

THE TRAGEDY OF THE TIME HORIZON: NAVIGATING SHORT-TERMISM FOR LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Future-orientated thinking needs to be strengthened in planning and policy making to respond to the challenges posed by 'presentism'. Despite the inherent uncertainty of the future, effective planning and policy making require the ability to envision potential future developments and implications of today's decisions. The 'tragedy of the time horizon' emphasises the detrimental effects of short-term thinking on various domains, including the environment, economic stability, and social equity. It encompasses the multifaceted challenges posed by short-term thinking and the neglect of long-term consequences. To combat this, we must boost our future literacy, i.e. the capacity to imagine, read, and use the future, both at the individual and societal levels. Future literacy is vital for navigating uncertainty, making strategic decisions, embracing innovation, enhancing social resilience, and promoting sustainable development. This requires a collective effort to improve future literacy skills, foster imagination and creativity, and overcome the challenges of 'the tyranny of now'. Envisioning positive futures is crucial for inspiring hope, collaboration, and informed decision-making, particularly in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords

Presentism, foresight, future literacy, myopia, imaginary crisis

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Introduction

The future exists only in our imagination. Nevertheless, we must not neglect it, not at least because policy making and planning are about shaping the future.

The future is uncertain and cannot be predicted. New trends, poor policy implementation or unexpected responses by citizens and enterprises might influence the outcome and have unforeseen consequences. Furthermore, sudden incidents and disruptions might change the game rapidly or even entirely plough up the playing field. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine are examples for such disruptions.

Still, good policy making and planning require the capacity to imagine the general shape of the future in a way that allows for proper planning in the present and offers an antidote to widespread 'presentism'. Strengthening the future dimension already in the analysis and preparation stages of policy and planning processes can be done through future-orientated approaches enriching and complementing data analysis. This may involve more foresight-orientated work, strengthening critical and lateral forward thinking in a structured and constructive way. Furthermore, considering extreme impacts of possible wild cards may lead to the discovery of new opportunities and risks, and the establishment of early warning systems of their potential arrival. (Böhme et al., 2020; Böhme and Lüer, 2016; ESPON, 2018, 2022; Steinmüller and Steinmüller, 2003)

At the same time planners often have only limited resources and capacities to imagine, assess and consider the full range of possible future pathways. Such 'policy myopia' (Nair and Howlett, 2017) cannot be solved even with more and better data and information. This leads us to the 'tragedy of the time horizon' and the need for future literacy, two topics which I have explored in previous blog posts.²

The tragedy of the time horizon

In today's fast-paced world, instant gratification and quick results dominate our lives. We are rather impatient and want it all and want it now. This attitude towards the future can be described as 'tempus nullius', 'nobody's time' as our views are clouded by political and social myopia (ESPON, 2022; Krznaric, 2020). This 'presentism' threatens our ability to make decisions with long-term benefits. It often results in short-sighted political decisions that prioritise immediate gains and current generations over future ones, which are more affected by current decisions.

That is when one talks about the 'tragedy of the time horizon' (Skovgaard Petersen, 2023), which can be understood as the little cousin of the 'tragedy of the commons'. The widely known concept of the 'tragedy of the commons' refers to a situation where individuals, acting in their own self-interest, deplete or exploit a shared resource, leading to its degradation, despite the negative consequences for everyone involved. It highlights the conflict between individual and collective interests when managing common resources. Adding a temporal component to this concept to reflect our responsibilities for the future or even for future generations, we arrive at the 'tragedy of the time horizon'. It refers to a situation where entrenched short-termism undermines our ability to make decisions with long-term-benefits.

In such a political and social myopia short-sighted, decision-making and thinking risk making decisions in favour of short-term results – rather than long-term changes – and neglecting potential long-term consequences of our actions, impeding progress in various areas. It prioritises current generations over future ones, who will be more affected by current decisions, as illustrated by a few examples (Böhme, 2023b):

² Blog post on the tragedy of the time horizon (June 2023) <https://steadyhq.com/en/spatialforesight/posts/f0ba83bd-9bd7-4753-8f26-8d5b138f05b3>

Blog post on future literacy (August 2023) <https://steadyhq.com/en/spatialforesight/posts/ca9c4162-4682-462e-8302-dd6f1243dbbe>

Environmental implications of transient decision-making. Nowhere is the grave peril of short-term thinking more pronounced than in the realm of environmental degradation. The exigency of addressing issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss necessitates an unwavering commitment to long-term considerations. Yet, time and again, the allure of immediate gains eclipses the far-reaching consequences of resource depletion, pollution, and climate change. The refusal to adequately address these concerns not only exacerbates the likelihood of resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, and an increasingly unstable climate but also threatens to irrevocably undermine the prospects of future generations.

Fragility of long-term economic stability. The ripples of short-term thinking extend to the economic landscape, where they can manifest as profound instability. The relentless pursuit of immediate gains, at the expense of investments in research, innovation, and development, undermines the foundations of sustained growth and dynamism. This approach leaves economies woefully unprepared for the shocks, market downturns, and financial crises that inevitably emerge. The imperative to strike a balance between short-term success and long-term resilience becomes self-evident.

Social equity in balance. Confronting the challenge of social inequality demands a commitment to sustained efforts and far-sighted visions. Regrettably, the predilection for short-term gains frequently perpetuates disparities, favouring immediate advantages for a select few while relegating investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure that yield broader societal benefits. The confluence of short-term thinking and inequity undermines social cohesion, stalling the momentum of long-term societal progress and engendering an environment ripe for discontent.

Navigating the shoals – strategies for overcoming short-termism. The imperative to counteract short-termism begins with an unflinching acknowledgment of its existence. Embracing the discipline of future thinking and foresight processes offers a mechanism to explore myriad potential futures and proactively prepare for uncertainty. Methodologies such as scenario planning not only inform decision-making burdened by significant time lags but also facilitate nuanced understanding of the intricacies of complex social-ecological systems. As societies grapple with the fatigue of past crises and mounting divisions, rekindling discussions about Europe's societal landscape becomes paramount, birthing a collective vision that subdues short-termism in favour of enduring progress.

Fostering a collective vision for a resilient tomorrow. Central to the endeavour of overcoming short-termism is the cultivation of a shared vision for the future. The 'tragedy of the time horizon' accentuates the urgency of collectively envisioning positive trajectories. Against the backdrop of societal strife and uncertainty, nurturing dialogues about the fabric of Europe's society and spatial patterns emerges as an imperative. By stimulating imaginative engagement, a shared vision can serve as an antidote to short-termism, fostering a transformational shift toward long-term benefits that resonate across generations.

Countering short-termism for long-term benefits

Recognising the importance of combating short-termism is the first step towards overcoming the 'tragedy of the time horizon'.

The intricacies of the 'tragedy of the time horizon' underline the multifaceted nature of short-term thinking across domains as diverse as planning, regional development, environmental stewardship, economic stability, and social equity. As an antidote to this 'tyranny of now', future thinking and foresight processes allow exploring different possible and plausible futures. Although we cannot predict the future, we can definitely prepare for it.

Thinking about how to increase resilience and account for future uncertainties supports planning and decision-making in which costs and benefits are separated by very long time-lags. Furthermore, it is about addressing intrinsically complex coupled social-ecological systems, and producing wide-ranging collective goods that go beyond the scope of unilateral 'single-best efforts' of any player. (Duit et al., 2010)

The need to counteract this pervasive issue is rooted in the acknowledgment of its existence, the cultivation of future-thinking, and the nurturing of shared visions that bridge temporal chasms. By embracing these principles, societies can navigate away from the precipice of short-termism, forging a sustainable, inclusive, and ecologically responsible trajectory towards a brighter tomorrow.

To achieve this, we need to become better at thinking about the future. Most of all, we must avoid 'future fatigue' in society. After a decade of crises in which social divisions have become stronger, it is increasingly difficult to establish a shared vision of what a positive future might look like. The future, it seems, is itself in crisis, and the 'tragedy of the time horizon' is just one sign of this.

Future literacy

The issues and themes explored above imply that we need to boost our future literacy. This is more than just an abstract concept. It is a critical skill that helps individuals and societies to actively shape their destinies and to 'use the future' more effectively and efficiently. (Mangnus et al., 2021; Miller, 2018)

Future literacy mimics the idea of literacy, referring to the ability to read and write as basic skills. As for future literacy, it is about becoming more skilled in imagining, reading and using the future. Essentially, it is the capacity to rigorously imagine possible futures, while avoiding the traps of 'presentism' and dystopian or wishful thinking. It allows us to better understand the role of the future in what we see and do. At a personal level, it is a skill that builds on our capacity to imagine the future. In that sense, it empowers our imagination, enhances our ability to prepare, recover and invent as changes occur. At a societal level, it helps to improve social and public imagination and to overcome the 'imaginary crisis' (Mulgan, 2020), i.e. our societal struggle to imagine positive alternatives. As it opens up wider menus of possibilities for our societal futures, it can help to navigate through uncertainties and towards desirable futures.

This is important for various reasons (Böhme, 2023a):

- **Navigating uncertainty.** Dealing with unpredictability in the future is becoming more crucial. Being future literate empowers individuals to envisage potential outcomes, prepare for uncertain situations, and effectively handle unexpected challenges.
- **Strategic decision-making.** Future literacy enables individuals and organisations to make well-informed strategic decisions that align with their long-term objectives and avoid making short-sighted choices driven solely by immediate benefits.
- **Embracing innovation and change.** In our fast-paced world, embracing innovation plays a pivotal role in progress. Future literacy nurtures a mindset that embraces innovation and encourages the adoption of new technologies and concepts.
- **Social resilience.** As societies grapple with global issues such as climate change and economic shifts, future literacy plays a vital role in developing resilience and adaptability, enabling communities to thrive in the face of adversity.
- **Sustainable development.** Future literacy is an essential component of sustainable development. It equips individuals with the capacity to comprehend the consequences of their actions and make choices that support environmental, social, and economic sustainability for this and future generations.

Embarking on the journey of improving the own future literacy requires dedication, open-mindedness, curiosity and willingness to embrace uncertainty. Fostering imagination and creativity, developing foresight thinking, engaging in critical discussions are first steps to boost one's own future literacy. Often, these first steps imply engaging in 'what-if' discussions and imagining how different factors could shape future realities. As Hopkins (2019) points out, moving from 'what is' to 'what if', is the starting point of unleashing the power of imagination to create the futures we want.

Conclusions

What we do today and how we live today affects our future and even more importantly future generations, i.e. all people who will come after us. Nevertheless, a lot of our planning, policy and decision-making is characterised by high degrees of ‘presentism’. Indeed, there is an overhanging risk, that decisions are either driven by fears and reactions to implicit threats, or that they focus merely on the here and now. To avoid dystopian thinking and the ‘tragedy of the time horizon’, we need to nourish our future literacy skills.

Future literacy can help to understand and navigate complex futures, anticipate emerging trends, and adapt proactively to change. This is of particular importance in a world of rapid technological advancements and constantly evolving societies, in which making good decisions becomes ever more complex. To master this complexity and the uncertainty of what the future might hold, it is essential to think critically about the future and make informed decisions, harnessing imagination and creativity to envision various scenarios, and developing the capacity to navigate uncertainties confidently. This requires personal and societal imagination which can open up creativity and learning, for exploring possible futures in order to shape the present better. It requires radical thinking and radical decisions to develop desirable futures for the next generations (Toptsidou, 2022). Imagination is important, as without the ability to image possible futures that inspire hope and foster collaboration, there is a high risk of resignation and despair.

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