

A Systematic Approach in Strategic Foresight

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Book Review

Strategic Foresight for Corporate and Regional Development by Michel Godet and Philippe Durance. 201 pages. DUNOD - UNESCO - 2011.

Downloadable at: <http://en.lapropective.fr/download-translations/5-file.html>

Michel Godet, the co-author of the book who is an economist and professor at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, wants to communicate this core message with his readers: to be aware of uncertainty, we need a systematic approach that can be found in strategic foresight.

Strategic Foresight for Corporate and Regional Development is composed of four chapters dealing with hot topics like introducing strategic foresight as a systematic approach of study and research, conventional methods, regional and urban prospective, scenarios as tools for strategy building and management, corporate and regional foresight. The book ends up with the amazing story of Godet unfolding how he became a futurist.

Correctly identified by Godet, the most important global crises of our world today are: climate and ecological crises; financial, economic and social crises; endemic poverty; agricultural crises; and energy crisis. Foresight may play a strategic role in meeting these challenges by providing not just the strategy, but also action plans.

In addition to understanding the French translation of foresight 'prospective', we see how European and American foresight styles can be different. However, they share some core components, methods such as description of the system studied, identification of key variables and actors, description of possible futures, etc.

According to Godet, in the mid-1950s the French philosopher Gaston Berger formalized the practice around what we might call 'decision science' today. 'Prospective' (foresight) in the European futurist mind is about envisioning the consequences of current actions and seeing how these consequences might ripple throughout various fields of activity.

The goal in foresight is not to observe the future from the present but rather to observe the present from the future. Godet remembers that during the period in which the concept of prospective was evolving in France, another remarkable futurist, Bertrand de Jouvenel wrote *The Art of Conjecture* (1964) and introduced the concept of futurible, a word derived from the combination of the French words 'futur' and possible translated simply into English as 'possible

future.’

Godet regards anticipation as ‘pre-activity’ to clarify present decisions and actions in light of possible and desirable futures. Nevertheless, in his view, preparing for foreseeable change does not preclude one from provoking desired change that is ‘pro-activity.’ He offers a useful distinction between similar expressions, like strategic planning and strategic management. He also warns that we should not confuse scenarios with strategic options.

Referring to Hasan Ozbekhan’s four perspectives in dealing with future, Godet reaffirms that foresight has a combined nature composed of reactive, pre-active and pro-active perspectives. He believes that the dichotomy between ‘*exploring*’ and ‘*preparing*’ for a proactive course of action defines our foresight approach.

Godet has set five key ideas for foresight: (1) The world changes, but problems remain, (2) Human will is required in the face of chance, (3) Let us stop complicating the already complex, (4) Ask the right questions and beware of preconceived ideas, and (5) From anticipation to action via appropriation. In working with foresight methods, he reminds us of a number of functions: stimulating imagination, reducing incoherencies, creating a common language, building collective thought, and enabling appropriation.

His formula of developing scenarios is has a resemblance to Peter Schwartz’ eight step scenario method. He considers five criteria in judging the quality of a scenario: pertinence, coherency, likelihood, importance, and transparency. His “ANAH 2010” is a good example of scenario practice.

Bringing strategic foresight into organizational contexts, Godet begins with establishing a diagnostic of the organization that is composed of these steps: representing a business as a tree of competencies, selecting proper methods and tools for strategic analysis, and providing the strategic diagnostic on two internal and external fronts of the organization.

Godet’s refers to these foresight methods: strategic stakeholder analysis, morphological analysis, Delphi, Régnier’s abacus, cross-impact analysis, trees of relevance and Multipol. His account of regional foresight obeys the same laws of general foresight and constitutes an instrument to understand regional dynamics within a context that is increasingly decentralized and where decisions are made independently. Regional strategic foresight, in its normative phase, seeks to build a desired but realistic future collectively. This future comes clearly into view with a strategic vision capable of being transformed into a set of strategic actions.

In Godet’s view, three fundamental elements of regional strategic foresight are: anticipation, action, and appropriation. And four kinds of regional foresight approaches are: probing for trends, decision-making aids, mobilizing local stakeholders, and transformative change.

He warns about a number of traps in regional and organizational foresight activity that can be avoided. For instance, he reminds us the risk of participatory tyranny, confusing government with governance, and too many scenarios and not enough endogenous projects.

Godet concludes with some keys to excellence in corporate and regional foresight, such as: innovation, defining community projects, creative intelligence, competitive growth, taking governance as anticipation and compliance as understanding, changing habits, and taking sustainable development as a lever for innovation.

Sponsored by UNESCO, *Strategic Foresight* is a mark of ontological dignity in contemporary futurist thought, establishing a foundation for all who want to know more about the foresight profession and its challenges. It is strongly recommended to foresight students who are studying today to become tomorrows futurists.

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