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Why strategic foresight?

Strategic foresight is a crucial tool for understanding and proactively engaging with the future. Governments face an increasingly intricate and uncertain landscape, requiring public policies to adapt to emerging dynamics and meet the evolving needs and expectations of society. Beyond merely enhancing policy coherence and shaping long-term strategies, strategic foresight helps foster resilience within policy-making systems. Resilience here refers to the government's capacity not only to withstand and manage challenges but to navigate transitions sustainably, equitably, and democratically.

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At its core, strategic foresight enables the construction of resilient policy-making systems by anticipating developments, stress-testing existing structures, facilitating necessary adaptations, and driving innovation based on relevant megatrends and prospective crises (Tönurist and Hanson, 2020^[2]). By empowering decision-makers to navigate uncertainty and respond to emerging trends and societal shifts in a systemic manner, strategic foresight enhances the effectiveness of decision-making processes and planning activities.

Importantly, strategic foresight empowers governments to transcend conventional risk avoidance and resistance to change inherent in "business-as-usual" approaches. It encourages governments to explore future opportunities and challenges beyond the immediate horizon.

However, to realise its full potential, strategic foresight must be firmly integrated into policy-making processes. Robust methodologies must guide a structured process of concrete actions to ensure the effectiveness of strategic foresight initiatives. Despite much strategic foresight excellence in government institutions, the OECD has identified significant gaps. Capabilities are often fragmented and isolated from policy-making. There is often a disconnect in communicating foresight knowledge to senior leadership, hindering its impactful integration into decision-making processes (OECD, 2022^[3]).

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach such as the OECD's Anticipatory Innovation Governance model. It emphasises that futures and foresight knowledge be incorporated into core government functions (Tönurist and Hanson, 2020^[2]). Governments must also commit to regular reviews of emerging trends to inform strategic planning cycles effectively, as exemplified by initiatives in countries like New Zealand (OECD, 2023^[4]).

The government of Flanders has recognised the importance of integrating strategic foresight into its policy-making framework. It has sought OECD assistance in assessing the current status of its strategic foresight capabilities and devising a roadmap for future action. The report emphasises the necessity of multi-level strategic foresight within the policy-making system and evaluates the development and implementation of strategic foresight practices in the government of Flanders. For this report, the OECD used an analytical framework encompassing the key components of demand and mandate; capabilities and skills; institutional arrangements; integration into the policy cycle; and mechanisms for feedback and learning. The analysis identifies areas of strategic foresight excellence alongside shortcomings in long-term planning processes. Strengthening the integration of strategic foresight throughout the system is crucial to Flanders' resilience and capacity to navigate future challenges effectively.

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