

# 11. Anticipation and futures knowledge in policy and strategy-making at the local level in Finland

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## INTRODUCTION

In a turbulent world, municipalities face complex challenges like an ageing population, increased immigration, and issues induced by climate change, such as heavy rains or flooding. Addressing such challenges requires anticipation, strategic thinking, and long-term planning (Bryson, 2010; Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017; Zeemering, 2018). In Finland, it is mandatory to have a municipal strategy (Local Government Act 2015). A good municipal strategy should anticipate the future and set the goals and vision for long-term planning in the municipality. This kind of future thinking is beneficial for all involved organizations (Wilkinson, 2016). However, municipal strategies can be merely mechanistic papers that lack the features of a good quality future plan (Guyadeen et al., 2023; Kettunen et al., 2020). It can also be argued that a municipal strategy that includes anticipation is essential for public governance to strengthen opportunities and minimize risks in the future (Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017; Poli, 2021). Global megatrends and sudden events, such as digitalization or the war in Ukraine, influence municipalities in Finland, but the effects can vary depending on the municipality. It appears to be impossible to keep up with the pace of changes since the systems and procedures in public governance in Finland are not very responsive to sudden changes. Consequently, it is important for local governments to be able to anticipate changes and understand how the future of the municipality can be influenced by these changes and current decisions (Poli, 2021). Thinking ahead and preparing for the future can be facilitated by strategic thinking and creating futures knowledge (Bryson, 2010; Heino, 2021; Kettunen et al., 2020; Poursu et al., 2019). Further, strategic thinking and the creation of futures knowledge support local governments in anticipating the future. As a matter of fact, anticipation can be considered an aspect of good governance (Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017; Wilkinson, 2016); it is

beneficial for local governments as well as organizations and individuals. With anticipation, municipalities can be prepared for the future and make better decisions today while also considering the future.

Public government bodies are, of course, interested in the future. In fact, states, regions, and cities are increasingly considering the future as an object of governance. According to Jones (2019), government bodies at different levels have at least three reasons for aiming to govern while bearing the future in mind. The first is to avoid the threats and fears associated with the future. There might be certain unwanted events and developments that the government wishes to restrict and prevent. These might be related to climate change, pollution, criminality, terrorism, pandemics, and so forth. The second reason is to pursue the possibilities available in the future and fulfil desires for a better life. This is related to a hope for a better and more equitable society. It also involves the idea that the future has numerous open possibilities. Jones (2019) points out that hope is as strong a motivation as fear is. The third reason is simply to ease decision-making and improve governance by having some knowledge of the future. When the future is predictable, it will ease governance and, consequently, improve society. In practice, this is often considered as a desire to build models and scenarios for the future.

Overall, there is interest among municipalities to govern for the future and change the future of their capabilities and scope of operations, and there are methods and tools that can aid in anticipating the future. Strategic thinking is one method to anticipate and create futures knowledge in municipalities (Bryson, 2010). However, it is unknown how municipalities in Finland anticipate the future and create and use futures knowledge in their strategy-making. These are the aspects that are investigated in this chapter. First, I study anticipatory actions and strategic behaviour in municipalities in Finland. Then, I examine anticipation-related practices from two perspectives – immigration and sustainability. Immigration and sustainability are both future-related topics. Immigration is a growing phenomenon in Nordic countries; it is becoming essential to balance the shortfall in labour, particularly in Finland (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020). Thus, it is vital to prepare for increasing immigration in order to integrate newcomers into society and avoid disorder and confrontations (Deas & Hincks, 2014). Similarly, sustainability is an issue that must be anticipated (Zeemering, 2018). Sustainability is a long-term issue and achieving sustainability requires future orientation and strategic thinking. Both issues are also global and are subject to different goals and agreements. However, local governments are key players in both these issues (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020; Zeemering, 2018).

The first section of this chapter discusses anticipation and future-oriented strategic thinking in municipalities. It defines the three key concepts used in this chapter – anticipation, strategic thinking, and futures knowledge. The

second section presents the methodology used in this chapter. The third section discusses the results, focusing on strategic thinking, knowledge creation, and anticipation, and presents two cases of immigration and sustainability. The last section presents the conclusions of this research.

## ANTICIPATION AND FUTURE-ORIENTED STRATEGIC THINKING IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE

Anticipatory actions in municipalities are related to planning and strategies (Guyadeen et al., 2023; Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017). Obviously, all decision-making in a municipality should include anticipation at a certain level (Wilkinson, 2016). Yet, strategies and strategy-making – which is a mandatory process for all Finnish municipalities – should undoubtedly be a future-oriented process. Therefore, I study the strategy processes of municipalities to discover their anticipatory practices. I argue that municipalities display anticipatory and strategic behaviour when they think long term, involve stakeholders in strategy formulation, and create futures knowledge by collecting information and observing their operational environment (Kettunen et al., 2020).

The three key concepts used in this chapter are anticipation, strategic thinking, and futures knowledge, all of which are related to each other and support each other. In this chapter, I consider anticipation as an umbrella concept under which strategic thinking and futures knowledge bring in the content. Various methods of strategic thinking facilitate anticipation. In addition, the four elements of strategic thinking – understanding the content and context; long-term planning; stakeholder participation; and knowledge collection – are also essential for creating futures knowledge. Both futures knowledge and strategic thinking are required in decision-making (Bryson, 2010; Pouru et al., 2019). Most municipalities collect information and continue to monitor their operational environments at a certain level. However, often, the created knowledge is inefficiently used in anticipation, policy, and decision-making processes (Guyadeen et al., 2023; Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017; Wilkinson, 2016). Moreover, public sector governance requires futures knowledge and strategic thinking to improve decision-making. Governing the future is related to these key concepts that provide various tools, like observing trends and collecting information, for the necessary actions.

### **Anticipation**

It can be said that human beings are constantly anticipating. It is important for us all to be cognizant of anticipation to create future plans. Anticipation is also vital for public decision-making, as the intention is to organize society and steer its future developments (Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017). In the absence

of anticipation, decision-makers are required to react to changes and issues when they are already taking place, which might be too late to influence these issues (Granjou et al., 2017). Reacting to changes might require difficult and costly decisions. Anticipation can help deal with harmful events and complex issues. For example, this is evident in environmental and climate change issues. It is important to anticipate future issues while we can still influence them with current decisions (Granjou et al., 2017; Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017). Anticipation is a means to shape the future in the present (Poli, 2021). There are numerous practices and methods to practise anticipation. In this chapter, anticipation is defined in the context of anticipatory practices of municipal organizations (Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017). Employing anticipatory actions requires an understanding of how to use the future in the present (Poli, 2021). All municipal decisions have the power to influence the future. Whether it is a consideration of reducing the education budget or building a new concert hall for the municipality, all decisions have a specific impact on the future as well as on different actors and stakeholders in the future. Therefore, it is vital to consider the future impacts of decisions in the long term. For example, short-sighted savings can lead to incurring huge costs in the future if the future is not considered.

### **Strategic Thinking**

Strategic thinking is one mode of anticipation. It is based on a long-term perspective and knowledge utilization to obtain long-range benefits and is a tool and method for governing the future (Bryson, 2010; Kettunen et al., 2020). Strategic thinking is a vital part of strategic management and planning and, in the context of local government, it is often emphasized in urban planning and urban sustainability. Strategic thinking is a facilitated method for considering the context and future over a longer period (Bryson, 2010). With strategic thinking, local governments are able to modify the vision and goals of the organization, understand the aims and impacts of current decisions, and look deeply into the future (Bryson, 2010; Zeemering, 2018).

Bryson (2010, p. 264) defines strategic thinking as ‘thinking in context about how to pursue purposes or achieve goals’. Strategic thinking in the local government context includes four elements (Kettunen et al., 2020). The first element is thinking and understanding the context and content. This requires observing and studying the operational environment and the topic at hand. For example, sustainable development is a topic commonly addressed by local municipalities but, first, it would require understanding the content of sustainability (Bryson, 2010; Zeemering, 2018). For example, sustainability has different dimensions (economic, environmental, and social) that are interconnected. Without this understanding, it can be difficult to consider issues that

need solving and ensure that these solutions do not generate new problems. In addition, it is important to consider the kind of operational environment a municipality has and how municipal decisions can change things.

The second element of strategic thinking is long-term planning (Bryson, 2010; Kettunen et al., 2020; Zeemering, 2018). This requires the ability to consider the future from a long-term perspective as well as consider the consequences of current decisions in the future. For municipalities, this implies periods of ten years or longer. Shorter perspectives often limit thinking and exclude future challenges and opportunities from discussion. Long-term planning in strategic thinking enables preparation for surprises and uncertainties.

The third element of strategic thinking is stakeholder involvement (Kettunen et al., 2020; Zeemering, 2018). Stakeholder groups provide new perspectives and a wider understanding regarding topical issues. Stakeholder involvement improves the quality of thinking by challenging assumptions and increasing knowledge sharing and co-learning. Finally, the fourth element of strategic thinking is knowledge collection. Different types of knowledge from different sources create a wider knowledge base for the assessment of risks and opportunities, as well direct discussion of desired futures. Systematic collection of data, statistics, and other types of knowledge enables the identification of trends and emerging tendencies. Such knowledge collection also benefits futures knowledge creation (Heino, 2021).

## **Futures Knowledge**

Futures knowledge is usually written in plural form, thereby indicating the idea that there are always alternative futures (Poli, 2021). The future can be realized in different forms depending on the decisions taken in the present. Therefore, the future is always open and has different possibilities (Heino, 2021; Poli, 2021). These different options and possibilities should be considered in advance in governance and decision-making. Futures knowledge is also called anticipatory knowledge (Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017). Futures knowledge can help municipalities and all involved decision-makers to anticipate the possible and probable developments and to foresee and consider the effects of these developments on certain decisions (Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017; Poursu et al., 2019).

Further, observing the operational environment, understanding history, and recognizing current trends and megatrends are important elements of futures knowledge. Combining different types of knowledge and data sources provides a wider base for the creation of futures knowledge and decision-making (Guyadeen et al., 2023; Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017). A good knowledge base supports the assessment of risks and opportunities and helps to analyse possible future developments. Furthermore, it is vital to include stakeholders in

municipality-related processes to create futures knowledge. This also includes different sectors that come under the governance of municipalities, as there can be a gap in knowledge exchange among sectors. Combining the knowledge of individuals and groups from different backgrounds can open new perspectives for the future (Fuller & Loogma, 2009; Pouri et al., 2019). Creation of futures knowledge involves knowledge regarding the past and present, which should be evaluated, interpreted, and justified as part of a social process (Fuller & Loogma, 2009; Heino, 2021). In municipalities, this would require connections and discussions among different sectors (for example, health care, urban environment planning, and education) and with their stakeholders.

## MUNICIPALITY SURVEYS ON ANTICIPATION AND FUTURES KNOWLEDGE

Two electronic surveys were employed to study how municipalities in Finland anticipate the future and how they create and utilize futures knowledge. These surveys were part of the data collection process of a research project called Urbanization, Mobilities, and Immigration (URMI), which was funded by the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland. Both electronic surveys were sent to all 311 municipalities in Finland.

The first survey was conducted in the autumn of 2016 and focused on the topic of immigration. The survey targeted immigration coordinators or other officials who dealt with immigration issues in municipalities. The second survey was conducted in the spring of 2017, and its topic was sustainability and related actions in municipalities. This survey was targeted at officials who deal with strategic decisions. Both surveys included a few questions regarding the future and anticipation.

In addition to the two surveys, 26 expert interviews were conducted to support this data. The interviewees were representatives of municipalities and ministries that were participating in a futures workshop related to urbanization in Finland.

With the help of this data, I attempt to answer the following question: Do municipalities in Finland anticipate the future and utilize futures knowledge in policy- and strategy-making? This question is first examined by studying anticipatory actions and strategic behaviour in municipalities in Finland. Then, this question is examined from two perspectives – immigration and sustainability. A few of the results are derived from research articles that use these same datasets. One article is on immigration and municipal strategies (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020) and the other is on strategic thinking and sustainability (Kettunen et al., 2020). Both of these topics are related to the future of the municipalities.

## ANTICIPATORY ACTIONS, STRATEGIC THINKING, AND CREATION OF FUTURES KNOWLEDGE IN MUNICIPALITIES

In this section, I investigate how the elements of strategic thinking are utilized in strategy processes in Finnish municipalities. First, I identify the individuals or units who lead strategy work and all those who are involved in the process. Then, I study the time horizons of the strategies. Thereafter, I concentrate on the creation of futures knowledge. It includes collecting information on the current state of matters and observing the operational environment. Understanding megatrends, trends, and driving forces benefits anticipation and the creation of futures knowledge. In addition, stakeholder involvement also improves futures knowledge (Heino, 2021; Pouru et al., 2019).

### **Leaders of Strategy Work**

The survey asked who is leading the future-oriented work or strategy work in the municipality. Most of the respondents named a single person who was leading this type of work. Moreover, approximately 73% of the municipalities stated that future-oriented and strategy work is led by the mayor, municipal manager, or other leading officials in the municipality. Most often, the mayor or municipal manager was named as the leading figure in this regard. In 20% of answers, a certain group was named as responsible for future-oriented work or strategy work. Most often, this group was the management group of the city or the strategy group; in a few cases, it was some kind of development committee. A minority of respondents (7%) said that work was led by a pair of individuals. The pair included the municipal manager and some other key official, like the chief administration officer or the director of the municipal board. Of course, this question does not indicate the type or quality of anticipatory actions in the municipality. These individuals or groups can lead future-oriented work and strategy work very well or very poorly. However, it is evident that, very often, the responsibility for this type of work is on one individual. These individuals have plenty of power to influence the future of the municipality, especially if they are not willing to broadly involve other people and groups in strategy formulation processes. Next, I examine who can participate in strategy formulation in municipalities.

### **Involving Stakeholders in Strategy-making**

Involving stakeholders in strategy work is one element of strategic thinking (Kettunen et al., 2020; Zeemering, 2018) and it also supports futures

knowledge creation. According to survey results, it is mainly the top management of the municipality that is involved in strategy work (Kettunen et al., 2020). This includes mayors and municipal managers, a few key officials, and municipal boards and councils. Stakeholder groups rarely participate or are invited to participate in strategy work. Only 14–18% of municipalities state that the staff of the municipality, local companies, or local inhabitants participate in strategy work. This implies that the perspective in strategy-making is narrower when there are fewer participants. Obviously, it is understandable that involving more people is more expensive or at least more time-consuming. Yet, local governments must find ways to expand their perspectives in order to benefit strategy-making and improve their understanding of the future.

### **Timeframes of the Strategies**

A long timeframe for the strategy is another indicator of strategic thinking (Bryson, 2010; Kettunen et al., 2020; Zeemering, 2018). Long-term planning demonstrates the ability to consider the future and reflect on the consequences of current decisions in the coming years. Just over half of the respondents reported that the timeframe of the municipal strategy is between 5 and 15 years, which can be considered a medium–long timeframe. Moreover, 42% stated that their strategy timeframe is only four years, which constitutes one election period (Kettunen et al., 2020); this is quite a short period. Strategies that have a timeframe of less than five years are rather short-sighted. A short-sighted perspective often limits the thinking and particularly the discussion regarding consequences in the long term. A short-term perspective hinders the dialogue regarding future challenges and opportunities. Similarly, it also prohibits the preparation for uncertainties and surprises. Often, considering these types of events is easily forgotten when the timeframe is short. Ten years should be a sufficiently long time period to consider alternative futures and reflect upon different possibilities and challenges as well as be prepared for surprises. Only a few municipalities responded that their strategy framework is over 15 years (Kettunen et al., 2020). It appears that only half of the municipalities even consider taking the long-term future into account.

### **Futures Knowledge Creation and the Ability to Influence the Future**

The survey also asked how much information the municipality collects systematically. This information included different types of data and information that are specific to the municipality, excluding financial accounts. Only a few municipalities indicated that they collect a substantial amount of information and data from different sources. Further, 38% of the municipalities stated that they collect a lot of information on their own municipality. However, 33% of

the respondents stated that municipalities collect a moderate amount of information, and the remaining 22% stated that they collect only a little information or nothing at all (Kettunen et al., 2020). Next, the survey asked how much of this collected information is used in decision-making. Half of the respondents stated that the information is used reasonably well. Only 39% said that they use a substantial amount of the collected information in decision-making. If municipalities or, in particular, decision-makers in the municipality are not aware of the current state of affairs in the municipality, it will make the decision, as well the future outlook, vague. However, a solid knowledge base would ease decision-making and support building a path to the future (Guyadeen et al., 2023).

Similarly, collecting knowledge from the operational environment and following the surrounding changes, trends, and driving forces will support anticipation and preparation for the future (Petit Jean & Brunet, 2017; Wilkinson, 2016). Additionally, in the survey, I asked how much attention is given to different future drivers in the municipal strategy. Most attention (83% of municipalities) is given to changes in economic structures locally or nationally. In second place are changes in administrative structures and then changes in population structures. The least attention is given to environmental issues and issues related to climate change. An average amount of attention is given to different types of migration processes and the increase of geographical inequality and inequality among various population groups. Of course, all these issues or drivers are important for municipalities and should be considered when preparing for the future. It can be alarming that economic structures grab all the attention because it can be much more expensive to subsequently correct errors, for example, those related to environmental issues or inequality.

Importantly, all the decisions and selection of attention are derived from the idea of how much a municipality can influence its own future, capabilities, and scope for action. According to the survey, 43% of municipalities believe that they have the possibility of influencing their future capabilities. These municipalities trust that their actions and decisions steer the future. However, a majority of the respondents state that they have only limited possibilities to influence their future. If this group is studied further by the size of the municipality (population), it becomes evident that the larger municipalities have more trust in their own capabilities to influence the future (Table 11.1).

### **Anticipation Related to Immigration**

In a recent article, I studied the relationship between immigration and strategic planning and showed that municipalities in Finland inadequately include immigration in their strategies (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020). This can be the case even when immigration is expected to increase significantly in that

*Table 11.1 Municipalities' capabilities to influence their own future scope of operations, by population size*

Population	Little	Some	Much	Very much	Total
< 9,600	8	29	14	6	57
9,600–50,000	1	17	15	5	38
50,001–100,000	0	4	3	1	8
>100,001	0	3	2	0	5
Total	9	53	34	12	108

*Source:* Author's own.

municipality. On average, the respondents expected the number of immigrants in Finland to increase by 60% in 10 years, which is a significant number. According to the survey, 25% of those municipalities that expect immigration to increase significantly (over 100%) have not considered immigration in the municipal strategy (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020). In particular, rural and semi-urban municipalities tend to ignore immigration. However, approximately half of the rural municipalities and over 70% of the semi-urban municipalities were expecting immigration to increase in their municipality. Thus, urban municipalities more frequently consider immigration in their strategies (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020). Almost all the urban municipalities expected immigration to increase, and the immigrant population in these municipalities is also the highest. Thus, even though immigration is an urban phenomenon, it is expected to be a solution for the diminishing population in rural and semi-urban municipalities.

The second survey asked how much attention is given to different future changes, developments, or driving forces in the municipal strategy. Only 19% of the municipalities responded 'give much or give very much attention to immigration and migration' in their strategies. When this response is studied in terms of the population size of the municipality, we can observe that the smallest municipalities, which are usually rural, tend to pay less attention to this issue, while bigger and urban municipalities often give more attention to this issue in their strategy. The disparity in thinking about the future between the rural and urban municipalities is evident here as well.

In summary, it is mainly the biggest urban municipalities that plan for immigration and include immigration in their strategies, although almost all the municipalities studied expect immigration to increase (Heino & Jauhiainen, 2020). Naturally, to a certain extent, this is not only a matter of resources but also a matter of choice. There are political and other interests (e.g., personal

or commercial interests) that are steering the strategy processes. However, ignoring a clear driving force reveals a poor understanding of anticipation and future preparedness.

### **Anticipation Related to Sustainability**

In a recent article, I examined how strategic thinking is related to commitment to sustainability issues (Kettunen et al., 2020). In that article, I confirmed the idea that strategic thinking is beneficial for sustainability and increases the engagement of municipalities in sustainability issues, and also examined the four elements of strategic thinking in relation to sustainable behaviour. For example, municipalities that had a separate sustainability strategy were more engaged with sustainability issues. This goes along with the first element of strategic thinking – that is, understanding the content and the context (Bryson, 2010). A distinct sustainability strategy helps municipalities concentrate on the topic and understand the complexity of sustainability. It also supports municipalities in focusing and managing organizational processes towards achieving sustainability (Zeemering, 2018).

According to the second element of strategic thinking, the article analysed the timeframes of municipal strategies (Kettunen et al., 2020). There was a clear statistical difference in the timeframes between sustainability-oriented municipalities and municipalities that were not very engaged in sustainability. This result suggests that thinking about sustainability is related to a longer future perspective or vice versa. Overall, municipalities that act and plan for sustainability also look further into the future.

The third element is stakeholder participation, which allows for capacity development and also enhances the knowledge base for strategy-making (Bryson, 2010; Zeemering, 2018). In the context of this element, all the Finnish municipalities were rather similar. The one difference was that municipalities that have the sustainability strategy involved more municipal personnel in strategy formulation, thereby implying that interaction among experts within the municipality is valuable for addressing sustainability (Kettunen et al., 2020).

The fourth element of strategic thinking is knowledge collection and utilization. The study revealed that those municipalities that have a sustainability plan were more actively and systematically collecting data for strategy formulation than other municipalities (Kettunen et al., 2020). Thus, active knowledge collection was related to strategic thinking.

In conclusion, the municipalities that performed well in the different elements of strategic thinking are also more engaged in sustainability issues. Thus, it can be said that strategic thinking is beneficial for municipalities'

sustainability objectives and supports the achievement of the long-term targets of these municipalities.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter set out to evaluate whether municipalities in Finland anticipate the future and utilize futures knowledge. Anticipation helps decision-makers to understand possible future developments and, thus, adjust their decisions, choices, and conclusions accordingly. The results of this investigation reveal that anticipatory practices are beneficial, but they are not widely used. It appears that even though local governments in Finland aim to govern the future, most lack the tools or skills for this. Naturally, municipal resources also influence anticipatory practices. For example, the collection and handling of data and involvement of stakeholders require resources. Larger municipalities have more resources, which can be seen as being better engaged in future issues. This research also revealed that futures knowledge is an unutilized resource. However, observing the operational environment and attempting to understand the context and content is possible for all municipal officials and decision-makers. Nevertheless, municipalities appear to give selective attention to certain types of changes in their operational environment. For example, municipalities consider changes in financial structures and technological development more important than the risks introduced by social inequalities or climate change. Yet, if not handled in time, all these changes can have major implications for the future of the municipalities.

Further, this chapter identified that stakeholder involvement in strategy processes is not very common. In addition, collecting knowledge and information and utilizing that in decision-making is done well only in certain municipalities. Therefore, it can be said that futures knowledge and strategic thinking are lacking at the municipal level in Finland, even though these kinds of anticipatory practices would benefit municipalities and help them to avoid pitfalls. It is also vital to understand that the future is open and there are always different alternatives for the future. The decisions taken by municipalities in the present will likely influence how the future will be created for them.

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