United Nations | Department of Economic and Social Affairs

FUTURE OF THE WORLD

POLICY BRIEF NO191

INSTITUTIONALIZING FORESIGHT: INTEGRATING FUTURES THINKING INTO PUBLIC SECTOR PLANNING

INTRODUCTION

Existing governance frameworks designed in the 20th century are increasingly unable to manage today's Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) environment.[1] Climate change, digital transformation, global health crises, and shifting geopolitical dynamics require governance that is adaptive and anticipatory. Strategic foresight[2] can support this shift, but its value is constrained when it is not institutionally embedded within core government planning and decision-making processes. The challenge is not a lack of foresight tools, but structural weaknesses in institutional design. In most governments, foresight remains disconnected from strategic planning and policymaking, leaving its insights underused in real decision making.

In most governments, strategic foresight remains at the periphery. When treated as separate, episodic exercise, its policy relevance and influence on decision making remain limited, weakening the anticipatory capacity of planning systems. The UN Governance Futures brief identifies foresight as essential for anticipatory policymaking, yet also highlights that many governance structures remain siloed, hierarchical, and constrained by outdated systems. This institutional weakness is most visible in the mismatch between time horizons. Foresight explores multiple plausible futures, while public administration operates on annual budgets and electoral cycles of only a few years. This structural weakness has direct consequences for sustainable development. With less than five years to reach the 2030 Agenda, the world is significantly off track in meeting the SDGs.[3] Foresight-capable governments are better positioned to identify transformation pathways, anticipate barriers to SDG implementation, and align policies with long-term development trajectories.

The urgency of institutionalizing foresight in public institutions is further underscored by the 2024 Pact for the Future which calls for long-term anticipatory governance, including through strengthened institutional capacity to understand and prepare for future risks. The UN 2.0 Quintet of Change identifies foresight as one of the five capabilities to navigate rising uncertainty, seize emerging opportunities and enhance support for the SDGs and future generations. Institutionalizing foresight enables governments to anticipate development trajectories beyond 2030 by assessing how public institutions, global markets, and social systems may evolve and how these changes could shape sustainable development outcomes in the decades ahead.

Against this background, this policy brief provides policymakers and public leaders with modular frameworks that embed foresight outputs directly into strategic planning and management cycles, so that foresight becomes a continuous governance capability rather than an occasional activity, and to position foresight as a strategic driver of the 2030 Agenda and the post-2030 development framework.

Key Messages

- Strategic foresight and strategic planning work best together, creating an adaptive governance system that manages current volatility while preparing for future uncertainties, accelerating progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and shaping the post-2030 development framework.
- Despite widespread adoption of foresight units globally, most remain isolated from core government decision-making processes, limiting their strategic impact and diminishing organizational learning.
- Integration requires systemic change across four dimensions: governance structures that link foresight to strategy; capabilities spanning both domains; processes that embed future-thinking into planning cycles; and practices that ensure actionable, politically aware outputs.
- When foresight is properly embedded, organizations become more resilient, anticipate disruptions earlier, and make demonstrably better strategic choices under uncertainty.

THE FORESIGHT INTEGRATION FRAMEWORK

The Foresight Integration Framework operates across four integrated dimensions, synthesized from successful practice in governments worldwide. It's not a one-off exercise, but a living process that links scenario thinking with every major policy, budget decision, and SDG implementation. Critically, it treats foresight not merely

1 UN (2025). Policy Brief: Governance Futures: Key Insights and Policy Implications.

2 Strategic foresight is an organized, systematic way of looking beyond the expected to engage with uncertainty and complexity. UN CEPA strategy guidance note on strategic planning and foresight.
ITU (2024). AI for Good.

3 UN (2025). The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025.

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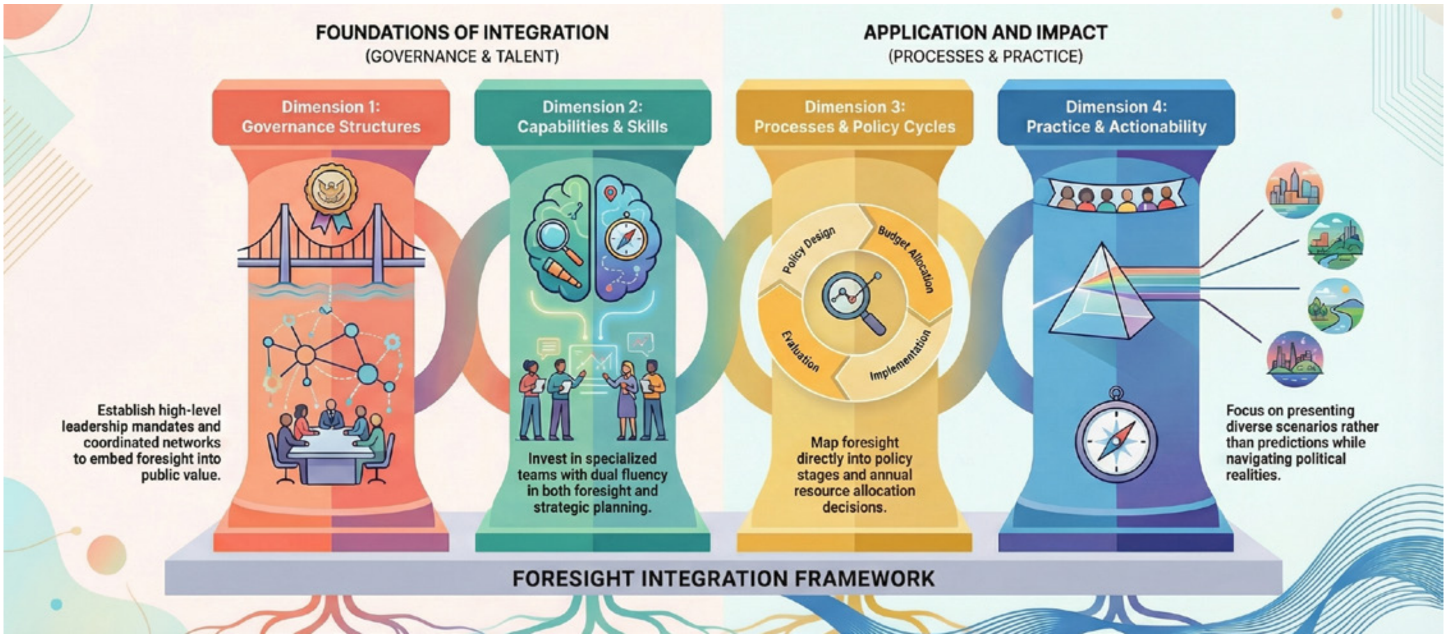
Figure 1
Foresight Integration Framework



Credit: Image generated by Notebooklm, an AI model created by Google

as a planning tool, but as a systemic capability for managing the interconnectedness of development challenges, a dimension that is central both to effective governance and to the achievement of the SDGs.

Dimension 1: Governance Structures for Foresight Integration

Effective foresight integration requires governance arrangements that anchor foresight at senior levels, connect it systematically to planning and budgeting processes, and enable coordinated contributions across government through clear mandates, institutional roles, and accountability mechanisms. Such arrangements should balance central leadership with distributed sectoral participation, ensuring that foresight remains both strategically relevant and operationally grounded, and that future-oriented analysis is systematically linked to SDG implementation, policy design, and resource allocation.

A. **High-Level Embedding and Leadership Mandate:** Foresight functions are most influential when they are positioned close to strategic decision-making and backed by a clear senior mandate. A formal mandate, supported by senior leadership, gives foresight teams the authority to convene stakeholders, access information, and shape planning and budget processes. Models such as Guyana's Inter-ministerial Steering Committee for public sector transformation[4] and Singapore's Centre for Strategic Futures,[5] show that high-level placement significantly increases impact. Governments should therefore formalize the placement, reporting lines, and procedural responsibilities of foresight functions, ensuring they are linked explicitly to national and local SDG implementation frameworks and medium-term development plans.

B. **Multi-Level Foresight Networks with Strong Coordination**: Foresight cannot be centralized alone. Ministries, agencies, and local authorities should maintain focal points who feed sector insights into cross-government processes. This network approach captures bottom-up intelligence, reduces silos, and strengthens organizational learning. Finland's Committee for the Future[6] and the U.S. GAO's Center for Strategic Foresight[7] demonstrate how distributed teams, supported by clear coordination protocols and shared platforms, provide system-wide coverage without duplication. In Seychelles, UN DESA trained government officials and financial leaders in foresight tools, strengthening inter-ministerial coordination and enabling more aligned, sustainable strategies for achieving the SDGs.[8] Networked foresight should be supported by common standards, shared platforms, regular convening arrangements, and a central coordinating actor able to synthesize intelligence and broker connections between sectoral insight and leadership priorities.

C. **Balance Demand-Driven and Supply-Driven Foresight:** Effective foresight balances demand and

4 UN DESA (2025). Future in Focus: Preparing for What Lies Ahead. UN DESA Preparedness and Foresight Review

5 The Centre for Strategic Futures in Singapore

6 OECD (2022), Anticipatory Innovation Governance Model in Finland: Towards a New Way of Governing, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris,

7 U.S. Government Accountability Office. Center for Strategic Foresight.

8 UN DESA (2025). Future in Focus: Preparing for What Lies Ahead. UN DESA Preparedness and Foresight Review

supply by addressing leaders' strategic priorities (demand) while identifying emerging risks they may miss (supply). Demand alone narrows foresight, while supply alone disconnects from policy. This balance is particularly important for SDG implementation as long-term development challenges such as demographic transitions, technological disruption, and climate tipping points may not feature prominently in short-term policy agendas, yet their anticipation is essential for sustainable development. Governments need both through two-way reporting between leaders and strategy units. Leaders define key uncertainties and decisions, while teams scan for weak signals. These inputs are combined to inform timely decisions. Flanders' Strategic Insights and Analyses Team applies this model, linking government priorities with systematic scanning to inform decisions and prepare for surprises.[9]

D. **Develop a Public Value Narrative:** Organizations must justify foresight in terms of what decision makers value, including resilience, anticipatory capacity, efficient resource use, lower crisis costs, innovation, and stakeholder engagement. Because foresight is often viewed as a cost, a clear value proposition is essential to sustain support, especially in tight budget cycles.[10] Governments with institutionalized foresight are better positioned to identify transformation pathways, anticipate implementation barriers, and sustain development gains across electoral cycles. Governments should document and communicate results, showing how early insights improved policy adaptation, reduced duplication, strengthened SDG alignment, and built resilience. The European Commission's Strategic Foresight Unit demonstrates this by showing how foresight shaped legislative impact assessments and identified emerging policy domains before they became mainstream priorities. Clear evidence like this demonstrates real decision value.

E. **Governance Architecture for Foresight Integration:** Translating foresight from principle to practice requires a clear governance architecture with defined roles, accountability, and strong linkages to decision-making processes. While high-level mandates, distributed networks, and demand–supply mechanisms provide the foundation (sections A-C), they also introduce coordination complexity and risks of fragmentation. In many governments, foresight efforts remain underutilized due to unclear ownership, weak integration with planning and budgeting, and inconsistent quality across institutions.

To address these gaps, governments need an institutionalized set of interdependent roles anchored at the center of government and extended across ministries to ensure coherence and maintain a strong link between foresight and policy action. Where no such actor exists, foresight tends to become fragmented across ministries, disconnected from planning and budgeting, or overly dependent on individual champions. For this reason, governments should designate a central foresight lead[11] with sufficient authority and proximity to decision-makers to coordinate foresight activity across government and to maintain its links with national strategy, planning, and policy and SDG implementation. This architecture enables foresight to function as a system rather than a set of isolated activities: leadership defines priorities, foresight generates insights, planning translates them into action, and networks ensure system-wide intelligence and uptake. Governance architecture is therefore the mechanism that connects these functions into a coherent system.

Table 1

Essential Governance Roles

Roles	Key Responsibility
Sponsoring Leader (PM/President/ Agency Head)	Champion foresight at the highest level; provide political and institutional mandate; ensure resources and visibility; embed foresight in executive decision-making and national SDG implementation strategic dialogue; signal its importance across government.
Central Foresight Lead[12] (e.g., Chief Foresight Officer/ Head of Foresight/ Senior Strategy Official)	Serve as the central integrator of the foresight system; coordinate the multi-level foresight network across ministries and agencies; translate leadership priorities into foresight agendas while elevating emerging risks and opportunities; ensure methodological rigor and quality standards; embed foresight into strategic planning, budgeting, and SDG-alignedpolicy cycles in collaboration with planning authorities; maintain alignment with national priorities; and act as the primary interface with external foresight ecosystems (international partners, academia, and innovation actors).
Head of Strategic Planning	Ensure systematic integration of foresight into planning, budgeting, and performance frameworks; translate scenarios and long-term insights into actionable strategies, policy choices, and resource allocation decisions; work in close partnership with the central foresight lead to operationalize foresight within formal government processes.
Agency Foresight Focal Points	Lead foresight activities within ministries and agencies; generate sector-specific insights aligned with SDG targets; contribute to whole-of-government foresight processes; adapt central scenarios to sector contexts; and ensure that foresight informs policy design and implementation at the operational level.
Foresight Practitioners	Apply foresight methodologies, facilitate cross-sector and stakeholder processes; produce analysis and strategic insights; and uphold professional and ethical standards across the system.

9 OECD. (2024). The Strategic Foresight System of the Government of Flanders: Assessment and Recommendations. Paris: OECD Publishing.

10 UN DESA Policy Brief No. 174: Leveraging strategic foresight to mitigate artificial intelligence (AI) risk in public sectors

11 In some systems this may take the form of a Chief Foresight Officer; in others, the same function may sit with a Head of Foresight, a central strategy unit, a cabinet office team, or an existing planning or reform authority.

12 The central foresight lead should complement, rather than replace, line ministry ownership by serving as the institutional link between senior leadership mandate, cross-government foresight networks, and the integration of foresight into planning, budgeting, reform, and policy design.

This governance architecture provides the institutional backbone for advancing capability development, tools, and culture change across government (Dimension 2) and integrating foresight into policy and planning processes (Dimension 3).

Dimension 2
Capabilities & Skills

This dimension focuses on developing and sustaining the human and organizational capabilities required to conduct foresight and integrate its insights into planning, policy, and decision-making processes.

A. Invest in Small, Specialized Teams: Successful foresight units are small, typically 6 to 15 professionals. Small teams move faster, take risks, maintain quality, and stay close to decision makers. Governments should keep a core team of senior experts and expand capacity through part-time staff, rotating fellows, and partnerships with universities, think tanks, and international organizations. Singapore's Centre for Strategic Futures and Flanders' Strategic Insights and Analyses Team show how small teams deliver impact at scale by leveraging networks rather than headcount.

B. Cultivate Diversity of Thought and Background: Foresight teams need diverse disciplines, experiences, and perspectives to improve pattern recognition and sense making. Single discipline teams produce narrow scenarios, while diverse teams generate stronger insights and greater stakeholder trust. Governments should recruit across institutions and society, prioritizing curiosity and humility, and include voices from different regions, income levels, generations, and genders. Malta's Ministry of Education applied this approach by engaging educators, technologists, parents, students, and economic forecasters, producing more robust and actionable scenarios than traditional planning.[13]

C. Develop Dual Fluency in Foresight and Strategic Planning: Foresight professionals need fluency in both strategic foresight tools and strategic planning and management. Dual fluency enables translation between the two communities and positions foresight as an internal capability rather than an external consultancy. Governments can support this by offering integrated training that combines foresight methods with strategic planning, including the SDG implementation framework, enabling staff rotations between foresight and planning units, and creating joint communities of practice.

D. Build Co-Creation and Stakeholder Engagement Skills: Foresight is a collaborative process that depends on strong facilitation, not just analysis. Teams must be able to guide diverse stakeholders, build shared understanding, and translate insights into actionable guidance. Governments should train foresight teams in participatory methods, facilitation, dialogue, systems thinking, and core soft skills such as listening and synthesis. Inclusive foresight processes should actively engage groups whose perspectives are often underrepresented in government planning, including Indigenous Peoples, youth, persons with disabilities and marginalized populations. Their participation can help identify emerging risks, challenge assumptions, and strengthen the legitimacy of long-term policy choices.

E. Implement Flexible Resource Models: Effective foresight programmes balance stability and flexibility. A small core team ensures continuity and institutional memory, while temporary themed teams allow rapid response to emerging priorities. Governments should fund core foresight capacity as a permanent budget line and use discretionary resources for time-bound initiatives such as climate, technology governance, or social cohesion futures. The U.S. GAO applies this model by pairing its permanent Center for Strategic Foresight with agency-specific foresight work funded through planning and performance budgets.[14]

F. Foster Learning Organization Culture: High-performing foresight systems treat foresight as continuous learning. They review past exercises, adjust methods, and strengthen anticipatory capacity over time. Governments can embed this by conducting annual after-action reviews, sharing lessons across the foresight network, and creating forums for open discussion of methods and failures. Finland's parliamentary Committee for the Future illustrates this approach, continually reviewing foresight outcomes and refining national practice.[15]

G. Access External Expertise and Global Networks: No government has all the expertise needed for comprehensive foresight. External partnerships with universities, think tanks, consultants, and international organizations expand capacity, introduce new methods, and increase credibility with stakeholders. Governments can join international foresight networks, form institutional partnerships, and commission targeted exercises when internal capacity is limited or when independent perspectives are needed. Lithuania, Italy, and Malta used this approach through the OECD's LIMinal project, which paired hands-on training with real policy challenges and led to stronger foresight units and strategies visibly informed by futures analysis.

Dimension 3
Processes & Integration into Policy Cycles

This dimension focuses on embedding foresight as a formal and systematic step within government strategic

13 OECD (2025), *Building Anticipatory Capacity with Strategic Foresight in Government: Lessons from Lithuania, Italy, and Malta*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris

14 Research and analysis Strategic foresight in the US Government Accountability Office

15 Proactive Parliaments: How Committees of the Future address emerging challenges

planning and management cycles to ensure long-term thinking informs policy development, SDG implementation and resource allocation.

A. **Map Foresight into the Policy Cycle by Stage:** Strategic planning follows defined cycles such as agenda setting, analysis, formulation, implementation, and evaluation and foresight adds value at each stage when tools are matched to purpose. Different stages require different foresight approaches. Each stage should identify the decision at hand, the relevant uncertainties, the SDG targets affected, and the foresight tools best suited to address them, with this guidance built directly into planning processes and documents.

B. **Establish Continuous Environmental Scanning and Early Warning Systems:** Continuous environmental scanning is more effective than episodic foresight, as many disruptions show early signals. Governments should assign responsibility for tracking technological, social, economic, environmental, and political trends, including those related to SDG trajectories, and provide regular updates to leadership, and set escalation thresholds. Insights should feed into routine governance processes. The European Commission's Strategic Foresight Unit and the U.S. GAO show this by integrating scanning into annual reporting and performance planning.

C. **Translate Scenarios into Immediate Resource Allocation Decisions:** A major gap in many government systems is linking scenarios to budgets and policy decisions. Without this, foresight remains aspirational and does not change behavior. Governments should identify 3 to 5 capabilities or investments for each scenario that hold value across futures and integrate them into the budget cycle. Foresight should inform budgets, strategic plans, SDG investment frameworks, performance indicators, and agency targets, creating a coherent chain from futures analysis to resource allocation.

D. **Integrate Foresight into Annual Planning and Review Cycles:** Strategic planning is periodic, but strategic management is continuous. Foresight should inform annual strategy reviews and SDG monitoring processes, testing assumptions, tracking emerging signals, and adjusting tactics and resources. Governments should require foresight in these reviews by assessing new uncertainties, signal thresholds, scenario updates, and resource shifts. Documenting these adjustments maintains the institutional linkage between futures analysis and decisions and ensures that SDG reporting reflects evolving development trajectories rather than static baseline projections.

E. **Embed Foresight into Whole-of-Government Coordination:** Major challenges such as climate change, inequality, geopolitics, and technological change cut across agencies and SDG goal clusters. Foresight supports whole-of-government coordination by linking these issues. Siloed approaches limit understanding, while shared scenarios reveal interdependencies and common uncertainties. Governments should complement agency efforts with system-wide exercises to identify joint priorities. New Zealand applies this through government-wide foresight exercises that inform coordination under the Public Service Commission's strategy.[16]

F. **Configure to Organizational Context:** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to embedding foresight. While municipalities, federal governments, parliaments, and international organizations all benefit from futures thinking, effective integration must reflect local scale, structures, and decision-making cultures. One nation's best practice can be another nation's bureaucratic burden. Governments should assess their existing planning systems, governance structures, and organizational culture to determine where foresight naturally fits. The OECD's work with Flanders, Lithuania, Italy, and Malta shows that core principles are consistent, but implementation varies significantly depending on institutional arrangements and political dynamics.

G. **Leverage Digital Tools for Transparency and Continuous Monitoring:** Digital tools are creating new ways to embed foresight into government practice. These technologies lower barriers to engagement and support ongoing monitoring rather than episodic exercises. Governments can build and regularly update dashboards aligned with key uncertainties and SDG indicators, supporting leadership visibility and stakeholder engagement.

Dimension 4
Practice & Actionability

This dimension focuses on ensuring foresight outputs are practical, politically informed, and directly usable by decision-makers to guide timely and effective action, including action in support of the 2030 Agenda.

A. **Maintain Continuous Service Management Focus:** Foresight teams often assume that insightful analysis will be used automatically, but impact depends on understanding decision makers' needs, timing, and communication preferences. Even excellent analysis has no effect if it arrives too late, uses unfamiliar jargon, or fails to address the real decision at hand. Governments can strengthen uptake by maintaining regular contact with core users, aligning products with upcoming decisions and SDG review cycles, and tailoring formats to audience preferences. They can also survey stakeholder satisfaction and adjust services based on feedback.

B. **Present Options and Scenarios, Not Predictions:** A common foresight mistake is trying to predict a single future. Effective foresight instead presents multiple plausible futures based on current drivers and uncertainties. Predictions create false confidence and often fail, undermining credibility. Scenarios acknowledge uncertainty while supporting better

16 School of International Futures (2021). Features of effective systemic foresight in governments around the world

decisions and risk hedging. This approach supports better decisions, improves risk management, and strengthens the resilience of SDG implementation plans against future shocks. Governments can frame outputs as a set of equally plausible scenarios, define actions for each, and identify "no-regret" strategies across all futures.

C. **Acknowledge and Navigate Politics:** Foresight inevitably has political implications. It challenges assumptions, questions current directions, and suggests shifts in resources. Ignoring this context weakens impact, while acknowledging it, strengthens credibility and influence. Governments should understand the political economy of decisions, identify whose interests may be affected, and frame foresight insights in ways that resonate with leaders' priorities and constituencies, including their SDG commitments. At the same time, teams must remain neutral in their analysis and clearly communicate tradeoffs across scenarios. Singapore's Centre for Strategic Futures follows this approach, aligning its scenario framing with cabinet priorities while maintaining independent analysis.

D. **Ensure Inclusivity and Transparency:** Foresight is stronger when it engages broad stakeholders, not just experts. Inclusive processes build public understanding of long-term challenges and increase support for strategic choices, while closed exercises risk skepticism and reduced trust. Governments should publish scenarios, consult widely, and invite public feedback to create a shared national conversation about the future.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Strategic foresight and strategic planning were meant to work together. When disconnected, both lose effectiveness. Foresight becomes academic; planning becomes static. The Foresight Integration Framework provides an approach for reconnecting these domains through four integrated dimensions: governance structures that link foresight to strategy; capabilities spanning both domains; processes that embed foresight into planning cycles; and practices that ensure actionability. As the world enters the final years of the 2030 Agenda, institutionalized foresight is a structural requirement for governance systems capable of steering complex, interdependent development transitions.

Looking beyond 2030, the stakes are even higher. The post-2030 development framework will be shaped by the trajectory decisions that governments make today. Foresight-capable institutions are positioned to anticipate what public services, healthcare systems, education models, labour markets, and global development ecosystems will look like in 2040, 2050, and beyond and to design policies that are resilient, coherent, and genuinely transformative across generations.

Policymakers and public leaders who embed foresight into government planning and decision-making will be better equipped to accelerate SDG progress, navigate global uncertainty, and build institutions capable of delivering on the promise of sustainable development for present and future generations. Those who do not risk being repeatedly surprised by changes that could have been anticipated.

Operationalizing this integration calls for targeted reforms across governance, processes, and capabilities. The actions below outline practical entry points for connecting foresight and strategic planning in ways that strengthen anticipatory decision making, policy coherence, and SDG achievement.

Governance Structure

- **Designate a central foresight lead** or equivalent senior role reporting to the Head of Government or a cabinet-level authority, with a formal mandate to link foresight to national strategy and planning and SDG implementation frameworks.
- **Create a whole-of-government foresight coordination mechanism**, with designated focal points in each ministry and major agency, linked directly to strategic planning units and SDG coordination offices.
- **Institutionalize regular coordination forums** (quarterly or semi-annual) between foresight leads, planning offices, budget authorities, and SDG focal points to ensure anticipatory insights inform strategic priorities and development budget.

Capabilities and Skills

- **Invest in targeted capability development** to build dual competence in strategic foresight methodologies and public-sector planning and management, including SDG implementation frameworks, long-term budgeting, and performance monitoring.
- **Leverage partnerships** with universities, think tanks, and international organizations to strengthen analytical depth and methodological rigor.
- **Establish learning and practice networks** across government to support peer learning, knowledge exchange, and institutional memory.

Processes & Integration into Policy Cycles

- **Integrate foresight into strategic planning cycles and SDG implementation cycles**, not as an episodic exercise, but as an embedded step in agenda-setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation phases. Document this in official planning guidance and Voluntary National Review (VNR).
- **Link foresight scenarios explicitly to budget processes,** identifying no-regret and hedging investments and incorporating them into annual and medium-term budget justifications.
- **Align time horizons** by requiring that major strategic plans demonstrate how long-term scenarios have informed priorities, sequencing, and resource allocation, including for the post-2030 development agenda.

Practice & Actionability

- **Establish early warning dashboards** tracking a limited set of key indicators linked to strategic scenarios and SDG progress metrics, updated regularly and reported to senior leadership.
- **Pilot foresight integration** in a small number of high-stakes policy or investment decisions to test institutional arrangements and refine approaches before scaling.
- **Publish strategic foresight findings** to engage stakeholders and the wider public, using foresight as a tool for transparency and inclusive governance. and the principle of leaving no one behind.
- **Develop national foresight roadmaps** that connect short-term institutional reforms to long-term capability building, aligned with the 2030 Agenda's remaining years and the post-2030 development framework.

UN DESA advances anticipatory governance by translating strategic foresight into practical public-sector planning, including evidence-based guidance, applied frameworks for integrating foresight into core decision-making, and system-wide analysis on preparedness and governance futures.