Public futures studies: themes and variations

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Abstract

Purpose – *The paper aims to present an analysis of today's key themes in the field of public futures studies.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Compares publicly available research results on futures activities in countries including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, The Netherlands, Quebec, Sweden, the UK.*

Findings – *The paper shows that there are striking similarities between countries in terms of themes and topics for public futures study and also that the themes are relatively stable over time. However, specific topics are determined by the challenges of the day: the themes are abiding, the subjects are changing.*

Originality/value – *The paper offers an interesting approach of the state's changing roles and priorities across the world. To help readers go further, links to web sites of the most relevant futures studies institutions are provided.*

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In Europe as elsewhere, many trends are contributing to redefining the place and role of the state. Almost everywhere, the state as manager is giving way to a state as guarantor, a state as regulator and coordinator, with more limited means and more modest ambitions.

These recomposed states are nonetheless faced with their basic tasks of orienting and managing society. Hence the need for them to show vigilance with regard to the future and to rely on prospective debate not only as an area to be explored (forecasting and futures studies), but also as an area to be built (projects and programs).

To look ahead to these possible futures, states use a large number of studies, carried out directly by government departments or commissioned from outside service suppliers. In the main, we are relatively well informed of the work conducted in the French public sphere. But what do we know about the way our neighbors address such debate? What do we know of the structures, procedures, methods or themes brought into play by forecasting exercises done abroad?

A detailed answer to these questions would go beyond the scope of this note because futures-oriented activities have become so many and so diverse. We therefore opted here to focus on an essential aspect, namely the themes chosen by these futures exercises. What are the subjects most frequently chosen by the forecasting projects carried out or commissioned by the authorities in foreign countries? What sectoral priorities do they set themselves and for what reasons? What challenges structure the discussions of a state, its government departments and local authorities? What debates expressing what opinions support them? What similarities or dissimilarities can we highlight as a result of international comparison?

This is the first in a series of articles to be published in *foresight* based on research for the Commissariat général du Plan exploring public futures research.

Our comments will be based on the experience of a few, mainly European, countries and therefore comparable to France on many points. The data used come from a range of sources: document scanning, interviews, hearings, meeting with foreign delegations, on the spot trips, data exchange in the international networks we take part in, etc.

In many countries, from the late 1970s on, the state's hold over the national direction of economic and social objectives has been weakening. This period was marked by lesser institutional aggressiveness and by the end of global plans and major town and country planning programs. Futures studies coincided with this movement and, whilst becoming more diverse, they themselves became more sector-based.

Today, the forecasts produced or used by the public sector are of more fragmented form, the results of studies are less affirmative and the scenarios are more open and contrasted. As for their strategic openings, these are contingent, adaptable and limited in both space and time. To give an account of this diversity without going into unnecessary detail, we have ranked the futures studies according to five main categories.

1. Institutional and political futures studies

The first family of futures studies concerns the future of political, administrative and regulatory systems. In the light of recent publications, five major challenges emerge.

Modernizing public administration is the first challenge. In many countries, various changes have helped raise awareness of the limits hanging over the old models of public services: relative reduction in financial resources, revival of private enterprise as a model of human organization, expansion of ''good practices'' sponsored by international institutions, etc. The result has been new concerns as to the future of government services, public management or the borders between public and private sectors.

For instance, the English Strategy Unit (www.strategy.gov.uk) has carried out futures work on the changes in central government, on ''the way government policies are embedded in the regions'' and on ''the modernization methods and models for public administration''.

Similar futures studies have been developed in Quebec, on what is called political ''gouverne'', which is addressed, *inter alia*, from the point-of-view of the information revolution and parity. Still in Quebec, the Observatoire de l'administration publique (www.enap.uquebec.ca/enap-fra/observatoire) runs an arena for thought and action spotting new contemporary trends in governance. These debates are often based on benchmarking and strategic intelligence.

In Belgium, these issues are dealt with by the King Baudouin Foundation (www.kbs-frb.be) (set up in 1976), an ''independent structure'' whose objective is to ''stimulate novel ideas and launch new projects''. This foundation sets up committees and ''circles of experts'' which, after studying a public problem, put forward long-term recommendations. Its approach lays stress on the citizens' tendency to direct new demands at the public authorities. For example, the aim of one of its committees had been to ''define the future challenges as regards the relations between the citizen, the law and society using an analysis of current changes in society but also internal changes in the legal system''.

The second challenge for the future is the decentralization of political systems. While poor societies are continuing to be centralized, rich societies are experiencing incidents of public action becoming more region-based, of a strengthening of local authorities and a transfer of skills. These trends will continue in future and many futures studies are trying to forecast their consequences. What will happen to the distribution of powers, territorial optimality or the application of the principle of subsidiarity? What will the effects be on citizenship or on social inequalities?

In Japan, for example, these questions were the subject of a report by the Committee for the Promotion of Decentralisation, the Trinity Reform Plan (June 2003), which deals with the distribution of central government subsidies, the transfer of tax resources to the regions and local taxes.

The governability of democracies and new regulations for political systems form a third challenge. This issue is frequently addressed in the US, Canada and in Northern European countries.

In Germany, an academic country, many institutes or laboratories produce futures studies on the subject. Straddling theory and public action, the projects on the organization and governance of modern societies conducted by the Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung (MPIfG) (www.mpi-fg-koeln.mpg.de) are well known. Among the most future-oriented themes, it is worth noting: changes in the roles and capacities of states faced with supranational integration, interweaving of government levels and decision-making, public policies and collective action, privatization and deregulation, independent administrative authorities and ''agencification'', states and markets, networks and hierarchies, public-private links, legitimacy and sovereignty, and neo-corporatism.

Europe and its futures is the fourth challenge. European construction is a fundamentally futures-oriented political project that has always been backed up by and has relied on forecasting projects. This is still the case today, with the awareness of the problems inherent to EU enlargement. There is no lack of futures subjects: integration of new members, Turkey's fate, Lisbon Strategy, introduction of the constitution, increased co-operation, construction of a European super-state, etc. Faced with these challenges, member states are tempted to carry out futures studies relating to their terms of joining the European Union.

For example, in Ireland, the Institute of European Affairs (IEA) (www.iiea.com) has made forecasts on the choices that are open to this country in an enlarged Europe. The aim was to report on the long-term effects of the integration process. Other more global studies focus on the development of the whole continent. The report called ''Four futures of Europe'' drawn up by the CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis comes into this category.

The fifth challenge is that of a new world order. The collapse of communism, the advent of a worldwide economy and an increase in local conflicts have brought about the emergence of new challenges. What will the new system of international relations be in the future? Are we moving towards a clash or a drawing closer of civilizations? Will globalization really restrict the sovereignty of states?

In Quebec, people are thinking about the growing integration of the American continent, in particular through NAFTA. In Germany, the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP – German Institute for International and Security Affairs) (www.swp-berlin.org) carries out a wide range of studies on the future of ex-communist bloc countries and on development in various world areas, singling out issues of international policy and security. The SWP advises Parliament, the federal government and any other player concerned by the future of German foreign policy.

2. Spatial and regional futures studies

The dynamics of regions has always given rise to a whole host of attempts at forecasting, characterized by their highly strategic and pragmatic side. Today, this is strengthened by movements to decentralize and to appropriate the ''local'' aspect again. A glance at recent work reveals four major themes.

The first concerns towns and urban phenomena. This general theme is itself broken down into more specific subjects: new forms of housing and living conditions, transport and mobility, new ways of life, new urban rhythms, equipment and shared areas, inequalities and spatial segregation, etc.

In Belgium, a report on ''the fiscal, technical and social aspects of mobility by 2020'' has been commissioned from outside service suppliers by the Ministry for Mobility and Transport.

In Sweden, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Ministry of the Environment) regularly conducts long range projects on the ''development of urban areas''.

In Quebec, the Research and Future-studies Workgroup run by Daniel Latouche is conducting a whole range of studies devoted to ''new urban territories'', within the framework of the National Institute for Scientific Research (equivalent of the CNRS, the French National Center for Scientific Research).

A second set of projections consists of discussions in support of regional development projects. Commissioned by elected representatives and often run by them, these exercises come within their strategy of separation from central government.

This trend is clearly seen in Germany that, as federalism would have it, includes a wide array of decentralized sources for futures studies. For example, several Länder have set up consultation committees dealing with general or thematic issues on the future: introduction of a ''suggestion box'' in Schleswig-Holstein; ''Economy 2000'' committee in Baden-Würtemberg; formation of a ''secretariat for futures studies'' by North Rhine-Westphalia; Kommission für Zukunftsfragen der Freistaaten Bayern und Sachsen set up jointly by Bavaria and Saxony, close from a political point-of-view and which wanted to show their ability to reform economic and social policies.

In Belgium, the regional economic and social councils run such exercises. The ESC for the Walloon region, through its commissions, committees and councils, deals with a whole host of local development issues. For its part, the ESC for Flanders addresses various subjects in a futures-oriented way: industrial policy, regional inequalities, infrastructures, environment, transport, communications, etc.

In Canada, in the same spirit, it is worth noting the work carried out by the Interdisciplinary research group for the East of Quebec about the Gaspésie region.

In Denmark, these issues are dealt with extensively. For example, the Institute of Local Government Studies (Amternes og Kommunernes Forskning-institut, AKF) (www.akf.dk), set up in 1975, develops futures studies on three themes: relationship between the individual and local society; environment and energy; and economy, public organizations, and regional development.

Thirdly, local authorities are increasingly using futures studies to promote regional governance. The desire here is to create the dynamics for collective awareness-raising, to bring about discussion and to draw closer the standpoints of the people involved in local decision-making: citizens, researchers, entrepreneurs, communities, authorities, etc.

This opening up to the ''civil society'' and search for ''participative democracy'' are frequently found in discussions carried out in Quebec. They are also central to projects managed in Belgium by the Institut Jules-Destrée (www.destree.org). This institute – one of the think tanks favored by the Walloon authorities – offers to help local decision-makers by using futures studies as a vehicle for their influence. In fact, futures studies are presented as an ''innovative approach'' capable of turning its back on ''declining practices''.

Fourth and final, although local and regional development is the prevailing concern today, it has not totally replaced the old issue of town and country planning. The future of national areas is still an important challenge for states and their government departments. How to secure equilibrium for regions in the future? How to increase the equalizing effects of government policies? How to foster mobility of people and drawing power of places at the same time? Through these questions, the region is seen as a factor favoring integration and modernization of the country, like the infra-structure on which socio-economic activities will come to rely.

In The Netherlands, the white paper on town and country planning was put to debate and then voted by Parliament. Its proposals brought about considerable progress.

In Ireland, the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) (www.irishspatialstrategy.ie), worked out by the Ministry of the Environment and the Spatial Planning Unit, equivalent to the French Delegation for Territorial Development and Regional Action (DATAR), proposes scenarios with a 20 year range that orientate the spatial distribution of activities. An analysis of current trends in terms of where investors want to invest and the drawing power of regions are used

to work out this strategy. In addition, studies have been conducted at inter-national level in order to determine common features of regions with strong appeal.

3. Science and technology foresight

Science and technology foresight has developed enormously since the 1980s, with the speeding-up of discoveries and the appearance of new risks. To begin with, it was confined to detecting trends at work in the research world. Consequently, the economic and social brakes to disseminating technologies were systematically underestimated. But these past few years have shown less determinist, less scientific approaches; the links between research and society have been favored.

What counts from now on is correctly anticipating the relationship between technical invention and social innovation. In every country, this change of approach results in making both economic players and citizens partners in prospective thinking. What will the impacts of future discoveries be on our ways of life and our economic activities? Conversely, what socio-economic factors will have decisive effects on the rate and contents of scientific progress? Such a renewal of forward-looking questions is largely due to entering into a ''knowledge-based economy'' in which research and innovation are the pillars of competitiveness for rich countries and of growth for emerging ones.

These past 15 years, the most ambitious futures studies have taken the shape of foresights. Broadly speaking, and as opposed to forecast, the term foresight is increasingly used in place of the term ''futures studies''. In the more limited sense we are concerned with here, a foresight is a vast exercise in science and technology futures studies, conducted over a fairly long period (1-3 years), rallying players from very different backgrounds, brought together in theme-based groups, and striving through their recommendations to influence public choices.

For many observers, these foresights constitute democratic innovation insofar as they combine long-range reasoning, social participation and decision-making support. Several countries conduct foresights today on a permanent, institutionalized basis. This has been so for The Netherlands since 1993, the UK since 1994 and Sweden since 1998.

The first Swedish foresight project (1999-2000), interesting on more than one account, deserves a detailed presentation. It was carried out and funded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences (IVA), the Swedish National Board for Industrial and Technical Development (one of the agencies funding public R&D), the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Research and the Federation of Swedish industries. The exercise had two aims: to strengthen a futures-oriented approach in companies and organizations, and to identify the high-priority areas in which Sweden should build expertise.

The exercise lasted a year and had a budget of around €650,000. As regards the organization, it comprised:

1. a management committee, chaired by the vice-chairman of Volvo and made up of institutions funding the project;
2. a steering committee tasked with day-to-day management of the project (two engineers, an economist and an architect);
3. a reference group (20 people from varying interest groups) making sure that players from Swedish society took part and that results were disseminated; and
4. eight theme-based panels, each with 10 to 15 experts:
   - health, medicine and care;
   - biological natural resources;
   - infrastructures;
   - production systems;
   - information and communication systems;

- materials;
- service industries; and
- education and learning.

Regarding the method, the chosen perspective was 10 to 15 years. The work was based on Delphi studies (collection and processing of experts' opinions), an analysis of critical technologies and the scenarios method. However, the time constraint made it difficult for the panels to appropriate the scenarios method, so the steering committee suggested context scenarios that the panels worked from.

This first foresight project was considered to be a success and this was so for at least two reasons. In the first place, it helped disseminate a foresight approach throughout various government agencies. Next, it was put to use by the government and funding agencies in the process to define scientific and technological priorities. A second foresight project is being carried out.

Another promising foresight project has recently been started in Quebec. This Perspectives STS (Science et Technologie au service de la Société) project is backed by the Conseil des sciences et de la technologie (CST) (www.cst.gouv.qc.ca), a public organization in which key figures from every background sit. The CST is trying to ensure that science and technology are more in tune with the concerns of society. The Perspectives STS project is an aspect of this intent because it proposes interviewing the population in order to identify the socio-economic challenges of the coming 15 to 20 years and then, with the participation of scientists, to direct research and innovation accordingly. So, unlike other foresights, it takes the analysis of society's demands as a starting point rather than the supply proposed by researchers and companies. The operation should last three years and include two phases: a phase to identify the socio-economic challenges and then, as from summer 2005, a phase of strategic forecasting in which researchers and ''users'' of technologies will work out joint objectives.

For its part, Belgium has increased smaller sized foresight projects. One of them, Belgian Federal Foresight Study (2001), was run by the Centre for Opinion Studies (CLEO) of the University of Liège (www.cleo.ulg.ac.be). Its aims were to identify ''initiatives capable of developing R&D activity potential in Belgium'', in liaison with ''socio-economic development'', ''the living conditions of populations'' and ''management of cultural and educational skills''. Another foresight study, commissioned by the Walloon region took inspiration from the French ''key technologies'' exercise; it was managed by the LENTIC (www.lentic.be), also of the University of Liège. For its part, the Catholic university of Louvain (www.ucl.ac.be) ran (1998-2000) Research on Foresight Methodology at the request of the Flemish government. Taking into account macro, meso and micro levels, the aim was to develop an ''integrated methodological framework'' (bibliometric analysis, Delphi, scenarios, interviews with experts, etc.) to grasp developments in science and technologies.

In Greece, a foresight program took place from 2001 to 2004, run by the General Secretariat for Research and Technology (which comes under the Ministry of Development). This program sought to investigate how science, technology and research are expected to contribute to shaping a ''knowledge-based society'' with the perspective being 2015-2022. The information collected had a dual purpose: for the government on the one hand, in support of shaping public policies and of decision-making; for the private sector on the other hand in order to fuel its own strategic planning systems.

Besides these foresight projects, more limited futures studies naturally continue to exist. In Belgium, for example, the Ministry of the Economy commissioned studies on ''ICTs (information and communication technologies) and the information society''.

In Japan, ICTs, influencing changes in ways of life, are particularly closely monitored by the Koizumi administration. Two priorities have been highlighted in this country, namely the development of broadband networks and computer training at school. The e-strategy II plan of July 2003 is promoting the idea of using the internet efficiently in healthcare (telediagnosis, centralization of medical records, on-line invoicing and reimbursements),

in food safety (product traceability), in daily life (electronic surveillance, consumer information, online services), in education (distance learning), in the labor market (the aim is to have 20 percent of teleworking jobs by 2010), in public services (interactivity with citizens, on-line assessment of public policies). The international market is also present with projects to develop information networks, more particularly with Asian countries.

In Austria, the Institut für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung, Institute of Technology Assessment (ITA) performs interdisciplinary research on the links between technology and society. It is a facility of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and is funded by this Academy as well as by national and European funds. Its work focuses on development trends and on the societal consequences of technology. Its research results provide the basis for giving advice to decision-makers. The ITA also develops assessment methods, often inspired by foreign experiences. Lastly, it takes part in ministerial working parties whose aim is ''to identify the potential and niches, inside world-wide technologies, in which Austria could become leader in 15 years' time and which could increase its competitiveness''.

Finally, it is worth noting Denmark's renewed dynamism in technological foresight, in particular spurred on by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, responsible for defining the strategy and main options for national research. Within this framework, the national laboratory Risø (www.risoe.dk), among others, has developed a ''Technology Scenarios'' program and set up a technology foresight unit.

4. Futures studies for sustainable development

Environmental issues are necessarily long-term. On the one hand, natural systems are extremely complex, very much passive and have delayed response times to disruptions. On the other, societies' reactions to ecological problems are slow, gradual and subject to unstable socio-political coalitions.

Futures studies and sustainable development therefore have many points in common: in both cases, the aim is to reason in a global, multidisciplinary and open manner and to make a strict inventory of the trends or crises likely to shape the life of future generations. Any proper forecasting is necessarily sustainable; any development makes choices as to the future.

Futures studies for sustainable development rely greatly on quantification and in particular on modeling. For instance, today, climate change is the subject of some 20 simulation models employing more than 2,000 researchers. However, although forecasts backed up by figures are a key element of these futures studies, the studies have always developed more qualitative analyses in addition.

Because of their global nature, futures studies for development are often carried out by international organizations. These bodies can mobilize experts from various backgrounds and take care of fostering negotiations or agreements at world level. One of the forerunners on this subject was the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) (www.iiasa.ac.at), set up in 1972 to promote east-west cooperation.

The United Nations have also become an important player, first through the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (www.unep.org) started in 1972 and tasked with organizing world summits on sustainable development, and then the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) established in 1988. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Resources Institute (WRI, set up in the 1980s) (www.wri.org) are also very active today. In Europe, the European Environment Agency, in operation since 1994, and the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, Seville (IPTS) (www.jrc.es), founded the same year, provide a whole host of long-range analyses.

The role of these international organizations is first and foremost to propose global reference scenarios, backed up by figures, on a few major founding variables: raw materials, natural resources, energy resources, worldwide consumption, climate change, etc. These macro-scenarios are then expressed at national level to draw up possibilities likely to

guide government policies – more especially in terms of technological options in order to comply with the commitments made in Kyoto on CO_2 emissions.

In Germany, the Wuppertal Institute (www.wupperinst.org) produces interesting futures studies about environmental issues. In Belgium, the Federal Planning Bureau (www.plan.be) provided itself, in 1998, with a sustainable development task force. This ran a study, *inter alia*, aimed at ''characterizing the uncertainties in exchanges between the ecological and social systems''. With a time horizon of 2050, several questions were raised: what differences in wealth will exist and will be allowed between developed countries? What will the required level of satisfying individual needs be, for each generation, and how will these expectations be compatible with the environmental point of view? The main results of the study were included in the *Federal Report on Sustainable Development*. Still in Belgium, the Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development (CFDD) (www.belspo.be/frdocfdd/fr/prempag.htm), set up in 1997, is tasked with coordinating federal policy. To achieve this, its members hail from various groups: energy producers, scientists, organizations providing aid, consumer, worker and employer associations. The CFDD also acts as a prospective forum: it has the responsibility of promoting public debate by organizing meetings where specialists, decision-makers and the population can dialogue.

In Europe, however, it is once again Nordic societies, the UK and The Netherlands that have produced the most stimulating discussions on sustainable development. Because of their vulnerability to climate change, these countries quickly became aware of the challenges related to the environment. Furthermore, futures studies are generally more widely developed as a tool to assist public decision.

In Sweden, ecological futures studies are an integral part of the debates that, irrespective of the people who drafted and commissioned them, are instrumental in putting new issues on the political agenda. In The Netherlands, over the past 20 years, environmental protection has been the subject of in-depth futures studies bringing together government services, experts and socio-professional circles. These operations, which consider the very long term, have resulted in the publication of documents that specialists consider to be of top quality (green plan).

5. Societal and social futures studies

For 25 years, from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, we saw the publication of interesting global futures studies that tried to understand all the trends in a society: economy, law, politics, culture, technology, the media, etc. In contrast, for the last 15 years or so, large-scale portraits have given way to more limited studies mainly going into the themes of social integration and social protection. In fact, futures studies for the society are particularly developed in the characteristic areas of economic and social ''crises'' which developed countries are confronted with: employment-unemployment, working conditions, health-sickness, retirement, population ageing, education and conditions of schooling, inequalities, etc. This changeover from societal to social futures studies certainly conveys, from the scientific side, a lesser ambition to consider the reality as a whole and, from the political side, a lesser belief in the possibility of changing the order of things.

Let us begin with employment, labor and company futures studies. In many countries, these are directly fuelled by the bad news relating to unemployment and relocation.

In Japan, for example, the *Rengo Vision for the 21st Century* report, published in October 2000 by the Japanese trade union confederation Rengo, emphasized the great changes in work and in enterprise: ageing, globalization, ICT revolution, environmental constraints, new forms of distribution, etc. It set several goals to be reached in the twenty-first century: full employment, fair working conditions, upholding social welfare safety nets, increasing the role of unions not only at collective bargaining level but also in providing support for individuals who aim to improve their skills by vocational training. It recommended increasing the participation of women and young people in the labor market and developing cyber-trade unions.

In Germany, the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB, Social Science Research Centre Berlin) (www.wz-berlin.de) has produced a wide range of studies on the trends in the labor market, innovation phenomena, company development, links between employment and technology, the relationship between institutions and markets. The WZB's approach, which is always multidisciplinary, is based on international comparisons.

For its part, the issue of working conditions often gives rise to forecasting. Sweden comes to mind in particular and the studies by the National Institute for Working Life, which reports to the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications. This institute is typical of the government agencies that, over and above the planning and futures studies units in certain ministries, are responsible for advisory work in a given field.

Still on the subject of employment, other futures studies are more directly aimed at the development of skills and competencies. In Ireland, for example, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) (www.skillsireland.ie) was set up in 1997. It is made up of experts tasked with directing the development of professional skills so that they meet the expected demand; this is to restore balance to the labor market and increase national added value. Its aims are threefold: to make projections of professions and qualifications, to advise the government about education and vocational training programs, to disseminate public information and see to it that the players concerned take it into consideration. This last, interesting point shows a determination to follow recommendations stemming from the projection right through to the end.

Connected to the ideas of qualifications and skills, the theme of human capital is also the subject of forecasting. How to raise the overall standard of education and take advantage of knowledge acquired over the generations? How to increase the effectiveness of investments made in people and their knowledge? What to do to minimize academic failure and promote life-long learning?

In Japan, the target of doubling human capital is one of the government's major projects. This program includes the reform of public education and the development of sciences and technologies. To this end, the Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT) published, early 2001, the *Education Reform Plan for the 21st Century* which aims to improve the quality of education (creating small classes, using ICTs, retraining teachers, bringing universities into line with the very highest international standards) and the learning environment (extra-curricular activities, one-to-one teaching). For its part, the Central Council for Education, set up in 2001, published a forward-looking report: ''The modality of new fundamental law of education befitting to the new times and a basic plan for education.'' This document was drafted using discussions by working groups but also drawing on the opinions of teachers and homes collected during the All-day Central Council for Education.

Everything that affects demography and its social implications directly concerns the future. People and the number of people, renewal of generations, migration and life expectancy are so many founding variables for the development of societies.

In Sweden, the Institute for Futures Studies (Framtidsstudier, set up in 1987) (www.framtidsstudier.se) focused a good part of its program for 2000-2004 on the relationships between ''demography and democracy in the twenty-first century''. It is an independent organization and its mission is to stimulate debate on the threats and opportunities for the development of society. It often works on a 10 or 20-year perspective, but the very long-term (50 to 100 years) makes its work particularly novel: its research on women's place in society, child labor or the consequences of ageing are worth noting. To deal with such distant time scales, the Institute combines various methods: scenarios, quantitative tools (econometrics, simulation, modeling) when long series are available, and a qualitative approach when it is a matter of detecting changes in behavior (mobility, family, beliefs).

Of all the ''social issues'', population ageing is by far the most frequently dealt with: studies devoted to the impact of this phenomenon can be found in every country.

This is naturally the case in Japan, where Prime Minister Koizumi has placed the emphasis on modernizing social welfare. At the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), researchers are looking at the sustainability of pension or health systems. They work out scenarios based on demographic and political hypotheses and on variations in rates and lengths of contributions as well as levels of benefits. But the reference in this field is still the work done by the National Institute for Population and Social Security Research: this takes more into account the choices of society such as the more or less collective nature of the reallocation of resources and national insurance system.

Sweden also has a large number of studies, but more focused on social and cultural aspects. In this country, the combined effects of population ageing and EU enlargement will be an influx of immigrants and it seems vital to think ahead to the challenges of a multicultural society – at least to reduce an increase in xenophobic ideas. Nevertheless, for the time being, futures studies for social and cultural integration are one of the main shortcomings of Swedish forecasting.

During the 1980s, some interesting futures studies focused on changes to the welfare state: they were first and foremost interested in its institutional structure, its methods of control and its sources of funding. From now on, discussions are more concerned with issues of access to entitlement, cultural identity and players' strategy (persons receiving benefits or insured persons).

A big increase can particularly be seen in work focusing on the future of the relationship between law and social policy. Will the tendency of society to become more legalistic also be seen in the field of social policies? What will the consequences be on taking care of social problems?

In Belgium, these issues are dealt with by the King Baudouin Foundation, already mentioned. Several of its working parties are devoted to analyzing changes in benefits and in social law. Scenarios are anticipated, along with the highlighting of the cultural values and political projects that underpin them.

In Ireland, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (www.nesc.ie) undertakes studies on the development of economic and social rights. It believes that a reformed approach to rights is the prime requirement for more efficient institutions and public policies to emerge. This advisory body, established in 1973, is under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach. Its make-up indicates the emphasis placed on consultation throughout the assessment work.

The legal regulation of social problems is also addressed from the more limited point of view of deviancy and delinquency. As part of its ''social prospective program'', the King Baudouin Foundation set up, for example, a ''Future vision of crime'' commission (''Vision prospective sur la criminalité''). In the future, where will the border between deviancy and crime lie? What meaning will be given to these concepts? Such are the questions that direct its studies.

Another set of futures studies involves inequalities and social stratification. It is more the inequality of opportunities and careers that is taken into consideration rather than the inequality of socio-economic conditions: are we moving towards more or less egalitarian societies in terms of status, pay and consumption? And in the future how will things stand from the point-of-view of professional fulfillment and the acknowledgement of cultural or religious identities? The relationship between equality and equity is also tackled, openly in Nordic or Anglo-Saxon societies, more timidly in Latin countries; the same can be said of debates about the notions of justice and positive discrimination.

In Ireland, the NESC regularly publishes *Strategy Reports* and *Research Series* comprising diagnosis and long-range facts, and economic and social recommendations. The interesting thing about these publications is that they analyze inequalities in a dynamic way, seeing to it that the overall determining factors of their making are mentioned: industrial policy, European integration, etc.

Sometimes, the future is imagined more globally: problems are then defined in terms of social integration. In Quebec, the integrated intelligence network for public policies set itself

several ''priority targets'', including as it happens that of social cohesion. Coordinated by the ''Secrétariat aux priorités et aux projets stratégiques'', it published in January 2004 a summary of the 85 documents already produced on that target. Under the heading of threats – real or potential – the network underlines an increase in the level of dependency and poverty, greater demands on the healthcare system and the withdrawal of state funding, in particular for childcare.

As far as recommendations are concerned, it highlights job creation, integration into the labor market and gender equality. It also recommends policies based on less standardized and linear progression through life than the education-work-retirement type. Established in 1999, this network draws together some 30 ministries and organizations as well as five of the biggest towns in the province. As many ''coordinating watchers'', spread over each institution, run a network of nearly 500 ''watchmen and women''. As its name says, it is first and foremost a strategic intelligence system, i.e. a compendium of up-to-date information. But it is also concerned with identifying the changes that are emerging, proposing a shared view of future-bearing events and collapses and keeping decision-makers informed of the social problems which, in the long run, could harm the integration of society.

To close, it is worth mentioning Sweden and its cross-disciplinary approach to welfare protection. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by extensive reforms, to begin with of the civil service and subsequently of the reallocation of resources and national insurance system (pensions, unemployment and health). Forward-looking methods were used at the time of these reforms in order to carry out consultation between the various interest groups. This style of concerted futures studies is still very much alive today. For example, the Institute for Futures Studies (Framtidsstudier) devotes part of its projects to the future of insurance systems. What is sought is the formalization of a new contract binding every social group and every generation. Futures studies are in effect combined here with methods of consultation and stimulating public debate.

Conclusion

This look at the fields of contemporary public futures studies shows the great diversity of themes and of their approaches. The more our societies change and become different, the more forecasting is used to try and reduce the uncertainties of the future. Futures studies support the development of social systems and they branch out as and when these systems become more complex.

These selective pages only go over the most important sets of themes. Many other subjects could have been touched on. All it takes to prove this is a list of the futures studies conducted by a few major European organizations.

In the UK, Tony Blair's strategy unit explores in many directions: e-commerce, future of the Post Office, adoption, financial crime, sales policy, migration, energy, health, drug addiction, alcoholism, ethnic minorities, sport, electronic networks, child welfare, and so forth.

In The Netherlands, the forecasting studies done by the Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regerings-beleid (WRR, www.wrr.nl) or Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy are no less eclectic: age and policy of knowledge, immigration, development and good governance, public interest, policy of generations, institutions and towns, culture and diplomacy, etc.

Finally in Germany, on account of its very considerable means, the Bertelsmann Foundation (www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de) is able to commission or run a wide range of studies. Currently, the foundation's program includes several priority areas: education, economic and social affairs, health, democracy and civil society, international relations, culture, etc.

Although incomplete, several lessons can be drawn from these pages. Firstly, the international comparison reveals striking similarities. The range of futures projects is fairly close from one country to another. Europe's historical similarity is partly to explain: the social, economic, cultural and political structures of our societies have common points that lead them to follow similar paths. The tendencies to globalization produce the same effects.

Secondly, the major concerns as to the future seem relatively stable. Over the past decades, the same themes have recurred: territories, institutions, science and technology, development, international relations, growth and employment, social problems, demography, etc. Times change but our doubts about the future look very much like those of previous generations.

However, the specific subjects taken from these overall themes depend on the challenges of the day. The reorientation given to one problem or another or its conceptual change is directly related to the players present, to how opinion stands or to the data at hand. The selection of an issue, a prospective method or a time scale also seems to be contingent. For example, territorial futures studies are still much in evidence, but observers are no longer interested in the same territories or the same territorial dynamics. The themes are abiding; the subjects are changing.

Where countries start futures studies on fairly closely related themes, the institutional and strategic conclusions they derive from them are more varied. At times, the similarity of scenarios gives rise to identical public decisions. At others, the same scenarios result in contrasting decisions where the influence of national traditions is expressed. There is no mechanical link between the content of a futures study and its political openings.

It is therefore necessary to beware of any superficial comparisons and hasty benchmarking. As such, the futures subjects in Germany, the UK, The Netherlands or Japan do not teach us anything: the worst thing would be to think that France must necessarily work on the same issues as its neighbors. Comparing ourselves to others is not enough to say what is good for us. We cannot isolate a Belgian or Spanish futures study and graft it onto France definitely.

On their part, these countries cannot borrow forecasts or scenarios from us that are of instant use to them. Comparing themselves to us does not help them find out what is immediately good for them.

These comments do not mean that international comparison is futile, quite the contrary. They simply intend to point out that this comparison must be cautious, precise and well thought-out, that it has to take the greatest possible number of variables into account: economic, political, cultural, social, technological, legal, ideological, demographic, etc. The comparison cannot just be based on separate facts, ingredients or elements; it always has to involve systems and their global adjustments.

Although it is always worthwhile comparing one-self to others, it is on the contrary important to beware of the copying, the ready-made ideas and the ''importing-exporting'' of themes. The most important thing is to know each society in depth (social groups, public management, state, companies, institutions, dynamics at work, public problems, etc.) and, on that basis, to consider the futures studies it really needs. Foreign experiences are only enriching on that condition.

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