

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

17-18 November
2022 ESPAS Annual Conference

GEOPOLITICS IS BACK

CHARTING A COURSE FOR THE EU
IN A WORLD OF SHIFTS AND SHOCKS

EUROPEAN FORESIGHT DAYS



European Strategy and
Policy Analysis System

DAY TWO

Friday, 18 November 2022

09.10-10.10: *Dealing with a complex, dynamic and uncertain world to secure Europe's future: which tools for policy makers?*

Over the last two years, policymakers have had to deal with multiple, simultaneous and intertwined crises with global dimensions and long-term consequences. This is testing and shaping governance systems as never before. What is the importance of an interdisciplinary approach in this context, generating collective intelligence integrating various disciplines (including natural sciences, economics, humanities and social sciences) to help addressing crises in different sectors (health, civil security/safety, construction, food security, human security, etc.)? How can foresight help build a responsible and adequate response to such complexity? What are the other methods available? How can policy makers make the best use of them?

Summary

The current complexity of what is happening in the world requires setting up sensing networks that go beyond current practices and embrace diversity. Complexity is characterised by entanglement, path dependency, emergence and unpredictability. This makes forecasting pointless and calls for an evolution of foresight practice. In that context, scenario planning can rely on experts to explore the known unknowns but today's circumstances requires to go beyond that. As the aim of foresight is to help people change the way they think, it is difficult to measure its impact, which often materialises with a long time lag and when people have internalised new ideas that they don't remember came from foresight.

Embracing complexity is now essential for policymaking

Approaches using complexity are now essential to map the present and help understand the dynamics at play. This is useful as it allows creating an ecosystem reproducing the crisis rather than trying to forecast. The start is to map what is known. Innovation in a crisis is not inventing things from scratch but having a robust complex map of what one knows presented as an entangled system. As complex systems are affected by path dependency, small things (which are easy to miss, especially when we don't know what to look for) can bring big changes. The key is not to try to forecast but to map what is known at the right level of detail.

Scenario planning is very useful to uncover hidden assumptions about how the world works

Scenarios provide lenses to look at issues and understand the world. They require collective intelligence. However, scenarios can only explore the known unknowns and can restrict what one sees at that point. They help bring together what do we know and identify the key uncertainties. For best use, it is important to help people appropriate the scenarios. This way, they can look at possible consequences and consider how to act.

Scenarios are designed to provoke specific conversations and are a tool that can contribute to change mind-sets.

Scenario planning risky if used in the wrong context.

As scenarios are designed to provoke specific conversations in specific contexts, they can also lead conversations in the wrong direction if not used appropriately. The short-term focus brought about by the 'tyranny of today' creates the need to take time to think and scenario planning is a useful tool for better thinking. They can be complemented fruitfully by 'What if' exercises, which are also not predictions. When experts can't crack the nut of the issues put on the table by scenario planning, other tools must be called upon.

Foresight and complexity require robust sensing networks

Foresight and complexity rely on collective intelligence. However, the scale of complexity often requires involving people beyond traditional 'experts'. Such networks must have a high degree of diversity. Governments could use all their citizens as a massive sensing network, potentially in real time during crises.

Innovation in a crisis is not inventing things from scratch but knowing what is happening, knowing what can be done and using people as a sensing network in real time.

In that realm, Japan has been doing technology foresight since the 1970s and is relying on increasing numbers of experts (from 1700 to more than 5000 in that latest exercise) with a realisation that society is increasingly important.

International networks must remain to exchange perspectives among foresight professionals and we should use new technology to do that more easily. No need to hop on a plane anymore as videoconferencing allows exchange in real time.

Assessing the impact of foresight is challenging

At the time of decision, attribution of any outcome to foresight is challenging. The end outcomes can be months or years after a foresight process. It always takes time for a foresight process to come to fruition. Foresight is a provocation, a stimulus to make people think more broadly, with a delayed impact. As there is no easy way to attach names to ideas, they are not traceable, and therefore not attributable. It is therefore difficult to measure impact.

There is no single way to apply foresight to policymaking

There is no single way to implement strategic foresight in a policy ecosystem. It is essential to respect context, to find the right entry points for foresight, and then to adapt its institutionalisation. It also depends on the needs of the moment. It can be formal or informal. What is important is to base it on collective intelligence: 10 people in a room don't have enough capacity.

There is no single 'true' way to implement foresight in a political system. It is different everywhere and depends on the moment. It is important to identify and attribute responsibilities and to help policymakers reflect beyond the electoral cycle.

Conclusion

For maximum impact of foresight in these complex times, it is important to apply approaches that consider affordance (availability of people, resources, input), assemblages (narratives on how people see the world that connect elements for sense-making) and agency (who can do what).