies not just to the facilitator of the exercise, but also to participants, whose knowledge, ideas or views on the future are supposed to be detached from opinions, beliefs and ideologies. Experts are generally invited to participate in such exercises on the understanding that they provide this objectivity, but even when lay contributors are invited, it is assumed that they will participate in expert 'mode', i.e. by providing facts rather than opinions. Not only is neutrality in such a setting nearly impossible (even for facilitators and civil servants), striving to achieve it also reduces the space for uncovering interesting and informative elements shaping the future that a foresight process should explore.

4.3 Compatible cultures: selection and self-selection

Finally, even the most experienced practitioners of foresight, implementing the best designed processes, will run up against the issue of who is involved, who is 'in the room'. This is not simply a question of having a diverse and representative group of people at a workshop, or ensuring that experts do not exclude voices that challenge the prevailing view or look at questions from a different perspective. It is more fundamentally about knowledge, capability and power. This is already a major (and under-investigated) issue for well-funded exercises carried out in developed countries. The challenge is in many cases greater and harder to resolve in developing countries, where there may be even more pressure to express a view consistent with that of a particular group, whether social, professional or political.

Linked to this is the question of whether a country or culture will embrace or reject the foresight approach. What to developed country administrations (particularly Western and democratic) is for the most part viewed as a potentially useful complement to the policy and strategy toolkit, may to other governments appear as an unwelcome challenge to their legitimacy and control. Part of the answer can already be found by looking at the way regions such as South East Asia or Latin America have adopted approaches to foresight that differ from the dominant model described above (see EFMN 2009 and Keenan and Popper 2008). But even in other cases, it is worth asking whether any kind of foresight approach is likely to gain purchase outside an elite group. In some cases, a government's sponsorship of a foresight exercise may be perceived as an attempt to influence political debate and policy to the advantage of one party or interest group or another.

5 Alternative approaches

What then are the alternative models that may be more suited to 'non-natural' foresight territory, perhaps because they are better understood outside elite circles, more flexible, or more in tune with the social and political culture of a country or context into which it is desired to introduce foresight? This section will consider two approaches that have already been implemented successfully, and which may also point to ways of conducting foresight in countries less suited to the dominant model.

5.1 *La prospective*

'*La prospective*' is a foresight approach created by Gaston Berger, a French philosopher, industrialist, and senior government official between the 1930s and the end of the 1950s. Berger developed the *prospective* approach – or '*attitude*' as he called it – to free the pursuit of better futures (political, scientific and human) from what he saw as the drag or dead weight of bureaucratic process (Berger 1967).

As a senior official in the French education ministry, who also travelled extensively (particularly to the United States) as a cultural ambassador, Berger had a great deal of respect for the role of the state, but saw its instruments as insufficient to achieve the potential for positive change in the world characterised by rapid technological change and economic growth following the Second World War. Berger observed that when planning the future of a country or sector, too often *means* were decided on before *goals* were set, and that when this happened, the means would often dictate (or overly influence) the goals. As Durance (2010) puts it, 'Man may thus give up a better condition, considered utopian, because the means required have not yet been discovered.' A better approach would be to:

[...] bring together those who can determine what is desirable with those who can determine what is possible. The idea of picturing possible worlds in broad strokes would not only enlighten judgment but also inform it early enough so that a decision would be efficient (*ibid.*).

This idea of 'picturing possible worlds in broad strokes' is recognisable to us as the creation of 'visions' of the future – now a standby of corporate consulting, even if less frequently used by governments. This vision creation was and is an essential part of the *prospective* approach, but was paired with an extremely rigorous, expert-led process to align policy with these possible futures.

Berger commanded respect in the French administration and his ideas were highly influential. The first French five-year plan launched in 1965 was strongly influenced by *prospectiviste* ideas, and by the end of the 1960s *prospective* units were active in all parts of the French government. There were also exchanges in both directions between France and the United States during the 1960s. While the *prospectivistes* and their partners in the similarly-minded *Futuribles* group were impressed with the future thinkers in thinktanks such as the RAND Institute and adopted some of their approaches, the intellectual traffic was two-way. The dominant foresight approach that emerged in the 1970s (particularly thanks to Frenchman Pierre Wack's influence at Shell) is strongly marked with the *prospective* stamp.⁸

This separation of ambitious vision from the means necessary to achieve it offers the chance to develop processes that harness the big ideas of imaginative people from all walks of life. In a second stage, these ideas are handed over to officials to evaluate their ability to implement them, and to identify what resources and instruments would be needed.

The *prospective* approach has been influential in many countries, particularly in Europe and Latin America. Whether drawing or not explicitly on *prospective* thinking, many policymakers in developing countries have been attracted by the idea of developing a vision of the future as a prosperous, stable place. One such example of a vision-based exercise cited by Van de Pol *et al.* (2014) is that of Botswana, now one of Africa's most stable countries, relatively free of corruption and with a good human rights record. The national vision for the year 2016 exercise was followed by implementation of a series of measures identified in a backcasting process.⁹ A Long Term Vision for Botswana was published in 1997; the document informed decision and policymaking by identifying major challenges and roadblocks, and the strategies required to deal with them.

5.2 Broad and 'bottom-up' participation

Bingley (2014: 9) (and citing Ramos, Mansfield and Priday 2012) sets out the charge:

[...] in describing processes as 'participative', documentation of foresight initiatives often fails to distinguish between expert participation and ordinary citizen participation; [what is needed is to] make futures thinking a popular process, and to allow futures thinking 'to reflect the needs of the vast majority of people, rather than the interests of the few.'

Foresight shares the challenge of representation and legitimacy with many ‘community’ processes that aspire to speak on behalf of a group of people. In some ways foresight can be seen to be in a particularly difficult position in this regard, since a common view is that to express a valid opinion on the future, one must belong to an expert community of some kind. There are, however, three reasons why a community process can be – and indeed has already proved itself to be – a particularly good setting for foresight. The first and perhaps most important is that, particularly if the process entails the creation of a desired future, the people who will be part of such a future ought to have the chance to express a view on what that future should be; an additional benefit being that they may also be inspired by that view. Secondly, the division of society into those who create the structures and those who inhabit them – dominant in the time of Berger – is today contested. The information and digital revolutions have, potentially at least, devolved agency from elites into the heart of society. Those who come up with the ideas of better futures will in some cases be in a position to help create them. Thirdly, coming together to discuss and agree common or shared goals, even if agreement is not to be found on all matters, offers a way to bring people together, whether from within one community, or from across different (sometimes opposing) ones.

A powerful example of a bottom-up approach is the series of projects undertaken by the Society for International Development (SID) in the late 1990s and early 2000s in East Africa.¹⁰ Barbara Heinzen, the lead facilitator for this work, described the scenarios developed by these exercises – in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, and also for the East Africa region – as ‘public interest scenarios, concerned with developing skills and opportunities for public dialogue, facing uncertainty through collaborative learning processes, and developing capacity for political agreement’ (Heinzen 2004). They were designed to maximise ownership at the local and national level.

The reasons given for undertaking this series of projects can be seen to be relevant to a number of developing countries today:

SID’s own interest in exploring scenario exercises in Eastern Africa in the mid-1990s was driven largely by the fact that far-reaching structural adjustments were being undertaken in various countries with seemingly scant concern for long-term impacts and the choices that some of these adjustments would inevitably foster (Bingley 2014: 19).

At the same time, Bingley’s account of the Kenya scenarios process suggests why, while powerful, this type of community-owned process with extensive public engagement does not take place regularly in developing countries. She suggests that ‘the Kenya scenarios were a conscious attempt at participative policymaking, in an effort to provide an alternative to undemocratic governance in Kenya’ (*ibid.*: 18). The activities of NGOs, particularly when sponsored by foreign governments or NGOs, are often viewed with suspicion by governments in developing countries. For such

exercises to have an impact beyond the grass-roots level and influence the development of national-level policy, it will generally be helpful, and often necessary, to obtain at least tacit government acceptance of the initiative, and ideally to find active supporters among the political elites.

6 Way forward

The optimal role for governments, international institutions and NGOs who want to encourage and support the use of foresight in developing countries, may therefore be to seek the best combination of (a) support from developing country governments and (b) local NGO and civil society participation in foresight activities. This implies three elements of support:

- Advice to developing country governments on what they should (and should not) expect from foresight, and education of a small team at ministry level that can act as the centre for commissioning foresight studies;
- Identification of existing foresight actors within a country and assessment of their capabilities and the techniques they have adopted or developed; and
- Brokering and supporting the development of links between the foresight actors and government ministry, and helping to identify and design projects and other initiatives that benefit development.

One famous foresight initiative, the Mont Fleur scenarios,¹¹ was strong on the first and third of these elements (even if the foresight process was led by outside actors and benefited from a very particular context). The SID approach described above was strong on the second element, bringing communities into the process, and made some headway in involving political actors.

There is certainly room for a range of initiatives, and it is unlikely that the optimal combination of these elements will be achievable in a majority of cases. The easiest solution will often be to support the central government to put in place the dominant model described in Section 2, potentially even to provide the team to implement such a model. This article argues that such a solution should be resisted, and efforts made instead to encourage initiatives that involve local foresight actors (and participants) and produce outputs that are relevant to the concerns and aspirations of the citizens of the country.

7 Conclusion

This article suggests that there is a dominant foresight method and approach practised by developed country governments, and gives reasons why this approach emerged. It argues that this approach may not always be suited to a developing country context, and puts forward two alternative approaches, which have been adopted successfully in the past, and which it may be useful to revisit when designing foresight approaches in developing countries.

The article concludes by proposing that the most promising way forward for foresight in developing countries may be to take inspiration from Gaston Berger's *prospective* ideas from the 1950s. The challenge is to harness the energy and ideas of creative minds, found in all parts of society, and link them to a policymaking community at the national government level. To make this work policymakers must be open to receiving such forward-looking ideas and proposals from its citizens, and ready to transform them into implementable forward-looking policies and projects.

Notes

- 1 Macmillan Online Dictionary, www.macmillandictionary.com/ (accessed March 2016).
- 2 For more on national models within developed countries, see Kuosa (2011) and Rhydderch in Frank and Matyas (eds) (2013).
- 3 See for example Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre Toolkit (accessed at <http://hsctoolkit.bis.gov.uk/index.htm>) and Foresight HSC (2009).
- 4 The existence of a dominant foresight model does not mean that there is necessarily a straightforward implementation schema for foresight in developed country contexts. For more on the options and trade-offs involved in designing an appropriate national-level foresight programme, see Rhydderch in Frank and Matyas (eds) (2013).
- 5 UNDP – United Nations Development Programme; UNIDO – United Nations Industrial Development Organization.
- 6 For example, the conundrum of 'services now versus institutional strengthening' (Brinkerhoff 2007).
- 7 See Barzelay (2001).
- 8 What the foresight approach lost on arrival in the United States, probably because of the corporate context in which it took root, was Berger's insistence that the process had to start with a *normative* vision of a future, or set of futures, that were considered desirable. The process of coming up with this vision is central to the idea of *prospective*, and Berger insisted that this should be independent of and not subservient to the instruments, technologies and resources needed to achieve it.
- 9 See www.vision2016.co.bw.
- 10 Bingley (2014) provides a good summary of the SID projects in East Africa. See also Harcourt and Muliro (2004).
- 11 The Mont Fleur process undertaken in 1991 is credited with helping South Africa emerge from its apartheid system without widespread violence or economic upheavals (see Kahane 1992).

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