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Let us no longer be oblivious: paths to weathering the next storm

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At the time of writing, the world is experiencing the second wave of the COVID-19



pandemic. Hurricanes come to mind. They begin with a withdrawal of the sea followed by winds, rain, storm surge and then the eerie, peaceful eye is experienced before an equally destructive, second round. The waters that receded earlier this year laid bare our illusions, exposing the true nature of our global and regional interdependencies, systemic failures, human resilience, and social inequities. Policymakers and stakeholders across academia, industry, and governments internationally are scrambling to address systemic impacts, using every tool to inform decisions made now for the future; among them, the use of strategic foresight – imagining what *could be* alongside what *should be*.

Strategic foresight is a system of tools and methods aimed at understanding the relevant past, scanning and collecting insights on present conditions and trends, and using this evidence to imagine possible futures. In thinking about and planning for possible eventualities – including some plans that we hope will never be needed – governments can build the present to aim for futures we most want. How can knowledge and insights based on past and current events be used to inform decisions to *build back better* while addressing immediate social and economic realities of citizens – and voting populations?

It didn't take long for civil society to experience the pandemic's impact: toilet paper, flour, and sandpaper were in short supply in Canada as people turned to comfort and distraction. Societal behaviours in other countries were sometimes more measured. Questions of continuity of food supply chains followed as countries tightened restrictions on movement, exposing the fragility of global supply chains with staggering implications for those without easy access to life's essentials, migrant laborers and those dependent on generating daily income, and those employed informally and thus outside governmental social safety nets. Some countries had additional issues to contend with such as the effects of recent mass migrations and the very real impacts of climate change. Many have asked: *Didn't anyone see this pandemic coming?*

Yes, many did. Attempts were made to sound alarms over the years – but getting people to understand something they've never experienced can be a challenge. Public health professionals, risk managers, and those involved in strategic foresight predicted that a global pandemic would eventually happen. While no one could pinpoint exactly when or where, the methods and insights used to inform strategic foresight anticipated a global pandemic with broad implications.

Innovations are born from imagination, happy accidents, trial and error, clever combinations of existing technology, etc. Foresight practitioners are often among the first to identify innovations that can transform entire sectors and are uniquely able to identify cross-sectoral applications. Governments make decisions to modify or create robust oversight systems that can respond to the pace of innovation – the pandemic has pushed these limits resulting in rapid deployment of innovations in support of citizens. Strategic foresight practitioners within government can provide valuable support in these situations. They often map/track the development of key innovations as they enter multiple sectors – a case in point being decades of interest in artificial intelligence and applications far beyond the Turing Test. Monitoring of *signals* over time and alerting institutions of their significance has validated the work of strategic foresight. Furthermore, strategic engagement and planning for the future based on these signals can help to imagine a world that *may* be and consequently help to identify areas to focus on as we work collaboratively across governments, academia, industry and international organizations to build, pivot, and regulate for the future that *can be*.

In the same way that hurricanes reveal the underwater landscape, this pandemic is revealing realities that are reshaping the way governments, academics, industry, and international organizations need to think about how to respond now and for the future. Governments around the world are turning to various experts to help define and articulate plans as they *build back better*. Some are looking at national *missions* to help guide policy and decision-making. This is where strategic foresight and systems thinking is useful. By considering a wide variety of signals, systems, and how they interact, strategic foresight can help policy makers contemplate resilient alternatives when a mission goes off course, and stress-test interventions.

The receding waters have revealed socioeconomic dependencies (i.e. childcare and the economy), fragility of interconnected supply chains (i.e. food and medicines), and linked effects of mental health and social cohesion on the population's compliance with public health guidance. The use of foresight and systems thinking to consider individual challenges, their impacts on interdependent systems, and possible future outcomes can help to stress-test and coordinate the benefits and trade-offs of various policy options. Now is the time to think of the next storm.

As policies and initiatives are designed and implemented now and for the future, voices matter. Foresight exercises work strategically by convening a wide range of perspectives to create a complete vision of how different plausible futures might lo

All voices need to be part of the discussion, and the impacts on every part of our broader social ecosystems need to be considered in policy development. Critics of government responses have noted that key portions of populations are not served by policies and interventions – health inequities can no longer be ignored. How can governments better incorporate the views of the people beyond boardrooms and Zoom meetings? What skills do we expect of policymakers to ensure that the breadth of human behaviour and imagination informs and guides policy trajectories? Can strategic foresight and systems thinking be better integrated into core policy competencies to facilitate the development of more inclusive and forward-thinking solutions?

The pandemic will end. The waters will rise again and decisions that acknowledge what was revealed will still need to be made. Futures that were imagined before the pandemic remain useful reminders of where we were headed, but our collective trajectories are forever changed. Strategic foresight can help us remember the landscape beneath returned waters as paths are charted to navigate into the future.

1-<http://www.icmra.info/drupal/sites/default/files/2019-04/Innovation%20Strategic%20Priority%20Final%20Report.pdf>

2-<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/turing-test/>

3-<https://marianamazucato.com/research/mission-oriented-innovation-policy/>

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