

Project Visions and Visioning



This article is developed within the scope of the **Project Visions and Visioning**, an effort to enhance Foresight learning through collaborative work.

Dissemination and Implementation of Results of Foresight Activities: Key Factors for Success

Many academic research projects, including those which use foresight methodologies, fail dramatically because of deficient planning of the dissemination and implementation activities. If we define foresight as 'a systematic, participatory, intelligence-gathering and medium to long-term vision building process aimed at present day decisions and mobilizing joint actions?' ^[1], dissemination and implementation become crucial elements that trigger decision making and action. Furthermore, all researchers participating in the project must be aware of the decision making processes their work is meant to influence. Overall, the importance of stakeholders both in the participatory process and in the process of dissemination and implementation cannot be ignored, as stakeholders may be able to affect the decision-making on an issue.

Taking into consideration the informational needs of researchers, decision makers and other stakeholders, dissemination strategies ought to be tailored to address distinct groups. Foresight projects are almost always collaborative. Communicating the outcomes successfully to all stakeholders is an essential ingredient for success. Active, widespread, and highly valued involvement of the various stakeholders throughout the project or program will bring enormous learning and heighten the possibility for a hugely successful outcome. The more stakeholders are engaged in steering the project or program from the agreement of objectives, through the planning of activities, to the determining of methodologies to be adopted, the management of operations and the dissemination of results, the better. This enhances the results of foresight projects and programs because it gives stakeholders a sense of ownership. The more actively they engage with the process the more likely they will use the analysis and results to choose the most appropriate actions to prepare for the future. Organization-wide consultation during certain phases of the process, where instruments such as panels, forums, questionnaires, workshops and public meetings are used, is important to get "out of the box" thinking, enhance the visibility of the exercise, avoid domination by any one particular group, confer wider ownership over the outputs of the exercise ^[2].

The results and recommendations of foresight activities should be communicated in terms which are easily understood and which may not necessarily be identical to the ones used by the participants in the foresight exercise^[3]. It is important not to assume that getting the results out in the form of publications is more important than more intangible outputs such as improved networks and embedding new knowledge in people's and organizations' practices and approaches to issues. These may be harder to identify and quantify than documentation, but nevertheless represent very important benefits ^[4].

Dissemination and implementation are not two distinct features. A policy paper may be disseminated but not implemented if dissemination is not effectively conducted or receives negative feedback. Due to the fact that the success of implementation depends on the material and human resources available, internal obstacles exist. Such obstacles include procedures, human resources or inadequate financial backing. Opposition from any group may limit or undermine the expected benefits. Without successful implementation, the result of policy, strategy or foresight may imply lost time and frustration, in particular for those who have invested funds, time and energy^[5].

A scenario of resistance could be envisaged when, for example, policy implementation is contested, conceivably due to heavy burdens that seemingly outweigh benefits to the end-user or a lack of utility value in the deliverables. Policy dissemination and implementation in a scenario of resistance could consider the possibility of

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communicating perceived or anticipated benefits that would improve the possibility of implementation in the immediate to short-term. Dissemination and implementation strategies ought to be planned carefully in the early stages of a research project. All factors that influence successful implementation must be taken into consideration during the design, planning and participative processes of any foresight exercise. Such factors are: resources, policies and programs, structure, rewards, and people^[6].

All too often, insufficient thought is given to the action to be taken following the foresight exercise. In many cases this has led to implementation gaps (i.e. recommendations have been prepared, but there has been no mechanism to check whether they have been implemented; networks that were working productively have been allowed to dissolve). Making the results of the exercise known to a wide audience and passing them on to future exercises is a key part of achieving full implementation ^[7]. Dissemination is important in foresight activities because the results are often expected to be diffused beyond the immediate actors who participate in the exercise. It is important to involve a much broader range of 'target publics' extending beyond the agents selected to participate. When it is impossible to involve everyone, such activities may be contracted to experts.

It is important to underline the fact that dissemination on its own does not translate into effective communication. Failed communication has become commonplace, as is evidenced by unopened junk or spam email, zapped commercials on TV, or unsolicited print media which most people receive on a daily basis, these all being examples of the futile dissemination of information. In today's networked world most people are continuously being bombarded with messages ' and this raises the question concerning how can messages be communicated effectively in today's media and message saturated world ^[8].

Some researches argue that much of the potential for progressive futures and futures-related research to influence social change is lost due to its inability to communicate effectively through contemporary and emerging media and communication channels.

The commercial media inhibits awareness of fundamental contradictions in the way we live. Instead of conversations about peak oil and climate change, we get commercials about the benefits of buying bigger and bigger SUVs. Such institutional power is unrivalled at making the outrageous seem natural, and the normal (or critical) seem outrageous.

^[9].

At times, academic research projects may risk compromising their efficacy because of fundamental flaws in their dissemination and implementation strategies. The strategy for the implementation and dissemination of the content and process of the exercise ought to be designed and incorporated into the original proposal, but flexibility and adaptability must be considered when unexpected developments happen later on. In communicating with people, the messages we try to deliver face the barrier of the individual's own values, experiences and ideology. A model introduced by Nowak and Warneryd in 1985 ^[10] shows that the anticipated effect of a message is mediated by the following factors: the way the message is presented, the communication medium chosen, and the person/institution who expresses the message. Due the interaction of the three factors, adding the individuality of the receiver, the actual effect of the communication campaign can differ considerably from the planned effect.

The ultimate measure of successful dissemination is action, which is evident in behavior. This could include awareness, the process of learning and acceptance of objectives in an attempt to generate favorable attitudes and foster supportive opinions. The results of a foresight activity, which may consist of a policy recommendation or a strategic plan, should imply commitment to action ' commitment by people with their own ideas, attitudes, preferences, concerns and needs. A sense of motivation and confidence must be induced from early beginnings. When used correctly, communication strategies can ensure support for the foresight exercise and efficient dissemination of results, successful implementation and an appropriate decision making process.

References

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