

POLICYBRIEF

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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).

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.



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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.

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This policy brief will delve into why embedding strategic foresight with a multi-level perspective is imperative and how this can be achieved, drawing upon best practices from Flanders. Furthermore, it will explore the necessity of adopting a regional perspective when envisioning futures and provide examples of how regions can collaborate and share insights in the field of strategic foresight.

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.

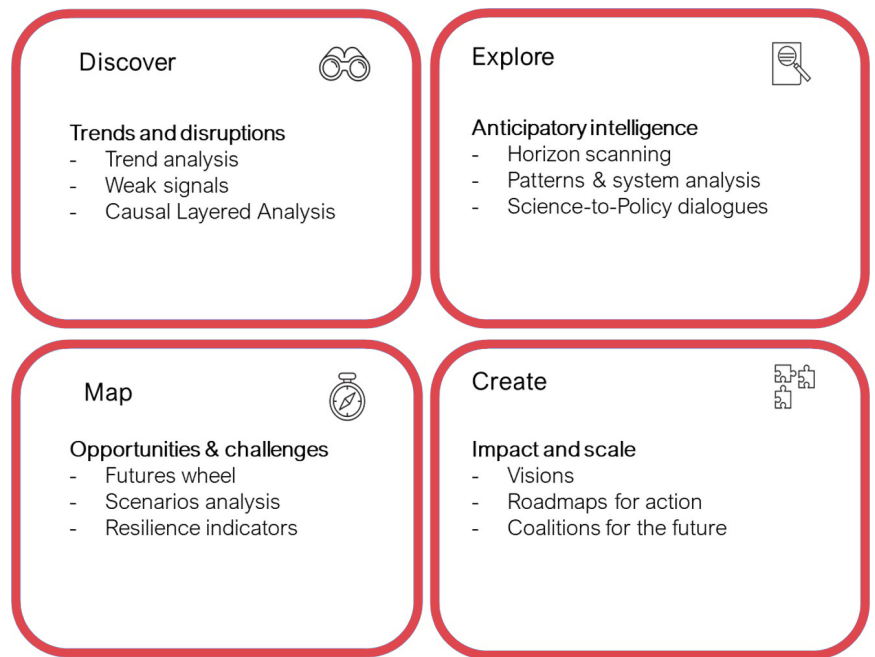
A growing number of regions are actively exploring, anticipating, and shaping their futures through structured and systematic strategic foresight practices. According to a 2021 CoR survey, half of the respondents, comprising local and regional politicians, affirmed the presence of some form of foresight 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

indicators, ensures heightened readiness to address emerging disruptions and confront evolving challenges directly. Crucially, the Flemish context cannot be viewed in isolation but must be contextualised within the broader European landscape. Linking Flemish findings with those of other European member states and regions fosters mutual learning and enables a deeper understanding of shared challenges and innovative policymaking approaches.

The fourth and most crucial function in Flanders' foresight work involves developing strategies and visions derived from insights obtained in preceding phases. This stage encompasses strategic planning, policy development, and the implementation of concrete actions aimed at navigating toward the desired future.

National and regional governments, often sharing a similar context and facing comparable challenges, stand to benefit from a collective approach to strategic foresight

These multi-level strategic foresight functions of discover, explore, map and create are practices that could also be implemented in other regions. A structured intelligence process underpins much of the strategic foresight work in organisations to collect signals and analyse drivers of change. Establishing these practices to continuously discover, explore and map drivers and signals of change most relevant to regions is typically the initial step towards systemic strategic foresight work. More advanced strategic foresight outputs often build upon these foundational practices.

Also the OECD underscores the imperative of a multi-level strategic foresight approach. Their research highlights that strategic foresight has predominantly been linked to crisis management within government circles, rather than adopting a more inclusive approach to envisioning futures in policymaking and bolstering resilience (OECD, 2024). Efforts are needed to mobilise foresight networks and enhance strategic foresight capabilities throughout governance systems. For strategic foresight to be effective across governance levels, it should ideally be integrated into a multi-level governance approach. This integrated approach not only enhances decision-making but also promotes coordination and synergy across governance tiers, which fosters a culture of resilience and adaptive management.

Global challenges, regional solutions

National and regional governments, often sharing a similar context and facing comparable challenges, stand to benefit from a collective approach to strategic foresight. In a multi-level governance system, the ability to explore (regional) opportunities for global challenges and the ability to interact at all appropriate levels is a distinct advantage. For instance, the OECD Recommendation on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development provides a comprehensive standard to help countries equip policymakers and key stakeholders with the necessary institutional mechanisms and policy tools to enhance policy coherence and address integrated economic, social and environmental goals (OECD, 2019).

During the Belgian European presidency, spanning from January 1 to June 30, 2024, Flanders aims to convey a robust message to the European Union, highlighting the pivotal role of European regions in addressing global challenges and promoting mutual cooperation for enhanced EU policy. The Government of Flanders is dedicated to

establishing a foundation for deeper collaboration among strong and innovative EU regions, fostering enduring engagement to collectively tackle future challenges.

As part of the presidency, the Government of Flanders invited ten European regions to Brussels to take part in a strategic foresight workshop. To bring focus to the discussions, the workshop was structured according to the four resilience dimensions outlined by the EC in its 2020 Strategic Foresight Report, namely social and economic, geopolitical, green, and digital resilience. This selection aligns with the EC's emphasis on these interrelated dimensions for achieving strategic long-term objectives.

Participating regions reflected together on possible future scenarios to explore common challenges and opportunities for cooperation. Diverse perspectives were taken into account, as experts from various fields and different regions were present. While policy officers shared insights into existing policies, foresight specialists brought methodological rigour and thematic experts provided domain-specific knowledge. The foresight workshop dismantled silos and fostered interdisciplinary thinking that is vital to navigating the complexity of modern challenges.

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.

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