

Leadership, Vision and Foresight

Summary

The UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) intends to host a high level conference in mid-2015 on *Leadership, Vision and Foresight*. This event, to be opened by Helen Clark, will seek maximum impact and publicity through being linked into the global initiative in 2015 to mark the 50th anniversary of the death of one of the most iconic statesmen of the 20th century, Sir Winston Churchill.

Background: Vision

'Vision' has traditionally referred to the transformational view of leadership by a strong charismatic statesman offering hope for a better future (rather than the transactionalist leader delivering the technocratic tasks of government usually through consensus based on good evidence).

Sir Winston Churchill's key vision was refusal to consider any compromise with the evils of Nazi Germany even in the face of apparent hopelessness in the Summer 1940 after Dunkirk and the Fall of France.

Similarly, Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues evidently had a clear-sighted vision for their country's development, and delivered on that vision with remarkable success. This illustrates how, in development, 'vision' similarly implies a strong political sense of national purpose. The 'Singapore Story' and other examples of successful development show effective leaders, while accepting the best possible foreign advice, have always been clear about their responsibility to set policy direction.

Foresight

'Foresight' refers to processes of anticipation that identify opportunities and threats which may arise in mid- to long-term versions of the future. It includes the use of specific tools and methodologies to collect, manage and produce knowledge about alternative futures that can inform more adaptive and resilient public policies. Foresight in policymaking is about early detection of changes and shocks, and fast

recovery; and about empowerment for smaller and more vulnerable developing countries.

In this increasingly complex and interconnected world, disruptions are becoming ever more difficult to predict, plan for and adjust to. As a tool for advising policy, foresight methodology offers a means of transmitting complexity to decision and policymakers. Foresight prepares organisations with an accessible pool of futures knowledge to quickly reduce the impact of shocks by delivering fast responses and proper course corrections.

But its profound importance is as means of empowerment. Foresight offers a country's leaders a way of overcoming vulnerability, to creating not just resilience and adaptability but a sense of taking control of the nation's destiny. It is thus Churchillian in offering a "We will never surrender" approach to existential threats like climate change.

Many foresight techniques are inclusive processes, drawing on the collective knowledge of corporate, academic, governmental and other social actors. A 'whole-of-society' approach to governance that includes diverse stakeholders in the policymaking process furthers 'anticipatory democracy' - "a process for combining citizen participation with future consciousness."

Importance for Developing Countries

As technology innovation and globalisation continue to accelerate change, governments everywhere increasingly struggle to keep up with the growing complexity of their operating environments and the rapidly changing demands of their citizens. Modern public administrations operate in a milieu of complex, multi-dimensional issues that are frequently interconnected and interdependent. In addition, the multifaceted challenge of development cuts across a vast array of interlinked issues that can no longer be considered in isolation from one another; they require an integrated and multi-sectoral approach. Effective policies must consider and address crosscutting issues in order to sustain economic growth, human development and public service excellence. However, the linkages between these disparate problems and challenges are not always clear. Therefore, decision makers must also be aware of the crosscutting implications of policy effects in seemingly unrelated areas. In order to deal with such unintended consequences,

policies across the board must be adaptable and resilient to potential change, disruptions or shocks.

Complexity

Complex problems are interconnected and interdependent issues that might exist in different spheres, but that interact with each other in unpredictable and sometimes mystifying ways. Complex systems are also the seedbed of ‘unknown unknowns’, ‘wildcards’ and ‘black swans’¹, which ultimately generate ‘wicked problems’. Wicked problems are large, intractable challenges with many dimensions and multiple stakeholders who may have divergent goals. They have no immediate or obvious solutions and their causes and influencing factors are not easily determined, so they have no simple solutions. The most vexing wicked problems today include climate change, energy security, global pandemics, terror networks, and extreme poverty.

Adaptability and resilience

In today’s environment of uncertainty and accelerating change, adaptation as a way of dealing with problems is the key to resilience in unpredictable and complex systems. Contrary to the ‘planning approach’ widely used in development to design complicated programmes and track implementation milestones, adaptation works on fast feedback loops—by making small changes, observing the results, and then adjusting. Adaptability combined with foresight work allows for quick, insightful decision-making that enables doing things right instead of doing the right things.

Rather than building robust systems that try to prevent failure, adaptability requires resilient systems that expect, appreciate and embrace shocks. Resilient systems have the capacity to continuously anticipate potential change, disruptions and calamities, construct ad-hoc responses, and adapt when necessary. Because change and disruptions easily influence or alter the course of national plans, “it may be appropriate to use forms of planning that do not specify a single route but identify options and cater for different possible outcomes.”²

¹ ‘Unknown unknowns’ refer to situations that planners are unaware that they do not know about. ‘Wild cards’ refer to low-probability and high-impact events. ‘Black swan’ events are unprecedented, unexpected, have major effects and are often inappropriately rationalised after the fact with the benefit of hindsight.

² Richard Hummelbrunner and Harry Jones, “A guide for planning and strategy development in the face of complexity,” *The Overseas Development Institute Background Note*, March 2013.

