

EMBEDDING FUTURES THINKING INTO ENVIRONMENTAL POLICYMAKING

This article summarizes the main obstacles for embedding long-term thinking into environmental policymaking and presents a cross-country comparison study from the European Environment Agency, analysing institutional arrangements, barriers and success factors.

Embedding long-term environmental perspectives into policy actions poses a big challenge for institutional and governance arrangements. The main obstacles for decision-making arise from both the problem structure and the problem solving context.

Firstly, the problem structure. Environmental problems tend to be very complex, highly uncertain and long-term, which can lead to institutional resilience to change and failure to act. The high complexity and uncertainty of environmental problems, for example, may create the perceived need for more evidence on which to base policymaking and, in turn delay, or avert decisions¹. As for environmental models and forecasts, their technical nature means that often only experts can interpret the results, whilst non-technical policymakers struggle to use them.

Secondly, the problem-solving context. Policymaking tends to be short-term focused, led by electoral and budgetary cycles. Short-termism may also be exaggerated by external advocacy pressure, lobbying for policy change with short-term aims. Furthermore, environmental policymaking is often compartmentalised, leading to several government departments defending their territory and budgets. As a result, overarching issues, such as long-term environmental issues, can suffer from the competitiveness of departments and ministerial ambitions.

An important element of environmental futures thinking in foresight exercises is the timely identification of issues and priorities that should alert and support the decision-making process². Hence techniques are needed that can better engage policymakers in long-term thinking. However, whilst future thinking and foresight³ is being increasingly

used as an instrument for shaping policies (for example see European Foresight Monitoring Network), evidence suggests that the institutional and governance aspects of foresight work have received little attention to date and need to be better understood: *“Even well-constructed, thoroughly analysed scenarios are of little use and relevance if the organizational capacity to absorb them is poor - if there is no policy backing, or if the relevant characteristics of the policymaking process have not been taken into account”*.⁴

With its BLOSSOM Project⁵, the European Environment Agency (EEA) started to analyse institutional arrangements, barriers and success factors for embedding long-term perspectives in environmental policymaking. The main aims of the cross-country comparison was to:

- Identify a “toolbox” of approaches to institutionalising long-term futures thinking;
- Identify which countries have introduced respective approaches and tools: finding pioneers and commonplace tools;
- Look for commonalities and differences; identifying factors for and barriers to success.

Based on interviews with practitioners in government, administration and policy advisory bodies and a review of relevant literature, twelve country case studies were compiled between 2009 and 2010 (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom). Each country case study addressed those aspects of most relevance to foresight and environmental policymaking, notably:

- Institutional and governance arrangements for futures work and for policymaking;
- The nature of the issues addressed in futures studies;
- How the preceding arrangements interact.

The study concludes that the key success factors emerging from the cross-country analysis were policy demand and political support, parliamentary involvement, embedded (internal) institutions, broad participation, communication, timeliness and relevance, as well as the skills and capacity, and

³ For a definition of foresight and futures thinking see <http://cordis.europa.eu/foresight/definition.htm> and European Foresight Monitoring Network (2009), page 27

⁴ European Environment Agency (2011), page 7.

⁵ BLOSSOM = Bridging LOng-term Scenario and Strategy Analysis: Organisation and Methods.

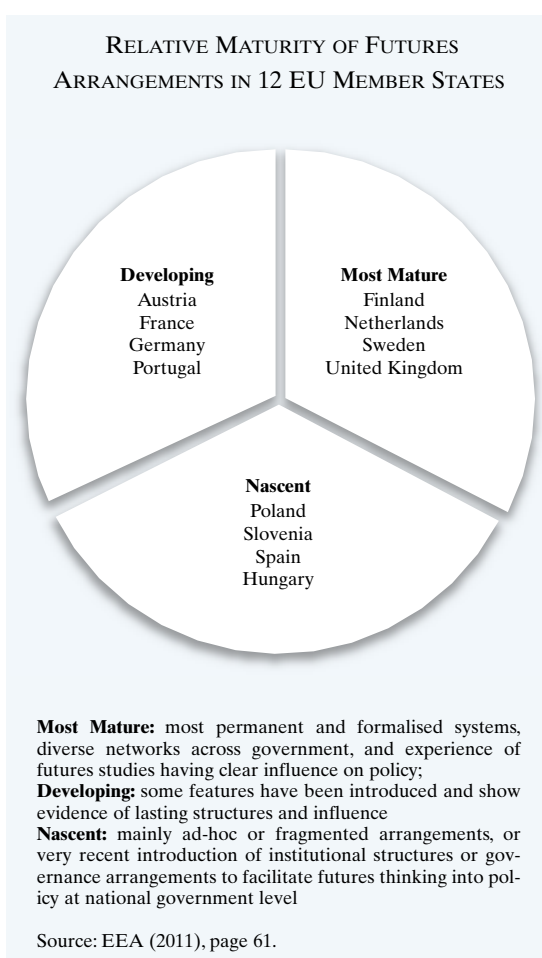
¹ European Environment Agency (2011), page 9.

² European Foresight Monitoring Network (2009), page 27.

‘champions’ in government. However, major barriers to success arose from a dominant focus on electoral / budgetary cycles, lack of political support, lack of staff continuity (‘institutional memory’), departmental change, responsiveness of studies to policy needs and compartmentalisation⁶.

Based on the case study reports, the BLOSSOM project developed a simple typology comparing the relative ‘maturity’ of future work in relation to environmental policy making (Figure 1).

Figure 1



A comprehensive summary of the cross-country comparison (including institutional settings, main actors, mechanism for foresight in environmental policymaking) and a SWOT analysis on the state of embedding futures research in environmental policymaking in each participating country can be found in the DICE database under Natural Environment – Regulatory and Other Policy Instruments.

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References:

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<http://cordis.europa.eu/foresight/definition.htm>, accessed on 23/04/2012.

⁶ European Environment Agency (2011), page 61.