

EFP Policy Reflection: Screening Urban Foresight

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Foresight activities of the JPI Urban Europe with a time horizon of 2050+ are planned

The Joint Programming Initiative - Urban Europe plans foresight activities with a time horizon of 2050+ that aim at developing a long-term Strategic Research Agenda. In the present pre-foresight phase, foresights on urban issues and studies supporting forward-looking activities were reviewed to support the formulation of foresight topics and provide an overview of challenges, trends and drivers addressed in recent foresight activities with a time horizon exceeding 30 years.

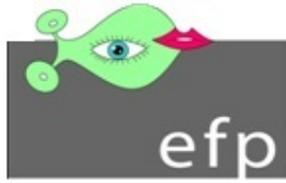
Foresights screened applying three different perspectives on urban issues: local, higher-level and sectoral foresights

More than 100 foresights dealing with urban issues with a time horizon exceeding 30 years were identified. Forty activities applying three different perspectives on urban issues were screened: (a) city foresights commissioned by local authorities focussing on a specific urban region (e.g. New York, Amsterdam, Uusimaa-Helsinki, Leeds and others) (b) higher-level foresights commissioned by national or supra-national actors not focussed on a particular urban region (e.g. France, Asia-Pacific megacities) and (c) sectoral foresights with a focus on urban challenges (e.g. energy, mobility or housing).

Screening Results on Foresights and Studies with an Urban Focus

Increasing urban orientation of society

Common to all the foresights screened is the recognition of a worldwide trend towards increasingly urbanized societies. Many foresights refer to the global trend of a concentration of populations and fast growing megacities. Although this trend has been far more moderate or even reversed over the past decades in Europe when we look at cities as administratively defined, urbanization is nevertheless a trend in terms of life styles, the culture of European societies and the concentration of populations in more widely defined urban agglomerations.



Turbulent times ahead

All of the foresights also share the expectation that urban agglomerations are most likely to face turbulent times with many uncertainties and big challenges over the next decades ahead. Even very optimistic scenarios do not ignore the urgency for action with respect to grand challenges and changing framework conditions. Major efforts will have to be made in many areas as transitions will affect urban regions in many ways.

From wild cards to “business as usual”

The foresights, most of them not older than 6 years, expect challenges, threats and necessary innovations to have a greater impact and unfold at greater speeds compared to older foresights. Only some years ago, factors were seen as stable that now dominate the discourse about drivers threatening society. Impact factors that were not even seriously considered in the analysis of wild cards are now on the agenda and cannot be ignored anymore. They have to be considered in any business as usual scenario. To give an example, energy prices at the present level were considered in worst case scenarios at the most. The peak oil debate for a long time was played down as esoteric and only recently surfaced in public debate when other arguments failed to fully explain the fast rising oil price.

Acceleration and magnitude of change processes emerge as a higher order challenge.

The acceleration and magnitude of change processes pose a new category of challenges. They are higher order challenges for policy-making for urban regions, urban management and economic endeavours, requiring us to seriously question existing paradigms in all of these domains. Related questions in preparing such paradigm changes and transitions are amongst others: How to deal with threats that cannot be mastered as calculable risks of infrastructure investments? How to deal with real uncertainty in terms of incalculable probability and consequences and the difficulties for the insurance industry to provide appropriate products for long-term investments? How to deal with the fast speed of change on the one hand, and inertia of decision-making and the lock-ins delaying adaptation efforts on the other hand?

World city foresights use broad participation for visioning

Local foresights for cities competing on a global level are designed with the intention of involving the inhabitants, diverse stakeholder groups and politicians in a broad process of deliberation. Around the world, foresights, particularly those for large metropolitan areas and city regions (Amsterdam, New York City, Durban and Calgary) are set up with a focus on visioning involving stakeholder groups, policy makers and inhabitants.

Good practice foresight: AGORA 2020

In search of foresights with a particular focus on defining a strategic research agenda as JPI Urban Europe seeks to do, only one activity could be identified that had a comparable time horizon and a similar aim: AGORA 2020 – a French foresight exercise of 2005 aimed at formulating research



questions for a French research programme addressing urban issues. JPI Urban Europe could therefore fill a gap by conducting a cross-national foresight activity and drawing on AGORA as a good practice example to learn from.

Networks of cities – a missing perspective

Although meta-level foresights intend to draw conclusions for cities more generally, a systemic perspective on cities as parts of an interacting network is missing in all of the foresight activities considered. As complexity research proves, we can observe a hierarchical ordering and differentiation of cities in a network of cities (Pumain 2006). That is to say, the distribution of cities is not random, and size and functionalities of individual cities are determined by linkages of various kinds. Accessibility of cities within the network and the capacity to innovate and adapt innovations seem to be the main factors explaining the diversity of urban regions in respect to size.

Topics of High Importance and Uncertainty

Grand challenges for urban regions

Most of the foresights screened deal with the following grand challenges: growing cities, climate change adaptation and mitigation, calamities (heat waves, flooding etc.), resource availability (energy, water and food), globalisation, demographic change, migration, and safety & security. This is not surprising, but it confirms the universality of these grand challenges for urban regions in Europe and worldwide. However, concrete opportunities and threats might differ significantly.

China and other growing economies

The growing global importance of China (but also of other countries) is seen as a factor associated with large uncertainties for Europe. Opportunities and threats for European urban regions are matters of long-term strategic interest.

Global competitiveness of European networks of cities

Given global competition and the emergence of networks of mega-cities, globally and regionally (e.g. China), questions arise about the interaction between these cities as well as between mega-cities and the clusters of cities connected to the mega-cities, and the consequences for the European network of cities.

Climate change adaptation as a cross-cutting issue

There is no doubt that the adaptation to climate change will be a grand challenge for European cities, as the already unavoidable rise of global average temperature by two degrees Celsius or more will not only affect European cities in the form of heat waves but also through extreme weather events, flooding or even food shortage. Given the wide range of threats involved, adaptation to climate change is a cross-cutting issue touching several policy fields at the urban, national and European level.



Policies and investments in the light of the 2008 financial crisis

The financial crisis in 2008 is a topic with a high impact on the strategic behaviour of a wide range of actors. The consequences have not been addressed in the foresights under consideration. Nevertheless, it is becoming a limiting factor with effects in the medium and long run. For example, the financial crisis and the consequences for public and private investments will have effects on financing the large-scale “greening” of infrastructure or housing.

Given limited public budgets combined with high uncertainties regarding climate change, energy availability, prices, and other factors as well, investments might be postponed or reduced to limit financial risk. The long-term consequences are not yet understood and adaptive strategies are needed.

Action Points and Policy Proposals

Multi-level, multi-actor governance processes and participation in policy development

Multi-level governance processes are seen as highly uncertain, and the role of different actor groups in decision-making processes is perceived as a large obstacle to strategic policy-making. While this raises many questions for policy-makers, no clear answers are at hand.

City foresights of an exploratory nature address the creativity and inspiration of participants with the aim of forming shared visions. As such, they are soft instruments in complex democratic governance structures that can trigger decision-making processes and provide orientation for implementation at public and private levels.

Taking advantage of opportunities for transition management

It is widely acknowledged that large transitions are to be expected in the next decades with significant consequences for the economy in urban regions. Transitions will give rise to new opportunities and will inspire entrepreneurial activities geared toward deriving economic profits from innovation. However, given the turbulent times looming on the horizon, it is questionable whether incremental innovations will be sufficient to master the necessary transitions (e.g. in energy, mobility etc.). Entrepreneurial activities should therefore strive for radical innovations.

Dealing with threats – management of uncertainties

As it becomes harder to assess and calculate the risks of climate change and other developments with potential for calamity, strategies for new uncertainty management for urban regions have to be developed in addition to conventional risk management and disaster control. This directly affects city management and urban planning. But even the consequences for the insurance sector might indirectly affect urban development strategies and investment plans through higher premiums.



Governance perspectives: city systems, city renewal areas, networks of cities

When looking at urban regions from a governance perspective, we can adopt three systems perspectives: urban regions can be viewed as city systems, urban development areas and networks of cities. Accordingly, foresights can address 1) city systems by looking at urban regions as systems with administrative or more loosely defined functional boundaries, 2) city renewal areas as territorially delimited space within cities and breeding places for adaptive city renewal from within, 3) networks of cities conceived as cities or urban regions that are interlinked through factors like accessibility, competition or higher level integrative mechanisms (e.g. nation states or supra-national boundaries).

Need for and lack of foresight on the adaptability of urban regions

After several decades of stable framework conditions for the development of urban regions in Europe, acceleration and magnitude of change are emerging as a higher order challenge. The capacity to adapt will be a matter of competitive advantages and the resilience of urban regions. Yet, we lack foresight exercises addressing adaptability as a key challenge for urban regions.

Adaptability foresight could address topics as broad as city management, infrastructures, urban ecology or uncertainty management helping to better understand and anticipate the challenges ahead of us. Probably the most important question to be asked now is: How can urban regions be enabled to adapt to threats and opportunities influencing their development as centres of economic activity and the well-being of the urban population?

Reference:

Pumain, Denise (2006): Alternative Explanations of Hierarchical Differentiation in Urban Systems. In Pumain (Ed): Hierarchy in Natural and Social Sciences. Methodos Series Vol 3., Springer