

Time horizons



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Policy makers and academics have different time horizons. That is one reason for their often limited dialogue. However, alignment and mutual reinforcement are necessary – especially in times of crisis.

The world is changing at an ever-accelerating pace, and those who have to deal with these changes seem out of breath. They hop from crisis to crisis, unable to do more than react, incapable of looking beyond the latest trends to find longer-term solutions. Academics, having no day-to-day political responsibilities, focus on a longer time horizon. This is of great use, especially now. It may seem contradictory: in times of crisis, shouldn't we act immediately, before the whole system breaks down? But doing so puts us at risk: it increases our chances of making mistakes or failing to seize the opportunities that present themselves in moments of great turmoil.

If there is one field where the short term seems to be the right time horizon to work and plan within, it is that of humanitarian operations. After an unexpected disaster, many victims need immediate aid. At a recent world conference on humanitarian studies (see page 27), a refreshing insight emerged from debates among experts who study crises, emergencies and conflicts. Contrary to common belief, many present-day emergencies in developing countries are not deviations from normality that need to be quickly fixed so that business as usual can be resumed. Instead, such seemingly sudden eruptions are consequences of underlying, longer-term processes. Apart from treating the symptoms – taking care of the victims – it is these processes themselves that need to be studied and addressed to solve and prevent problems. It is precisely 'business as usual' that needs to be changed.

Direct and forceful action seems appropriate in times of crisis. We need strong leadership to adequately solve problems. Just do it – chase away the dictator and install democracy. However, in practice this tendency creates the dangerous illusion that a democracy can be created from the outside, through force, within a few years. In this issue, Gerd Junne analyzes the structural factors underlying authoritarianism in the Middle East and concludes that authoritarianism is here to stay. Instead of jumping into disastrous ventures such as the Iraq invasion, it is better to achieve patient and careful cooperation with existing groups, both secular and religious, within those societies while trying to reduce the singular reliance of many of those states on oil revenues.

A special sort of long-term horizon is required by our concern for future generations, often described with the inflated term *sustainability*. Although many Western governments today focus on just one type – financial sustainability – the notion has its origins in environmental thinking. The special report in this issue of *The Broker* illustrates how the dominant short-term economic thinking – in which only limited production costs are included in

measures of competitiveness and possible profits, not the broader environmental damage that will need to be repaired sooner or later – clashes with the longer-term goal of environmental sustainability. But even within the current market discourse, solar energy may soon reach competitive prices, provided that governments create the right incentives.

In the field of environmental research, experts are years ahead with respect to formulating concrete policy proposals on the basis of their research. But one of the main problems in applying those proposals is the transnational nature of the problem, and hence the global character of the solutions. Here researchers of globalization and development could help. If the idea of a 'Global Green Deal' is ever to succeed – and now is the moment to push this forward – there must be an effective collaboration among those in the environmental, development and global relations fields.

Academics and other shore-bound captains can be very sceptical about the limited time horizon and the opportunism of politicians, but alas, this is the real world. Politicians are urged to act by impatient constituencies clamouring for jobs and by a frantic media. They are pulled in every direction by all kinds of short-term interest- and profit-seekers. When the deeper insights and longer-term perspectives of the academic visionaries are not translated into step-by-step practical policy advice, it is hardly surprising that policy makers often ignore them.

Researchers should do more than just publish analyses of events three or more years after they occur, in a journal read only by colleagues. This has no direct, real-time use for policy making. They should also try to translate such insights into clear advice for action. We need to find new mechanisms for doing that translation, which must include the positive aspects of academic production: strict quality criteria, review and the independence that many consultants, professional advisors and think tanks no longer have. But our translation must avoid the negative sides: too late, too abstract and nuanced, too isolated from the broader context.

The discrepancy between the short time span of politics and the need for long-term strategic action is potentially dangerous, given the increasing complexity of global processes. What is needed for policy making in ministries and NGOs are people with vision who can rise above the trenches of day-to-day quarrels, trends and emergencies to seize hidden opportunities and make the most of the blessings in disguise that come with every crisis. And if they stick out their heads and look around, there must be some concrete advice ready for them. ■