



European Foresight Platform

supporting forward looking decision making

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Lessons learnt from the follow-up assessment of former FLA exercises

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European Foresight Platform

The European Commission is providing the means to continue the important networking activities of foresight initiatives. Setting out on the previous work of the European Foresight Monitoring Network and For-Learn the new European Foresight Platform resumes its work.

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Follow-up assessment

The compilation of briefs written for EFP and for the predecessor project EFMN is a valuable source for further research of foresight, on innovation systems and on policy activities in S&T and related fields. Since briefs are generally written shortly after a foresight process was finalized, the time frame is too short to give an assessment of the foresight as such and on the effects on the innovation system. However, the questions, “does foresight make a difference for the innovation system in focus” and “are recommendations implemented”, remain crucial. At this point considerable learning output can be generated. This has never been assessed before. For this reason, we will draw upon the compilation of the first 160 briefs that were produced between 2005 and 2008 to do a follow-up assessment of some of the exercises covered. The foresight processes covered in those briefs have been completed some time ago and will be adequate for consideration of result assessment.

For this first midterm assessment a small sample of about 5 initiatives was chosen to start with the review on some FLA initiatives and to ask what we can learn in retrospect. These examples were: FISTERA (No. 9), Freight Vision¹, European Manufacturing Vision (ManVis, No. 53), Transport and Mobility in an Enlarged Europe (No. 19), and the Vienna Foresight on Research, Technology and Innovation (No. 141). Material from such exercises was analyzed and interviews with the organizers and/or few participants and/or sponsors of the exercises were undertaken. They were interviewed on the results and their implementation as well as on the overall effects of the particular foresight in focus. For each assessment a short supplement to the brief will be produced, in agreement with the interviewees. This will be made public on the website. Even though the follow-up briefs are not finished yet but still in production, we will use these first cases to draw on some conclusion. This will be the first step towards a policy document, where we systematically analyze the cases and draw upon the lessons that can be learnt from these experiences – lessons from best and from worst cases, lessons for foresight practitioners, clients, sponsors. This policy document is supposed to be designed for the EC as a consultation document for future foresight exercises. It may also serve as an input paper for one of the workshops foreseen in WP 4.

Motivation

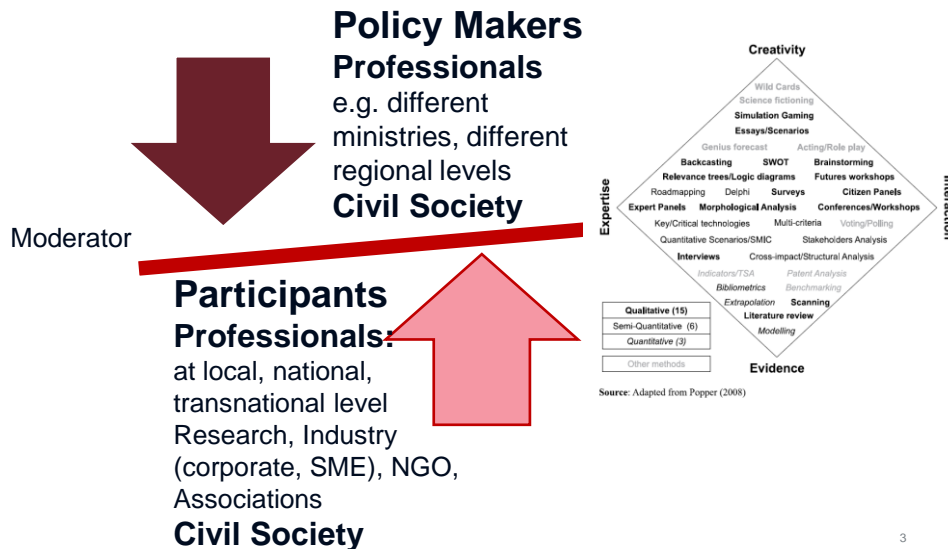
Why do we think an assessment can bring new insights in the usage, meaning and set up of Forward Looking Activities? From empirical evidence we found that

- there is only little empirical account for the impact of Foresights
- no coherent analytical approach in social sciences exists to assess the impact
- the outline of a Foresight usually puts only little attention on the increase of the impact
- existing handbooks and guidelines give only little advice on how to set up a FS in order to increase or assess the impact

From our perspective, Forward Looking activities are both, top-down and bottom-up processes. This is to say that the structure is usually provided by the sponsor and the organizer. But they can also be organized from civil society groups. Apart from the two groups of players – sponsors and organizers – there will always also be participants. These can be stakeholders, experts, or people from civil society. A strict distinction of these groups is not possible. Every person, no matter if she is a stakeholder, a sponsor, an organizer or

¹ Freight Vision was a more recent FLA in FP7 and accompanied by an AIT research project on the implementation of foresight results. Our thorough knowledge of the case and the follow-up survey we are doing now is giving us enough material to include it as a case in this assessment.

representative of another group will always be part of civil society as well. This is why we have to be aware that we all carry several roles when dealing with a FLA. The potpourri of methods used in an FLA will help to structure the roles and the entire process of the activity.



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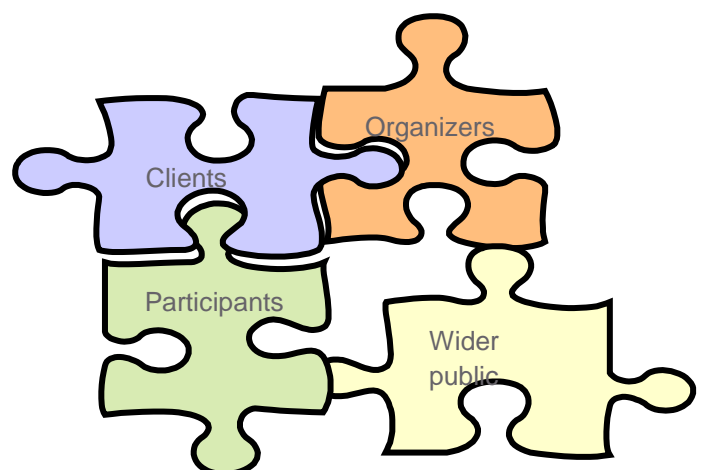
Assumptions

While doing the assessment of the four cases we started with the following assumptions:

- The impact of Foresight depends on the design of the process and on the methods selected; and at the same time on the institutional environment: culture, experience, knowledge, learning, etc. which facilitates dissemination and implementation of the results (or not).
- Applying certain methodologies from organizational development can increase the impact of Foresight

Looking at three types of actors

As indicated above, in this report we will deal with three different groups of actors: the sponsors (or clients), the organizers and the participants. Here we will not deal with the wider public even though this would be an interesting study but with a slightly different focus. In our example cases participants are experts in the foresighted area as well as stakeholders in the sense of concerned actors. We will discuss the role of the three groups in the following sections with regard to the structure of the FLA and the final impact.



Role of the client

With regard to the role of the client (or sponsor) we found that the following points are important to make an FLA successful:

- Clarification of the assignment and objectives
- Commitment: client's resonance in response to the results of the FS, making a difference in the political decision making system
- Visibility: Balancing between active participation and passive observation
- „Spokesperson“ (Champion) is important in order to speak out for the topics/outcomes of the FS in the ministry (DG/agency etc.; a certain „standing“ in the organization is needed; only a „Spokesperson“ can achieve a certain impact. This person has to close the gap to policy making; that is to say between vision building, recommendations and implementation of results.

Role of the organisers/moderator

With regard to the organizers and moderators of an FLA we encountered the following phenomena:

- Expectation management of organizers: motivate participants, but be aware of unrealistic expectations
- Theoretical background is usually not reflected (should be aware of their norm set)
- EU projects are usually quite inflexible with regard to adaptation of new methods or approaches (Deliverables)
- Definite understanding of roles and the options of shaping politics: „... you have to know your role, because every time you go too far you get killed“
- Realistic recommendations regarding implementation; less priority on normative objectives

Role of participants

As with the other two groups of actors, participants can take a multi-faceted role as well:

- Danger of „mainstreaming“ opinions, if balance is not possible or some participants are (too) dominant (hierarchical position)
- Danger of „cognitive closure“, new viewpoints missing
- Demotivation of other participants if their views are not sufficiently taken into account; can undermine the entire process
- FS process and results strongly depend on participants (appearance, number, expertise, opinion, engagement, mindset, etc.)
- Motivation: interest in the discussion of contents, networking with big shots, diversity of participants (industry/science)
- Strengthening existing networks
- Broad participation may facilitate access to a broader knowledge base; better understanding of different perspectives; greater awareness of the sources of knowledge; increased understanding of the scope and limitations of Foresight activities; greater legitimacy of the work and results

Definition of objectives

Apart from the roles of different actor groups some activities are important to consider when conducting an FLA with the aim of having a measurable impact. First of all it is important to define the objectives. This seems to be natural, however we found that

- in general objectives are not clearly defined, this leaves a lot of room for interpretation and misunderstanding
- there is a difference between client projects and research projects – the latter ones usually do not get a lot of (political) attention with regard to the outcome
- in many cases it is not clear if a consensus is to be achieved or rather, if the plurality of opinions should be maintained
- in other cases, the objectives of the FS are defined by the organizers only, without any reference to political strategy building (e.g. developing and testing new methods)
- there is little consideration on the existing structures at the client's organization and it is rarely reflected if the results are fit for smooth implementation (or disruption)
- at the end only little attention of organizers and clients is directed to the degree of achievement of the objectives
- almost no accompanying measures for the implementation process are undertaken

Usual methods applied

Further, a proper set and mix of methods needs to be selected and adjusted to the process. From our assessments it became clear that

- there is not much communication or agreement on what is meant by „representation“/“representativeness“ and „participation“ during the course of the FS
- balance in nominating experts, i.e. countries/regions, gender, sector/academic disciplines is favorable in order to avoid one dominant group that will set the mainstream
- some methods are very time consuming and expensive and hardly worth the effort (e.g. recording and transcription of workshops, events)
- there should be awareness that FS is a PROCESS which might not come to a definite end
- a board of advisors can be helpful for the transfer of results, implementation and the identification of appropriate participants
- the resources of social science can contribute to the design and implementation of Foresight, even if its focus is a technological or industrial one. Failure to identify these inputs at the beginning of a Foresight process could cause problems in the efficient use of time, integration of social analysis, and implementation of results.
- one FS design does not fit all situations: methods and practices should be adapted so that they fit the needs of the local context.

Stimulate organizational learning

For the organizers it is crucial to stimulate organizational learning due to the following reasons:

- If key people, teams and (sometimes) rationales of a program are not maintained (at least until sufficient organizational learning has been achieved), there is the danger that organizational memory can be lost.
- The need for absorptive capacity: ability to understand, incorporate and apply Foresight concepts and practices within the institutions
- Inclusion of the practices of the institutions involved facilitates the operationalization of recommendations into specific action plans

Dissemination of results

In our case studies, not much attention was paid to the dissemination of results, which might be hindering regarding the impact of the FLA:

- Most organizers of FS have no knowledge on who is using their results, documents, papers, or who is citing them, working with them
- Generally there is no proper dissemination strategy except for the homepage, distribution of documents to the participants, clients, sometimes presentations and talks at public events, conferences (the general public or communities outside the FS focus are not addressed)
- In some cases of European Foresights members of the Commission will read Policy Papers in order to write Green or White Papers
- Organizers are usually not aware if the FS is of any use to the participants, or of which use; often they are not sure if participants have read preparatory documents, final documents etc.

Benefits of Forward Looking Activities

Forward Looking Activities can have multifold benefits, however it is very common, that these are not exploited and that the biggest gain is achieved by the organizers. This impression may however be biased due to the fact that organizers are more aware of the benefits and also have an interest in assessing the relative impact. The results from our inquiries can be summarized as follows:

- Plethora of results is in general not much processed
- Usually, organizers have the highest learning curve, and are able to re-use the design of FS for other purposes
- Organizers see some use in FS experience from their research perspective
- Participants take important research questions home, expand networks (to submit new proposals), and enhance knowledge in Foresight design/methods
- Informal structures and processes are laid open (e.g. administration, policy making), new possibilities for synergies emerge from FS processes
- Conclusion: In many cases, organizers profit more from FS than clients (EC)

Synthesis and final remarks

Finally, we can already make some statements about the contributions that an FLA can make with regard to an institutional or systems change. It is important to state that expectations regarding FLAs should not be too great.

- The theoretical foundation of FLA is relatively weak; implicit assumptions of certain theories and biases that are transported with FS approaches (knowledge-based view, complexity-based views, risk society).
- Foresight has only limited capabilities to overcome inertia and path dependency, because FS is usually part of the systems (“Foresight should overcome lock-in” Georghiou/Keenan, 2006²).
- Foresight is sometimes functionalized to legitimize existing paradigms and political strategies. Foresights are hardly ever disruptive.
- It is important to involve clients/policy makers in a balanced way, between loose and tight coupling.

² Georghiou, Luke and Michael Keenan (2006): Evaluation of national foresight activities. Assessing rational. Process and Impacts. In: Technological Forecasting & Social Change. 73 (7), pp.761-777.

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