Embedding Strategic Foresight With a Multi-Level Perspective

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**Highlights**

1. In today’s hyperconnected world, Flanders advocates for a multi-level approach in strategic foresight, stressing the importance of regional, national and subnational collaboration in foresight endeavours.
2. Flanders uses four key functions in its strategic foresight work – discover, explore, map and create – to navigate a volatile world, ensuring evidence-informed policymaking.
3. Through workshops and knowledge exchanges, Flanders encourages stakeholders to share insights regarding global challenges and best practices in foresight methodologies.
4. By fostering a culture of anticipation and adaptation, multi-level strategic foresight empowers governments to navigate uncertainty and build resilience collaboratively.

**Background**

Contemporary policymaking has reached unseen levels of complexity, placing new demands on governments to use the best available information and knowledge. In response, the idea of evidence-informed policymaking has become a focal point in policy science research (Jennings and Hall 2012; Pedersen 2023) and has secured a central position on agendas of international organisations such as the OECD (2020) and the European Commission (EC, 2022).

In today’s volatile world marked by global crises, the necessity for strategic foresight has ascended to rising levels of recognition and urgency. Policymakers must find ways to interact differently with stakeholders, especially by moving away from seeking a predictable single future toward the possibility of multiple transition pathways that offer adaptability in the face of rapid change (De Smedt & Borch, 2021). Cross-level drivers of change do not add up in a linear, predictable manner. To be effective, strategic foresight should ideally be embedded in a multi-level system that considers global trends and fosters strategic interactions across various levels (Kaplan et al., 2021).

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1 Strategic foresight is a discipline aimed at understanding and anticipating emerging challenges and opportunities. It involves systematic analysis of long-term trends, drivers of change, and potential disruptions. By exploring various possible futures, strategic foresight helps in better preparing for upcoming changes.
Against this backdrop, the Government of Flanders has actively pursued the enhancement of its strategic foresight system, aiming to serve as a model for resilient policymaking. It increasingly endeavours to embed strategic foresight in a multi-level governance approach, spanning regional, national and subnational levels. Embracing a multi-level strategic foresight approach signifies a paradigm shift in governance, which transcends traditional hierarchical structures towards adaptive co-management and multi-actor learning. This entails embedding strategic foresight into the fabric of policymaking, with the goal of fostering a culture of anticipation and adaptation across governmental entities and international networks.

**The rising importance of strategic foresight at the European level**

Governments face unprecedented challenges and opportunities, encompassing not only geopolitical changes and technological acceleration, but also other transformative developments reshaping societies in unpredictable ways (De Smedt & Borch, 2021). Amidst these tumultuous times, the European Union has taken significant steps towards fortifying its strategic foresight capacity (EC, 2023).

Strategic foresight helps to create shared goals, reframe policy issues, act as an early warning system, stress-test current policies and innovate for better policy outcomes. It redirects leadership attention from understanding the past to exercising prospective judgment on potential future scenarios. This is accomplished by engaging with a manageable and memorable set of alternative futures, fostering learning and proactive decision-making (EC, 2017). The European Commission, in particular, has embarked on a path to enhance foresight capabilities within its ranks and across Member States. This endeavour is intertwined with ongoing Resilience and Recovery Plans, an example of a concerted effort to proactively anticipate and manage future challenges.

The imperative for knowledge sharing and cooperation has emerged as a pivotal strategy to confront long-term transformations effectively. The many interlinkages within and between socio-economic systems frequently present significant obstacles to attaining the transformative change necessary to achieve long-term sustainability objectives.

Designing governance systems that simultaneously produce high levels of collective knowledge creation, learning and testing often means overriding basic system features such as path dependency (Duit & Galaz, 2008). These long-term transformations are fundamentally changing governments’ relationships with their key stakeholders, requiring an essential change in the design and delivery of policies and services. Instead of being fragmented or disconnected from formal decision-making, such stakeholder processes must be carefully integrated into policy design (De Smedt et al. 2008). This includes exploring alternative innovation pathways to overcome current barriers and identifying short-term opportunities that allow stakeholders to actively take part in change toward system innovation.

In 2023, the Committee of the Regions (CoR) adopted its first stand-alone opinion on strategic foresight as an instrument of EU governance and better regulation. The document stresses the added value of strategic foresight for local and regional authorities. Members further underlined that regions and cities need to be supported in developing their own foresight capacity through appropriate dissemination and training activities for local and regional decision-makers and public authority staff. Encouraging learning and involving citizens and local and regional authorities directly in horizon scanning, identifying weak signals, and long-term trends will raise the profile and visibility of foresight activities and help in developing options for the future.

Within this context, the Government of Flanders, together with several regional partners, is actively promoting the #Ourfutures – Stories for the Future of Europe story collector...
under its Strategic Foresight for Resilience initiative. This story collector is an initiative of the European Commission in which Flanders participates within the framework of the Belgian EU Presidency. With #Ourfutures, it gathers stories of citizens living in different European regions, which are intended for European policymakers.

Engaging in strategic foresight at the subnational level is crucial for identifying specific needs, challenges, and catalysts of change that impact each territory uniquely. Regions possess unique socio-economic, cultural and environmental characteristics that differentiate them from national and global levels, as well as from one another. Governments should recognise that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is unlikely to work in today’s volatile world. Initiatives such as #Ourfutures empower regional decision-makers by providing them with invaluable insights and data. Through strategic foresight at the subnational level, regional decision-makers can customise policies and strategies to suit the particular context, thereby fostering effective and responsive governance.

A growing number of regions are actively exploring, anticipating, and shaping their futures through structured and systematic strategic foresight practices. According to a 2021 CoR survey, half of the respondents, comprising local and regional politicians, affirmed the presence of some form of foresight activity within their respective subnational authorities. Climate change, economic development, demographic change and mobility, sustainability, and digitalisation emerged as the most pertinent topics for foresight endeavours. The CoR has furthermore actively sought to connect such regions with strategic foresight capacity without necessarily establishing new structures. This effort aims to enhance its own foresight capabilities and integrate foresight principles into its work.

**Flanders’ four strategic foresight functions**

The Government of Flanders regularly uses strategic foresight to navigate a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. To integrate strategic foresight into all processes, a dedicated Strategic Insights and Analyses unit within the Chancellery and Foreign Office has defined four functions: discover, explore, map and create. Embedding these four functions has proven essential to guarantee high-quality, evidence-informed, and future-proof decision-making processes.

The ‘discover’ initiatives, for example, focus on using international data sources for strategic outlooks and scenario analyses. Futures Platform, for example, proves to be an excellent tool for horizon scanning to identify early signs of change not yet on the radar or adequately addressed within government.

Among the ‘explore’ initiatives, science-to-policy dialogues facilitate strategic conversations between scientists and policymakers to develop anticipatory intelligence. In 2022, the Government of Flanders organised such a dialogue with the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy. Researchers from both the Dutch and Flemish academic world, policymakers and experts discussed topics with a long-term perspective after recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, such as new system technologies and strategic interests. The aim was to explore common challenges and discuss concrete recommendations and tools for policy.

‘Mapping’ constitutes the third pillar, whereby visual representations of possible future scenarios and how they relate to each other are created. A prime illustration is the Flemish Resilience Dashboard. This tool, incorporating 38
National and regional governments, often sharing a similar context and facing comparable challenges, stand to benefit from a collective approach to strategic foresight.指标，确保了对不断出现的挑战做出准备并直接面对这些挑战。至关重要的是，弗莱芒的背景不能孤立地看待，而必须放在更广泛的欧洲景观中进行上下文化。将弗莱芒的发现与其他欧洲成员国和地区的发现联系起来，促进了相互学习，并使人们对共同的挑战和创新的政策制定方法有了更深刻的理解。

第四和最关键的功能在弗莱芒的预见工作中的发展策略和愿景是由此前阶段的洞察中获得的。这一阶段包括战略规划、政策制定和实施具体行动，旨在朝着未来前进。

这些多级战略预见功能的发现、探索、绘制和创造实践也可以在其他地区实施。结构化情报过程是战略预见工作的背后支持。在机构中收集信号并分析变化驱动因素。建立这些实践以持续发现、探索和绘制变化驱动因素和发展是实现系统性战略预见工作的第一步。更先进的战略预见输出往往建立在这些基础实践之上。

OECD也强调多级战略预见方法的重要性。他们的研究强调，战略预见主要与政府圈子中的危机管理相关，而不是更广泛地与政策制定和增强韧性（OECD, 2019）。需要动员预见网络并增强治理系统中的战略预见能力。为了使战略预见在所有治理水平上有效，它应该被整合到一个多层次治理方法中。这种整合方法不仅可以促进决策制定，还可以促进各个治理层面上的协调和协同，从而促进有韧性的文化和适应性管理。

全球挑战，地区解决方案

国家和地方的政府，通常共享一个类似背景，可以受益于集体的战略预见方法。在多层次的治理系统中，探索（地区）机会对全球挑战的应对能力以及在所有级别进行交流的优势是显而易见的。例如，OECD关于政策一致性的建议为各国帮助政策制定者和关键利益相关者提供必要的机构机制和政策工具，以增强政策一致性并解决综合经济、社会和环境目标（OECD, 2019）。

在2024年1月1日至6月30日的比利时欧盟主席国期间，弗莱芒省致力于传达一个有力的信息给欧盟，强调欧盟地区在应对全球挑战和促进增强欧盟政策合作的重要性。弗莱芒政府致力于建立一个更深层次合作的基础，加强和创新的欧盟地区，促进持久参与，以集体方式共同应对未来挑战。

在全球挑战中，区域解决方案

作为主席国的一部分，弗莱芒政府邀请了十个欧洲地区到布鲁塞尔参加战略预见研讨会。为了聚焦讨论，研讨会根据欧盟2020年战略预见报告中列出的四个韧性维度进行结构化，即社会和经济、地缘政治、绿色和数字韧性。这种选择与欧盟的强调这些相互关联维度以实现战略长期目标的强调相一致。

参与地区在可能的未来情景下共同探索挑战和合作机会。不同领域的专家和不同地区的政策官员被纳入讨论。虽然预见工作者在现有政策中拆除时，预见专家带来了方法学上的严谨性和主题专家提供了特定领域的知识。预见研讨会打破了孤岛思维，促进了跨领域的思考，这是应对现代复杂挑战至关重要的。
To follow up on this exercise, Flanders is planning to convene regional foresight experts once more, with a focus on exchanging knowledge and best practices regarding methodologies. Additionally, Flanders is exploring the establishment of a Regional Foresight Network, aiming to take a leading role in fostering multi-level dialogues on futures. To ensure that the regional perspective is embedded in EU policymaking, regions should foster ongoing learning and collaboration. Specific actions appear as especially relevant such as:

- shared scans: what are the signals that are emerging or profiling the horizon for regions?
- scenario approaches: which scenarios are possible, probable or desirable for regions?
- opportunity spotting: how can regions leverage existing and potential opportunities to shape their futures?

**Conclusion**

To foster evidence-informed policymaking, strategic foresight should be seamlessly integrated into a multi-level governance system, facilitating the creation and dissemination of robust anticipatory intelligence. Such a multi-level strategic foresight system ideally relies on international partnerships and data-sharing mechanisms to thrive. By intertwining indicators of current situations with insights derived from foresight activities such as science-to-policy dialogues, and shared horizon scanning and scenario development, national and regional governments can enhance their capacity for evidence-informed policymaking and strategic planning. Within each level, there should be a clear focus on policy innovation, challenges and opportunities.

Embracing a multi-level and collaborative approach enables governments to stay ahead of emerging challenges and adapt proactively to changing circumstances. Through the exchange of knowledge and expertise across borders, governments gain a broader perspective on future trends and potential disruptions. Such an international and multi-level network of foresight practitioners will promote continuous learning and innovation, driving collective efforts towards resilience.

By prioritising a multi-level perspective in foresight, national and regional governments position themselves to navigate the complexities of the future with agility. Pooling resources and sharing intelligence will not only enhance resilience but also lay the groundwork for transformative innovation and collective action.

**References**


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Peter De Smedt has an academic background in System Analyses. His major professional challenge is to connect science and policy. On a broad range of regional and EU projects, involving Foresight, Horizon Scanning and Integrated Assessment, Peter works together with experts and stakeholders towards achieving a common understanding on non-sustainable trends, offering scenarios, visions and integrated solutions to support policy-makers. See for example: Future scenarios to inspire innovation. Participatory policy design in system innovation. Peter currently works as Director Strategic Insights and Analyses at the Chancellery and Foreign Office of Flanders. In his previous assignment he supported to establish the EU policy lab at the EC Joint Research Centre.

Flo Van den Broeck, a policy analyst within the Strategic Insights and Analyses unit of Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office, informs her department about global trends and insights for strategic initiatives. Her primary role involves policy research, including the analysis of international indicators, macroeconomic trends and pertinent future studies, all aimed at bolstering evidence-informed policymaking. In the context of the Recovery and Resilience Plan, she is engaged in reporting on the common indicators of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and in monitoring of Flanders’ overall crisis resilience. With regard to strategic foresight, Flo collaborates with various stakeholders such as the OECD, other governments, think tanks and academics.