The Futures of Governance and the Governance of the Future: Using the Future as a Governance Innovation

A collaborative research project

Draft Concept Note for Discussion

Prepared by Robin Bourgeois, Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation, University of Pretoria, South Africa and UMR ART-Dev, CIRAD, France.

Background

At the Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation, the term ‘governance’ entails a dimension which refers to the complexity of decision-making processes in contemporary political, social and economic affairs. This idea of governance presupposes a fragmentation and diffusion of authority among a diversity of organizations. Governance is hence represented concretely by the architecture of decision-making which develops both ‘vertically’ (as in hierarchical organization) and horizontally (as in networks).

Governance remains a contested issue, with different actors exerting different types and levels of influence. The concept of governance innovation as understood here refers to ideas, experiments and practices, in breach with existing ones or at least with the dominant ones: “Governance innovation indicates the continuous search for new paradigms to resolve social conflicts and strengthen cooperation across different sectors and among people. In a word, to achieve better policy decisions in an era characterized by complexity and a holistic understanding of well-being”.

Governance innovation needs to be also understood as a future-oriented concept. It requires not only an understanding of where we come from and where we are today, it requires also unveiling uncertainties about what the future states of governance could look like (the futures of governance) and using these uncertainties to explore forms of governance that differ from the existing/dominant
The forms innovative governance could take are expected to significantly modify the way our societies are managed, that is how, by whom, why and with what expected results. The question of the futures of governance has thus all the characteristics of a wicked problem, that is a “... class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing” (Churchman, 1967).

Research on the futures of governance is abundant in the Futures Studies literature as governance is often seen as a major source of uncertainty and the source of significant potential discontinuities (see Annotated bibliography in Annex 1). Futures studies on governance can be mobilized to i) take stock of what the futures of governance could look like through the exploration of existing alternative forms (pockets of the future in the present), ii) explore to what extent the use of anticipation and the development of futures literacy in governance can be by itself a governance innovation, in particular to what extent the use of the future in decision making (such as anticipatory governance) can contribute to the emergence of alternative/original forms of governance, and iii) explore and discuss the implications for present and future governance of the future.

**Objectives**

This research project on the futures of governance and the governance of the future has therefore a primary objective to generate knowledge regarding these three elements. It is also an applied research project whose second objective is to connect this knowledge generation process with empirical work, in dialogic way, with a particular, but not exclusive, focus on Africa. For this purpose, it is designed to be a process of collective investigation involving i) people with a taste for future-oriented postures and interested in the issue of governance and ii) people facing governance issues who are interested in using the future.

**Design**

Tentatively the research project is structured along the lines of the three points identified above. The first line (blue column in Fig 1), exploring the futures of governance, is intended to be developed through two connected research streams, one is a critical review of the relevant literature, and one is an exploration of the seeds of governance in Africa through a collective reflection using a future-oriented approach with a diversity of participants from various backgrounds.

The second element (green column in Fig 1), anticipation and futures literacy as a part of governance innovation, has also two connected research streams. One is based on the review of the literature and one is based on an application to the governance of territorial development in Africa.

The third element (red column in Fig 1), the governance of the future, has also two connected dimensions, a reflection about the importance of who controls the future in innovating forms of governance and an applied dimension to the question of the sustainable development goals which are seen today as the major reference for shaping the future of the planet.

The overall research process can be tentatively represented as in figure 1 where the central boxes represent the three components of the research. The upper boxes correspond to the acquisition of information through review of existing literature, the lower boxes indicate how this would be applied. Connecting arrows are labeled to indicate how these different elements relate in a systemic approach of the issue, rather than a linear approach.
Implementation strategy

This research project is facilitated by the Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation, a joint research centre currently involving the University of Pretoria where it is based, CIRAD and the University of Western Cape.

The implementation of its activities, production of outputs and outcomes will rely on the contribution of a network of committed professionals from various background who share a genuine interest in transforming governance through a combined conceptual and practical framework. An important component of the research process is therefore the identification of these professionals and how they will be willing to engage in that process. This is a post-normal scientific project seeking to unveil uncertainties and complexity, valuing a plurality of perspectives and recognizing their legitimacy. Rather than seeking to establish a truth on governance innovation it will explore the quality of this issue. It will connect scientists with people and society, building an extended peer community (EPC) in the form of a networked initiative that will not be dominated by a single person or institution. Roles, responsibilities and activities will be shared and developed around the different components by participating people and/or teams. Authority is substituted by responsibility and commitment and decisions will be made within self-organized teams and via transparent rules to be agreed upon, binding all in the same way once a critical mass of interested participants has been reached. Meanwhile, the kick-start of this initiative is coordinated and facilitated by the Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation, operating as a trigger.

Where we stand and the next steps

So far, we have a (this) draft concept note, proposed as a zero draft to be discussed and amended so that it will serve as a starting point and a reference framework for the extended peer community.

A first literature review has been undertaken as indicated in Annex1.

The next steps include the dissemination of this draft concept note among potential interested people who would be willing to join and contribute to the implementation of the project. Dissemination will take place through the following channels:
• GovInn website: [http://governanceinnovation.org/research-projects/](http://governanceinnovation.org/research-projects/)
• ResearchGate: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robin_Bourgeois](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robin_Bourgeois)
• Direct contacts are currently taken with people who could be interested regarding their potential participation to the extended peer community of the project and further diffusion of the concept note.

A three-month period is being considered starting February 1, 2018 for expression of interest, feedback and progressive constitution of the extended peer community. Results will be made available with open access. The EPC will then provide inputs on more operational organizational and operational aspects regarding the implementation of the project. A second advanced draft with some operational content is expected to be ready for and disseminated by end of May 2018.

For more information and contact:
robin.bourgeois@cirad.fr
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robin_Bourgeois](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robin_Bourgeois)
ANNEX 1. ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

References for “future governance”

Note: Generic information about governance from a future-oriented perspective


References for “future(s) of governance”

Note: Specific information about how governance could look like in the future, including what some of its features could be


References for “governance scenario”

Note: Scenarios of governance


References for “anticipatory governance”

Note: The concept of “anticipatory governance” as an emerging/new form of governance


Reference for “governance of the future” and epistemology

Note: Reflections on the issue of controlling the use of the future as part of anticipatory governance, or controlling anticipatory governance.


Cairns, G., Wright, G., Van der Heijden, K., Bradfield, R., Burt, G., 2006. Enhancing foresight between multiple agencies: Issues in the use of scenario thinking to overcome fragmentation. Futures 38,
References for “participatory governance”

Note: Reflections on the issue of future participation in governance (who is involved)


References for “democracy”

Note: The question of democracy from a future-oriented perspective.


References for “participatory democracy”

Note: Participation in future forms of democracy
