SDG Implementation Framework

Empowered Futures for the SDGs: Participatory Visioning, Resilient Planning and Innovative Solutions through Foresight

Summary

‘Empowered Futures’ is the GCPSE term for the adaptation and application of ‘foresight methodology’ to development needs. This takes four distinct forms: i) Alignment of Development Visions; ii) Anticipatory Governance and Strategic Management; iii) Resilient Policy Planning; and iv) Policy and Public Services Innovation.

Introduction: The SDGs and Foresight

In September 2015, world leaders gathered in New York for a unique visioning event. The UN Sustainable Development Summit adopted Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, also known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 SDGs encapsulate the global vision for how the world could look like in 2030. It proposes that the spoils of human progress and economic growth be more fairly shared by all, poverty be eradicated, governance be improved and the planet protected from degradation. The empowering nature of the visioning process was captured by the slogan ‘The World We Want’.

Much of the success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will depend on the ability of national and sub-national public service organisations to turn words in tangible results for all citizens. That is not a given. Public administrations in both the developed and developing countries are facing stubborn capacity constraints. The reality of the 21st century presents additional challenges, in particular:

1) The complexity of development issues and the need to produce integrated policy results;
2) The volatility and uncertainty of the policy implementation environment and the requirement to be resilient and adaptive, and;
3) The changing nature of the relationship between state and citizens and the demand for more citizen involvement.

Governments need practical tools and ‘space’ to experiment, learn and adapt in order to deal with the challenges of SDGs implementation in the volatile reality of the 21st century. The core characteristics of classical public administration are rationality, predictability and hierarchy. Many of its structures, procedures and outputs are based on these principles. Complexity, uncertainty and a demand for meaningful citizen engagement are profound challenges. ‘Foresight’, with its proven track record and fit in bureaucratic structures, is emerging as an essential addition to conventional planning and policy tools.¹

¹ There is increased recognition for the contribution foresight can make to SDG implementation. See also Strategic Foresight: How to Enhance the Implementation of 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in Developing Countries by Sergio Bihar
Foresight is the umbrella term for those innovative strategic planning, policy formulation and solution design methods that don’t predict or forecast the future, but work with alternative futures. Foresight has been defined as “a systematic, participatory, future-intelligence-gathering and medium-to-long-term vision-building process aimed at enabling present-day decisions and mobilizing joint action.” Foresight empowers decision makers and policy planners to use new ways of thinking about, talking about, and implementing strategic plans that are compatible with the unfolding future.

Foresight is based upon a range of skills such as situational awareness to possible, probable and preferable futures, a pro-active and ceaseless scanning of the wider environment, an ability to sort, sift through and combine open, real-time data and the creation of tight feedback loops. It entails the exploration of possible scenarios and pathways, the identification of future risks and opportunities and the systematic rehearsal of potential responses; and the strengthening of the system’s structural capacity to deal with this plethora of possible changes and either cope with the disruptions or turn opportunities and risks into transformative moments.

There are four major areas where foresight can make an important contribution to the work of public bureaucracies in SDGs implementation:

1. **Alignment of Development Visions**
2. **Anticipatory Governance and Strategic Management**
3. **Resilient Policy Planning**
4. **Policy and Public Services Innovation**

**Alignment of Development Visions**: The SDGs (goals, targets and indicators) capture the global vision on development in 2030, a negotiated common ground between different development aspirations, priorities and interests among states. ‘SDG alignment’ requires an additional process of ‘nationalizing’ of the global development vision, in which a broad consensus among national actor on development aspirations is agreed upon; an aspirational national development vision formulated, and; ‘local’ targets and priorities specified. In the cases where such a national development vision already exists, there will be a need to reconcile the visions before any meaningful planning action can be taken. The introduction of the 2030 Agenda might also provide an impetus to update or improve existing national development strategies.

Public service organisations play an important role in the key processes of vision building. In their official capacity, public servants supply politicians with technical expertise, often framing what visions of the future are deemed to be ‘feasible’ and influencing what is prioritized. Public sector institutions also function as intermediaries between state and citizens and have access to information on citizens’ current concerns and needs. Civil services combine robust organisational power with structures that deeply penetrate society and can rapidly identify, mobilize and facilitate key stakeholders.

Many bureaucracies, however, lack mechanisms, processes and methods for the kind of engagement that development visioning requires and citizens demand. The bureaucratic consultative processes can be limited in terms of active engagement (once-off), restrictive in terms of participation (either for ideological or practical reasons), or poor in terms of incorporating recommendations (if they diverge from the expert consensus). Foresight provides a rich repertoire of methods to have realistic but aspirational deliberations about the preferred future. These methods provide a platform and a structure for different ‘voices’ and perspectives to have a meaningful conversation with each other and to produce a document that cannot be ignored.

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Anticipatory Governance and Strategic Management: The vision of the SDGs is aware and explicit about the complex, interrelated and uncertain nature of the world. During the post-2015 Development Agenda deliberations alone, governments and communities had to deal with the fall out of calamitous events such as the Global Financial Crisis, the Arab Spring, the Refugee Crisis and the Ebola Epidemic. The disruptive potential of global trends, such as urbanization and changing demographics, slowly moved from the periphery to the centre of discussions. But the exclusion of ‘slow onset shocks’ such as antibiotics resistance, which surfaced after the formal adoption, indicates that the 2030 Agenda only provides limited insights in what the future has in store, beyond ‘the world we want’.

Government must explore and anticipate what ‘healthy lives’, ‘quality education’, ‘economic growth and jobs’ etc. will look like in 2030. What possible health threats will there be in 2030? What type of education increases the chances for what kind of jobs in 2030? What sectors will produce economic growth in 2030, and which not? On what kind of markets, and which market mechanisms, will national food security in 2030 depend? How will the four disruptive forces of the early 21 century – urbanization, technological innovation, ageing population and global flows of trade, capital and people – impact all 17 Goals? Foresight enables governments to anticipate some of these emerging trends and to evaluate the implications and impact of their policies under different circumstances. By doing so, foresight helps leaders make better decisions and regain a sense of direction over the future of their nation.

In 2014, the Rwanda Government embarked on a journey to apply foresight methodologies to identify strategic future opportunities for urban and rural development. Supported by GCPSE and the Future-Moves Group, key senior decision makers have developed integrated policies for the future development of secondary cities in Rwanda, emphasising the need for a future-oriented perspective and integrated policies.

In light of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, Tonga must find ways of moving from a Small Island Vulnerability perspective to a ‘Big Ocean Prosperity’ future. If Tonga is going to navigate this transition, it must prepare now for the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow, which requires deliberate and thoughtful action today …

Lord Tu’Ivakano, former Tonga Prime Minister
Resilient Policy Planning: The SDGs are being implemented in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment. Globally, governments are experimenting with planning tools that allow for change, complexity and uncertainty. Classical planning methods, with their emphasis on predictable, gradually unfolding, unambiguous change, have been found wanting to deal with the inevitable changes, disruptions and shocks that will happen between 2015 and 2030. Government agencies are often slow to detect the increasing irrelevance of policies, and inattentive to promising opportunities until they have passed by. SDG implementation will require a tool to make classical planning more resilient in the unfolding future.

Foresight is emerging as one of the approaches to infuse classical policy planning with a manageable dose of uncertainty and unpredictability. Several governments in developing countries use scenario planning to identify risks and opportunities in future policy implementation environment. These scenarios often explore the possible impact of key global or local trends (for example fluctuating energy prices or changing demographics) on important policies and produce recommendations for policy adjustments or enhancements. Another popular foresight application in a planning context is ‘back-casting’, in which policy planners work backwards from a ‘preferred future’ (a vision or a goal) through different implementation scenarios, picking the most ‘resilient’ path for the policy.

These and other foresight methods (see also GCPSE Foresight Manual)3 are a major contribution to make policies ‘work’ in society. Foresight not only imbues classical planning with a more comprehensive risk assessment, it also highlights the (unexpected) opportunities and requires adjustments to existing plans in the here and now. SDGs policies will therefore become more ‘resilient’, that is, effective in a range of different circumstances. By collaborating on foresight with other stakeholders, such as communities, businesses and academia, government agencies can become more attune to the distributed knowledge inside the wider environment, leverages imaginative use of technology and ‘sense signals’ of emerging change.

Policy and Public Services Innovation: The successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda will require innovative policies and public services. The speed of technological innovation, the mobility of people and ideas, the concentration of human activity in large urban centres is changing the way governments and citizens relate and interact with each other. These trends (and many others) are generating a new kind of public space, where co-design, prototyping and collective action create innovative (public) goods and services. In many countries around the world, public service organisations are engaging with policy and service innovation.

There is a comparatively long history of the use of foresight in identifying opportunities for scientific and technical innovation. The first generations of foresight in government from the 1950s and 1960s tried to forecast the next big thing in science or technology (often spurred on by military necessities in the Cold War.) The strength of this tradition is clear from a recent UNCTAD report on the use of foresight in SDGs implementation, in which the researchers exclusively looked at those institutes around the world that focused only on science, technology and innovation.\(^4\)

Recently, foresight has been coupled with a new wave of technological, social and public innovation, creating an electrifying new field of application. Public officials, citizens and entrepreneurs team up in ‘social innovation labs’ to do a ‘quick-and-dirty’ exploration of alternative futures, with the creative aim to reframe problems in surprising new ways and to identify high-leverage entry points for innovation. These typically concern short-term cycles, in which the potential of opportunities is tested through prototyping and leveraged by scaling up.

The Empowered Futures Initiative

UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) has been responding ad hoc to a growing number of requests from governments from developing countries to strengthen their capacity to productively apply foresight methods to above mentioned areas.

Now, to offer a systemic method of support with a focus on SDG implementation, GCPSE intends to establish the **Empowered Futures Initiative** (EFI).

EFI will promote the use of foresight by government in developing countries. It will focus on foresight for SDGs, foresight for cities, foresight for technological innovation in government, and foresight and the changing state-citizens relationship. EFI will partner with foresight partners around the globe to strengthen the capacity of government to apply and tailor foresight to their strategic, planning and policy needs.

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\(^4\) Quoted above