

Foresight: What, why and how

Context

- President von der Leyen has decided to reinforce the use of evidence and to mainstream foresight into EU policymaking.
- These two dimensions can increase the robustness of policymaking and reinforce strategy building, long-term relevance, preparedness and inclusiveness.
- The JRC is at the forefront of evidence informed policymaking and anticipation.
- Our organization is supporting the European Commission to strengthen its capacity in both knowledge management and foresight.

What is foresight?

Foresight is a well established field with a robust academic underpinning. It is based on the fundamental premise that the future is open and cannot be predicted but that it can be shaped.

There are many ways to define foresight, sometimes also called 'strategic' foresight, but a few core characteristics are constant in these definitions:

1. Foresight deals with the medium- to-long-term future, or as is sometimes said, 'beyond the planning' timescale.
2. Foresight is a collective intelligence building exercise.
3. Foresight is structured, systematic, participatory and inclusive.
4. Foresight aims at informing present-day decisions and at facilitating joint actions.

The collective intelligence processes applied by foresight bring three key benefits:

- They facilitate exchanges between people bringing diverse perspectives to the table.
- They also develop learning and stimulate engagement among all relevant stakeholders.

- They broaden the participants' horizons and help develop shared perceptions of challenges and options among broad groups of stakeholders.

As such, foresight generates valuable knowledge about possible futures (and much more) that can be very useful to inform policymaking. In any case, the aim of foresight is not to try and predict the future as the future is inherently unpredictable.

Why do Foresight?

The emergence of grand societal challenges, such as climatic change or aging population, raises questions on how innovation systems should be organised and whether in their current structures and dynamics, they are suitable for such challenges. In their very nature, global challenges are boundary-spanning: they demand an interdisciplinary approach both in terms of research and governance, and require longer time-frames than normal planning activities. Furthermore, they require managing and embracing uncertainty rather than reducing it. As such, they cannot be addressed by current institutional setting.

Foresight is undertaken when a country, region or organisation faces a specific challenge. It implements a process of systematic reasoning to develop "visions", understood as possible future states of affairs that can be reached (or avoided) through action in the present. Each Foresight exercise will be based on its own specific premises and will have a number of objectives, functions, limitations, outcomes and benefits.

A foresight exercise is necessary in situations in which strategic decisions have to be made. Typically one of the following reasons that require the preparation of long-term decisions are given:

- Formulating longer term national and regional programs
- Setting research priorities (matching opportunities for investment with needs)
- Planning science and technology funding
- Planning major public spending with long-term implications (e.g. infrastructure)
- Strategic decisions
- Defining the strategy of a company or industry

A foresight exercise can be launched also to cope with challenges:

- Transition in the economic or political system
- Improving long-term competitiveness within a certain territory
- Changes to the socio-economic framework (new markets, new legislation etc.)
- Changes in the natural environment (e.g. coastal flooding, climate change)
- Demographic changes

How to do Foresight?

Foresight exercises are complex and highly interactive processes. As stressed previously in the guide, there is no “one-single” way to organise an exercise. Although each individual exercise will have its own specific characteristics, they should all have in common the following: a good exercise starts with a deep understanding of the context in which it is embedded and a clear set of objectives. This will lead to an adequate selection of the Methods in an iterative Foresight Approach.

Process

In the following we split the process in seven different phases. You should always keep in mind that these are logical, rather than chronological steps and feedback loops are present across all of them. It is also only one way of looking at a Foresight Process.

- **Feasibility:** in this phase the organisers evaluate whether a foresight exercise is appropriate given the context and whether it will be able to yield valuable impacts on the system addressed.
- **Parameters:** once the formal decisions to proceed has been taken, this is -broadly speaking- the design phase of the process, where the main structural decisions are discussed and taken.
- **Scoping:** after the basic decisions are taken, the further development of a coherent and more detailed design is necessary. Two aspects define the scope of a Foresight exercise: the choice of the topics to be dealt with and the perspective to be adopted to investigate these topics.
- **Organization:** managing time, people, participants, communications and most importantly the learning process itself is at the core of the foresight exercise itself.
- **Methodology:** devising the methodology is effectively an element of the broader scoping phase.

- As methodological choices are crucial and complex they deserve deeper focus and a dedicated section.
- **Management:** Managing a Foresight project means to apply the same rules of good project management as for any other project. Similarly, manage time, people, participants, communications and most importantly the learning process itself are key aspects.
- **Evaluation:** Once the main tasks of the Foresight exercise have been completed, follow-up activities are required to ensure that the results are used effectively and all the knowledge acquired is shared.

Methods

There is a variety of methods that can be used in Foresight, each producing different results. The underlying ideas of choosing which method, or methods to use was described earlier but the precise choice of the appropriate combination of methods will always be a matter of judgment based on the particular context and nature of the issue being examined. It is important to emphasise that no one method is a panacea. Each method is best suited to certain specific objectives, context, resources, culture and the mind-set of the team and participants, and will prove inadequate if these conditions are not met.

The method of choice needs to have the ability to perform, be able to build on existing material, mind the cost, take the participants’ availability into account, manage time and skills of the team and – to a certain degree – also meet the needs of the sponsor.

The following overview on specific Foresight methods in use at the JRC is extensive, but not necessarily comprehensive. Due to the fact that this scientific discipline is still in the process of formation and emergence there are also conflicting ideas on how certain methods are described and conducted. One method has many variations and the definition of terms and processes can vary, with regards to the issue, the institution or the epistemological background.

Contacts:
JRC-FORESIGHT@ec.europa.eu
#foresight4EU
#policylab4EU

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