

ANTICIPATING STRATEGIC SURPRISES: AN INTRODUCTION TO STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND WARNING

Dr. Helene Lavoix

IN BRIEF

Strategic Foresight and Warning (SF&W) is an organised and systematic process to reduce the uncertainty of the future. It allows policy-makers to make decisions, with a sufficient lead time, by identifying impactful changes within our environment that are likely to take place.

SF&W: A RIGOROUS APPROACH TO ANTICIPATING CHANGE

SF&W is a disciplined approach to anticipating the future in an increasingly complex world by identifying threats and opportunities. First developed to analyse security issues, SF&W is now associated with a range of concepts, including “Futures Studies”, “Forecasting” and “Risk Management”, in the field of strategic planning. Strategic warning occurs when information is delivered in sufficient detail, with enough lead time, and adequately conveyed, to enable recipients to accomplish strategic objectives. Strategic warning is usually assessed by timeline, impact and likelihood of occurrence.

APPLYING SF&W

The key benefit of SF&W is in making policy-makers more cognisant of uncertainties in the future. It can be utilised throughout the policy-making process (see also Fig. 1) in:

- (1) Defining questions and scope at the exploratory stage by understanding underlying processes and emerging weak signals,
- (2) Identifying variables and their interactions when defining the frontiers of plausibility,
- (3) Synthesising variables and related possibilities when creating narratives or scenarios,
- (4) Creating indicators for warning and verification of the scenarios.

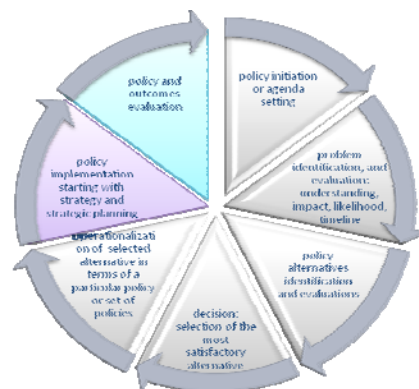


Fig. 1. The policy-making cycle.

SCENARIO PLANNING AS STRATEGIC FORESIGHT METHODOLOGY

Scenarios are one of the most frequently used methodologies for strategic foresight. It identifies key variables shaping the future through questions such as: What are the driving forces? What is uncertain? What is inevitable? The scenarios process involves:

- (1) Identifying the focal issue or decision,
- (2) Identifying the key forces and trends in the environment,
- (3) Ranking the driving forces and trends by importance and uncertainty,
- (4) Selecting the scenario logics and filling out the scenarios.

BIASES ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES OF SF&W

A major cause of strategic surprise and warning failure is bias (an inclination to present or hold a partial perspective at the expense of alternatives) by the stakeholders involved. According to Heuer (Psychology of Intelligence Analysis, Chapter 9) the biases we face are:

- a. Cognitive (mental errors caused by our simplified information processing strategies),
- b. Cultural/normative/belief-based at country, group, individual and institutional level,
- c. Organisational,
- d. Resulting from one's own self-interest and personal history,
- e. Emotions-induced biases at individual and group level.

However, there are methods by which biases can be identified, studied and taken into account in order to reduce their impact. One of these is to make the assessment or mental model in use explicit.

SF&W IN THE SINGAPORE CIVIL SERVICE

To anticipate emerging complexity, the Singapore Civil Service adopts several SF&W-related tools such as the Scenario Planning Plus (SP+) suite which includes the Scenario Planning methodology; the Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS) programme; and the Integrated Risk Management (IRM) approach – all working in tandem to draw out future risks and opportunities Singapore could face. These tools help to constantly challenge policy-makers' assumptions by posing "What If" questions.

Dr. Helene Lavoix is an independent researcher and consultant specialised in Strategic Foresight and Warning (SF&W), conflict and crises prevention. Given her expertise in strategic foresight and its relevance to the Singapore Public Sector, Dr. Lavoix was jointly invited by the Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF) at the Public Service Division, and the Centre for Governance and Leadership (CGL), to deliver the above lecture at the Civil Service College on 26 January 2011. This summary report was written by Anuradha Shroff, a Senior Researcher at CGL, Civil Service College.

