



Evaluating local and national public foresight studies from a user perspective



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss the opinions and experiences of local and national Dutch policy-makers in applying foresight methods within the context of strategic policy processes. Motives behind the selection of foresight methods, the timing involved in using insights from foresight studies in strategic policy-making processes, the added value of foresight methods, and the barriers and leverage points experienced by policy-makers are described and compared at the local and the national level. Different insights are related to different activities in the policy cycle, i.e., agenda-setting, policy preparation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. In most evaluative studies on foresight, the added value is addressed from a 'supply-driven' point of view, by which we mean from the point of view of experts on the production or methodology of foresight studies. In this paper, the evaluation is approached from a demand-driven perspective, in other words, from a user perspective – i.e., that of policy-makers who have applied the results of foresight methods in policy-making processes. The insights presented in this paper are based on recent policy document analyses, in-depth interviews, and questionnaire research involving users in the local and national policy domain.

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1. Introduction

Government organisations design policies for a future full of uncertainties. Policy-makers who focus on long-term policy issues can use foresight methods during strategic policy-making processes to arrive at a better understanding of the future and its uncertainties, and to design policies that are more future-proof. Knowledge about the future can be gathered, structured and applied in different ways by using various foresight methods (see, among other things, [1]). In this article, we focus on the use of foresight methods, with special attention to scenario analysis, which involves the exploration of alternative images of the future, including the pathways that describe and explain how events and developments in the contextual environment are connected. In addition, scenario analysis is the systematic analysis of a variety of uncertainties combined into distinctive stories about the future (see [2]). In this article, the consideration of scenario analysis as a method includes both the development and the use of scenarios. We are interested in finding out (1) how scenario analysis – as a

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method – is used in the creation of strategic policy and (2) what policy-makers consider to be its added value. In various studies, the added value for strategic policy-making processes has been emphasised: the use of the scenario analysis method makes policy-makers more aware of the future, future changes and the policy implications, and government organisations learn to anticipate by developing more robust policies, etc. [2–5]. We examine whether these theoretical assumptions correspond to the experiences of policy-makers in their everyday practice. According to a recent study by the European Environmental Agency [6], there is insufficient empirical evidence of the added value of scenario analysis in general, and in particular in strategic policy processes in the public domain. In this paper, we argue that, by paying more attention to the user perspective in the public domain, we may be able to gain insight into the value added of scenario method [6] [7].

2. Research approach

2.1. Research questions

In setting up and analysing the cases, we adopted a demand-driven approach, focusing on the end-user perspective – i.e., that of policy-makers who have applied scenario analysis – and using their perceptions as a measure of the perceived added value. We draw a distinction between experiences at a local and at a national level (within the same country), to increase our understanding of possible similarities and differences, taking the different responsibilities and tasks of these levels into account. In a sense, this amounts to determining whether the prefixes ‘local’ and ‘national’, which are often used in literature, do indeed apply.

The aim is to increase insight into topics such as the level of acquaintance and experience with scenario analysis methods in strategic policy-making, the motives policy-makers have for using the scenario analysis method, and the perceived levers and barriers. We combine these insights with the different elements or phases of a policy cycle: in which phase(s) of the policy cycle is the scenario analysis method used, and how and in which phase(s) is the added value perceived. With respect to the policy cycle, we draw a distinction between the phases of agenda-setting, policy preparation, decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation (see [8]). Indeed, according to literature, scenario analysis methods can be used in the different phases of the policy cycle [1,2,4,6,9–11]. Because we are not only interested in the impact of using scenario analysis methods in the different phases of the policy cycle, but also in the factors that affect the potential impact on the policy process, we look at the perceived levers and barriers as well. We focused on the following research questions at the national and local levels:

- How familiar and experienced are policy-makers with the use of scenario analysis methods?
- What are their motives for applying scenario analysis methods?
- How are the results used in the strategic policy process, and in which phase(s) specifically?
- What, according to policy-makers, is the added value of using foresight methods in strategic policy processes?
- Which levers and barriers do they perceive when applying foresight methods in strategic policy processes?
- What are the similarities and differences in the application of foresight methods to strategic policy processes between the local and national level?

These research questions imply a clear focus on policy-making in the public domain (see, for example, [15]) and on the perceptions of policy-makers, because they may be involved in the development phase of scenarios as well as the usage phase of a foresight study.

2.2. Methods and data sources

We compared experiences at the local level with experiences at the national level. At the local level, we adopted a case-based approach to increase our understanding of the key issues involved. Four case studies were analysed, focusing on different settings of strategic policy-making in the Netherlands. Each case involved experiences with the application of scenario analysis methods at a regional and/or local policy level (including municipalities and regional authorities). The strategic policy processes in the Dutch municipality of Overschie (a district of the municipality of Rotterdam), the Dutch province of Limburg, the municipality of The Hague and the province of Overijssel were assessed. The cases were selected on the basis of whether they involved the use of scenarios for strategic policy-making and whether there was sufficient willingness to cooperate with the study and access to civil servants for interviews and other data sources.

The case involving the **Province of Limburg** concerns the use of two scenario studies, each in the context of the development of a strategic environment plan (see [16,17]), that was developed for the first and second Limburg environment plan (covering a long term vision and strategies for the entire province) respectively (see [18] and [19]). In the development process of the first environment plan, qualitative scenarios were developed by an external organisation in a broad participatory process. A project team of the Provincial organisation monitored the scenario analysis project. In the development of the second plan, quantitative scenarios were produced. Policy-makers from the provincial organisation were involved more thoroughly in the development of the scenarios. The empirical evidence for this paper is based on three in-depth interviews with policy-makers who were closely involved in the development of the scenarios, the analysis of the scenario studies, and the environment plans.

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