

Foresight, the SDGs and international innovations around political governance

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework has provided the world with a universal opportunity to create a better future. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals that were signed in September 2015 have been in effect since the 1st January 2016. Now that the first year has passed, 2017 provides an opportune time to assess whether the framework is generating new practice in governance.

The SDG Framework envisages a significant shift away from existing business as usual practice in order to fulfil the 2030 vision of a secure, equal and prosperous world. This paper will focus on part of the goal SDG 16 (“inclusive, effective and accountable institutions”) which is considered to be key to unlocking the transformative potential of the rest of the framework. SDG 16 demands new governance innovations in order to be achieved, and this paper examines the extent and nature of such innovations across different countries – with a focus on the use of Strategic foresight approaches. Case studies provide examples of where new governance practice is being developed and where it is being overlooked. In order to provide a practical resource to governance innovators and SDG advocates, the end of this paper provides the principles of strategic foresight implementation, based on the features of effective country innovations.

Methodology

The findings in this paper are based on case studies, conferences and semi-structured interviews with government, UN staff, civil society leaders and development experts, with particular geographic focus in: Latin America (Dominican Republic, Colombia and Costa Rica), where work was undertaken with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; Finland (in collaboration with the Committee for the Future of the Parliament of Finland); Laos (in collaboration with the United Nations Development Operations Coordination Office) and the UK.

Rather than employing a random sampling strategy, interviewees were explicitly selected based on their expertise. Over fifty interviews were conducted, primarily through telephone conferences or face-to face conversations where possible.

Strategic foresight and SDG 16

The post-2015 agenda has brought renewed energy and interest in the Strategic foresight approach to the development sector. This timing is far from a coincidence. In an uncertain world with long-term threats like climate change, experts and governments have reflected on how traditional policymaking and government structures fall short, given that “few contemporary challenges can be confined to one policy area and that a single-issue focus is in many instances insufficient”.¹ The role

¹ Van de Pol, P. et al. Foresight as a Strategic Long-Term Planning Tool for Developing Countries. 2014. United Nations Development Programme

of government is shifting and in order to effectively plan for the future in a strategic way, expert institutions such as the Institute of Development Studies recommend states engage in Strategic foresight as a matter of survival. In the words of Kate Bingley:

“Foresight has an important role to play in international development, to ensure that policies are robust and forward-looking, and that development organisations and institutions are resilient and agile, able to cope with change and manage increasing uncertainty and complexity in order to tackle the global and local development and humanitarian challenges ahead.”²

Strategic foresight is defined as a systematic way to examine alternative ‘futures’ and apply the insights to shape today’s activities for the better.³ Using Marie Conway’s definition: “*foresight is the capacity to think systematically about the future to inform decision making today. It is a capacity that we need to develop as individuals, as organisations, and as a society*”⁴. Although thinking about the future itself is nothing novel, the way we do it must be carefully assessed.

Over the past 30 years, two key approaches to strategy development have influenced the way Strategic foresight is implemented. These approaches were pioneered by Michael Porter and Henry Mintzberg respectively⁵. Porter’s approach can be summarised as “command and control” (where organisations set direction from the top-down along inflexible and time-bound lines), whereas Mintzberg’s centres on “emergent” methods (where organisations harness their internal and external stakeholders to develop a more bottom-up, adaptive and diffused approach).

As our world has becoming increasingly recognised as needing a complex adaptive systemic approach, there has been a slow shift from Porter’s rigorous, analytical and centralised strategic planning process to Mintzberg’s school of thought. Mintzberg champions an approach where ideas and processes emerge, information comes from multiple levels of an organisation and plans are adaptive, iterative and “culture” based.

This adaptive, participative approach, which is complementary to ‘systems thinking’ frameworks, is understood to serve governments better in complex environments and in the face of complex problems⁶. An example is David Snowden’s *Cynefin*: a decision-making framework developed to describe the evolutionary nature of complex systems, helping determine operative contexts that enable effective choices and decisions⁷. It is this type of approach to thinking about the future that is championed by the SDG framework.

² Bingley, K. A Review of Strategic Foresight in International Development. 2014. Institute of Development Studies

³ Tully, C. Applying Foresight and alternative futures to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework. United Nations Development Group, 2016.

⁴ Conway, M. ‘Foresight: an introduction’, *Thinking Futures*: <http://thinkingfutures.net/wp-content/uploads/TFRefGuideForesight1.pdf>, p2, 2015.

⁵ Mintzberg, H. co-authored with J.Jorgensen, Emergent Strategy for Public Policy, 1987 Canadian Public Administration 30(2): 214-229

⁶ Bowman, K. et al. Systems Thinking - An introduction for Oxfam Programme Staff. 2015.

⁷ Snowden, D and Boone, M. ‘A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making’, Harvard Business Review. 2007.

Conversations about the future are critical for the SDG Framework to be effective; however, the manner in which these conversations are had must break away from the status quo. The development of the SDGs was based on a complex-adaptive systems view of policy-making that replaced the technocratic, linear, top-down approach of the Millennium Development Goals. The process for developing the SDGs (detailed beneath) reflects the systemic, interrelated and uncertain nature of the world, and underscores the point that governments cannot do this kind of planning alone. These are the fundamental tenets of Strategic foresight and indicate the need for governments to innovate too, which is further underscored by SDG 16.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 in particular focuses on the critical need for “inclusive, effective and accountable institutions” at all levels. With this as its essence, SDG 16 plays a catalytic role within the Sustainable Development agenda, presenting the need to re-shape institutions and governments, and build core capability for delivering on 21st century governance. SDG 16 mandates a transfer from regular practice and structures towards dynamic innovation, with the intention of embedding strategic foresight processes within governments worldwide. As Melissa Leach from the Institute of Development Studies said in her statement to the UK government, “[if the goals are to be reached] business as usual is no longer an option”.⁸ Added to this are three core principles of the SDG framework:

- 1) The first principle is universality. Universality within the SDGs means that all countries are accountable to others, regardless of their standing. This principle also means that no country is exempt from the SDG agenda. Every nation state has areas for improvement and key areas where more attention is needed.
- 2) The second principle is interdependence. When approaching the SDGs, it is parochial and unproductive to only focus on one issue. A holistic, complex systems approach is needed to tackle interrelated and indivisible issues like cyber crime, obesity and long-term unemployment. As well as the interwoven nature of our global markets, for example, the responsibility of UK citizens for consuming products that create pollution in China.
- 3) The third principle is participation. This is core to the transformative nature of the SDGs (particularly SDG 16). If decisions and planning are left solely in the hands of governments, it will only perpetuate the existing business-as-usual approach and forego meaningful inclusion of the public and civil society. Citizens have valuable assets, including ideas, energy and resources, that need to be mobilised.

The underlying drive behind the growth of interest for Strategic foresight, a transformation in the role of government, and these three principles, is the fact that the traditional government mode of command and control is not working any more. At the domestic level (both national and local) in most countries, public confidence crises and political failures have resulted in a climate of mistrust, political apathy and reduced accountability between government and citizens. Effective governance,

⁸ UK Parliament. Report: UK Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. 2016.

therefore, requires including strategic foresight as an explicit step in strategic planning.

The changing nature of global public policy challenges and opportunities, including the increasingly complex environment, requires government to re-envisage itself as a system steward rather than as a command-and-control hierarchical centre⁹. As a result, and in order to meet the SDGs, the purpose of government becomes one of a facilitator, not a commander, who implements long-term strategies that are legitimate through their accountability to their citizens and other states. In this respect, SDG 16, with its accountable institutions, becomes the motor of the whole SDG framework. In order to lead by example, the UN's design process for the Sustainable Development Goals was much more participative, drawing on contributions from thousands of people all over the world. One of the participative processes leading to the SDGs, titled 'The World We Want', is a key example of this¹⁰.

Conversations, innovation and new practice around Strategic foresight have emerged as a result of this SDG framework. Before now, Strategic foresight theory, methodology and practice have traditionally focused on developed countries' experience. As discussed in the next section, however, interest and innovation is now growing for Strategic foresight methods and tools that are relevant for developing country contexts (including bridging the link with the humanitarian field). Moreover Strategic foresight provides a framework for developing states to regain ownership of national development narratives, and to find locally suitable and resilient implementation strategies of development visions. Effective governance and decision-making – especially around public collective challenges and opportunities, require three capabilities associated with emergent approaches to policy-making¹¹: openness, future-focus, and coherence.

The SDG framework has created a whole new challenge, agenda and social mission for the world, and this progress has generated excitement for an empowering, shared global agenda. Furthermore, SDG 16 has established the need for dramatic changes in governance practice. However, the extent to which countries are innovating for change, and to which the three principles of universality, participation and interdependence outlined above are being realised, dramatically varies.

Where change is happening

Some countries are using the SDG framework to innovate, and are thereby resolving the challenge of how government can reform to be successful in achieving outcomes in a complex and turbulent world. Some regions and nation-state governments have established units and capabilities to enable longer-term thinking, strategic planning and implementation. Practice internationally has traditionally been patchy. In Latin America and the Caribbean, foresight approaches have already been used for some time, but now their use is being systematised and expanded. Notably, this has not

⁹ Tully, C. *Stewardship of the Future. Using Strategic Foresight in 21st Century Governance*. 2015. Singapore: United Nations Development Programme Global Centre for Public Service Excellence

¹⁰ <http://www.beyond2015.org/our-story>

¹¹ Mintzberg, H. co-authored with J.Jorgensen, *Emergent Strategy for Public Policy*. 1987. *Canadian Public Administration* 30(2): 214-229

just been happening at the city or industry level, but has stretched to a national scale: central government and ministries of planning have been innovating and making progress too. For example, in 2013 the Argentinian government ran a major foresight exercise that focused on 2026, featuring many different provincial officials from across the country¹².

The SDG framework has been pushing this innovation up a level. One example is from Costa Rica. Costa Rica's 2015-2018 national development plan was created in concordance with the SDG 2030 vision¹³. Throughout the creation of this national development plan, Costa Rica engaged several other actors – from regional governments to citizens – in a foresighting process. They explored alternative and desired visions of the future, drivers of change, risks and opportunities facing the country from many different perspectives. The Dominican Republic has also aligned their national development plan and vision with the SDGs and the 2030 vision, and created a National Commission for Sustainable Development. This Commission featured Ministers and ministry delegates, public bodies, civil society, development agencies and the private sector¹⁴.

Similarly, the Colombian government created a high-level interagency commission mandated to fulfil the 2030 vision. In addition, the national development strategy incorporates the SDGs and is linked to the OECD accession strategy. It recognises that everyone needs to be able to contribute and participate (*"Pasar de un enfoque por demanda a uno de oferta"*) and focuses on ensuring that to make sure nobody is left behind: *"necesidades de desagregación de indicadores: región, sexo, edad, etnia, etc."*¹⁵

Strategic foresight exercises form a key part of the planning processes for fulfilling the SDGs, especially when it comes to the need to incorporate others' ideas and energy through participative, co-ordinated conversations about the future. Multiple actors and agencies are engaged in the Dominican Republic's strategic plan, from the government to the private and civil sectors, and as Juan Temístocles Montás states: *"Cómo la vamos a implementar: – Coordinación intra e inter-intersectorial y entre los actores (Gobiernos, sector privado, sociedad civil) – Sin sinergias, es muy difícil lograrlo ("nada sin ustedes, nada sin nosotros")"*⁹. Strategic foresight is a powerful, effective way of harnessing a diversity of views and conversations to inform a unified approach.

However, Latin America is not the only region embracing strategic foresight. Laos provides another example of participative strategic foresight being implemented in development planning efforts. Using *FutureScaper*, a cloud-based collective

¹² Ministry of Federal Planning. Los Territorios Del Futuro: Escenarios prospectivos del territorio Argentino y sus regiones hacia el año 2026. 2013.

¹³ Sanchez, O. "Estrategia y arreglos de implementación de la agenda ODS en Costa Rica", 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.

¹⁴ Juan Temístocles Montás, "Sobre los retos de la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible en República Dominicana", 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.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Arciniegas, "Departamento Nacional Planeación: Comisión Interinstitucional de alto nivel para el alistamiento y la efectiva implementación de la agenda de desarrollo 2030 y sus Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible", 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.

intelligence platform that helps organisations to crowdsource strategic conversations, Laos' UN Country Team gained wider input on development planning¹⁶. The aim of this exercise was to engage UN staff, government, civil society, development partners and the general public in the exploration of development issues and future challenges.

Within Europe, Finland is leading on institutional transformation, though Germany and the Netherlands also have nice examples of innovation (including in the latter at the city governance level). Finland has a Parliamentary Committee for the Future, which prepares studies on futures, proposes different options, highlights dangers and builds scenarios using methods of future research¹⁷. Within the broader context, Sustainable Development is a core priority for Finland, evidenced by the fact that the Prime Minister is the Chair of the Sustainable Development Committee. Finland's eight areas of commitment to the 2030 vision are integrated with the Sustainable Development Goals, and with the recognition that the means for implementing the goals are just as important as the goals to be achieved. Moreover, the SDG consultative process has led to new efforts in areas that were identified as needing focus – loneliness, future work and the blue economy.

These examples provide promising evidence that governments have taken the SDG framework on board and directly embedded and mainstreamed it. These innovations to put strategic foresight into practice are excellent, but in reality not all foresight initiatives will be sustainable. Within institutions, change takes a long time to implement and the tendency to return to the status quo is always strong. Nevertheless, countries are trying along various different fronts (including participation, foresight, interaction and interdependence between different policy areas) to improve their institutions for the better.

Where the SDGs are not being applied

Neither the level of development nor the nature and duration of democratic legacy seem to have any impact on whether a country innovates or not. Some developed countries, principally the UK, have not yet demonstrated any interest in transforming governance practice using the SDGs; likely because the Government seems to interpret the Sustainable Development Goals as for the benefit of other less-developed nations. Evidence of this comes in a speech from a Government Minister in 2015, who declared that the UK had already met its SDG commitments: when giving evidence to the UK's Environmental Audit Committee, Minister Oliver Letwin stated "*As a matter of fact, we don't have very much difficulty in meeting the goals. The problem is that large parts of the world do have very considerable difficulty meeting the goals.*"¹⁸ This assumption undermines the entire SDG framework, primarily disregarding the key principle of Universality, but is also a missed

¹⁶ Tully, C. Applying Foresight and alternative futures to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework. 2016. United Nations.

¹⁷ Tiihonen, P. "<http://www.futurejustice.org/blog/guest-contribution/guest-article-A-Committee-For-The-Future/>". *A Committee For The Future*. 2017. Web: 11 Feb. 2017.

¹⁸ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee. *The Government's Approach to Sustainable Development: Inquiry*. 2015.

"<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/environmental-audit-committee/the-governments-approach-to-sustainable-development/oral/26027.html>". Online: 11 Feb 2017

opportunity for the UK itself. The SDGs are designed for the benefit of all countries: to transform domestic policy and strengthen participation.

In contrast, Finland, as mentioned above, fully commits to the Sustainable Development Goals, despite being in several top ten global development indexes. It is consistently ranked as one of the world's most literate, happy and prosperous nations¹⁹. Nevertheless, Finland recognises that development and innovation are permanently necessary.

Although the UK was once ahead in this area of governance innovation, the current direction of travel is backwards, and civil service staff are losing the skills, institutions and culture that enable strategic foresight to be implemented. As a consequence, there is no established structure within the UK government to take forward discussions and thinking about the SDGs at a national level; for example, where Finland has the Committee for the Future, the UK lacks designated resource to take on this type of national strategizing.

Nevertheless, there are areas of excellence in the UK. For example, the Welsh Assembly have a ministerial position of 'Commissioner for Future Generations', whose mandate is to advise, promote and encourage sustainable ways of working²⁰. This position was created as part of the Future Generations Act, passed in 2015 in order to ensure sustainable development was core to government functioning. Furthermore, the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office commissioned a review and open consultation with government staff on how it could improve its processes and structures. The 'Future FCO' report, commonly known as the 'Fletcher Review' was published online in May 2016 and contains honest insights generated by participative responses from staff.

The SDG framework is evidently valuable in driving innovation around the role of governments in a complex, uncertain and rapidly transforming 21st century. SDG 16 in particular prompts governments to address prominent and widespread issues such as gaining participation and trust from citizens, preparing for upcoming technology changes and the impact of artificial intelligence on work. Nevertheless, there are a number of key principles of strategic foresight and the SDG framework that demonstrate excellence – and that advocates can use, together with case-study examples – to drive impact.

Principles of implementing strategic foresight and the SDGs

When looking at new practice across various countries, there are six issues and qualities that stand out across countries implementing strategic planning well²¹.

¹⁹ Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. World Happiness Report 2016, Update (Vol. 1). 2016. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network; UNESCO Statistics. *Adult and Youth Literacy*. September 2015. Online: www.uis.unesco.org/datacentre.; World Atlas. *The Richest Countries In The World*.

"<http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-richest-countries-in-the-world.html>". Online: 11 Feb 2017

²⁰ The Wales We Want. 2016. "<http://thewaleswewant.co.uk/future-generations-commissioner>". Online: 11 Feb 2017

²¹ From research conclusions from Tully, C. "Strategic Foresight and the Sustainable Development Goals in Latin America and the Caribbean" to be printed in 2017 for ECLAC

These are:

1. A well-designed system for cross-governmental coordination and engagement, including leadership at the highest level (chaired by the president or prime minister) and including external relations ministries as well as domestic departments.
2. Building on, incorporating and going beyond the existing strategic plans of the country in a substantive way, rather than either replacing them or replicating them by merely relabelling former plans. This creates congruency, particularly within reporting systems, and reinforces pre-existing plans as well as identifying new areas for reform and progress. This forms part of the process to 'nationalise' the SDGs.
3. Proactively incorporating wider good governance agendas and projects (e.g. open government, decentralisation, transparency and open data, and gender equality).
4. External participation, including regional and sector consultations that are structured to include the development of targets and indicators, as well as visions to 2030, roadmaps and plans.
5. Citizens are a critical and core part of the process, including consultations around the future but also reporting back throughout the process. The SDGs are seen as a focus area for government communication with citizens.
6. Scoping out opportunities for international cooperation across borders, on specific SDGs and across the full agenda.

Whether, and to which degree, countries decide to commit to innovation is never guaranteed. However, there has never been a greater, or clearer incentive to do so than the SDG framework and 2030 vision. Development of the inclusive, effective and accountable institutions that SDG 16 demands will not happen overnight, and cannot be added on to existing practice. To reach the SDGs and transform state institutions along the way requires a total overhaul of cultures (including those of denial), behaviours and processes, and a focus on long-term thinking. Nevertheless, the SDGs are the ideal catalyst to begin these changes across the world.

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