

The Relevance of Foresight for Accession Countries and Possibilities for Co-operation

Reflections on the discussion at the EU Conference on
The role of Foresight in the Selection of Research Policy Priorities
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Issue: Foresight is increasingly used at various levels of governance, as well as at different stages of development, i.e. countries and regions facing different challenges. Therefore its goals, methods and relevance to specific conditions are also widely debated.

Relevance: In spite of diffusing fast, and hence becoming somewhat ‘fashionable’, foresight should not be conducted for its own sake; on the contrary, there should be a strong link between foresight, decision preparation and policy-making. Thus foresight programmes should be carefully designed in terms of their scope, goals, methods and participation. International co-operation is extremely useful to share information, exchange experience, compare methods and achievements, i.e. to learn from each other. Foresight has now reached a point, at which different approaches can be compared to highlight ‘good practices’: what has worked in certain circumstances (level of development, challenges and hence policy aims), and thus what set of tools and approaches are likely to be useful in different environments. Another, more ambitious, and more difficult aspect of international co-operation would be to conduct joint programmes on issues which go beyond the national boundaries, such as the upcoming enlargement of the EU, its global competitiveness (i.e. the success of the Lisbon strategy), environmental challenges, etc. However, when participants are coming from various countries, communication problems might arise due to different ways of thinking, values and behavioural routines. Thus, efforts have to be made to identify and overcome potential gaps as well as to remove other obstacles to fruitful discussions. New methods should also be developed and tested to accommodate wider participation.

Introduction

The main objective of the conference was to discuss how foresight can contribute to priority setting, policy development and decision preparation. Four parallel sessions were organised to highlight four major aspects of this overall question: European level Foresight, Foresight and Multi-level Governance, International Level Foresight and Thematic Foresight. Given the broad range of issues and the diversity of participants (methodological experts, foresight practitioners, policy-makers at various levels and their

aides, industrialists) it was not possible to reach consensus on some of the issues or to formulate a few clear-cut points as conclusions. However, concise feedback, reflecting the sometimes opposing views, from the parallel sessions was provided at a plenary on the second day of the conference, again followed by a lively discussion.

This note is aimed at highlighting some of the issues that seem to be relevant for accession countries, too, even if most of these questions have not been explored from this angle during the conference. In other words, what follows is not intended to be a well-balanced account of the whole conference, just a short discussion of certain issues, with the aim of generating further exchanges among experts and policy-makers both in the current EU member states and accession countries.

Present and future of foresight

Several presentations were aimed at developing taxonomies of foresight programmes, using different organising/ underlying principles. Participants also emphasised that the ‘maturity’ of foresight reached a point, at which it can be classified. In other words, no ‘optimal’ approach or any form of ‘best practice’ can be identified, yet, taxonomies can be developed to highlight ‘good practices’: what has worked in certain circumstances (level of development, challenges and hence policy aims), and thus what set of tools and approaches are likely to be useful in different environments. That is a promising development, indeed, especially if we take into account that – as this conference and many other meetings have indicated – some policy-makers are still confused when considering/ discussing the rationale and use of foresight: they tend to mix up forecast, planning and foresight.

So far, two candidate countries (Hungary and then the Czech Republic) have concluded holistic foresight programmes at a national level, following different approaches. This difference has confirmed that context does matter, i.e. even accession countries with a more or less similar history, facing similar challenges on the whole and broadly at a similar level of development can opt for different foresight approaches/ methods when trying to respond to specific policy challenges. Other candidate countries, which are just preparing their foresight programmes (e.g. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Malta, Poland and Slovenia), might consider taking somewhat different routes, given their own specific circumstances and goals, while co-operating when it is appropriate. (see below some more detailed proposals for potential fields of co-operation)

Level(s) of foresight

As discussed at the conference, foresight can be a relevant policy tool at various levels: local, regional (‘domestically’), national and supra-national. A number of major challenges – e.g. the competitiveness of the EU, together with mobility and human resource development to underpin that; sustainable development; the new, enlarged EU, etc. – are transborder issues by their very nature. Adequate policies, therefore, can only be devised and implemented if they are assisted by transborder foresight activities. Yet, quite a few participants expressed their concerns about supra-national foresight initiatives, in part due to genuine methodological and financial constraints, but also reflecting some unsubstantiated fears of a ‘heavy’, overly centralised programme, imposed upon their countries, albeit no one has ever suggested that approach. Even so, these latter concerns cannot be dismissed simply and easily by rational arguments; on the contrary, they require a lot more, and more complex, efforts to gradually ease them. Patiently continued, tolerant

discussions, together with thoroughly planned initiatives, taking into account these sensitivities are still needed to convince those, who should also be involved in transborder foresight activities but not prepared yet to accept the importance of these programmes. In other words, to prove the relevance of foresight for appropriate decision-making is crucial, and this link should be strengthened particularly at a truly European level.

However, the first step has already been made: a clear consensus has emerged among the participants on the need for a European level foresight knowledge platform/ infrastructure for sharing information, monitoring various initiative so as to facilitate exchange of experience, to compare methods and achievements, i.e. to learn from each other.

As most candidate countries are relatively small, and have not accumulated much experience with foresight, the national level seems to be most appropriate one, with some elements of supra-national co-operation. (see below in more details) In fact, at least some of these countries might be more willing to embark upon some joint activities – given lack of resources and expertise, while facing a number of similar structural challenges – than some of the current member states, whose policy-makers seem to be more reluctant in this respect (as shown at some points of this conference and at previous meetings, too).

Participation in foresight

A closely related question is the breadth and depth of participation in foresight programmes. Here we are faced with a trade-off: the broader the geographic scope of a programme is, the more difficult and costly is to maintain its participatory character. Up to a certain level – most likely, this threshold is a middle-sized nation – participation is more of a question of costs, i.e. no severe methodological constraints apply to achieve a sufficiently wide consultation, i.e. an ‘appropriate’ level of participation. However, when participants are coming from a large, and diverse area, or indeed, from different countries – in terms of level of development, norms, ways of thinking, values, behavioural routines – it is not only a question of travel time and costs to organise and facilitate meaningful workshops. In that cases potential communication problems should be taken into account carefully when preparing these meetings: possible gaps should be identified in advance, and efforts have to be made to bridge them as well as to remove other obstacles to fruitful discussions. Of course, not all the problems can be envisaged, i.e. some ‘slack’ (e.g. extra time for clarification, reconciliation, other means to exchange ideas) should be allowed for that.

Another important direction to advance methodology – mainly via experimentation, i.e. including ‘action research’ – in order to accommodate a significantly wider participation is to develop and test various methods e.g. for virtual meetings; electronic discussions; arranging and exploiting feedback from a series structured, ‘aligned’ meetings held separately across various regions/ countries on the same set of problems (allowing for somewhat different approaches, and yet following the same broad lines of discussions); on-line questionnaires with (almost) real-time (‘instant’) feedback; etc.

Finally, for a certain number of problems, the contribution from ‘lay’ people is of crucial importance. Yet it is also causing a number of (methodological) difficulties: how to identify ‘representatives’ of the civil society, how to involve them in a meaningful discussion with experts, etc. The latter problem is somewhat similar to a previous one, that is, the preparation of meetings for people coming from different regions/ countries, and

hence with different backgrounds, norms, values, ways of thinking. Programmes, where foresight panels were set up to deal with broad socio-economic issues – e.g. the second British, the Hungarian and the Swedish ones – have already had to face this issue to some extent. For example, the members of the Hungarian Health and Life Sciences panels were doctors, drug researchers, managers of pharmaceuticals and medical instruments companies, lawyers, social scientists, etc. In other words, they were experts in their own fields, but when discussing the complex issues of health, they were ‘lay’ persons in the fields of other members, and yet, they all did need to be engaged in a sensible discussion to arrive at a consensual panel report.

As an initial step, specific meetings can be organised to discuss the (preliminary) results of a foresight programme (at its various stages), attended by the experts who produced those results and laypersons whose life is going to be affected e.g. by the recommendations. Adequately trained facilitators can moderate these meetings to help achieving a constructive dialogue between these different communities, and thus improve the foresight results. More creative, and more ambitious, ideas would be needed, of course, to engage a wide range of actors in a truly participatory process.

Scope and participation

Conference participants have emphasised at several occasions that industrialists should also be involved in foresight programmes. In some countries, it has been a well-established practice (e.g. Hungary, Italy, Sweden, the UK), because in some cases the panels have been set up following the logic of industrial branches, while in other cases the tasks of panels have necessitated the participation of industrialists (to discuss broad socio-economic issues). In other words, participation of industrialists and the scope of a given foresight programme can hardly be separated: unless a programme is focussing on narrowly defined S&T issues, it cannot be successful without the active role played by business people.

A related issue – to facilitate a two-way co-operation and exchange between industrial foresight and public foresight activities – was also raised by some participants. Firms have already exploited the results of national foresight programmes in a number of countries when designing and implementing their own strategies. This is straightforward, as in this direction of the exchange the problem of confidentiality is simply not present. The other direction needs much more consideration, as industrial foresight initiatives – either at firm or industrial association level – tend to be confidential. However, trust can be built between firms and organisations running public foresight programmes, and thus certain results, insights of those ‘private’ programmes can be shared, without jeopardising the commercial interests of participating firms. In fact, it is the best interests of firms, too, as they rely on the contribution of various ‘public’ players, too (e.g. clients, public research institutes, universities, government agencies [their statistics and analyses]) when conducting their own, ‘private’ foresight programmes.

The design and use of various foresight methods in accession countries

The recent Hungarian and Czech foresight programmes clearly show that various foresight methods developed and applied in advanced countries can be relevant and useful for accession countries, too. Obviously, some modifications, adaptation to the local needs and circumstances are inevitable.

As participants of the conference pointed out, it is of vital importance to maintain diversity in methodologies. The success of foresight depends on the match between its

context (level of development, and hence the goal of the programme) and the methodology applied. The two recent Central European cases vividly illustrate this point. Hungary took a broader approach, and hence methodologies were similar to the ones applied in the UK, while the Czech programme focussed on identifying S&T priorities, and thus applied a modified version of the so-called key (or critical) technologies method.

The proposals below are formulated in the conceptual framework of the so-called innovation system approach. This understanding of the innovation process emphasises the importance of communication, mutual learning and co-operation among various actors (e.g. scientists and engineers, business people and policy-makers), strengthening the existing – and building new – institutions, formal and informal networks conducive to innovation. It is systemic as well, in the sense that a successful innovation process encompasses not only technological elements (inputs, actors and factors) but economic, organisational and social ones as well.

The organisation and the management of the foresight programme is crucial:

- The design of the programme should take into account the level of the socio-economic development; the size of the country in question; the socio-psychological legacy of central planning; the overall communication, co-operation and decision-making culture (norms, patterns, written and tacit rules); the legal and organisational framework, etc.
- Objectives should be formulated clearly at the very beginning. To juxtapose two extremes, a foresight programme can be:
 - confined to assist the decision-making process of setting narrowly defined R&D (as mentioned above, that was the case in the Czech Republic, accordingly the ‘key technologies’ method was used); or
 - geared towards broader socio-economic needs and problems of a country in question, i.e. what is the role of S&T developments, various policies and regulation in solving these broader problems, what are the responsibilities of the various actors: government, scientists and researchers, businesses, NGOs, families, individuals? (that was the approach taken in Hungary)

Given the challenges and the very nature of the systemic changes, it seems appropriate to stress the importance of ‘visions’ (‘futures’, or fully fledged scenarios) for transition countries both at panel (micro, mezzo) and macro levels. In other words, there is obvious room and a need for methodological innovations.

The decision on the issues for panel discussion is also crucial in terms of the expected output. One possibility is to set up panels to analyse various disciplines and/or economic sectors (as in the case of the first UK foresight programme). A different approach would be to analyse broader socio-economic issues, like human resources, health, environment, business processes, of course with a strong emphasis on technological drivers/ opportunities, too, in that context. For accession countries the latter approach seems to be more appropriate, and this has been followed e.g. by the Swedish and the second UK foresight programme, too.

A number of cross-cutting issues are likely to be of relevance either at a regional, national or transnational level. Because of their very nature – being at a crossroads of various fields – it is simply not possible to find a single structure, which would allow the

required, complex analysis of these issues. Therefore, specific attention needs to be paid to develop, and apply, a mechanism that would facilitate an appropriate co-operation of various foresight panels and experts concerned with these issues from different angles.

The transition process also calls for specific policy recommendations (as opposed to, e.g. the Austrian, German and Japanese foresight exercises). Again, the decisions on the objective, methods and scope (if it has a technological or a broader socio-economic focus) of the programme would influence the issues for policy proposals (e.g. human resources, various fields of regulation, competition, innovation, FDI and regional development policies, institution- and network-building).

The other major foresight method, namely the Delphi-survey can also be useful in accession countries. Its benefits are threefold: it is not only to collect information (experts' opinion), but also to disseminate those pieces of information (during the second round), and involve more participants in the process (as opposed to the case when only the panel method is applied). However, it should be carefully designed, and certain aspects need to be considered thoroughly. Just to give a few examples:

- Is there a sufficient number of technical/ technological experts to conduct a large-scale postal survey, or is it better to use it as a supporting tool at experts' meetings, or 'target' a wider, different audience for a postal survey?
- What structure is more appropriate: the traditional one aimed at collecting opinion or the more decision-oriented Austrian version?
- What is the appropriate balance between the strictly technological and non-technological issues in the statements?
- What are the appropriate questions (taken into account the nature of statements/ issues and the country characteristics)?
- What is the appropriate size of the questionnaire (the number of statements and questions)?

For a successful, effective foresight programme strong emphasis should be put on organising awareness raising seminars in the first stage, and then on continuous, wide-ranging dissemination, discussions in parallel with the analytical activities.

It is needless to say, that without a carefully designed dissemination and implementation stage most of the efforts and resources committed to the programme in the first two stages (time of experts, tax-payers' money to cover the organisational and publication costs) would be wasted.

In sum, it is not only the 'products' – i.e. the different documents, final reports, policy recommendations – that are important results of a foresight programme, but also the 'process' itself, namely disseminating a new, participatory, transparent, future-oriented decision-making method; intensified networking, co-operation and institution-building activities. In other words, a foresight programme can contribute to the strengthening of the national system of innovation in two ways: through reports, recommendations as well as via facilitating the communication and co-operation among various professional communities.

Co-operation among accession countries

There is an obvious scope for co-operation among accession countries. It might be extremely useful to exchange experiences on methods applied in various countries, as well as identifying success and failure factors. Moreover, some analytical activities (issues going beyond national borders) might also be harmonised if there is a mutual interest in doing so. In other words, it cannot, and should not, be imposed by any national or international player. However, various international organisations, notably the EU and UNIDO, as well as national governments and professional associations might play a crucial role in facilitating this co-operation.

The EU, especially, as a sponsor of two foresight projects in accession countries, can contribute significantly to achieve synergies and economies of scale in a number of ways. A well-designed co-operation among the players would assist local (national) capacity building and regional (transborder) networking by

- promoting interactive learning through joint, tailored workshops (i.e. not a one-way flow of codified knowledge at traditional training seminars) to develop skills and generate shared tacit knowledge. The most important issues are the benefits and drawbacks of various foresight techniques (methods) in the context of accession.
- facilitating future co-operation among major players (once accession is completed) by establishing good, mutually beneficial working relations, i.e. building trust through actual co-operation during the national/ regional foresight programmes.

This type of regional co-operation can also help in exploiting economies of scale (compensating for insufficient intellectual resources in highly specialised fields, be they technical, socio-economic or policy expertise). Some possibilities to kick-off this co-operation are:

- producing (commissioning) joint background studies on major technological and socio-economic drivers (relevant for the co-operating accession countries). More in-depth, context-specific analyses, of course, should be conducted and policy conclusions should be drawn as part of the national foresight programmes.
- devising scenarios on European/ global developments (if scenarios are to be used in the various national programmes);
- building partially aligned scenarios (the structure of scenarios might be partially co-ordinated, in other words some 'variables' might be the same, while their actual 'value' would differ country by country).

Once co-operation starts, other issues to be discussed jointly and further possibilities for building capabilities and sharing resources, exploiting economies of scale are likely to be identified by the participants. In other words, any rigid 'blueprint' for this co-operation might be counter-productive: insisting on a detailed plan (methods and milestones) might cause more harm than good.

To conclude, foresight can be a useful policy tool at various levels of governance, as well as at different stages of development, i.e. countries, (national and transnational)

regions facing different challenges. It is even more so, if we think of the Lisbon strategy, the Barcelona goal and the upcoming enlargement of the EU. These major challenges call for a number of foresight activities both at a transborder and a national level. As for the former ones, the principle of ‘variable geometry’ should be followed: the current EU member states and accession countries can address certain challenges together, while other issues are best tackled by various groups of the accession countries. In all these cases, however, there should be a clear understanding of the context: foresight should not be conducted for its own sake; on the contrary, there should be a strong link between foresight, decision preparation and policy-making. The various actors, therefore, should communicate and co-operate while performing their tasks. As for foresight, its timing and relevance to major issues faced by societies, as well as the level of its ‘products’ – reports and policy recommendations – are critical: only substantive, yet carefully formulated proposals can grab the attention of decision-makers. As already pointed out, all the time and efforts of participants put into a programme would be wasted – together with the public money to cover organisational cost – if the results are not implemented. In that sad case the so-called process results – e.g. intensified networking, communication and co-operation among the participants – still might be significant, but they are less visible, much more difficult to measure, and thus the chances of a repeated programme – when it would be due again given the changes in the circumstances – are becoming really thin.