

The Futures Mandate

How to Embed Foresight in Governance

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The *UN Summit of the Future*, held in September 2024, prompted governments to begin addressing a foundational design flaw in modern governance: the challenge of planning for the long term. Across different political systems, decision-making is often shaped by short-term imperatives – be they electoral cycles, media narratives, crisis response, special interests, or institutional inertia – rather than consideration of the long-term consequences of today’s decisions.

With the Summit, 143 UN member states committed to integrating strategic foresight in national governance through the Declaration on Future Generations. The question facing governments is no longer whether to act, but how.

The need to develop responses to the temporal limitations of governance systems is clear, but translating broad commitments and diplomatic rhetoric into lasting structures will require more than good intentions. Polarisation, increased geopolitical contestation, technological risks, democratic erosion, and climate breakdown – these are problems that are not only wicked and complex, but which stretch far into the future as well. Their causes are entangled, their impacts unevenly distributed, and their consequences often unfold over decades, far beyond the reach of conventional policy cycles. Addressing them is no easy task.

Yet templates and prototypes for new systems of governance that take steps toward doing so already exist. In countries like Singapore and Finland, governing for the long term has been institutionalised over decades through foresight initiatives that inform strategic policy planning. In Wales, Scotland, and New Zealand, there have been extensive efforts to define and measure long-term wellbeing outcomes on behalf of future generations.

At a general level, these examples can be positioned along a spectrum of strategic orientation in anticipatory governance. Towards one end of this spectrum, Wales, Scotland, and New Zealand represent a group of countries where anticipatory governance is anchored in wellbeing economics and long-term societal goals. Here, the approach is primarily value- and mission-driven with an emphasis on defining which outcomes matter over the long term, embedding values like sustainability, equity, and intergenerational fairness into governance structures.

At the other end of the spectrum, countries like Finland, Singapore, and Spain exemplify a capability-driven orientation to anticipatory governance, with a more explicit focus on building systemic foresight capacity across the whole governance system. In these cases, the emphasis is more on building strategic foresight capacity within the system than on influencing which specific goals governments and policymakers set for the future. In reality, these two orientations often overlap, and effective long-term governance often blends both value-driven and systemic foresight capacity-building.

These initiatives all predate the formal adoption of the UN Declaration on Future Generations. In many ways, they have helped shape the very language and principles now reflected in the Declaration. They are not one-size-fits-all models, but rather situated responses, shaped by distinct political contexts, legal mandates, institutional cultures, and patterns of cross-sectoral engagement. But they are examples that despite all the barriers that inhibit governance for the long term, it is a goal that is both possible and achievable.

Examples of putting the future to work

In the case of New Zealand, ambitious steps were taken in 2019 to support strategic foresight via public financing. That year, the government introduced the Wellbeing Budget, which earmarked NZ \$26 billion for wellbeing activities the following four years. In this context, wellbeing was measured in terms of improvements in the natural environment, social institutions and culture, population health, human knowledge and skills, physical infrastructure and the material living conditions of citizens.

The Wellbeing Budget provided an example of ambitious long-term governance, perhaps best exemplified through New Zealand's 30-year infrastructure strategy co-designed with government, industry, and communities, as well as a 10-year commitment to education infrastructure that set aside dedicated funding for a School Property Programme to ensure that the future classroom capacity keeps pace with demographic and regional needs.

As of 2025, the political landscape has shifted. While the language of “wellbeing

objectives” still appears in official documents, the framework has been significantly de-emphasised. In May 2025, the government announced plans to repeal the wellbeing provisions from the Public Finance Act, effectively dismantling the legislative requirement to integrate wellbeing into fiscal decision-making. In many ways, this development underscores a deeper point: even well-established and widely praised examples of anticipatory governance are inherently fragile. Without broader political ownership and structural entrenchment, long-term policy frameworks remain vulnerable to short-term political shifts and changing economic narratives.

Finland, through its well-established national system for strategic foresight, provides an example of a more entrenched form of foresight governance. The Finnish government has long utilised foresight reports to inform parliamentary dialogue and decision making on long-term challenges. Foresight bodies and initiatives like the parliamentary Committee for the Future, the National Foresight Network, coordinated by the Prime Minister’s office and the Innovation Fund Sitra, and the Government Foresight Group, made up of foresight and futures professionals, have created a robust and lasting link between foresight and policymaking.

A few outcomes of this are worth highlighting. One is Finland’s national strategy for continuous learning, established by identifying needs for future skills and by guiding investment toward flexible, lifelong education pathways aligned with expected labour market shifts. In climate policy, foresight has also played a part in informing the government’s roadmap to carbon neutrality by 2035, shaping regulatory design, infrastructure planning, and fiscal policy to ensure that short-term milestones are consistent with long-term emissions targets. In both cases, foresight has been used not as a parallel exercise but as a core part of policy development.

The participatory premium

The case of Finland makes it clear that when foresight is anchored in central governing institutions, it can directly impact decision-making cycles and shape longer-term strategic agendas and policy delivery. Yet building an integrated approach to anticipatory governance is a significant undertaking. It might require adjustments of planning and hearing cycles, budgetary frameworks, financial modelling, and regulatory mechanisms that assess policies for both long-term value and feasibility.

Of course, long-term governance is never only a technical challenge – it is also a social one. An important matter for anchoring foresight in governance is thus participation. If futures are imagined exclusively by experts and policymakers behind closed doors, the risk is not only blind spots but legitimacy gaps as well.

Participatory foresight offers a way to embed futures work more broadly in the desires of the populace – widening who gets to imagine, challenge, and co-create the future. This can include citizens and civil society in general, or specific groups like youth, indigenous communities, and others whose voices are often absent from formal processes. Citizen assemblies, youth foresight labs, and participatory scenario-building processes are examples of ways to redistribute the work of imagining alternative futures while nurturing cultural cohesion and ensuring broad representation. Participation builds democratic resilience, and communities that imagine futures together are often better prepared to face uncertainty collectively. Embedding participatory foresight may be one of the most effective ways to shift ownership of the future from governments alone to society at large.

Foresight is context-dependent

Whether foresight is sought to be embedded in governance via a technocratic route or through broader public participation, there's no perfect template to follow. Every governance system must approach the task differently, because every system has its own constraints and needs. As such, figuring out how best to adapt foresight methodology to a diverse range of institutional and policy architectures, whether as embedded foresight units, participatory infrastructures, or cultures of anticipatory governance, is where the hard work begins.

At the core of the challenge, however, is the fact that foresight in governance is something beyond a mere skillset. It also requires building a mindset consisting of a shared language, habits of reflection, and a tolerance for ambiguity. These are the qualities that make foresight possible and which will also be necessary for maintaining anticipatory governance as something more than just a checklist.

While declarations can set direction, they can't shift systems on their own. The Declaration on Future Generations creates new opportunities for politicians, bureaucrats, and government officials who subscribe to the idea that state institutions have long-term responsibilities. Whether it leads to system change and reforms depends on what follows. ■

