

WORLDS @ 2050

**Policy making
for the better future**

**Long Term Futures Studies and public policies
: Some considerations and experiences.**

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THE NEED OF FORESIGHT IN GOVERNMENTAL BODIES

Long Term Futures Studies and public policies: Some considerations and experiences.

The need of official governmental bodies foresight.

Foresight is useful and needed:

- In essence it studies change, and always something is changing, something can change, or something should change.
- We can't change the past, but the future seems to be, at least partially, in our hands.
- Today's societal problems (energy, climate change, poverty, migration, education, etc.) represent long term challenges, although urgent action is needed to tackle them.
- The speed of changes in today's world and the need to act to face them gives governmental bodies little time to reflect on appropriate public policies (decisions based on incomplete or outdated information, models of yesterday's realities, unexpected or undesirable consequences).
- Faced with the acceleration of change, the only sensible answer is to try to foresee and anticipate it, not as a forecast, but as conjectures, alternatives or possibilities.
- Not having long term futures images (possible, desirable, undesirable) makes us drift in the present. Our temporary myopia causes us to stumble over and over again with an undesirable future.
- Foresight studies have a strategic value in understanding the present (better understanding change), thus helping governmental bodies to make better informed decisions.
- Growing complexity of social systems (more components, more interconnected) contributes to higher uncertainty.

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Governmental bodies foresight is useful and needed:

- Governmental bodies have the duty to do what they can and the best they can for their peoples. They can (and should) look far into the future to design better informed public policies.
- Foresight studies should be a natural framework for all official governmental planning efforts. They allow governments to consider alternative long term futures unconstrained by the pressing necessities of the present.
- Foresight imagines what planning (after a selection process between possible futures) will try to turn into a reality.
- Action planning without vision ends up being improvisation. Vision unaccompanied by planned actions is just a dream.
- Foresight and planning are both necessary and should operate as a team.
- The main objective of futures studies in governmental bodies should be the betterment of public policies formulation.
- Foresight can stimulate and expand the imagination of public policy makers, clarify and expand important issues, develop possible alternative contexts for public policies, increase the capacity to identify possible new crisis, explore the long term consequences of present decisions and courses of action (identifying possible future obstacles to public policies about to be embraced), clarify the efficacy and flexibility of realistic present options of public policy if faced with future contingencies, and help to improve the capacity of governmental bodies to react appropriately to new and (today) unknown events.

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DIFFICULTIES FACED TO IMPLEMENT FORESIGHT IN GOVERNMENTAL BODIES

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Difficulties faced to implement foresight studies in governmental bodies:

- ✓ Benefits and limitations of long term foresight studies are frequently misunderstood by governmental bodies (results seen as long term predictions, which they are not; frequently confused with long term planning, which they are not).
- ✓ Both foresight and planning focus on the future, but differ in purpose, time horizon, and tools . While foresight is reflective by nature, planning is action oriented.
- ✓ Foresight is a strategic dialogue, not about what will happen, but about what could happen (if ...). It is a navigation instrument.
- ✓ A plan is made when the present situation differs from the desired one (objectives). It is anti-random. Given an objective, it designs the actions to be taken in a temporal sequence to reach it, instruments mechanisms to implement them, and assigns the resources needed to execute them.
- ✓ Difficulties in the implementation of foresight in governmental bodies depend on the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of their countries (concept of time, religious beliefs, future as an excuse for not acting in the present, political stability, etc.). Taking into account these conditions is crucial in all foresight exercises.
- ✓ Politicians in democratic societies tend to see foresight studies as not belonging to their real of operation (short term; Harold Winston: "One week is a lon time in politics). Uncertain about their personal future, they wrongly believe that whatever happens after the term for which the y have been elected will be the business of somebody else (their sucesors).

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Difficulties faced to implement foresight studies in governmental bodies:

- When looking into the future decision makers want some certainty. When offered alternative (uncertain) futures they press to know which is the most probable to plan accordingly (they usually plan based on present conditions which they believe they know with sufficient certitude).
- Planning “based on evidence”, i.e. finding the “truth” about future objectives and how to reach them (a paradox, for in the future there are no truths, only possibilities), works against foresight.
- Public policy developers tend to ignore insecurity and repress ambiguity. Foresight doesn’t reduce uncertainty (the future will remain equally uncertain regardless of our images of it).
- There are at least two main types of barriers when considering the use of futures studies in public policies formulation: (1) The difficulties of linking present decisions to alternative futures; (2) The relevance (or lack of it) of futures studies to the most important issues (present, actual or potential) of public policies decisions.
- Linking present decisions to alternative futures implies the need to explicitly establish causal relations between the two. If the future is seen as independent of present decisions (or its relations with the present are seen as too vague or dubious) future images will not be considered in public policy making. Unless the results of foresight studies are pertinent to present or potential public policies their utility will be questionable.
- Futures issues which today are considered outside of the formulation processes of public policies for ideological, political or technical reasons, must be transformed into political means subject of present decisions, which is not always easy.

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Difficulties faced to implement foresight Studies in Governmental bodies:

- ❖ If certain futures states are considered not liable to be changed by current or future policies (inevitable futures), then public policy efforts should focus on how to better adapt to these states, or to reformulate the basic social institutions, or even the basic values, generally left outside of the field of public policy, which will almost certainly generate resistance (foresight studies can be useful, at least partially, for the betterment of values judgement).
- ❖ Governmental bodies in charge of public policies development are generally ill equipped to discriminate between low and high quality foresight studies (the concept of “high quality foresight study” has been debated for a long time and has proven to be an elusive concept, even among foresight specialists; however, there are some useful criteria to discriminate between “serious” foresight studies from mere occurrences and disparate futures).
- ❖ When using foresight Studies (unfrequent case) public policy developers have a tendency to incorporate images of the future which reproduce their own *a priori* conclusions (making futures studies useless), those which by some criteria are considered the most credible (ignoring futures which could become credible under a different set of hypothesis), or those backed by groups which can exert a strong political pressure by themselves or through the media, which are not necessarily the best guide. Any of these options work against the main underlying value of futures studies: the creation of different possible alternative visions.
- ❖ To be useful inputs for the definition of public policies futures studies must accommodate to the needs of public policy development, but also needed is a reformulation of the system in charge of formulating public policies to increase its capacity to receive and use the results of futures studies, and the creation of direct and indirect structured channels of communication between the two.

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IDEAS TO INCREASE CITIZENS PARTICIPATION (AND FUTURES LITERACY)

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To increase participation of citizens in Foresight Studies:

Today's societies are ever more demanding and better informed, and exercise pressure to have better government policies (effective and efficient) and results. transparency of government actions has become an important issue. If foresight studies are to be used to formulate public policies, a more ample participation of citizens in the generation of future scenarios through formal channels is desirable. Many of the methods used in foresight involve expert opinions; but even in large foresight studies, the number of participants is limited, at the most, to a few hundred.

Some possibilities:

Radio and TV programs presenting alternative futures issues (the possible occurrence of a future bearing event, two or three short narratives of future scenarios, preferred values for the future, possible solutions to pressing issues, definition of key variables for the future, etc.), asking the audience to vote for one of the future options.

Short theater plays depicting alternative futures based on different assumptions, followed at the end by a brief questionnaire about future options related to them applied to the audience (theater plays can also be short films projected in public spaces).

Setting up a page to question visitors about different futures issues in an interactive manner
Simple simulation programs in the form of electronic games related to public policies and some of their possible future consequences.

Creating an interactive Museum of the Future to enrich the understanding of futures choices and public policies by citizens.

Engaging recognized novelists commissioning each of them to write a novel based on the description of one of the alternative scenarios. This would help to increase the "futures literacy" of the readers.

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FOUR FORESIGHT STUDIES: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND (SOME) LESSONS LEARNED

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MEXICO 2010 FORUM (1985)

Prompted by:

- Previous experiences in foresight exercises of topics/sectors; need for a global view.
- 1982 crisis generated a sense that the country was in the process of being reshaped.
- Climate of high uncertainty about the future.

Objective:

- ✓ To develop alternative futures trajectories (quinquennial) of the country from 1985-2010.
- ✓ Futures images should include quantitative and qualitative features.
- ✓ National scenarios to be built based on scenarios of 24 sectors/topics scenarios.
- ✓ Differentiate clearly between possible, probable, and desirable (undesirable) scenarios.

Funded by:

- Subscription scheme (60-100 sponsors). Not all sponsors were fully engaged with the Project.

Limitations:

- Young and unexperienced staff with little knowledge of foresight tools and techniques.
- Lack of a comprehensive historical data base (short series, not always reliable).
- Lack of an ample experts base in some topics.
- Delays due to disruption of infrastructure after the 1985 destructive earthquake

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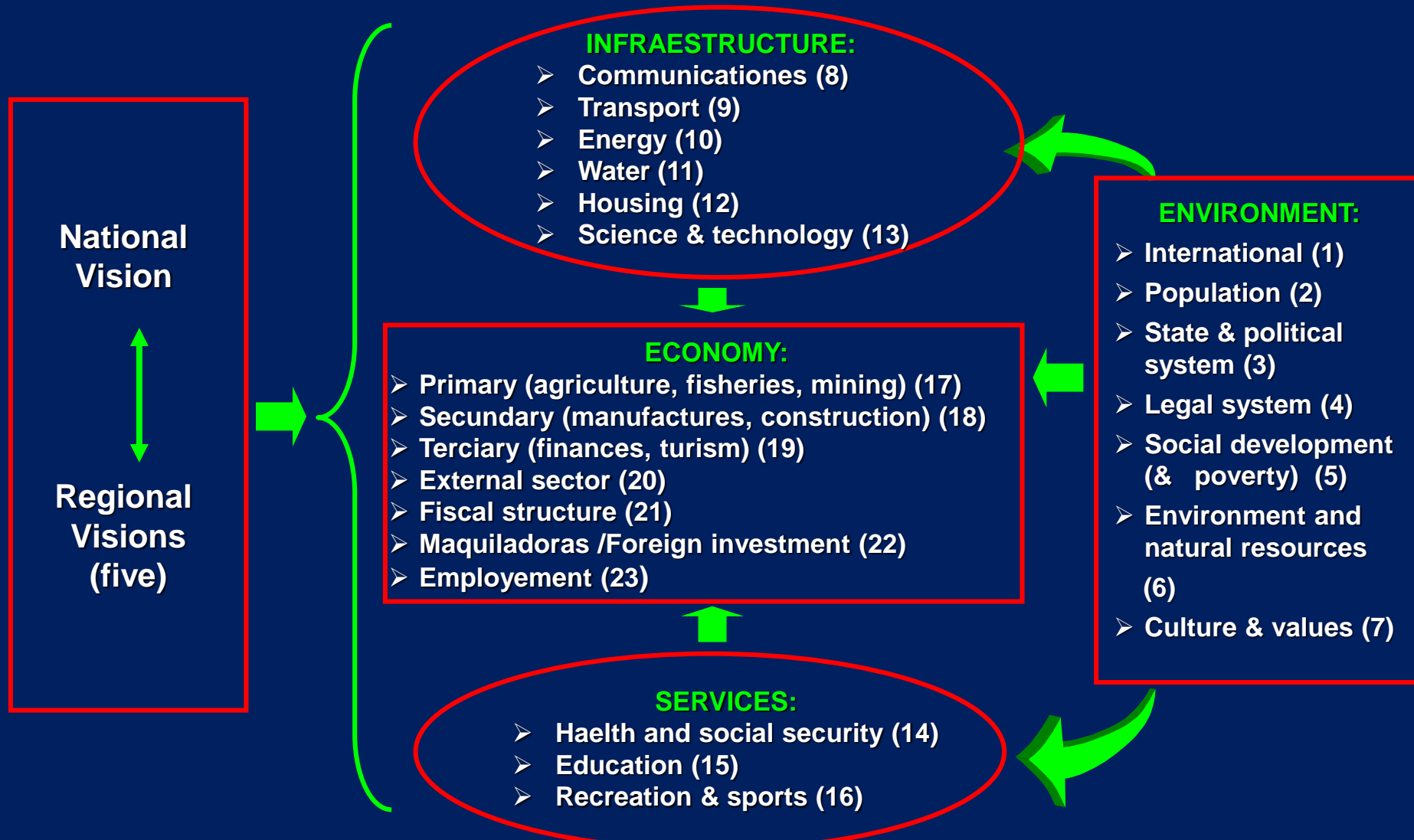
MEXICO 2010 FORUM

Some lessons learned:

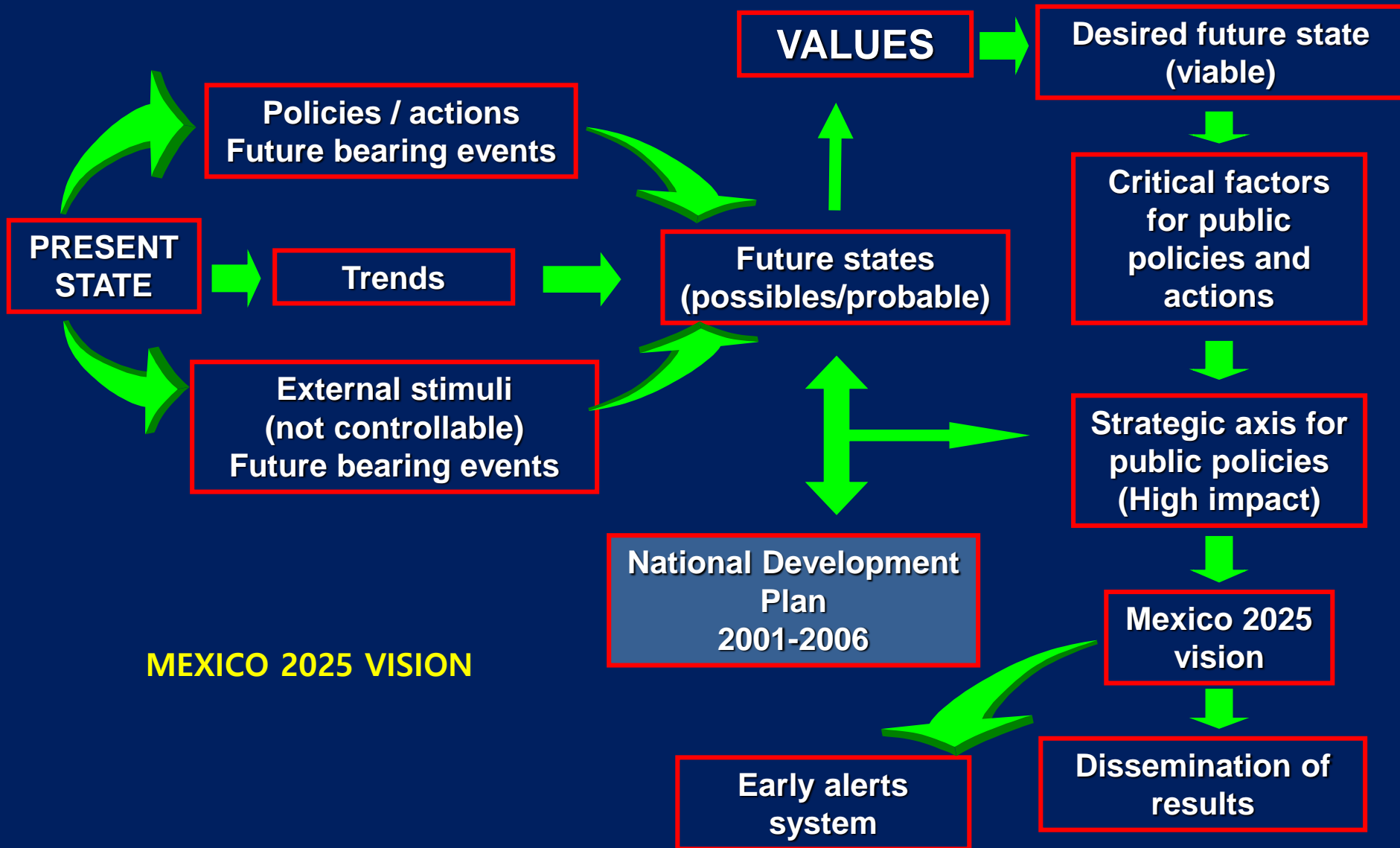
- Underestimated the resources needed (human, financial) for such an ambitious project.
- High rotation of experts in the consultation processes, demanding that their opinions be included in the results of workshops where they were absent (methodological problems).
- Insufficient (and/or no) links with those responsible of public policies design. Thus, little impact of the results.
- Cross-fertilization of ideas between topics/experts groups became more difficult than expected
- Experts invited to act as sector/topic coordinators tended to incorporate a too large number of driving variables (for some, reliable data were not even available or were hard to get).
- Sector/topic coordinators exerted pressure to disregard ideas which disagreed with their own models (limiting futures diversity).
- Integration of national scenarios based on the sectorial/topical scenarios proved to be a very complex issue.
- Scenarios containing both desirable and undesirable events/trends or very innovative ideas made it difficult for reviewers to select a preferred scenario in multi-objective, multi-criteria selection framework.

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MEXICO 2025 VISION: Analytic framework

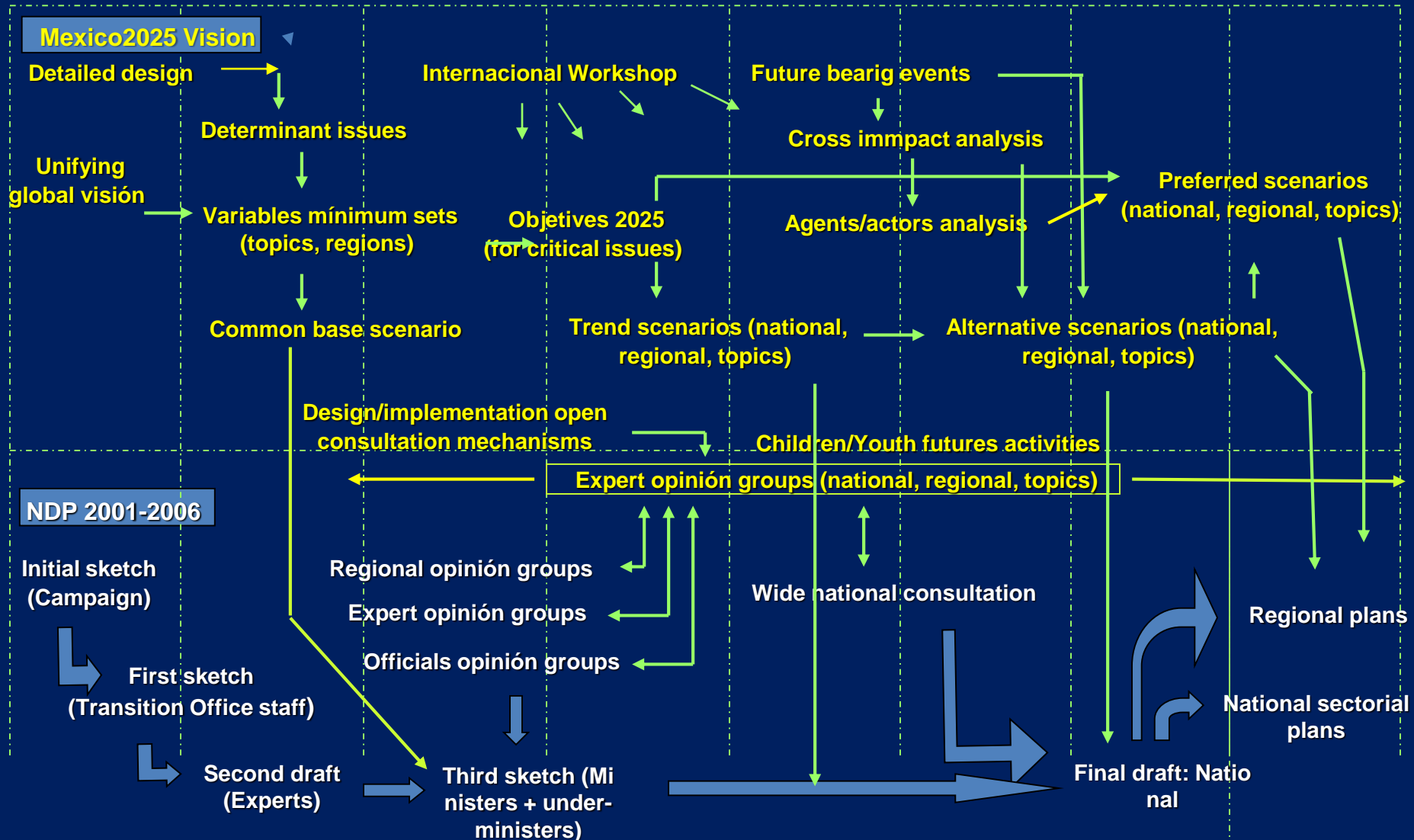


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Mexico 2025 Vision and National Development Plan 2001-2006



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Some lessons learned:

- A strong link with government officials (Presidential Office in this case) is no guarantee that the results of a foresight exercise will have a high impact on public policy's development.
- Foresight results must be public policy oriented if their objective is to influence policy decisions made by governmental bodies.
- Consequences of imagined futures for present public policies must be clearly stated.
- Total independence of the foresight processes must be clearly understood and accepted by all those engaged in the Project.
- The objective of exploring alternative futures, regardless of Public visibility may put unnecessary pressure on the foresight project; having a designated media liaison can help to reduce the pressure.
- In complex foresight projects it is essential to clearly describe its complexities and make sure that everyone involved in it understands them.
- Simple foresight exercises will be insufficient to analyze the complexities associated with national long term futures.

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HEALTH FUTURES IN MEXICO 2050. (2002)

Commissioned and funded by the under-Secretary for Innovation and Quality, Ministry of Health.

Objectives:

Explore present and future challenges and alternative futures (to the year 2050) to better serve the health care needs of the population. Four possible scenarios of the evolution of the National health System between 2000 and 2050 were developed and described. Future rate of change of 20 components of the health system and possible changes in the relative power of some 20 actors/agents of importance for decision making in the sector were explicitly explored.

Duration:

Three years. More than 25 futures workshops and two large Delphi studies. More than 600 participants

Results:

In spite of direct and heavy involvement of government officials in charge of public policies design, only vague references to this project recommendations were occasionally made, and only an incomplete implementation of some of them was weakly attempted. Perhaps this was because these same officials were in charge of maintaining the then current structure of the system and dealing with the many pressures associated with the day to day operation of a very complex and socially critical system. Separation (and Independence) of governmental bodies in charge of foresight from those in charge of operating the system under study is recommended.

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JALISCO TOWARDS THE FUTURE 2012-2032 (2011)

Commissioned by a local University and the Economic and Social Council of Jalisco (a collegiate and autonomous civil society organ consultant of the Government of the State of Jalisco). Extended re-edition of a successful 1999 project.

Objectives:

To develop a quantitative trend scenario and alternative scenarios of the State of Jalisco using futures workshops, a Delphi exercise, and a morphological analysis method, with the participation of an ample number of experts (more than 400).

Results:

Alternative scenarios were compared with a desirable scenario to determine possible opportunities for public policy actions. The possible future role of more than twenty different actors (or groups of actors) in shaping the futures of the State were explored, and were incorporated in the final version of three scenarios: "Probable"; "Erratic of high impact"; and "Desirable". The priority issues for the future of Jalisco derived from the scenarios and possible public policies to tackle them considered of higher priority were explored in an additional battery of workshops.

Results were presented in a meeting attended, among others, by the new government officials of the State of Jalisco (a new Governor had been elected in 2012), and were used by the Social and Economic Council of the State as part of its new agenda. However they had only limited influence in actual public policy design (the State's Development Plan for the period 2012-2018 had already been published).