

Using Foresight to Cope with Uncertainty

In an increasingly uncertain world where resources are limited, foresight thinking and approaches provide a critical way for governments and communities to understand and plan for the future. Using foresight techniques can contribute to the development of policies that are robust and fit for purpose. Foresight practitioners have an important role to play in the design and implementation of these processes. However, more needs to be done to ensure that such initiatives are properly supported and the capacity of policy thinktanks and foresight practitioners strengthened in developing country contexts. Increasingly, foresight processes should harness advances in information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate broader citizen participation in policymaking.

The global picture of foresight

Currently, significant resources are invested in the foresight programmes of multilateral organisations and by certain governments that commission large-scale foresight studies. On a smaller scale, foresight studies and processes are also initiated by academic institutes and civil society organisations. However, there is limited evidence of foresight initiatives undertaken in least developed countries, and especially in fragile and conflict-affected countries which are characterised by uncertainty.

the foresight programmes of Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands.

In the international development arena there have been two particular initiatives that highlight the potential to use ICT to facilitate participation of stakeholders on a significant scale:

1. An initiative conducted over the period 2006–08, supported by the United Nations (UN) and reckoned to be the most extensive online foresight exercise in the history of intergovernmental processes in the developing world to date, secured nearly 1,500 contributions (from civil society, academic and private sector participants). The contributions were then fed into intergovernmental decision-making as part of the **Regional Action Plan for the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean (eLAC2010)**. This initiative demonstrates the potential role of the UN and other intergovernmental agencies in supporting participatory policymaking in developing countries in the digital age.
2. The **Rockefeller Foundation’s Catalysts for Change project** sought to complement horizon scans of foresight experts by integrating citizens’ ideas for innovation. Using a visualisation tool as a common language and framework, the Institute for the Future convened a three-day global collaborative foresight game which engaged with more than 1,600 people in more than 79 countries.

What is foresight?

Foresight is about understanding the future systematically, usually considering a horizon of at least ten years into the future. Approaches to foresight include horizon scanning, model-based projections and narrative scenarios. Methods used in foresight processes may be qualitative, quantitative or a combination of both. Foresight thinking can serve a variety of purposes in relation to policy and decision-making in international development, including setting agendas for research, action or investment; mobilising key actors and building visions.

Both of these initiatives demonstrate how innovations in ICT can and should be harnessed to facilitate participation in foresight processes for participatory policymaking in resource-scarce developing countries. However, it is also important to recognise barriers to broad-based citizen participation such as lack of access to the internet by certain sectors of the population.

Using ICT to support participatory policymaking

There is an established set of tools and approaches applied in foresight processes, but the nature of stakeholder participation varies considerably. Initiatives range from desk-based studies, and processes that engage with policy stakeholders and thematic experts, to processes that seek broader citizen engagement. Studies conducted by the UK Foresight programme are essentially expert-led; this contrasts with the more participatory political tradition reflected in

Developing capacity for scenario building in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda

The Society for International Development (SID), an international non-governmental membership network, was instrumental in initiating processes for the development of national and regional scenarios in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and the region as a whole, between 1998 and 2008.

The Kenya scenarios were a conscious attempt at participative policymaking, in an effort to provide an alternative to undemocratic governance in Kenya. SID partnered with Nairobi-based public policy thinktank Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) to support the process. Foresight practitioner Barbara Heinzen played a lead role in designing and facilitating the process. She guided decisions around participation to ensure that SID convened a diverse set of individuals. Diversity is essential to effective scenario building, both to ensure that the status quo is challenged and radical alternatives are identified. The Kenyan foresight exercise (1998–2000) was designed to maximise ownership at local and national levels, and the project's donors (British Council and USAID) were not encouraged to participate in the scenario process. A key strategy of SID to attract interest and secure ownership across the Kenyan political spectrum was the creation of a board of trustees which included individuals with different political affiliations.

Four scenarios were identified through a series of workshops and research, and this was followed by a one-year process of engagement in two phases: firstly with opinion leaders in the public sector, private sector and civil society; and secondly with the general public through partnering with credible and respected community organisations. Core roadshow activities included a series of participatory theatre workshops and presentations, as well as distribution of the research compendium with the facts, data and arguments behind the scenarios, and a booklet outlining the four scenarios in story-form. The scenarios were generally received with enthusiasm by the people of Kenya, though there were a few attempts by government officials to disrupt the public meetings. The four scenarios created a new shared language among Kenyan people and served to stimulate dialogue about the country's current situation as well as the future.

In the case of the Tanzania scenarios, subjects that had previously been considered taboo, such as donor dependence and the supposed unity of the country, became open discussion points. Common elements of these processes in East Africa undoubtedly include the value of scenarios as a catalyst for public dialogue, embracing uncertainty through collaborative learning processes, and developing capacity for political agreement.

Policy recommendations

1. All development actors should consider integrating foresight into policy/strategy planning cycles. Foresight initiatives should draw on practitioner expertise where possible to maximise the effectiveness of both process and outputs.
2. National governments and international donors should recognise the potential of policy thinktanks in developing countries to play a stronger role in foresight activities in support of policy development.
3. International donors should support the development of foresight capacity, and the strengthening of foresight practitioner networks, particularly in the South.
4. Multilateral development agencies should seek to broaden participation in policymaking, moving beyond expert-led processes. By harnessing the potential of ICT within foresight processes, agencies can draw on collective intelligence at regional and global levels for participatory policymaking.



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Further reading

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Credits

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