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Iris Futures – Foresight in the Brussels Capital Region

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Authors: Maya Van Leemput
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Type: Territorial study of foresight
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Purpose

Iris Futures (IF) is a study of prospective activities and futures thinking in Brussels conducted at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in the framework of 'Prospective Research for Brussels'. The point is not knowing or predicting the future of Brussels but to create an overview of existing prospective activities in Brussels as well as of different attitudes towards the future in Brussels.

Exploration of foresight in the BCR

Iris Futures has an intentionally open and explorative line of questioning. The initial research question was: *What is the range of systematic consideration of, and action on, the future taking place in the Brussels Capital Region?*

In the first stage different uses of the term foresight and a range of definitions is explored. Three important characteristics are, reference to the future or futures, foresight also has an important action related dimension. Participative or collective nature. The IF exploration of foresight in Brussels takes into account both those fully fledged foresight exercises that display all three of the above characteristics and those future oriented activities that do not. The first have been termed '**characteristic foresight**' activities or **FA** in short and the second '**future oriented**' activities' or **FO**.

The central research question then, is rephrased: *What is the range of characteristic foresight and future oriented activities taking place in the Brussels Capital Region?*

IF takes into account both the activities themselves and the organisations that conduct these activities. To open up possibilities for further future oriented work in Brussels an interpretative approach for the futures dimension of a range of organisations is developed and barriers and motivations to futures oriented work are discussed.

Listing activities, organisations and interviews

A single researcher conducted the two-year study. An overview of FO and FA that took place in organisations and institutions of Brussels in the years 2005 and 2006 is added to by 82 interviews on future oriented work in Brussels. The data for the analysis was taken from these interviews and materials pertaining to the future oriented activities in the overview to identify some of the recurring elements in representations of the future in Brussels.

Sixty activities and 120 organisations

Listed for this study's analysis are sixty activities - future oriented and characteristic foresight. These all took place in Brussels in the years 2004, 2005 and 2006. The list is not intended as an exhaustive overview, but does include a broad range of activities by four actor types: public, private, non-profit and learning organisations. The titles and the names of the initiative takers of eight FA and fifty-two FO are the primary identifiers of each activity.

Eight characteristic foresight projects (FA)



Zinneke Parade 2006.	org Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence	Zinneke Parade creativity 51-150 years BCR 500+ high
Empreinte écologique	org Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence	ETOPIA Other 36-50 years BCR & International 50-200 low
Après le pétrole : un monde à inventer.	org Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence	ETOPIA Urban infrastructure 11-15 years International 50-200 high
Mobil2015	org Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence	BCR Urban infrastructure 5-10 years BCR 350-500 high
MIVB 2020	org Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence	MIVB Urban infrastructure 11-15 years BCR 50-200 high
Masterplan 2015	org Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence	Port de Bruxelles Urban infr. and welfare 5-10 years BCR & part of Brussels 50-200 high
Regards prospectifs sur l'associatif bruxellois	Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence.	CBCS other 5-10 years BCR 0-50 high
Brussels Capital of Europe.	org Theme Time horizon Geographical scope number of participants prominence	Berlage students Urban infr. and creativity 36-50 years BCR & Europe 500+ high

The duration and frequency of the activities were limited. Most activities were one-off events or projects. With the exception of the larger FA, few lasted longer than 2 days. Only four were part of regularly recurring programs.

Four themes receive attention: urban infrastructure, creativity, learning, and welfare. An 'other' category was also created and the allocation of one theme to an activity did not exclude the allocation of another. Half of the activities in the overview are related to the theme of urban infrastructure but none of the FO or FA focused exclusively on bricks and mortar. They combined thinking about infrastructure with questions of quality of life, welfare and wellbeing. The language of planning, activism and conjecture is evident within this theme. Almost half of the organisations in the list and fourteen activities were related to creativity one way or another and the overview contains 50 organisations that focus on employment, housing, education and care. These welfare related topics re-

ceived attention in a third of all the activities. The BCR authorities have taken the initiative for several extended now activities in this area and a range research, policy support and deliberation organisations of organisations tied in with various levels of government are involved. Thirty-nine organisations are involved in learning, 13 of these are learning institutions, the universities and other institutions of higher education. Not just universities but also organisations from the technology-dependent library sector and activist organisations have paid attention to this theme in 14 separate activities.

The time horizons of the activities are relatively short: less than 15 years and effectively never more than 100 years ahead. Most of the projects are reported to have medium-term horizons of between 10-15 years. There were two FA with a time horizon of more than 50 years among which the *Zinneke Parade* aiming for 2106 with floats depicting 2058 as well as 2250.

For describing subject matter, instead of a set of pre-determined keywords, tags were used that reflect wording and terms from documents and conversations about the listed activities. Each activity received at least two tags. This resulted in a collection of 72 tags. Different tags sometimes refer to closely related concepts and ideas. For example, both work and employment appear as tags, both multi-culturality, interculturality, both integration and social cohesion appear in the list, avoiding the reduction of the subtleties of language that express diverging frames of reference. Tags to do with mobility and urbanism, city renewal and ecology appear most in relation with the 60 activities in the list.

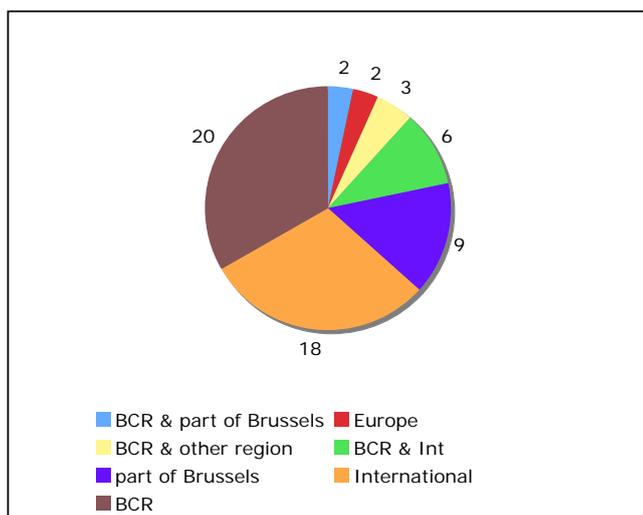
The geographical scope of the FO and FA is specific to the BCR. Only activities initiated by organisations that reside in Brussels and are active on the territory of the BCR are listed. The territorial and the jurisdictional scope of these actors is impacted on by the Belgian institutional organisation and the role of Brussels within it. Taking the reasoning of the intricate Belgian system of jurisdictions divided over communities as well as regions into account, only those government and public administration activities of the region - and smaller scales - were within the scope of the study. The three other levels of government present in Brussels - federal, regional, European - remain to be studied elsewhere. However, activities organised by organisations from Brussels in Brussels can treat issues in a community, national or international context.

The significance of the future orientation of 7 out of 8 the 'characteristic foresight' activities are high. Almost half of all the activities are categorised with a low prominence for their future orientation and only a small share of their time/space allocated to it. The remaining half is divided equally between medium and high significance.

The prominence of the future orientation of the listed activities is determined by the way futures questions are put at the forefront in communication on the activity, the use of timelines, visual images of the future or rhetoric references. The share of the activity that focuses literally on the future further indicates significance. Time allocated to futures activities within organisational schedules is problematic to ascertain. Programmes

and end products of the activity, the number of speakers or the number of participants were the two most useful indicators.

Geographical scope of the FO and FA



Very little specialised methods are being used in the FO, the emphasis lies with debate, discussion or deliberation. In the FA more consideration and skill goes into the choice of methods. Outside facilitators or researchers are called in for their methodological expertise as well as for their topical knowledge and contributions. In programmes and reports of activities debate and expert opinion appear as the two top methods.

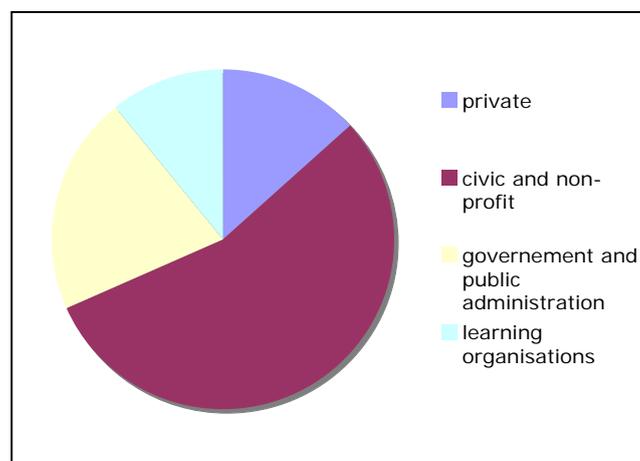
Only a few outputs have been conceived as stand-alone presentations. Exceptional outputs from a handful of creative projects include the *Zinneke Parade* and BNA-BBOT's *Blind-date 58* audio-archive. Policy recommendations and priority lists were the end product of no less than 26 activities from our overview. These are especially important in the larger FA but also in smaller FO from interest groups or special interest organisations.

The numbers of people involved in the activities and the types of audiences/participants vary. All together, the 60 activities reached at least 8500 people. The 2670 people taking part in the *Zinneke Parade* are the largest actively participating audience reached by any of the activities. The estimated

100.000 viewers spread out in the streets of Brussels on the day of the parade represent a considerable audience. One research project at the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, reached more than 1400 people with its survey - with three explicitly future oriented questions - of EC functionaries alone. More than three quarters of the activities were aimed at or at least open to the general public. Thirteen were directed to a local public and about a third of the activities were directed to special interest lay audiences. Private companies and members of the research community were included in almost half of the activities.

The organisations listed for *Iris Futures* have been organised in to five different layers of future orientation. Those not up for consideration fall into 'layer nil'. In 'layer one' organisations are found that are involved in the implementation of forward looking views and that are 'en route'. Only a couple of examples of these types of organisations were retained for the analysis. In 'layer two' includes an important number of organisations involved in 'extended now planning', limited to about 5-6 years in many contexts. In 'layer three' have an implicit or secondary formal future orientation. Fifty-eight organisations listed in IF are found in 'layer four' having formal futures orientations or being involved directly in FO. 'Layer five' covers the organisations that have initiated or partnered in the eight FA in the IF overview.

BCR organizations involved in FO and FA by actor type



Impact and Policy Implications

There is good foresight potential in Brussels. No less than eight characteristic foresight projects and 81 organisations involved in forward-looking activities were found. Nevertheless there is room for improvement. The most important barriers and motivations for foresight in the BCR are listed in this study and suggestions for approaches to stimulate FO and FA are tentatively formulated.

Uncertainty features both as a barrier and as a motivator and concerns both the survival of organisations as more general uncertainties about trends and evolutions. Policies to encourage long-term thinking will need to address both types of uncertainty without aiming to undo them.

Institutional organisation has a great impact on future oriented activity in Brussel, due to the city's place in the complex Belgian political landscape. Institutional fragmentation constitutes an important barrier to pro-active, integrated

foresight. Two basic attitudes have been found on this issue. One regards it a pre-condition for this issue to be resolved before headway can be made with foresight in Brussels. The second starts from the idea that 'this will never change' and it is necessary to 'work with what we've got'. In relation with the territorial jurisdiction of the various levels of government in Brussels, the points that the BCR has little leveraging power over what takes place in the neighbouring regions and it shares its territorial jurisdiction with 19 municipalities have been made by many respondents. Close collaboration, good networking and joint efforts constitute the most widely supported response to this barrier.

The impact on FO and FA by the time horizon of political mandates of course is not typical of Brussels alone. The experience of those close to government rule as well as those who dependent on ever-changing policy orientations for the funding of their activities is that the time horizon of political mandates increases uncertainty and therefore the potential for action upon the future.

Closely related to the need for collaboration and joint efforts across levels of government, communities and themes, is the question of trust. While a lack of trust is an important feature, inter-organisational cooperation in the framework of 'characteristic foresight' has been reported to bring actors closer together.

Most of the listed organisations take part in active networks. The future orientation of the partners in these networks impacts on that of each of the individual organisations.

Time pressure and the knowledge of foresight methods and objectives are also reported to impact significantly. There are few foresight specialists in Brussels - other than those active at institutions separate from the BCR - and there is little theoretical understanding or practical knowledge of foresight. The large majority of respondents were not familiar with the idea of foresight, even among those that have participated in or initiated some of the smaller FO.

Fifteen respondents were well informed on the principles of foresight and the methods available for its implementation. All have practical experience with concrete foresight exercises and the large majority is in favour of its implementation on the social level and recognises its use value at the organisational level. Also among less well-informed participants positive estimations of the need for a forward-looking practice were found.

The authorities can play an important role. The large majority of respondents have expressed some interest in conducting foresight in the future, so that efforts to encourage this will find fertile ground. The issues they have taken up in the past are the issues that most respondents are aware of, so that it becomes clear that the BCR authorities can lead by example. If the time horizon of their outlook increases, that of their partners and other organisations active on the BCR territory is likely to increase also. Respondents place responsibility for FO and FA most often with public policy-makers.

The set-up of a foresight programme or a large-scale characteristic foresight exercise is suggested. The scope of such a programme or exercise should reach beyond the formal jurisdictions of the BCR and not be limited to a single issue and take account of the main barriers to foresight. It would need to refer back to efforts already made in the BCR context as well as in the international context.

From the IF overview it becomes clear that most successful foresight exercises have been conducted in the context of organisations where good foresight skills are present within the organisation itself. The conclusions of the study suggest that the BCR authorities set up a transversal unit to support its forward-looking practice. It also emphasises that the challenge is to look at a range of possible futures for Brussels and that singular views on the future should be avoided. The complexity of the issues at hand and the inherent potential of diverging ways to tackle these issues need to be accepted. Emphasis is placed on the plurality of futures, on the relevance of the examination of possibilities and on the need for open futures.

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