

A Guide to 'Regional Foresight' for Local Actors

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Activities supporting future foresight are seen as an important element for coping current and forthcoming challenges. International companies use foresight activities to define their future corporate strategies. In the field of regional development the foresight technique is used to prepare for long-term trends, to develop regional visions and to predefine promising spheres of action.

Foresight activities are recommended by the European Commission as an appropriate tool to stimulate long-term thinking. To encourage those activities, a comprehensive paper of 120 pages was published by the European Commission (FOREN 2001 – see references at the end of the paper). It contains theoretical information as well as practical advice for the implementation of foresight activities in large, well-financed and long-running projects. But even small foresight activities implemented on local level with small resources may have an important impact on the involved protagonists/ institutions and their environment: Thinking about alternative futures opens the awareness for long-term trends and enables actors to respond to them early.

To encourage the implementation of foresight activities on local level, the following paper is designed as a practical guide for small projects. The paper may be seen as a target-group-oriented summary of the FOREN-paper.

What is Regional Foresight?

Regional Foresight may be defined as a **systematic, participatory, future-intelligence-gathering and medium-term vision-building process** aimed at present-day decisions and mobilising joint actions' (FOREN 2001: V).

The activities will pursue four **objectives**:

- 1) Stimulate common discussion about the future and therefore support long-term thinking;
- 2) Collect and combine wide-spread information by gathering important protagonists and improve shared knowledge in consequence;
- 3) Support creation of networks and therefore stimulate common action;
- 4) Provide information and therefore qualify present-day decisions.

In consequence foresight activities differ from (simple) future prognosis activities. They are more focussed on participation and networking and will initiate joint activities.

Scenarios as 'descriptions of possible futures that reflect different perspectives on the past, the present and the future' (van Notten et al. 2003:424) could to be seen as similar.

Foresight activities could differ in a wide range: in aim, time horizon, thematic focus, financial and personal resources, organisational and methodological efforts and in regard to favoured results and final products.

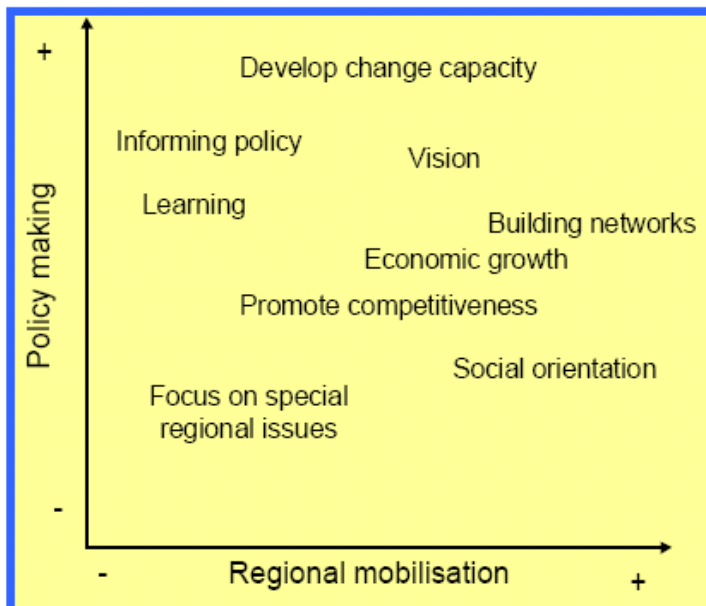
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Objectives of Foresights

The first step to create foresight activities is to define own **objectives** and to pose questions for the vision building process. Are we dissatisfied with governmental strategies and solutions? Is it necessary to adapt on general changes and new demands? Do we expect any threats for the local economy?

Based on this reflections and considerations the pivotal question is: **What would we like to achieve by using the foresight technique?**

Figure 1: Objectives of Foresight activities



In regular foresight activities pursue two objectives:

- 1) Qualifying present-day policy-making and political decisions, and
- 2) Informing and mobilising involved protagonists (inhabitants, local government, entrepreneurs, etc.).

Combining these objectives by using foresight activities supports the achievement of more complex objectives, like building networks (see figure 1).

Source: FOREN (2001): A Practical Guide to Regional Foresight, p.36.

Time Horizon

In common present-day decisions (political or administrative) focus on a short time-scale. Paying attention only on the development of the next months ignores certain changes and trends which will be much more significant by looking into the medium-term future. Therefore Foresight activities support long-term thinking and open new time horizons for planning and political decisions. Foresight activities should work with a time horizon of at least 10-30 years.

Focus

Most Regional Foresights are not focussed on a single issue, but are predominantly oriented towards a specific set of issues. There are a number of ways to classify the focus of Foresight activities – figure 2 represents one possible way.

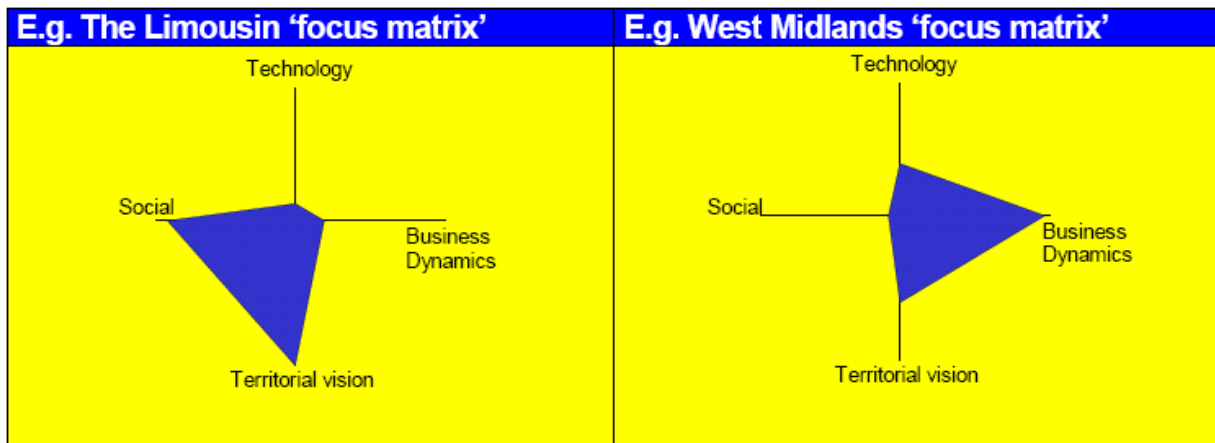
What is to be focussed depends on various facts: political situation, financial resources, institutional and social capital, intentions of the involved organisations. It is wise to concentrate on those

fields being most significant for/within the region and which could be influenced by the involved regional protagonist.

Concentrating on those focuses does not mean to ignore other facts. Looking on long-term problems necessarily assume an analysis of the framework conditions. Which sectors and themes are to be included vary regarding the Foresight's objectives.

For example in peripheral areas fields of action could be *learning and qualification processes, information policy, competitiveness of SME, education, culture, mobility or health care.*

Figure 2: Focuses of Foresight



Source: FOREN (2001): A Practical Guide to Regional Foresight, p.37

- **Social:** Emphasis on human development (demography, settlement, mobility, identity, networks, human capital, education and training, healthcare...)
- **Science and Technology:** Emphasis on technological development and market opportunities
- **Business Dynamics:** Stress on economic development (e.g. enterprise clusters, SMEs)
- **Territorial Vision:** Region is considered as a whole for four main global issue areas: geography (resources, environment, etc.), geopolitics, economy and human development

Practical Advice for Implementing Foresight Activities

Foresight processes should be embedded into existing measures and processes (in the region and/or of the leading institution). Therewith the use of financial and personal resources is optimised and the results of the Foresight processes may influence (and hopefully improve) every-day work.

How to Choose and Recruit Participants

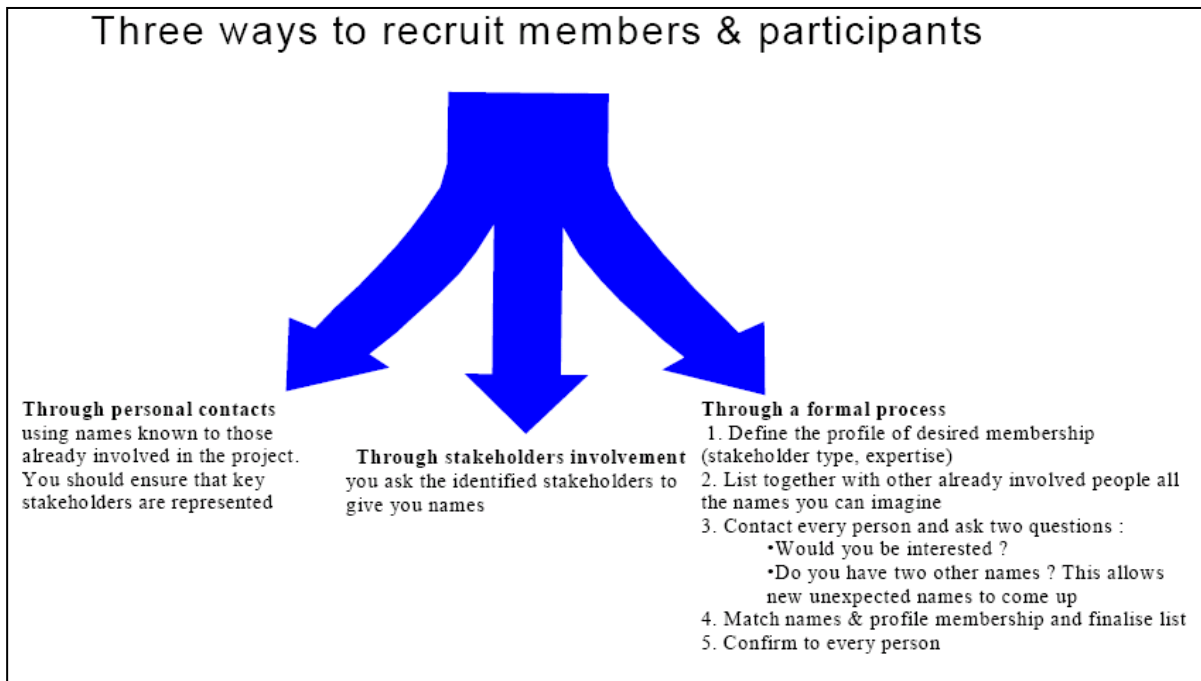
Selecting adequate participants for the activities is a crucial but difficult task. It is important to find those having the relevant knowledge and those who may support the project (on political/ administrative level or amongst certain social groups). Furthermore those should be involved from the very beginning, who are expected to put the results finally into practise.

The inclusion and mobilisation of regional protagonists is the key to successful Foresight. Accordingly participants from the following fields of work should be considered: official local institutions, institutions of research and education, enterprises and entrepreneurs, organisations of the third sector (civil society, local networks, NGOs...), journalists.

Extern protagonists may be included, if they may contribute to the content and/or implement the results on transregional level.

But how to find the participants mentioned above? There are different options to recruit participants. Three possible ways are described in figure 3.

Figure 3: Three ways to recruit members & participants



Source: FOREN (2001): A Practical Guide to Regional Foresight, p.44

Managing successfully the appointment includes convincing the participants in regard to the expected profits by participation. Possible benefits for participants could be:

- to get new information about demand of products and services (entrepreneurs)
- participation in decision-making (entrepreneurs & inhabitants)
- provision of new adapted services (entrepreneurs & inhabitants)
- long-term prevention of living and working environment (entrepreneurs & inhabitants)
- rising legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness of public services (official institutions)

But even by trying to convince the participants pointing out their advantages, it is a must to keep clear the expected contributions of the participants; promoted benefits should be achievable as well. Loosing credibility in this step will minimize the protagonist's willingness to participate further on or for the next time.

Keeping in mind that the present economic, ecologic and social situation in the region has a long history and needs long time for change will reduce the danger of disappointment by using Foresights as a tool. Foresight activities are only a small step into new directions.

The Use of Formal Methods

The use of formal methods will help to generate knowledge and to make results more comprehensible and convincing. Transparent discussion and decision about useful methods for collecting existing and generating new knowledge is an important step. Table 1 summarises methods which seem to be most practicable and useful in relation to the given time and financial limits in the

HINTERLAND-Project. The methods are not explained in detail; for further information check FOREN (2001: 99-119).

Table 1: Broad classes of formal methods

Criteria	Methods
1. Quantitative methods making use of statistics and other data	* Trend extrapolation * Simulation modelling
2. Methods basing on eliciting expert knowledge	* Expert panels * Brainstorming * Mindmapping * Scenario analysis workshops * Delphi method
3. Methods to identify key points of action to determine planning strategies	* SWOT-Analyse * Relevance trees

Source: FOREN (2001): A Practical Guide to Regional Foresight, p.100

It is important to embed the use of the listed methods in a broader, participatory discussion process aiming to link protagonists and activities.

If you decide to work with workshops you should first determine the number of meetings in combination with the expected results by bringing together various participants. In addition it is necessary to discuss and decide about the design of the meetings. Main questions are: Which methods do we want to apply? Who is involved in which part? What are possible tasks for and functions of involved actors? How do we integrate those meetings into our every-day work in the end – e.g. in combination with already ongoing activities?

Final Outcome and Products

Measuring the success of Foresight activities and their implementation is a difficult task. There are of course formal products (codified knowledge), which are recognizable and easily to be measured: reports, videos, poster presentations, lists of priorities and arrangements and concrete follow-up projects (in ideal). But above all the foresight process influences the thinking and work of the protagonists – may be due to newly created networks opening new horizons for cooperation or through better understanding the long-term consequences of present day decisions. Even though those effects are difficult to be measured, they are at least as important as the formal outputs.

From case to case the importance of products and results will differ. It depends on actors and processes where to put into more or less efforts: focussing more on formal results or on raising awareness and networking.

Guiding Questions to Design your Foresight Process

Summing up the activities described above, the following questions will assist you to design a Foresight process in practice:

- What is our aim and objective?
- Which time horizon do we want to look at?
- What are our available financial and personal resources?
- In which way could we integrate our Foresight activities into our every-day work?
- How do we want to bring together the relevant knowledge? May formal methods help us?
- Do we want to gather all relevant protagonists at a round table? When and how?
- Who should take part in meetings and processes? How do we convince them to join our activities?
- Which results do we want to achieve? Who will benefit? To whom will the results be of value?

References

- FOREN (2001): A Practical Guide to Regional Foresight. Published by the European Communities. <http://forera.jrc.es/documents/eur20128en.pdf> (10.05.2007)
- van Notten, P. / Rotmans, J. / van Asselt, M. / Rothman, D. 2003: An updated scenario typology. In: Futures 35 (2003), pg. 423-443.