Features of effective systemic foresight in governments around the world

Background

Strategic foresight, or foresight, is an organised, systematic way of looking beyond the expected trajectory towards the future to engage with uncertainty and complexity. It is one of a number of approaches that can help decision-makers to create better policy and strategy in the face of unpredictable change and evolution.

Foresight is not new, governments, private sector and non-profit organisations have been using foresight approaches for many decades. However, there is a limited evidence base on the impact of foresight work. The majority of case studies that are available focus on how specific projects or units have used foresight rather than how governments as a whole have done this.

This project has taken a broader approach to explore how different governments have developed their foresight ecosystems over time, and to map the features that can support integration of long-term thinking into policy-making at the most strategic level.

It aims to provide a guiding framework to build and sustain foresight in policy-making and to do so in a way that creates long-term impact from futures work. It is focused on how to ensure a sustainable, effective system of strategic foresight within a government. It is not a toolkit or guidance note for the methods and approaches to take in a foresight project. There are a number of resources for this, including GO Science's own Futures Toolkit.

It builds on work undertaken by the School of International Futures (SOIF) on behalf of the Government Office for Science, in particular:

- case studies of how eight countries integrate foresight in a comprehensive way across policy-making, drawing on a high-level literature review and semi-structured interviews: Canada, Finland, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and the United States

- a workshop with leading foresight practitioners from across the world, including those that have built and led systems within the policy-making sphere

- SOIF's own knowledge and expertise working to deliver foresight with impact across more than 50 organisations including multiple international bodies such as the UN, WHO and EU.

Key findings

There is no silver bullet for creating effective sustainable foresight in government. Considering foresight as an "ecosystem" that includes the socio-cultural and political context of that nation is critical to ensure lasting integration into policy-making (see figure 1). Focusing on a unit or department can enhance the value of specific projects or teams. Our research suggests that more needs to be done to create sustainable long-standing foresight capability that ensures foresight work makes the strategic contribution that it can.

There is a common set of features that have helped countries to build future-oriented, resilient and adaptable foresight ecosystems. These features need to be seen as mutually reinforcing and reliant ingredients that together provide the type of ongoing, long-term thinking required of today's policy-making. They include culture and behaviours, systems, processes and people.

Different countries have experimented with investment across these features to build healthy foresight ecosystems. No one nation has all of these features and none on its own is sufficient for a sustainable foresight ecosystem. The best mix for any particular country will depend on what is already in place, where there is appetite for activity and which aspects of the foresight ecosystem are most in need of development.

A healthy foresight ecosystem creates demand for futures work, ensures quality supply, and nurtures itself. The research suggests that this requires coordination between all of the actors in a government system; gaps between parts of the foresight ecosystem undermines its strength and sustainability. Developing the ecosystem can, and should be, done in phases. Those seeking to develop or enhance foresight capacity do not need to tackle the whole ecosystem at once. Instead, the ecosystems approach allows for policy-makers working across government, or within particular units to make strategic and culturally appropriate choices about where to intervene or invest in what is often a long journey to sustainable, impactful foresight work.

Figure 1. An ecosystems approach to foresight. The foresight ecosystem (light blue) is nested in the government and socio-cultural contexts. This ecosystem is enabled through a set of capability features that can be considered at all levels: at the system level, the department, team or individual levels, to help build and sustain the foresight ecosystem.
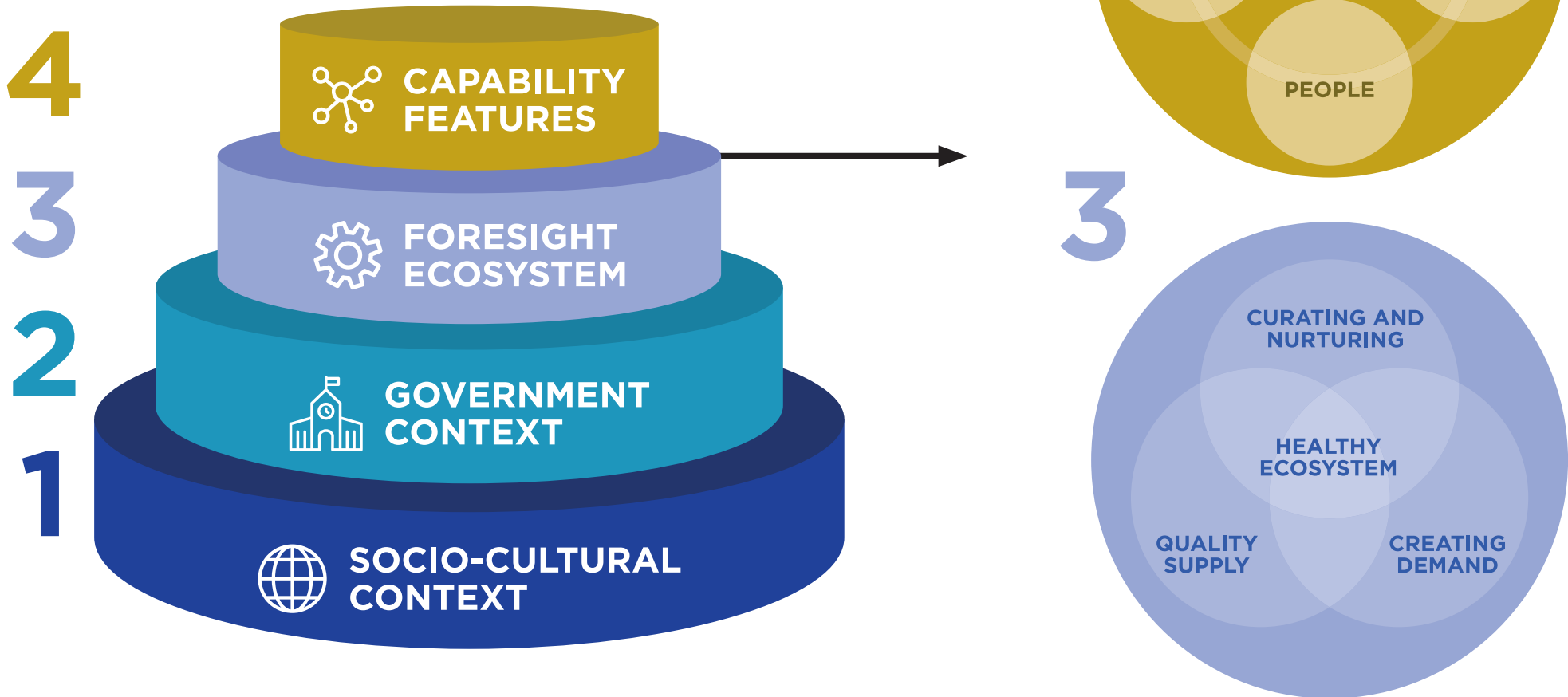
Features of an effective foresight ecosystem

The list here summarises the four features of an effective foresight ecosystem (see figure 1) that are drawn from the case studies and research. This list is provided as a quick summary of these features.
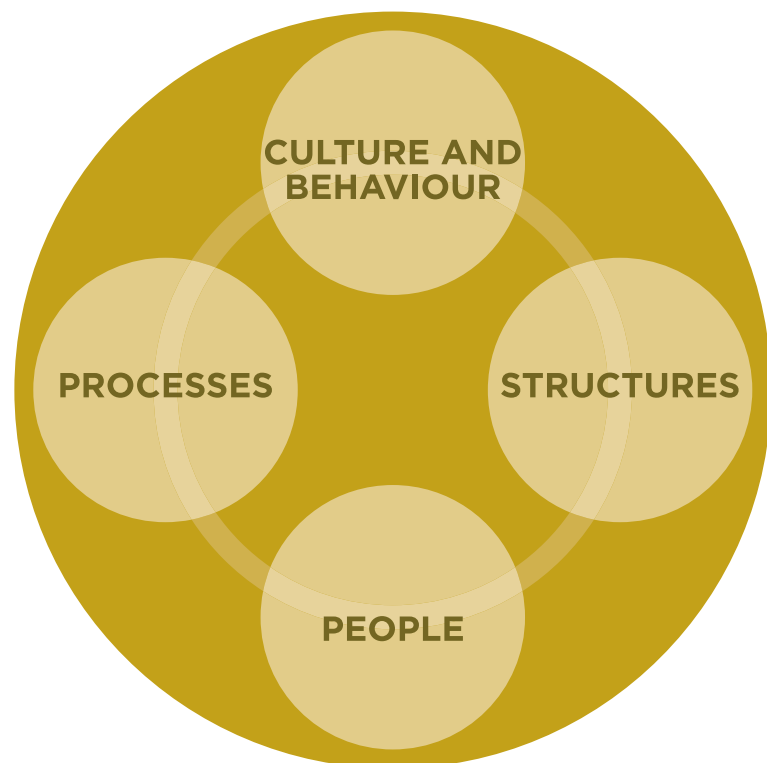
Culture and behaviour
- focus on creating commitment
- bring policy-makers into foresight
- meet policy-makers where they are
- support short-term work with long-term perspective
- generate shared ownership and buy-in

Structures
- have central units sitting in or near the heart of government
- build and foster capacity in departments and agencies
- work to have courts, elected officials and audit officials involved
- put in place coordinating and sharing groups

People
- make sure that there are in-house skills and capacity
- invest in the development of the next generation
- have visible consistent champions
- support and nurture people working in strategic foresight
- build local and international experts

Processes
- work across all of government and use all government levers
- deliver a small number of set piece activities
- develop their own work
- draw on diverse methods and disciplines
- invest in ongoing research and innovation around strategic foresight

CULTURE AND BEHAVIOUR

PROCESSES

STRUCTURES

PEOPLE

Building effective ecosystems

These features never exist all at the same time in one system. The context changes, the priorities of governments change over time. For those interested in ensuring that foresight is – and remains – integrated into a policy-making process, these features above are choices about where to focus and should be framed by the wider context of that government and nation. Collectively they can help build capacity and sustain foresight activity through cycles of interest and promote long-term decision-making.

This review took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which formed an unavoidable backdrop to considerations about where next for foresight in government. In the case studies and workshop we found a mix of assessments of the pandemic's impact on foresight ecosystems. These ranged from a radical increase in demand for foresight work to a significant retrenchment at the expense of long-term planning. It was noted that despite pandemics being identified as a key issue in many foresight and other planning exercises, there was a failure to integrate, act or sustain attention with their implications not fully understood or integrated into policy. By building out the foresight ecosystem, the ambition is to institutionalise the capacity to both detect and critically to act on signals about the future.

Contributions

The insights shared here have been informed by generous input from a large range of people. Most recently this includes colleagues from a number of countries including Canada, Finland, Malaysia, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, The United Arab Emirates and the United States whom we spoke to as part of developing a series of case studies. Insights from a half-day seminar with leading foresight practitioners from around the world also shaped our findings, as did inputs from SOIF colleagues and the Government Office for Science team.

For more information please contact School of International Futures

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