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# The Emergence of Foresight Activities in Swedish Government Authorities

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### *About the author*

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This paper emanates from an internal project carried out at the Institute for Futures Studies, *Statens omvärldsanalys*, investigating foresight activities in central government authorities. The project includes more than 50 authorities and is based on interviews and documents.

Versions of this paper have been presented at the World Futures Studies Federation's Conference, *Transitions: Encouraging Emerging Worlds*, in Trollhättan, Sweden, in June/July 2008. It has also been presented at the NordWel workshop *The National Welfare State: Citizenship and Democracy in the Nordic Countries*, at Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm in October 2008.

### *Summary*

#### *The Emergence of Foresight Activities in Swedish Government Authorities*

This paper discusses and aims to explain the emergence of foresight activities in Swedish government authorities, including environmental scanning and analysis, futures studies and other activities trying to detect and analyse change in the surroundings of the organisation. To explain the growing importance of foresight activities we must consider the increasing administrative autonomy given to public authorities in recent years, and the development of information technology that has given new technological opportunities to conduct foresight. Furthermore, structural (and institutional) changes – such as globalisation and the development of the EU – created a need and incentives for more foresight activities.

### *Sammanfattning*

#### *Framväxten av omvärldsanalys i statliga myndigheter*

Artikeln diskuterar och avser förklara framväxten av omvärldsanalys i centrala statliga myndigheter. Den förklaring som ges för omvärldsanalysens ökade betydelse över tid består av tre steg i en process. För det första har statliga myndigheter fått en ökad administrativ självständighet. För det andra har informationstekniken möjliggjort omvärldsanalys till en lägre kostnad än tidigare. Och slutligen har samhällsutvecklingen med ökad osäkerhet genom globalisering och medlemskap i EU gett incitament till omvärldsanalys.

Torbjörn Lundqvist

## **The Emergence of Foresight Activities in Swedish Government Authorities**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to discuss and to some extent explain the emergence of foresight activities in Swedish government authorities. Here foresight activities include environmental scanning and analysis, futures studies and other activities trying to detect and analyse change in the surroundings of the organisation. These forward-looking activities are often named *omvärldsanalys* in Swedish, which might be translated as “surroundings analysis”. However, it is not obvious that we should use the term “foresight activities”. Today, foresight often is understood as specific methods used in technological foresight, for example expert panels. I give the term “foresight activities” a broader meaning and use it to refer to different methods like SWOT-analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), trend analysis and scenario construction along with above-mentioned approaches.

Government authorities monitor their environment, analyse it and try to look forward to, at best, be able to make rational decisions based on robust knowledge. Strategic foresight thus refers to the development of decision-making in the context of national and international environment, in order to identify, formulate and support long-term policies and plans (Furustig & Sjöstedt 2000, 18).

There is a broad consensus in the literature that a foresight activity is about improving the knowledge base in decision-making. It is also considered as a basis for strategic considerations, budgets, results and resource analysis (Sjölund 1994). A large part of the literature on this subject deals with organisational issues and methods. An organisational perspective, often in the form of normative management literature, dominates

(Morrison 1992, Frankelius 2001, Hamrefors 1999 & 2002, Pagels-Fick 1999, Choo 2001). In this paper, we have a different approach – we analyse the emergence of foresight activities in terms of societal change. The question is: How do we explain the increased role of foresight activities in Swedish government authorities in recent years? With government authorities we mean, in this case, central government authorities (agencies) placed under ministries, such as the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, and the National Heritage Board. In Sweden they have a long-standing and important role as implementing agencies of government policy. The government's own description is "Administratively autonomous national authority, subordinate to the Government and responsible for implementing public policies, overseeing the provision of many public services and discharging a range of regulatory functions" (Glossaries, Government terms, [www.sweden.gov.se](http://www.sweden.gov.se)).

It is important to analyse the knowledge about the future produced by different actors in society. There are several good reasons for this. In the first place, it is a question of democracy. Anyone who can define the future has a position of power, and prospective studies can be based on interest (De Jouvenel 1967, Ehliasson 2005). Secondly, it is a question of knowledge. There is a risk that foresight activities become based on poor analysis because the scientific requirements have low priority. Thirdly, it is a reason to ask what significant benefits foresight activities have in government authorities.

Nowadays, a commonly accepted message suggests that every organisation needs foresight activities to be able to make rational decisions, and ultimately survive. The message is based on the discourse of rapid societal change and spread by stakeholders in the field: mainly consultants, but also foresight analysts, futurists and debaters. State authorities seem to follow this message increasingly, making foresight activities a trend in government authorities. One researcher in the field argues that qualified foresight activities are about to become a core competence in an increasing number of organisations. The time when directors could manage foresight activities by themselves is supposed to be over (Slaughter 2002). In many cases, this is probably true. Still, the foresight activities are often done by directors.

Although foresight activities have become more common in the last ten years, it has a longer history. The Swedish concept *omvärldsanalys*, equivalent to term "foresight activities", already existed in the 1960s, but long before there were monitoring and analysis of the surroundings under different names. Military intelligence is an early form, as well as diplomacy and later embassies. The business community has for long supported

assessment of technological development, and competitors' behaviour. Trade associations in the industry had from the beginning (early 1900s) an important monitoring function. When, for instance, the Swedish Brewers Association was established in 1885 the main purpose was to defend the interests of industry against the threats of a tougher alcohol policy and the taxation of beer, made by the temperance movement and politicians who sought to find new fiscal sources (Lundqvist 1998). This led them into strategic foresight activities.

The most important form of information about the environment, before the current information society, has always been personal and social networks. A good example is the Catholic Church that for centuries probably was the best-developed network of information that existed in Europe. Networks are still important but the relative importance has diminished with the emergence of the availability of open information sources. The development of the Internet has brought about a radical change for foresight activities.

In the 1970s, futures studies and long term planning were carried out in many authorities. However, strategic foresight activities in their current form are a later phenomenon in government authorities. It emerged in the 1980s on a small scale, grew slightly in the early 1990s, to take off in the early 2000s. How can we understand this development? Some factors appear to be crucial:

1. Institutional factors in the state: changes in public administration policy in the direction of New Public Management (NPM), and fragmentation of the state (Sundström 2003, Jacobsson & Sundström 2006).

2. Technology and knowledge factors: the information society (new information and communication technologies) enables foresight activities to a much lower cost than before. The increased level of opportunities (IT) to produce the kind of knowledge demanded, has meant a boom for consultants in the field.

3. Structural and external institutional changes caused by globalisation, internationalisation and the EU have created internal needs, or presumed needs of foresight activities. The type of changes that this involves could be real or discursive.

If we regard the emergence of foresight activities in government authorities as a process, with feedback between levels, the following hypothetical causality seems reasonable: at first, we have the necessary condition of institutional change ensuring more administrative autonomy in public administration (New Public Management and its forerunners). The second group of factors is providing the technical possibilities. Lastly,

structural and external institutional changes create incentives for foresight activities by in creating the uncertainty that follows globalisation and EU membership. To this category also belong increased risks and threats resulting from less sharp national borders.

In the following we do not strictly keep to this explanatory model. Instead, the paper continues with a discussion of the zeitgeist of post-modern thinking and related issues. Thereafter follows a section on information society, globalisation and internationalisation, the importance of the EU, and public administration policy. In the conclusion, finally, we return to the above model. Empirical examples are used from foresight-reports in government authorities: The National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*) and the National Heritage Board (*Riksantikvarieämbetet*).

### **Zeitgeist**

Some scholars regard the increased importance of foresight activities as an effect of larger societal changes. Such an analysis may, for example, be made in terms of a post-modern society. Philosopher Bengt Kristensson Uggla argues that in the modern interpretation of the world, there was a belief that science would lead us to a better world (Kristensson Uggla 2002). Already in the French Enlightenment's main project, the Encyclopaedia, the purpose was to open up the possibility for constituting the new future that would not involve too much historic leftovers (Koselleck 2004, 79).

In the post-modern interpretation of the world, instability is reigning. Society is supposed to change faster than ever in history, and there is a focus on risks and threats. The belief in progress, on the other hand, is less pronounced. The post-modern interpretation implies a focus on the diversity of singularities instead of a focus on the general; the permanent is replaced by the temporary, and the timeless by the time-bound (Kristensson Uggla 2002). Analysing the near future becomes important. Uncertainty drives long-term planning in the direction of strategy and scenarios.

Similarly, post-modern discourse stresses difference, plurality, fragmentation and complexity. Moreover, some post-modern thinkers are critical of closed structures, fixed meaning and rigid order, for the benefit of games, indeterminacy, incompleteness, uncertainty, ambiguity and chaos. In general, we can argue that we have witnessed a tendency to abandon notions of realism, representation, objectivity and truth for the benefit of the variety of different perspectives.

Modern science stabilised society and the future with its focus on the certainty of knowledge. Post-modern sciences rather highlight uncertainty,

and thus create a perception that we live in an unstable world. In this perspective foresight activities become a kind of “weather forecasts” for the near future, but also a form of self-understanding in an unstable world (Kristensson Uggla 2002). Today's interpretation of rapid societal change often encourages narrow foresight activities at the cost of long-term perspectives. However, there are important exceptions and the climate threat has urgently brought about a return of long-term analysis (Giddens 2008). It may even be argued that this has gone too far – the coming century seems to be colonised by climate and demographic models. In this way, the room to manoeuvre gets limited, and we rather want to avoid the future as it is described today.

In addition, politics and policy have been affected. Often do politicians and policy makers advocate flexibility, diversity and dynamism. Since everything is said to be in a continuous transformation, process-oriented approaches to policy are preferred. At the same time, the increasing complexity increases the needs of coordination. A policy field such as sustainable development is largely targeted to draw various sectors in the same direction (Lundqvist & Carlsson 2004, Lundqvist 2006). The notorious lack of political visions has been partially replaced by foresight activities and adaptation to megatrends such as globalisation.

Literature in the foresight field is in itself an example of the reasoning mentioned above. Thus, a Swedish book on strategic environmental scanning argues that it is no longer realistic to plan in the very long term. Quite to the contrary, it is necessary to be proactive, create readiness to act, and to be able to identify changes in patterns and indicators before they are already a fact. Governance is better complemented by both skilled foresight activities and political insight (Furustig & Sjöstedt 2000, 185).

Irrespective of the labels we put on societal change, it is obvious that society is undergoing major transformations in key areas. At least since the early 1990s, there have emerged studies pointing at the reduction of time available to decision-makers to respond to changes in the outside world. The problem was considered to be that traditional long-term planning, with its reliance on historical data, discourages policy makers from perceiving changes in the outside world and valuing their importance for the organisation. Foresight activities were seen as a method to understand change and how it interacts between sectors, and an opportunity to translate this knowledge into a planning and decision-making process (Morrison 1992).

On the other hand, the issue of rapid societal change is hardly new. Already in the early 1900s, the American historian Henry Adams presented a “law of acceleration” in society. German historian Reinhart Koselleck says



about Adams' theory that the accelerating future constantly shortens the distance to the past, which means that we get less and less benefit from experience (in other words, the past). Adams' example was that population grows faster, the technically produced speeds increase squarely, production growth shows a similar curve, as well as scientific efficiency, and life expectancy is increasing and may consist of several generations. Adams concluded that what we can learn from history is how to react, not how to act (Koselleck 2004, 84-85). All this sounds like downloaded from the present discussion on societal change. For instance, sociologist Richard Sennett argues that experience no longer has the same value at the workplace. Now it is the "potential", what we are expected to achieve in the future, that counts (Sennet 2006).

### **Information Society**

However, one crucial difference between the present societal situation and the one in the near past is the extent amount of both information and knowledge. The amount of written information available is growing fast. Via Internet, information is also quickly available on the global societal stage. With services such as Google Translate, we now can read documents in foreign languages. In this regard, the contemporary society truly is an information society. Sociologist Manuel Castells talks about an informational economy based on a new paradigm, the information technology. His concept *informational* points to the fact that information suddenly not only has become important, it rather pervades society (Castells 1996). My use of the concept "information society" includes Castells view, in line with social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen who describes the information society as a society where information technology is a key factor in all types of production. Hylland Eriksen also discusses the contradictions arising in the information society and how the new dominant approach faces opposition from traditionalists (Hylland Eriksen 2001, 25).

It is quite clear that advocates of foresight activities have embraced the mindset downloaded in the left hand column below.

Table 1. Contradictions in the information society

<b>Dominant</b>	<b>Counter-reaction</b>
The new	Well-known
Freedom	Security
Liberalism	Communitarianism
Individual	Fellowship
Feet	Roots
Impulse	Tradition
Ambivalence	Fundamentalism
Future	History
Change	Stability

Source: Hylland Eriksen (2001, 42).

At the same time, and increasingly hand in hand with the growth of information society, most sciences have developed enormously during the 1900s. The collective knowledge is hardly possible to overview. Organisations want to take on board the relevant information and knowledge, which logically requires specialised monitoring and analysis of what is happening in the surroundings. The amount of information and knowledge that can be of potential use far exceeds what can be collected and analysed, and what can be used in strategic decision-making. The amount of information leads to “information stress” in many organisations: a feeling that one always knows too little and is all the time a step behind. This, in turn, initiates the demand for different types of intermediaries and analysts. Information was previously in short supply. Today organisations suspect that there is always important information available, if you only have the right skills to find it in the large flow.

It is no exaggeration to say that the foresight activities that the contemporary government authorities carry out are completely dependent on IT and Internet. Moreover, most authorities subscribe to various types of information services. Still, it is important to have personal networks and use traditional methods such as reading newspapers.

### **Globalisation and internationalisation**

The process of globalisation and internationalisation generally seems to imply that organisations are more vulnerable to change today, than in the past. This constitutes a strong incentive to invest in foresight activities. Let

us examine how the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) consider these phenomena in a foresight-report (NBHW 2006).

The report treats globalisation and internationalisation as trends said to permeate “virtually all other trends to a lesser or greater extent”. The actual trends can be exemplified by the increased mobility, cross-border activity, increased foreign ownership in Sweden and increased Swedish investments abroad, and quick access to information. They see a “multitude of new opportunities and challenges” and the increased need for international cooperation. Globalisation operates as a driver for internationalisation. Another important trend and result of globalisation is increased ethnic diversity.

In the areas of NBHW, an important trend is that health services, as well as pharmaceuticals, are made available through the Internet. Moreover, Swedes are buying health care abroad. Globalisation of health care reinforces need for international agreements on rules, but also for clarification of responsibility for Swedes medically treated abroad, not least financially. The trend can also mean an increased need for preparedness to help Swedish citizens who happen to be offers of accidents and disasters abroad. The Board writes:

The international development will have direct and indirect consequences for a large part of the activities of NBHW (health care, social services, emergency preparedness, health and disease control, etc.) and demands a lot from our knowledge and awareness of international trends and tendencies (NBHW 2006, 6).

The trend towards increased globalisation and internationalisation can however be counterbalanced by increased transportation costs due to rising fuel prices and environmental taxes, they argue. Visitors and transport may also decline through increased focus on risks: infections, terrorism, natural disasters. The trend can also slow down if the economy goes worse by the ageing of Europe or by nationalism and protectionism. But at the same time this does not constitute an obstacle to continuing international convergence through information technology.

The NBHW also points out that social services and health care are sectors with an inertia, which means that they are the least internationalised, but that there are “a lot of signs that this picture may change rapidly” (NBHW 2006, 9).

Another example is the National Heritage Board (NHB), which for its part sees globalisation and internationalisation as very strong trends and forces driving the industry, communications and IT. The only thing that can mean “dips” in the trends is considered to be phenomena such as the oil price, terrorism and xenophobia. The trends imply, according to the NHB, *inter alia*, that:

International links, exchanges and cooperation is increasing both in public as well as on individual level in society. State authorities, municipalities, businesses and other public and private organisations have daily contacts within and outside the EU and have more and deeper cooperation (NHB 2006, 35).

The NHB foresees a number of future implications for the field of cultural heritage because of globalisation and internationalisation. Some of these future implications are for instance: the diminished importance of Swedishness, changes in focus and priorities and on the labour market, new perspectives, increased international exchanges in research and education, more players and increased competition, changing conditions for public actors, exchange of goods and services.

Privatisation and continuing marketisation is regarded as a very strong trend that continues into 2015 and “continued privatisation of the public sector is likely”. The economic globalisation and the economic policies of the EU are understood as driving forces in this development. In the case of the government authorities, the Heritage Board sees growing claims on increased efficiency and quality which may drive operations towards other sources of funding than the state budget. The consequences can be, among other things, the commercialisation of the field of cultural heritage, increased sponsorship, increased government control of markets, the difficulties in taking overall responsibility (NHB 2006).

### **The importance of the EU**

A central issue in most authorities seems to be the relationship with the international development, and in particular the development of the European Union (EU). A major reason for the increasing importance of foresight activities in government authorities is the uncertainty and complexity that has followed from the Swedish EU membership in 1995. Questions are emerging in networks cutting across formal boundaries. For a long period of time, issues can be buried in committees and groups and then suddenly appear on the agenda. From the outside, it seems as if

anything can happen. Moreover, time pressure seems to be one of the main characteristics of the decision-making processes in the EU. This gives government authorities a strong incentive to be foresighted. EU's approach also creates a high demand for national positions, which creates a pressure against government authorities to be prepared to produce expert statements to government. The ministries' need for national decision-making positions has grown in an increasingly rapid pace (Jacobsson & Sundström 2006, 36-40).

There is a reason to believe that the growing importance of foresight activities has a connection to authorities' ambition to be proactive, since policy today tends to be reactive. This in turn is a result of the decision-making processes in the EU and in other European and international arenas.

The National Board of Health and Welfare believes that EU will increase its influence and that we will probably face great changes. Over the last few years, the level of EU's involvement in welfare policy has gradually increased, both directly and indirectly. What is known as the EU's "open method of coordination" can lead to "substantial changes in a very quick manner" in national affairs such as health care or social services. Statistical production in the EU is also a driving factor for change through a "spill over" effect in which member states compare themselves with each other.

What are then the consequences of the enhanced impact from the EU for health and welfare? We can mention three aspects. Firstly, there is a direct impact on regulations. Secondly, there is a risk that the implementation of EU directives leads to increased bureaucracy. Thirdly, the NBHW needs to change and improve its competence in terms of issues that are common in the EU: "Today we have for example little or no track of trends in the EU that could have a major impact on NBHW activities in the long term" (NBHW 2006, 4-7). This is a remarkable and highly interesting statement by the Board. Not least can this type of statement explain why foresight activities have become more important to central government authorities.

### **Public administration policy**

Until the mid-1960s, the Swedish government ruled the central authorities with detailed regulations. Since then, a gradual loosening began in which the authorities got increasing autonomy. Management by results and New Public Management (NPM) – a crucial step in making authorities independent concerning internal organisation – later replaced governing by rules. The former head of the National Audit Office, Inga-Britt Ahlenius, calls the introduction of the NPM in the late 1980s, the "largest reform in

the state since Axel Oxenstierna”, a powerful 17<sup>th</sup> century chancellor of the realm (Ahlenius 2005). The reform implied a new accounting system in the state and a completely new regulatory framework, which gave director generals in the authorities’ great freedom within the given frame. The intention with management by results was to give authorities increased opportunities for long-term planning. Decision-making was delegated to director generals who were closer to the operations.

Public administration researchers Jacobsson & Sundström (2006, 33) argue that public authorities increasingly have come to see themselves, and are seen by others, as unique entities with their own specific problems and goals. The change in public administration policy means, in relation to the policy before the 1980s, that government authorities in some respects have business-like characteristics. In the first place, authorities act like relatively autonomous organisations with a common policy and a clear border to the outside world. Secondly, they have become independent in terms of internal organisation. This leads to increased need for foresight activities and it is to a large extent up to the authority itself to determine whether foresight activities are needed or not. As a result, authorities follow each other. When some government authorities rely on foresight activities, it can be seen as problematic to another not to do so.

### **Foresight activities**

How common are foresight activities within central government authorities? Most authorities have some form of the activities. Continuous foresight, however, with emphasis on analysis and full time working staff in specific units, is quite uncommon. Essentially, such units exist mostly in large authorities within the threat and risk sectors, such as the police, the military, customs, and the emergency management authorities. It is, of course, in these authorities that foresight activities are necessary. Authorities in areas where there is rapid change also invest resources in foresight activities. In general, operationally oriented authorities are focused on foresight activities while long-term-oriented authorities, in sectors such as infrastructure, rather give priority to planning and traditional futures studies. In short, authorities which are nationally focused and believe that they are operating in a relatively stable environment are less inclined to pursue foresight activities.

Perceived rapid societal change implies a continuous development and ongoing quality improvement of foresight activities. Typically, this leads to specialisation, which can be observed both in some authorities and in consulting firms in the field. Interestingly, however, foresight activities in

many authorities are characterised by non-professionals doing the job, and a relatively high staff turnover. It is seldom the case that staff doing foresight activities consists of specialists in studying societal change.

Our investigations suggest that even if foresight activities are common in Swedish government authorities, systematic analyses of collected materials are not that advanced. The ambition to develop these systematic analyses varies between different authorities. It varies with regard to mandate, size, and not least to personal factors such as the type of the personalities of entrepreneurs in the staff or the interest and curiosity of directors.

In some authorities, there is a systematic work with staff focused on foresight activities, which sometimes results in producing annual reports with trend analysis and scenarios. In other authorities, foresight is completely informal.

### **Conclusions**

Foresight activities could be understood as future oriented analysis, usually with a relatively short time horizon, focusing on the factors of uncertainty in an organisation's environment. To understand the increased importance of foresight activities among Swedish government authorities, we must regard the phenomenon as a part of the larger societal changes that include concepts such as information society, insecurity, individualisation and competition. Information technology development has affected the speed and quantity of information. Internet has become an important part of globalisation. IT has affected knowledge in all fields, and not only contributed to increased development of media and to the corresponding influence of the media on society. In addition, there is a tendency that the importance of the present increases when the amount of information is growing. In short, foresight activities are affected by and are a part of the information society.

Uncertainty is a concept that is often connected with foresight activities. And there is a loss of context often mentioned in the postmodern discourse, focusing on difference, diversity and chaos. Within foresight activities, we can see a tendency to analyse the present instead of the future because of the availability of information and the growing complexity of society. Boundlessness is another theme in terms of uncertainty and insecurity, not only because of IT but also as a result of the EU and resolved borders between countries. The uncertainty has in recent years also expanded due to threats to climate, energy and water, pandemics, ageing populations, and terrorism. In almost every foresight report presented here, these concepts

are represented. The same is true for the phenomena of globalisation, individualisation and competition. That is the consequence of the fact that the higher purpose of foresight activities is actually to create an understanding of societal change.

To explain the growing importance of foresight activities in Swedish government authorities, we must also consider institutional factors, such as the increasing administrative autonomy given to public authorities in recent years. Furthermore, the development of information technology has given new technological opportunities to conduct foresight, which allows non-experts to carry out the work. Finally, structural (and institutional) changes – such as globalisation and the development of the EU – created a need and incentives for more foresight activities. It is a reason to believe that the Swedish EU membership is one of the most important factors for the increasing importance of foresight activities in Swedish government authorities.

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