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## When is the future? Temporal ordering in anticipatory policy advice

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### **Highlights:**

- The temporal ordering of the future in Strategic Environmental Assessment, Technology Assessment and Foresight is analyzed.
- Time horizons frequently span around 10-20 years and have an upper limit of 50 years into the future.
- Time horizons are related to the subject matter, epistemic considerations, human experiences, political aspects and spatial contexts.
- Multiple dynamics of limiting and expanding the future in time are to be found in anticipatory policy advice.
- Overall, a tendency to shorten time horizons prevails, contradicting the very purpose of instruments of anticipatory policy advice.

### **1. Introduction**

Global climate change, the loss of biodiversity, or radioactive waste – contemporary societies increasingly face socio-ecological problems that surpass the context of their emergence in time and space and involve the risk of serious impacts on humans and the environment over decades, centuries, or millennia (Beck, 1986). Contemporary societies constantly create such long-term futures through scientific-technological, economic, and political means. However, they largely lack the institutional capabilities to foresee, control, or take responsibilities for the unintended consequences of these future-creating actions (Adam, 1998; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 2003). Particularly in regard to political decision-making there is a discrepancy between increasingly long-term consequences of decisions and a myopic-reactive orientation of political institutions and actors (Jacob, Feindt, Busch, & Biermann, 2007; Kreibich, 2006; Tonn, 2003).

Against this background, a range of institutional and methodological innovations has been introduced with the aim of strengthening the anticipatory capabilities in governing. Ex-ante policy appraisals and assessments have been implemented at different levels of decision-making, ranging from the assessment of new technologies, to the assessment of the sustainability of policies, to the assessment of environmental impacts of policies, and to the assessment of ecological impacts of concrete projects. Moreover, a range of new analytical and interactive approaches of strategic intelligence and participatory planning

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