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Interpreting foresight process impacts: Steps towards the development of a framework conceptualising the dynamics of 'foresight systems'

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Abstract

Foresight programmes are usually evaluated in terms of the achievement of initial objectives and the scale and nature of direct, anticipated impacts, notwithstanding the difficulty of measuring such impacts. However, indirect and/or unanticipated impacts that fall outside the scope of specific programme goals and objectives have also been reported. These are mainly impacts associated with the foresight process itself, i.e. with the way in which foresight exercises are designed and implemented. These impacts typically fall in areas such as:

- Knowledge creation, diffusion and absorption;
- Social capital and networking;
- The evolution of strategies to cope with or escape from the negative consequences of a 'risk society'.

The diversity of the above areas suggests that foresight process impacts should be interpreted through the lenses of epistemology, sociology, political science, management science and organisational theory. In parallel, given that developments in the above spheres are strongly associated with the evolution of 'participatory knowledge societies', this paper presents an interpretation of foresight process impacts within a conceptual framework that attempts to characterise such societies.

Additionally, such an interpretation is conceived as a step towards the development of a conceptual framework aimed at understanding the dynamics of 'foresight systems'. This framework should be capable of explaining the interdependencies and inter-relationships between system elements such as actors, processes, inputs, outputs and impacts, as well as the interaction of the system with the broader socio-technological-economic-political environment.

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The overall aim of the paper is to develop an impact assessment framework for foresight exercises that assesses the degree to which they promote the development of 'participatory knowledge societies'.

The paper is based primarily on research carried out during the preparation of a PhD thesis entitled "Assessing the contribution of Foresight to a more participatory knowledge society". The research mainly involved a literature review of available documentation on past and present foresight programmes and their results.
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Keywords: Knowledge society; Foresight impacts; Impacts assessment; Logic model; Networking; Actors' alignment

1. Introduction

The present article presents results to date[2] from research leading towards the production of a PhD thesis entitled "Assessing the contribution of Foresight to a more participatory knowledge society". This topic is of specific interest due to the fact that no common evaluation and assessment approach for foresight exercises has been developed to date. This is a consequence of the fact that most foresight activities, although sharing some methodological characteristics and similarities in terms of time horizons and audiences addressed, usually have different aims, scopes and levels of implementation. Thus evaluations typically focus on assessments of whether or not these goals have been attained.

The evolution of a common evaluation and assessment framework for foresight exercises, however, could facilitate the identification of good practices irrespective of their specific objectives and levels of implementation, as well as facilitating the benchmarking and coordination of policies for socio-economic development.

However, a common evaluation and assessment approach is not possible if evaluations are based on the specific objectives and needs that foresight exercises typically try to address. Another level of reference is needed, i.e. foresight exercises need to be assessed in terms of their contribution to the attainment of higher level, generic goals.

In this paper, we argue that one higher level of reference is offered by a commonly agreed goal amongst the EU Member States, namely the goal of becoming "*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*".[3]

In parallel, a further higher reference level is offered by the trend towards participatory governance. This has increased in importance in the past few years, not only in terms of the management of health- and environment-related risks, but also in terms of ensuring sustainable development.

These two 'pillars', the 'knowledge society' and 'participatory governance', can become the common framework in which to assess and compare the performance of foresight exercises. In order for this to happen, however, the major characteristics of these two 'pillars' first have to be examined and understood. This facilitates a greater understanding of the wider environment within which foresight exercises are implemented and the identification of many of the characteristics of emerging knowledge societies which foresight can affect in both anticipated and unanticipated ways.

As a starting point, a conceptual framework is presented which outlines the major characteristics of emerging knowledge societies. This is based on a review of the available literature. A further review of the literature on foresight impacts showed that many of these are in line with the societal shifts needed if emerging

[2] PhD research will be complete by Jan. 2010.

[3] Strategic goal for 2010, set for Europe at the Lisbon European Council – March 2000 (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm).

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