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FORESIGHT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**Editors James Sumberg
and Gioel Gioacchino**



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Introduction: Foresight in International Development

Gioel Gioacchino and James Sumberg

Abstract This article introduces this special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* on Foresight in International Development. It argues that foresight should be at the centre of development studies, and suggests two reasons why this is not the case. The four-year Institute of Development Studies research stream on foresight in policy-oriented research is introduced, as are the articles that make up this issue of the *IDS Bulletin*.

Keywords: futures, participation, methods.

1 Introduction

Foresight encompasses a wide range of methods and approaches that help individuals and groups to think about and prepare for different possible futures. Systematic approaches to foresight originated in the private sector, where the interest was in developing strategy, understanding implications of present and future trends and events, facilitating better decision-making and improving risk management (Conway 2008). Governments and public sector bodies subsequently embraced foresight with similar objectives.

Looking to the future is – or certainly should be – at the core of development studies. While the benefit of ‘looking back to look forward’ is well recognised, foresight is more akin to ‘looking forward to look forward’. It is striking that foresight approaches and methods do not figure prominently in policy-oriented development research (Bingley 2014). Why might this be so? We suggest two possible explanations. First, most social science disciplines are more comfortable with the analysis of the past and the present than the future. Second, the model of the large, well-funded public sector foresight programme simply does not reflect the realities of much policy-oriented development research.

A principle concern of this *IDS Bulletin* is whether foresight approaches and methods can be usefully integrated into small-scale, exploratory research of relevance to the international development community.



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Source Authors' own.

2 Low-budget foresight

Between 2012 and 2016, with support from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), researchers at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and their partners undertook a number of small-scale, policy-oriented projects using foresight approaches and methods. Most of these projects were completed for around £50,000 each – a far cry from the multi-million pound budgets associated with many public sector foresight activities. Topics were identified through a competitive process, and were meant to address new and emergent trends and policy issues that have the potential to impact significantly on development processes and outcomes. The project teams benefited from some limited input by a foresight specialist (Alun Rhydderch), and the expectation was that the projects would be completed within 12 months. Each project resulted in a published report and policy brief.

The topics addressed by these studies included: the rise of non-communicable disease; the meaning of resilience in rapidly urbanising contexts; drivers of investment in alternative energy; urban waste; the potential of insects as food; big data as a development resource; implications of knowledge sharing for development; the future of social protection; and security provision in the cities of tomorrow. Table 1 provides a listing of the published outputs from this stream of work.

In October 2015 a one-day conference on 'Foresight and International Development' was held at IDS (Gioacchino 2016). The conference brought together 30 academics, development practitioners and foresight experts to explore a number of questions including: What is foresight in the context of international development? What kind of foresight is useful? Should the use of foresight be more widely promoted in international development? The presentation and discussion highlighted some challenges associated with small-scale foresight studies.

3 This IDS Bulletin

This issue of the *IDS Bulletin* focuses on the role of foresight in policy-oriented international development research. It draws directly on the work and the conference described above and seeks to draw attention to the opportunities and challenges associated with a range of foresight approaches and methods.

Kate Bingley (this *IDS Bulletin*) and Alun Rhydderch (this *IDS Bulletin*) set the stage by introducing the field of foresight, reviewing its use in international development, highlighting some potential limitations of the dominant foresight model in developing country contexts, and identifying key aspects of alternative models. Both authors argue that widening participation and engagement in foresight beyond experts and policymakers is of critical importance.

Marie de Lattre-Gasquet and Sébastien Treyer (this *IDS Bulletin*) compare and contrast the Agrimonde and Agrimonde-Terra foresight studies undertaken by the French Agricultural Research Centre for International

Development (CIRAD) and the National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA). Focused on food security and land use respectively, these studies were relatively long term and well resourced, and in these respects they reflected some well-established approaches to public sector foresight. Three key lessons emerge from the comparison. First, the design of foresight processes and the selection of methods depend on the objectives and desired changes. Second, foresight exercises take place on a sea of expectations, which can lead to both creativity but also to vulnerability, and which must certainly be managed. Finally, much more attention must be devoted to understanding the strategies of different actors, and the power relations amongst actors.

Robin Bourgeois (this *IDS Bulletin*) also takes a futures perspective on food security, but in this case through an analysis of briefs produced by the authors of 38 recent foresight studies. From this analysis Bourgeois argues that policy, cultural values and individual and collective behaviours have the potential to disrupt patterns of food insecurity observed today. Shifts in framing – food security to food insecurity, and from technology to people, institutions and society – and more attention to local specificities will allow foresight studies to be more relevant to the transformative agenda that is integral to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Three articles draw on the IDS experience with low-budget foresight studies. Ashish Chaturvedi and Jai Kumar Gaurav (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe the use of an analytical framework that combines foresight and political economy methods to explore the future of urban waste management in India. They argue that this process has opened up deliberations beyond the usual expert committees, and has the potential to help open up and democratise the policymaking process of waste management in India, particularly through the inclusion of the informal sector. Stephen Devereux, Keetie Roelen and Martina Ulrichs (this *IDS Bulletin*) use a foresight approach to explore the possible futures for social protection following its rapid ascendancy up the development agenda. A ‘wind-tunnelling’ exercise highlights the importance of a country’s political regime as a fundamental determinant of its approach to social protection policy. They conclude that a better understanding of political processes is needed to protect the gains made in social protection systems against possible reversals when the political climate shifts against pro-poor redistributive policies. Jaideep Gupte and Stephen Commins (this *IDS Bulletin*) ask ‘How will security in cities be understood in the future?’ Working with a number of foresight tools including the social, technological, economic, environmental and political (STEEP) framework their process developed two contrasting scenarios: ‘coastal collapse’ and ‘post-capital commons’. A particularly important conclusion is that misconceived urban planning, policy and design are likely to create insecurity, not reduce it. In this sense there is a critical gap in the understanding of the lessons that the safest cities can provide in terms of systems thinking.

Finally, on a methodological note, Dominic Glover, Kevin Hernandez and Alun Rhydderch (this *IDS Bulletin*) describe how they adapted existing foresight scenario methods to investigate possible trade-offs, tensions and synergies amongst the international development goals of reducing inequalities, accelerating sustainability, and building secure and inclusive societies. They find that the trilemma triangle is particularly successful in forcing participants to confront the possibility of trade-offs and tensions, and as such helps expose some of the difficulties and challenges which might be faced in international development in the coming decades.

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