



# Strategic Foresight

**For Corporate  
and Regional  
Development**



**Michel Godet  
Philippe Durance**



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

**DUNOD**

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# STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

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With the support of  
**Bureau of  
Strategic  
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The publication of this book was made possible through the cooperation of Foresight Section at UNESCO and the Entrepreneurs of the Future Circle, a joint program of the National Center for Entrepreneurship (CNE) and the Fondation Prospective et Innovation.

The authors wish to thank Adam Gerber, an American and PhD in management at the *Conservatoire national des Arts et Métiers* (CNAM) Paris and Kathryn Radford who collaborated in the translation of this book.

This book is available at the Unesco's bookstore.



United Nations  
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## Preface

Hans d'Orville

Assistant Director-General for  
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“To know is to foresee, to foresee is to have power”. This quote of Auguste Comte captures neatly the intent and focus of foresight activities in general and of UNESCO’s involvement therein in particular. Through its action in education, science, culture and information and communication, UNESCO promotes the creation, dissemination, use, application and preservation of knowledge as instrument in an all-encompassing strategy to build peace and a culture of peace, involving the power of dialogue and effective and inclusive knowledge societies.

The 1945 Constitution of UNESCO articulates in its preambula a straightforward yet challenging goal which is inspired by many political and philosophical traditions, primarily humanist in character, namely to promote through international cooperation adherence to the core principle and vision: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. This then is the UNESCO vision with its own strong prospective dimension, namely that we must catalyze towards this end the efforts of all stakeholders alike – Member States, civil society and, increasingly, private corporations and concerned citizens. As a founder of the French school of foresight, Gaston Berger fully embraced this vision, to no surprise as he was indeed a member of the French delegation to the first General Conference of UNESCO in 1946, alongside Léon Blum, René Cassin, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, Lucien Febvre and François Mauriac.

With the passage of more than 65 years, UNESCO’s mandate has expanded into numerous new fields and grown in ambition, while still upholding the ideals of universality and diversity. Today, we all are committed to be involved with the future, our future and that of the successor generations, which we perceive to be affected by

multiple crises. The most important of the multiple global crises which challenge our civilization, our prosperity and our wellbeing are: climate and ecological crises; financial, economic and social crises; endemic poverty; agricultural crises; energy crisis. All these crises are interconnected, they harbour threats to peace and they call for solidarity and the sharing of ethical values among people and peoples.

As an actor in multilateral cooperation, UNESCO is steeped in the present, seeking to influence it with ideas, values and standards while also striving for the emergence of a sustainable world with a moral and intellectual infrastructure needed for globalizing world of the future. How to move from vision to action? A bridge is needed to move from the notion of a desirable future to the reality of a sustainable and achievable future. At UNESCO, it is through strategic foresight, expressly captured in its medium-term strategy<sup>1</sup> and related to the biennial Programme and Budget documents (C/5 documents), that an effort is made to translate the overarching vision into concrete activities and programmes that Member States request the Secretariat to implement, deploying in the process five key functions entrusted to the Organization.

UNESCO carries out diverse roles and functions: that of a laboratory of ideas; that of a normative organization whose diverse instruments and tools are to be integrated into national legislation; that of a clearinghouse and an information exchange bringing together knowledge and experts in emerging fields like the ethics of science, notably bioethics; that of a capacity-builder in Member States by developing requisite skills and institutions; and, lastly, as a catalyst for international cooperation, such as when UNESCO encourages Member States to tackle issues jointly and to promote intercultural dialogue.

In order to realise our multiple and complex mandates, strategic foresight serves as a vital tool to help integrate and express the range and scope of our expectations and desires. The need for effective foresight tools, mechanisms and methodologies becomes greater yet in a context where UNESCO's actions take place more and more within the broader framework of the United Nations, globally and at the country level.

Two components are organically linked to strategic foresight. For one, results-based management (RBM) demands an enhanced cohe-

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1. See Medium-term Strategy for 2008-2013 (document 34 C/4)

rence, pertinence and a reliable impact assessment of the various efforts. This leads to a special demand on foresight: anticipate in order to realise and improve results. The other component is risk management which focuses our attention on the unintended threats and opportunities that may affect our internal and external environments. This then defines another feature inherent in foresight: to be aware of uncertainty, which in itself can be seen as the very hallmark of future-oriented thinking and planning. Managing to obtain better results and knowing which risks to take or avoid have become significant organizational principles and skills, closely linked with strategy, budget or human resources. All are interrelated and are a precondition for serving as a driver of change and not being driven to unpredictable directions. The publication of this book provides us with an opportunity to renew a stimulating and beneficial partnership that led to a very fine publication in the 1990s<sup>1</sup>. In the end, prospective and foresight really make little sense unless they are able to spread the concepts and methods involved which are relevant for all actors, public and private alike.

The publication of this new manual is especially welcome in that it shows how an organization can develop and disseminate its own vision, a shared language and common reference points at all levels and for all concerned. As prospectivists or foresight specialists, we will have succeeded if we manage to promote a culture of anticipation, resilience, curiosity and inventiveness which will help bring about a more sustainable and peaceful world.

January 2011

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1. Michel Godet, *From Anticipation to Action. A Handbook of Strategic Prospective*, UNESCO Publishing, col. "Future-oriented studies", 1994.

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## Foreword

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### Are we going to predict the future or build it?

The translation of this book, which is an introduction to the fundamentals of strategic *prospective*<sup>1</sup>, began with a difficult choice concerning how to translate the French term *prospective* into English. In Spanish, Portuguese, and other Romance languages, the concept is basically the same. The problem was translating *la prospective* into English. Over the years there have been a few contenders, such as futurology, future studies, and forecasting; however, none of these terms does justice to *prospective*. For example, the term forecasting is too often used in the context of economic modeling and technological forecasting, and therefore does not capture the true essence of *prospective*. In many of my previous English publications, I managed to skirt the issue. In one book, prefaced by Igor Ansoff, I took his advice and the term was replaced in the title by scenarios (Godet, 1987). In another book, *prospective* was loosely defined by the English title, *Creating Futures* (Godet, 2006). The one time that I refused to compromise was in the publication of *From Anticipation to Action: A Handbook of Strategic Prospective* (Godet, 1994). Ironically, the title of this book did not go unnoticed in English as the translation is available on Amazon.com with the following parenthetical information “(Future-oriented Studies)” to make sure that readers know what to expect!

In the early 1990s, a *prospective* ‘cell’ called the “Forward Unit” was created at the European Commission. In 1993, during a meeting with Ian Miles at Ispra (IPTs, 1993), we introduced the concept of “profutures”, a contraction of *prospective* and futures. At that time, the department at the University of Manchester where Miles had been conducting research was entitled “strategic *prospective*” (Miles, 2010). Given the adoption of *prospective* among British academics,

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1. We are grateful to the publisher for allowing us to translate this book into several languages.

we had hoped that the concept would secure a place in the Anglo-American lexicon (Bain, Roubelat, 1994; IPTS 1995; Godet, 1979). Would the efforts of authors such as André Cournaud and Maurice Lévy (1973), or Philippe de Seynes (Godet, 1979) to introduce *prospective* to the United States by publishing in English during the 1960s bear fruit in Europe? Not likely as the European Commission, which certainly drew upon the French school, did little to promote it. Given that the English language tends to dominate, the term *foresight*, introduced in the 1990s, was adopted. Of course it is not the container but the content that counts. In the end, “strategic foresight” comes about the closest to *prospective* as we practice it and describe it herein.

For several years there was no satisfying English equivalent. Instead the French term *la prospective* was used to designate a discipline which strives to enlighten anticipation by clarifying actions made in the present through the thoughtful examination of both possible and desirable futures. Only in 1996 did Ben R. Martin publish a now historical article in which he introduced the term “foresight” and evoked for the first time an English term seemed to approximate the French word *prospective*. Martin actually wrote, “[...] the starting point of foresight, as with *la prospective* in France, is the belief that there are many possible futures” (Martin, 1996; 2010).

Despite this explicit reference, Martin’s translation is only approximate. Even though foresight puts an emphasis on group processes and participatory debate, it still lacks pro-activity, an integral aspect of *prospective*. Pro-activity, as used here, is the voluntary construction of an action plan to incite desirable change(s) through a project. Given the emphasis on pro-activity in *prospective*, we find the term *strategic foresight* more closely approximates the meaning of *prospective* as it developed in France and in countries where romance languages are spoken. In this book, we use *strategic foresight* and *strategic prospective* indiscriminately to designate *prospective*.

### **Foresight: Thoughts on how the concept has differed between Europe and North America<sup>1</sup>**

“The preparation of this special issue proved educational for all involved. The guest editors, editor-in-chief and several contributors began looking at foresight as practiced in the Americas and in the Old World.

1. This excerpt is taken from the Introduction of *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Strategic Foresight, edited by Joseph Coates, Philippe Durand and Michel Godet, Volume 77, Issue 9, November 2010.

We tacitly agreed on what seemed to be strategic foresight, concept and practice. We expected to find a common ground between the two main centers of post-WWII forecasting. Of course, these two centers rose from different roots: the USA had very advanced approaches in technological forecasting developed primarily in a military milieu; France had the prospective attitude based on critical thinking in decision-making, which emphasized the human factor, values, freedom and reflection on the endpoint of action. [...]

As discussions with authors and reviewers advanced, some debate arose. This appears more or less explicitly in the various articles published. The earliest opposition involved foresight itself. If we specify strategic foresight, it resembles *la prospective* in French. American-style foresight has a more restricted meaning related to the image of a given future. In the famous Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987), foresight is used in the original English while intuition appears in the French version. A perfect example of what we face in intercultural communication and in the field of futures studies! The term foresight should thus not really be used to designate the process as well as those tools used in creating the image. However, this problem of designation is a frequently discussed yet unresolved issue in terminology and lexicography hence not unique to foresight. If we simplify, *la prospective* is foresight when we add the adjective strategic in English; i.e., strategic foresight. Prospective may be seen as referring to both the process and result of that process in terms of action.

This initial opposition helps explain the second which arises over the practice of prospective. If we consider foresight as only the result then we can envision the futurist's role as a supplier to specific clients of images of given futures delivered without their paying attention to the means employed to create those futures. This stance on practice has two important consequences:

First, the creative process of these visions of the future, even if transparent to the client, belongs to the unique purview of the futurist. The client does not participate in producing the work. This aspect represents the strongest opposition to the 'French style'. In *la prospective*, it is essential that the beneficiaries (the recipients) of the report also help generate it. [...]

If we consider foresight as simply a result which does not involve a direct relationship with decision-making and preparing for action then clients merely receive these visions which will enable them to adjust their awareness of a given situation. The American tradition speaks of strategic foresight without any real link to drafting strategy but mainly because the working horizon is longer than that of operational planning. In the French tradition, prospective is directly related to action,

thus it is strategic. Within any organization, the study of possible and desirable futures remains of limited interest if not destined to have a real influence on action. In order to ensure that a strategy will be the best suited to the current reality and future of the organization, it must be shared and based on an intimate knowledge of the dynamics of the environment. (...)

Despite the opposition outlined above, the two traditions share two basic principles which form the pillars of both prospective and strategic foresight: first, humans have the will and capacity to influence the future in order to favor the desirable; second, this capacity creates a moral obligation to reflect upon the future and its possible paths. The two styles also share the objective of prospective which is to make the actors aware of the implicit hypotheses underlying their decisions. This awareness obliges participants to question and possibly modify their thinking. Overall, the French and American traditions do share some core components, methods such as description of the system studied, identification of key variables and actors, description of possible futures, choice of a desirable future, etc. There are also numerous techniques and tools, (cross-impact analysis, morphological analysis, scenarios, etc). In sum, even though the two traditions may appear at times deeply opposed, their current differences are considerably less than those weighing upon their original conceptualization some 60 years ago”.

Joseph Coates, Philippe Durance, Michel Godet

*Prospective* is a multidisciplinary intellectual approach characterized by an all-encompassing and systemic vision in which various actors and variables may play a determining role in the outcome of any given future. *Prospective* considers the future to be the result of free will, which, in turn, is strongly conditioned by human desires, projects, and dreams.

The French philosopher, Gaston Berger, has been considered the spiritual father of the discipline ever since a seminal 1957 publication in which he outlined the fundamentals of *prospective*. Berger himself had been a disciple of the philosopher Maurice Blondel, who considered that the future could be constructed from elements carried over from the past. Blondel once said, “The future is not forecast, rather it is prepared”. Berger went further by stating that, “the future is the *raison d’être* of the present” and many of our actions could be explained by the projects that justify them.

Actually, Berger’s ideas were not particularly novel and could be found in the classical philosophy of Aristotle, who distinguished

between means and ends, or more specifically between an efficient cause (one which provokes any given effect) and a final cause (one which justifies our actions with the aim of producing a goal). Similarly, advocating the use of a project with a corresponding action-plan is borrowed from Seneca who wrote, “what use is a wind without a direction”.

In *la prospective*, the future is not yet written but remains to be constructed by the best placed actors and those prepared to sacrifice in order to make their projects succeed. That is why we speak of anticipation as having two complementary attitudes; pre-activity and pro-activity. The former is concerned with anticipating foreseeable changes in the global environment so as to prepare oneself better and take advantage of such changes. Pre-activity includes the various approaches to the future: future studies, forecasting, and scenario planning. The latter attitude, which is decidedly more voluntary, tries to provoke desirable changes through the action, e.g. innovation to capture market share.

By now, the legacy of Berger’s *prospective* is a process of reflection in which current decisions (and subsequent actions) are enlightened by possible and desirable futures<sup>1</sup>. This optimistic and voluntarist attitude may be embraced by those familiar with strategic planning, but is often regarded with suspicion by free-market advocates who distrust anything resembling social or economic planning. Nevertheless, several concepts, such as sustainable development, our responsibility towards the planet and towards the next generation as well as regulation and governance all stem from this pro-active and voluntarist attitude toward the future.



This book provides an introduction to the practice of strategic foresight. Its goal is to give the reader an overview of the *Manuel de*

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1. The “futuribles” approach (a contraction/concatenation of *futurs-possibles*) introduced a few years later by Bertrand de Jouvenel is more speculative in nature than *la prospective*. Furthermore, in his book *The Art of Conjecture* written in 1964, Jouvenel does not refer to the word “*prospective*” at all. In the late 1970’s, I asked him why he never cited Berger’s work. His response was simply “What purpose does that serve, it’s effectively the same thing [as conjecture]”. History has retained the concept of *la prospective*, but not that of conjecture. Conjecture concerning possible futures is not without risk because it leads to an endemic problem that we often observe in strategy; too many scenarios and not enough projects.

*Prospective stratégique* regularly updated and published for 20 years. The theory is illustrated by examples drawn from my experiences as a researcher, professor, and consultant to corporations and regional territories for close to 40 years (Godet, 2007).

One of my missions is to pass on my knowledge to future generations. As a result, I am pleased to co-author this book with Associate Professor Philippe Durance, certainly the most efficient and promising promoter of the cause that I was able to influence. His thesis on Gaston Berger's philosophy, supervised by Jacques Lesourne, and defended in 2009 at the CNAM, is destined to become a classic in the field<sup>1</sup>.

Seen from abroad, the growth of the French school of *prospective* has continued apace since the end of the 1950s. We have borne the torch by continuing to develop methods which are both rigorous and participatory. The rationality of these methods allows users to deal with the complexity of their business environment, while stimulating the imagination and reducing the incoherencies that often appear in group processes.

I have had the pleasure of applying these methods and their associated software thanks to the generous support of the Circle of Entrepreneurs of the Future<sup>2</sup> — an organization founded in 2003, which includes fifty major corporate sponsors. The software accompanying the methods of *prospective* is available free for download in French, English or Spanish and allows users to identify key variables and factors, construct scenarios, and then assign probabilities to these scenarios. In the past five years alone, there have been more than 40,000 downloads throughout the world (approx. 40% in Latin America) which clearly demonstrates the range and influence of the French school.

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1. The authors wish to thank Adam Gerber, an American and PhD in management at the *Conservatoire national des Arts et Métiers* (CNAM) Paris and Kathryn Radford who collaborated in the translation of this book.
  2. The Circle of Entrepreneurs of the Future was created in 2003 and includes some 50 corporate members. Its main objective is to encourage the creation and dissemination of knowledge, support entrepreneurship, and help companies think and act boldly (see <http://en.lapropective.fr/entrepreneurs-circle.html>). Thanks to this Circle the strategic foresight software has been made available free online in several languages. Since 2010, the Circle has become a program of the *Fondation Prospective et Innovation*. Of great public service, this foundation is headed by Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the former French Prime Minister (see <http://www.prospective-innovation.org/>).



However, as the proverb says: No man is a prophet in his own country. We have not been able to elicit the same interest in our own country, France, where public administration continues to carry out foresight studies without even drawing upon the rigorous methods of *prospective* and without training participants how to use such methods properly. These administrators likely feel that such studies require neither preparation nor professional facilitation. In a political context, however, *prospective* is more often used at the regional/municipal level than at the ministerial/national level, but even then it often lacks professionalism and rigor.

Another characteristic of the French school of *prospective* is that it has successfully spread throughout the world despite divisions forming among competing camps within France. It must be said that these divisions have less to do with ideology and more to do with competition for clients — after all, strategic foresight is a profitable activity for consultants, at least. There are many disputed points, e.g., the abuse of scenario building to the detriment of endogenous projects. We also observe a general over-use of certain methods, particularly morphological analysis, a method that we systematized that allows users to create scenarios from Lego-like building blocks; however, the quality and relevance of the resulting scenarios is directly proportional to the knowledge and experience of those who create them. One can learn to recite by heart the methods in a few weeks but years of practice and research are needed to become a seasoned professional. The goal for this book, as well as the previous publications, is to contribute to the transfer of human capital in strategic foresight.

I am very grateful to UNESCO, which published *From Anticipation to Action* in 1994, for having joined forces with the Fondation Prospective et Innovation and Editions Dunod to distribute this book in bilingual editions<sup>1</sup>.

Professor Michel Godet

Paris, January 2011

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1. The following language pairs will appear: French-English, French-Portuguese, French-Spanish, French-Arabic and French-German. French-Chinese and French-Italian are also foreseen and gradually all the material will be put online.