

Singapore's foresight practices should be taken beyond the government

By Alex Fergnani

“You've got foresight.” We say that when a friend anticipates something which turns out to be true. In academia and organisations though, the practice of foresight goes deeper, and it does not involve predicting the future. Originating from the United States military in the 1940s, foresight practices encourage a systematic study of potential future possibilities. They include trend analysis, a common established tool in many organisations, and less-widespread practices such as causal layered analysis, scenario planning and design fiction.

These practices encourage participants to think more deeply about present assumptions, and how they might be overturned in the future. Participants immerse in several possible future scenarios to enhance their capacity to prepare for and shape the future.

Singapore's public service has also been practising foresight. In a recently published study conducted at the National University of Singapore, we found that foresight practices have been introduced in Singapore by senior public servants over several decades.

Consecutive heads of the civil service – Lim Siong Guan, Peter Ho Hak Ean and Peter Ong Boon Kwee – developed and grew the foresight community in Singapore, first in the Ministry of Defence, then in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and across the public service. To do so, they had to use their entrepreneurial acumen, explain how such efforts were essential to addressing Singapore's strategic vulnerability. Vulnerability – the lack of natural resources, small land area and small population – has been at the very foundation of Singapore's foreign policy.

Over time, the Singapore government has developed a strong expertise in foresight practices applied to governmental decision making. However, one of the unintended implications of the way foresight was introduced within certain sections of the government was that exposure to foresight became limited outside of those sections.

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Foresight practices may have been perceived as a resource-intensive process that only large organisations such as governments and multinational companies can afford to undertake. While there were efforts by various groups in the PMO to reach out to academia and the private sector, the perception of foresight as unwieldy might have persisted and prevented it from spreading further in non-governmental sectors.

Yet, although foresight can involve resource-intensive exercises lasting months, its methodology has now

evolved, and there are multiple ways to practise it creatively in more resource-light ways, which present opportunities for Singapore's non-governmental sectors to adopt and benefit from them. One example is the Centre for Strategic Futures' Driving Forces Cards – a deck of cards designed to be readily used by local organisations as building blocks to create future scenarios related to their particular industries.

Indeed, although some local consultancies have been practising foresight, this has been limited, and greater interaction between consultancies and foresight units in government could strengthen the overall foresight community in Singapore and enhance corporate future-readiness. Citizens could also benefit from foresight education in schools, or from the integration of foresight online courses in island-wide development programmes such as the SkillsFuture movement. Basic foresight methodologies, such as the creation of simple future scenarios that describe how the future of a professional career could evolve, can help citizens to become more comfortable with uncertainty and change.

Finally, despite the potentially rich pool of case studies in government, local academia has scarcely leveraged Singapore's governmental foresight expertise; very few currently active local scholars conduct research on foresight practices. The governmental-academic foresight community could be further nurtured to maintain foresight excellence both in local research and practice.

The issues that Singapore faces – including inequality, racial harmony, climate crises and an ageing population – are well-established in the public discourse. These issues are beyond the government alone and require various sectors in society to work across boundaries and arrive at the common good. Foresight practices could encourage participants to see for themselves possible worlds to adapt to and respond together. Doing so could forge the collective resilience needed to address such issues and to thrive in an uncertain world. By sharing its expertise and igniting foresight endeavours, the government could initiate such thriving and self-sustaining foresight communities in the society at large.

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