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Barriers and levers to future exploration in practice experiences in policy-making

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the first findings of a retrospective scan of the use of future exploration methods in strategic policy-making processes in the public domain in the Netherlands and Belgium will be addressed. The barriers and leverage points as experienced by the policy-makers involved will be assessed from their perspective as end-users who have applied foresight methods in their policy-making activities. By means of four case studies, the success factors and barriers that policy-makers encounter as they apply future exploration methods will be elaborated on. Attention will be paid to the different motives and intentions employed when opting for future exploration methods. The case studies are based on policy document analyses and in-depth interviews with users in the policy domain, all conducted in view of building empirical evidence.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context

“If long term scenario planning is to become an effective cornerstone of policy-making, more empirical evidence is needed to demonstrate that scenarios can deliver on their promises” [1].

To make a strong case for the added value of future exploration methods in strategic policy-making processes in the public domain, the field is currently still lacking sufficient empirical evidence. The general observation is that future exploration methods are still not used in an optimal way [1–6]. As van der Steen et al. [7] state: “Most future studies are not used by managers and strategists and do not influence the direction of organizational development. Although the contribution of future studies to management is in theory all but self-evident, the practice in organisations is that futures knowledge is hardly used, or at most, is used selectively and strategically (politically).”

In this paper the first findings will be addressed of a retrospective scan of the use of such methods in strategic policy-making processes in the public domain in the Netherlands and Belgium. Such methods are defined as allowing us to analyse what might happen in the future in a systematic way. The use of *foresight* methods will take centre stage. Foresight is seen as the attempt to explore alternative futures by taking into account uncertainties. Scenario analysis is a foresight method. Scenarios can be defined as stories on how the future might develop in a specific area of interest. As the future is fundamentally uncertain it is possible to conceive of several different futures which are equally plausible and all worth considering [8].

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1.2. Demand driven perspective leading

In this retrospective scan, a *demand-driven* approach will be followed. In other words, the perspective of the end-user – i.e. that of policy-makers who have applied foresight methods such as scenario analysis in policy-making – will take centre stage. As such, it will be the policy-makers' perceptions with regard to the use of foresight methods that will serve as a measure of added value as perceived by them. More attention ought to be paid to the user perspective in the public domain [1,9]. Generally speaking, more insights are required with regard to the way policy-makers use foresight methods, which success factors and bottlenecks they encounter in doing so and which added value they experience as a result.

The retrospective scan has been based on a literature scan and in-depth interviews. Policy-makers have been asked to reflect upon how they perceived the use of foresight methods. In our research, focus lies on the one hand on policy-makers working in governmental organisations who made use of future exploration methods for the first time, or on the other hand on those who had some years of experience in applying foresight methods.

The retrospective scan is part of a PhD research project focussed on the use of foresight methods by policy-makers. The results of the scan presented in this paper, are first results, which will be elaborated on in the coming two years. Although the empirical basis is still modest, the first findings can shed new light on the use of foresight methods and can prove a source of inspiration to new dialogues within the foresight research community.

2. Approach

2.1. Key research questions and demarcation of the retrospective scan

In this paper the following key research questions have been focussed upon:

1. What is the added value of using foresight methods in strategic policy processes according to policy-makers?
2. Which levers and barriers do policy-makers perceive in applying foresight methods in strategic policy processes?

Both research questions imply a clear demarcation of the analysis. The focus is on policy-making in the public domain, thereby excluding experiences in the domain of private business (see for example [3]). The perceptions and viewpoints of policy-makers (the official perspective) are at the centre of attention. The policy-maker, or civil servant, may be involved in the development phase of scenarios as well as the usage phase of a foresight study. Hence this actor plays a key role in the preparation of strategic policies. Focus lies on strategic policy processes which might result in either a policy agenda, a policy vision or strategies and which consist of different phases i.e. setting the agenda for policy-making, preparing policies, taking decisions, implementing and evaluating policies.

2.2. Case-based approach

Within this context, a case-based approach has been opted for to gain a deeper understanding of the key issues of the research questions. Four case studies focussing on different settings of strategic policy-making in the Netherlands and Belgium have been analysed. Each case revolves around experiences with applying foresight methods on regional and/or local policy levels (including municipalities and regional authorities). As such, strategic policy processes in the Dutch municipality of Overschie (a district of the municipality of Rotterdam), the Dutch province of Limburg and the province of Overijssel have been assessed. Furthermore, a strategic policy process in the context of rural policy development, coordinated by the Flemish Land Agency, has been assessed. Every case has been analysed by means of the analysis of strategic policy documents and in-depth interviews with the policy-makers involved.

The province of Limburg case concerns two foresight studies, a qualitative and a quantitative scenario study (see [10,11]), respectively developed for the first and second Limburg surroundings plan (covering a long term vision and strategies for the whole province of Limburg) (see [12,13]). The Flemish Land Agency concerns the development of qualitative scenarios as a building block for the first rural Flemish policy plan [14].

The Overschie case involves the development and use of a qualitative scenario analysis as a strategic building block for a new coalition program for the new governing board [15].

The case of the Trendbureau of Overijssel includes different foresight exercises for strategic policy processes of city councils and the provincial organisation itself, focussing on different policy themes.

Furthermore, in all four cases the scope of the analysis was the future of a territorial entity, including each and every of its functions. The time horizons employed all extended at least 10 years into the future (Table 1).

The researcher has been involved in two out of the four case studies. In the case of the Flemish Land Agency the researcher has trained the officials in the use of the method of scenario analysis. In the case of Overschie the researcher has facilitated the process of scenario development and the application and was one of the authors of the scenarios.

The document analysis has been focussed on those documents presenting the scenarios and strategic policy documents for which the foresight efforts were meant. The insights of screening the scenario documents and the policy documents were confronted with the insights of the interviews. Being aware of the potential bias of in-depth interviews (for example, a

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