



The Impact of Selected Foresight Studies

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Introduction

It is notoriously difficult to measure any kind of impact of studies, such as those written by parliamentary offices of technology assessment. An oft-reported finding is that such reports are used mainly to find arguments in support of a position already formed in the decision-maker's mind rather than informing the decision itself.

The only certain way to determine impact is to interview the main stakeholders.

Types of Impact

A necessary distinction is between impacts achieved due to the approach/process itself and those due to its results.

A very obvious way of measuring impact is to compare the results that have been achieved with the originally stated aims of the project, possibly making a distinction between principal aims and secondary aims. At times, the ranking of the individual aims can change during the course of a project, as for instance seems to have been the case for the UK foresight programme.

Another kind of impact are the unexpected effects, which can be either positive or negative.

For activities seeking to influence or inform public decision making, an important area of impact is the media, such as the press and broadcasting. There also might be some scientific debate about the approach and the results of the exercise.

A more fundamental question is if the method/approach itself is adequate for the ends to which it has been used. A question that arises here is if the same goals could have been achieved by another, possibly less elaborate means.

The information on the impact of the foresight exercises covered in this study was provided almost entirely by the projects themselves or major actors usually involved in the exercise, and thus usually sympathetic to its aims.

Discussion:

While some foresight projects have achieved an impact on science and technology priorities, the major benefit underlined in many newer studies is the creation of networks and a more atmospheric impact in the shape of a contribution towards the creation of a "forward thinking" culture throughout society. This is valued almost unanimously positively, but there are no indications on how permanent, such a culture might be, problems concerned with excluding certain actors from the process, be it deliberately or unintentionally, or of the long-term effects of the networks created in the process (new clubs or old boys networks).

The studies are generally too new to be able to assess the validity of any statements they have made about possible futures. Validation of Delphi forecasts is said to be remarkably successful (lit.) But Technology Hindsight in Sweden lists common sources of errors, and exercise itself has admitted to having fallen into most traps.

There are some charges that Foresight tends to shorten rather than lengthen the time horizon for planning.

It will be necessary in subsequent stages to interview stakeholders in foresight identified by national network members of FISTERA