

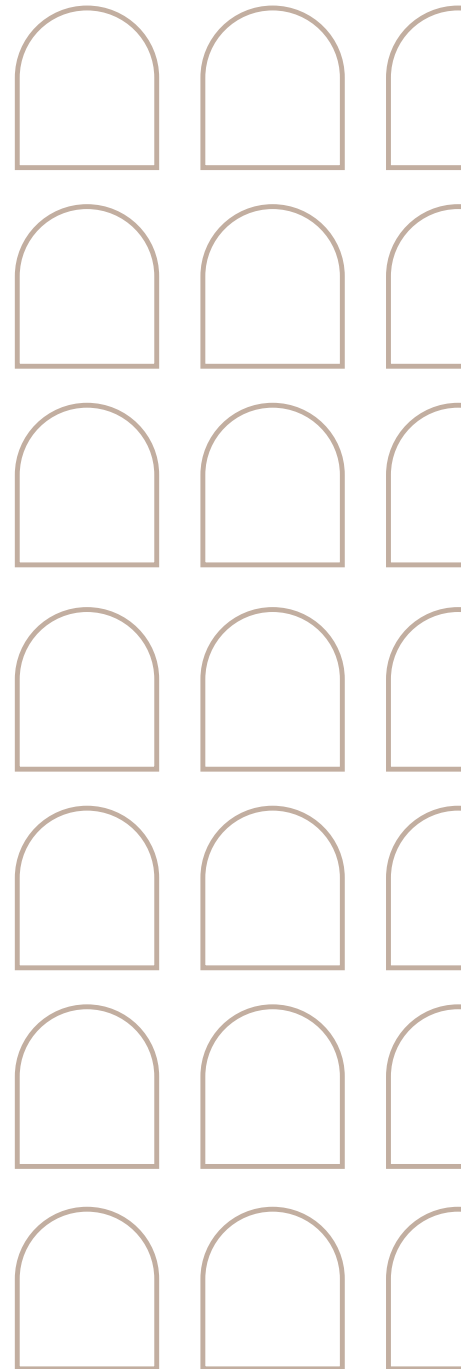
STG Policy Papers

POLICY BRIEF

ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL? THE CASE FOR EMBEDDED FORESIGHT

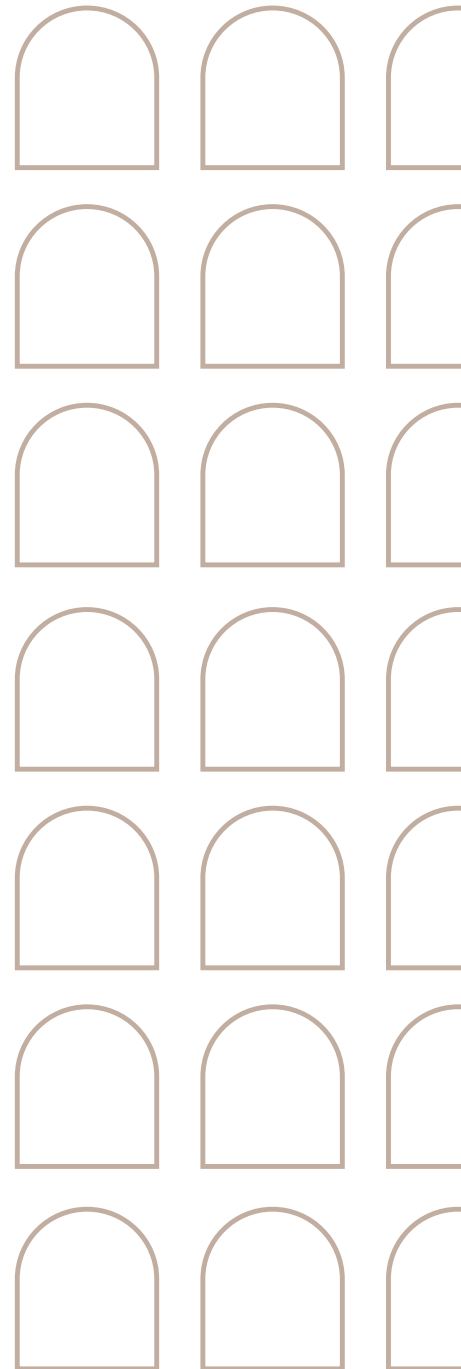
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Foresight can support policymakers to address long-term goals and navigate uncertainty in a context of poly- and perma-crisis. Common foresight methods like scenario planning and horizon scanning are commonly deployed to anticipate future risks and opportunities, and test interventions against different trends and possible futures. However, as governments and organisations develop their foresight functions, there is a risk of seeing foresight only as a set of tools or guidance, or as an extra administrative step. Instead, the transformational power of foresight lies in challenging conventional thinking and assumptions at all stages of policymaking. We argue that, to enable a culture of anticipation, organisations should go beyond guidance and embed foresight as a practice throughout the policy cycle. In so doing, it is important that organisations pay particular attention to inclusive and appropriate participation of multiple actors and stakeholders.



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1. INTRODUCTION

It has become common place to state that [future-focused policies](#) are necessary as we live in a world of poly- or perma-crisis and as we expect governments to pursue long-term goals (such as the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)), to which transnational (e.g. [the EU green transition](#)), and national strategies (e.g. [net zero strategies](#)) should align.

Foresight is an important element in the formulation of policies that take intergenerational justice into account and balance risks and opportunities of future scenarios. Typically, foresight is understood as a suite of methods and techniques deployed to produce future-focused policies and regulations. Common foresight methods include, for example, scenario planning or horizon scanning. At the most basic level, foresight contextualises proposed interventions within long-term megatrends that might influence (positively or negatively) their effectiveness, thus uncovering potential future risks and opportunities through, for example, horizon scanning. Some foresight methods like scenario planning can create a rehearsal space for policymakers and stakeholders to test how proposed interventions would fare against different ‘what if’ circumstances, including those resulting from accelerating/ decelerating trends and ‘wild cards’ (i.e. low probability/high impacts events). As governments and international organisations embark on producing guidance documents, description of the tools, and training material for policymakers, the risk is one of framing foresight as just another tool and suite of methodologies. Foresight in this vision adds quality to a logic of thinking but does not change the logic itself.

Policy formulation becomes ‘smarter’ – the narrative goes – if it makes explicit use of foresight tools. The pressure on policymakers is to demonstrate in their [regulatory impact assessments](#) and analytical documents supporting policy proposals that their analysis is compliant with foresight guidance.

This is a classic organisational fallacy: to confuse [guidance with practice](#). In this

case, the proliferation of guidance (by all means necessary) may have the unforeseen consequence of shifting attention away from the transformative properties of foresight. Indeed, foresight is not (just) a tool that adds robust evidence methods to the plethora of tests and analyses carried out on policy proposals. It is not another brick in the wall of proceduralisation of policy formulation, but a way to think differently, to challenge our conventions.

In a sense, foresight brings in a discontinuity in policy formulation. Consider for example, how foresight changes all the elements of an impact assessment: the problem definition is no longer limited to how a problem has emerged from the past; stakeholder engagement cannot be limited to those who speak the loudest in present-time policy; direct costs incurred by today’s industry matter less than costs accruing to industries that may exist only tomorrow; discount rates for benefits gained by new generations can be challenged because they make the benefits of our children matter less than our own.

The transformative value of foresight lies in its ability to shape mindsets and change the way the root causes of problems are perceived and addressed in the first place. This is where our focus should be, not just on the applications of more or less sophisticated techniques. The true challenge is, therefore, to institutionalise long-term and futures-oriented thinking rather than simply increasing the use of foresight techniques.

2. TAKING THE FUTURE SERIOUSLY

Can this new way of thinking become embedded in policy processes, and therefore become a practice? For a start, following the [UNDP classification](#), foresight applications and methodologies are influenced by how decision-makers ‘see’ the future in the first place, whether in a *reactive*, *inactive*, *proactive*, or *interactive* way. These indicate, respectively, focussing on removing sources of problems to avoid unwanted consequences; protecting the status quo and addressing symptoms of crises; reducing risks and maximising opportunities to meet future objectives; and considering

the future as open, not linear, yet inextricably linked to our actions today.

These different viewpoints influence how we approach foresight in the first place; in turn, foresight shapes the questions we ask, the assumptions we make about the world, and whether we challenge these assumptions. The a-critical deployment of foresight techniques alone can obfuscate these nuances. Instead, we need a culture which encourages policymakers to make explicit the assumptions they hold about possible futures and to create opportunities to challenge and discuss competing viewpoints.

3. CURRENT APPROACHES

Academics concerned with the applicability of foresight in policymaking have defined [fully-fledged foresight processes](#) as prospective, practical, and participatory. What does this mean in practice for governments and decision-makers? What are the supporting mechanisms that public sector organisations can put in place to help policymakers embed futures and foresight even in the context of short-term demands?

International organisations such as the [OECD](#), [UNICEF](#) or [UNDP](#) have developed and championed 'best foresight practices'. Many governments, such as [Canada](#), [Singapore](#) or the [United Kingdom](#), to name a few, created strategic foresight units, often located centrally (e.g. Cabinet Offices, or Head of Government offices). These units provide a range of services and strategic outputs, including trends reports, horizon scans, scenarios on key issues that may affect the country overall. These units also work with departments and policy teams to conduct individual foresight projects and to provide training to policymakers (the so-called futures literacy). For instance, central foresight teams carry out foresight exercises with policy teams to tackle specific issues, including cross-cutting and cross-departmental issues such as climate change (e.g. the [UK Government Net Zero Society](#) report).

Generally, governments' central foresight teams are well equipped and have specialist skills and expertise that ensure that foresight methodologies and techniques lead to robust thinking, instead of taking off the shelves this or that tool to spice up and make more attractive a policy proposal. And yet, when it comes to foresight in policymaking, a distinct challenge arises in making sure that these applications are not too piecemeal or too detached from the policy cycle to make a real difference in how the future and future generations play a part in policy choices from the outset. In other words, the challenge for these units is whether they can really embed foresight as practice, beyond checking if a given policy proposal contains a table on megatrends or is supported by a scenario workshop.

In other instances, foresight can become a distinctive procedural and formalised step in policymaking. This has implications for how traditional administrative procedures like impact assessment are used. Indeed, the current formulation of the UK parliament's [Wellbeing of Future Generations' Bill](#), at the time of writing in its second reading at the House of Commons, requires public bodies to publish a future generations impact assessment when publishing a proposed policy change.

In the European Commission, guidance on the analysis of megatrends and creation of multiple scenarios and backcasting does not consider how to develop the skills to recognise whether megatrends, scenarios and backcasting are the best techniques to apply nor how to diffuse the practice of foresight within the organization. The guidance of the Commission does not seem to be concerned with issues of participation and with the apparent disconnect between foresight and existing strategies, which should be used as compasses: two shortfalls that are likely to lead to impact gaps, as highlighted by the [European Parliament](#)¹.

¹ The Welsh Government included 'long-term' as one of five key ways of working for the delivery of seven national well-being goals as part of the [Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015](#). It constitutes a case of a public organisation that has linked long-term thinking to overarching goals, an approach that is in line with the European Parliament's position presented here.

4. THE FUTURE OF FORESIGHT AS PRACTICE

To be clear, no one is against guidance and rich descriptions of the tools. They are necessary (but not sufficient conditions) for the practice to emerge. And no one is against training. Indeed, we desperately need to build capacity and capability for foresight, and this means increasing futures literacy. But what does this entail?

If we consider futures literacy *stricto sensu*, i.e. as the skilful deployment of a broad range of foresight techniques, from scoping to evaluation, and including facilitation, there is no shortage of comprehensive and [publicly available toolkits](#) and methodological guidance for rigorous applications, nor there is a lack of training providers. The priority in this case is to ensure that civil servants can apply foresight techniques, and, ideally, that foresight is integrated into organisations' competency frameworks as a skill.

This understanding of futures literacy is insufficient. Indeed, it could put organisations and teams at the risk of [shallow or narrow applications](#), meaning in the first instance that foresight is limited to reading trends, and in the second instance that foresight would include scenarios but without engaging in deeper critical interpretations and testing of the core underlying assumptions. If foresight is just another procedural step, there won't be real ownership of this way of thinking by those who use it. In [impact assessments](#), foresight can become an ad-hoc overlaid exercise, a superimposed lens to fit or even retrofit futures insights into policies or analytic narratives that have already settled in the minds of those who design policies.

If, however, the answer to the fundamental question "what is foresight for?" is broader and it is to enable a culture of anticipation and broadened temporal horizons, then we need to be more ambitious and look at the issue from upstream. Embedding foresight is a tall order, but some governments like the Welsh Government, have taken this challenge

head on by framing 'long term' as one of the five *ways of working* within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, an overarching law that sets out seven national well-being goals.

5. EMBEDDED FORESIGHT

The journey to embedding long-term thinking into policymaking is not going to be an easy one, nor is the pathway to achieving foresight practice a straightforward one. Embedded foresight is foresight that informs all [stages of the policy cycle](#). To be prospective and practical, embedded foresight requires the intellectual and emotional ability to deploy and facilitate foresight starting from the framing of problems in the first place, in order to develop and stress test shorter- and longer-term options against multiple scenarios and pathways including wild cards, to interpret the role of existing and non-existing factors such as weak signals (i.e. indicators of potentially emerging issues), all the way through to evaluation and eventually policy learning. Furthermore, to be participatory, embedded foresight also needs to become a platform to discuss problems and solutions openly and even outside governments buildings to engage wider societal actors² in [appropriate, inclusive, and deliberative ways](#). Embedded foresight should help uncover and deconstruct underlying assumptions, to critically consider today's and tomorrow's stakeholders and relative changes in power dynamics within relevant constellations of actors. In this sense, it is disruptive of the status quo.

So, institutional attention should shift focus from [guidance to practice](#), which, as recent neuroscience and behavioural research indicates, would in turn promote the creation of new mindsets, norms, and ultimately agency (following the '[actions drive beliefs](#)' argument).

Embedded foresight raises new questions for representative institutions too because of the need to diffuse a culture that is truly open to discussion and [learning](#). This is a culture that creates the space and gives permission to test pre-conceived problem framings and policy

2 This would open up the question of developing foresight skills more broadly, [among citizens](#) and through inclusion of futures studies in [school curricula](#).

solutions by bringing together multiple actors in a way that is inclusive and that goes beyond organisational hierarchies. The Finnish Parliamentary Committee on the Future is a high-profile attempt to involve the political sphere with futures discussion. Likewise, in the EU foresight network the [Ministers for the Future](#) meet informally at least once a year. These committees generally aim at bringing foresight into the political sphere, but do not have a specific focus on changing policy formulation processes within departments.

In the end, embedded foresight is a challenge for our societies as a whole. Too serious to be boxed into the categories of tools. Too disruptive and discontinuous in its logic for representative institutions not to be involved. Too important for our future not to involve society at large and make space for [missing stakeholders](#).

The School of Transnational Governance (STG) delivers teaching and high-level training in the methods, knowledge, skills and practice of governance beyond the State. Based within the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, the School brings the worlds of academia and policy-making together in an effort to navigate a context, both inside and outside Europe, where policy-making increasingly transcends national borders.

The School offers Executive Training Seminars for experienced professionals and a Policy Leaders Fellowship for early- and mid-career innovators. The School also hosts expert Policy Dialogues and distinguished lectures from transnational leaders (to include the STG's Leaders Beyond the State series which recorded the experiences of former European Institution presidents, and the Giorgio La Pira Lecture series which focuses on building bridges between Africa and Europe). In September 2020, the School launched its Master-of-Arts in Transnational Governance (MTnG), which will educate and train a new breed of policy leader able to navigate the unprecedented issues our world will face during the next decade and beyond.

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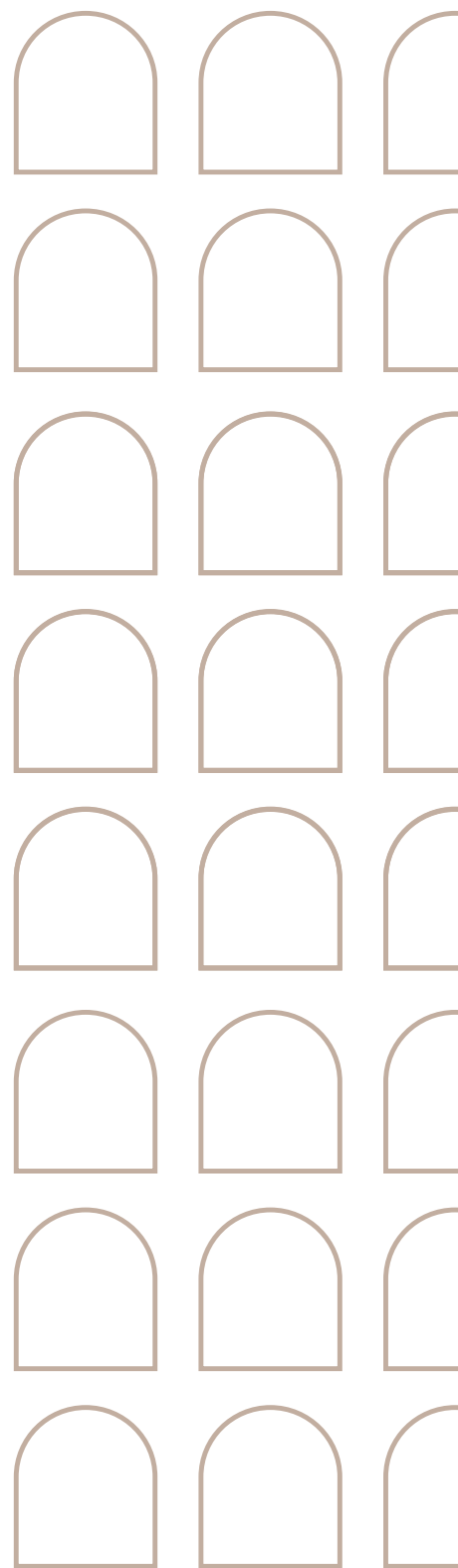
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