

Abstract

Foresight and Designing Policy: The Experience of the OECD

As an intergovernmental organisation, OECD has a mandate to assist governments in preparing for future contingencies. One of the preoccupations of government agencies and ministries, is the responsibility to anticipate future risks and opportunities and to plan for these. Over the past decades, this “future horizon planning” has become more a mainstream activity for governments and businesses, with concerns over long term issues a part of everyday thinking. This includes large unknown developments like climate change, as well as sectoral developments, such as the future role of space applications or biotechnologies to increase productivity and enhance sustainability. Much has been written on risk assessment, monitoring and prevention in a variety of fields; much has also been written on whether we can anticipate known risk, unknown risks and possibly even unknowable risks. There is still no clear consensus on what action needs to be taken in the face of future shocks and risks of any of these categories, although the concept of building “resilience capacity” has gained currency in many professional circles. What can we say about tools to anticipate future risks? How can we design links from foresight exercises to policy design to re-enforce preparedness? The OECD foresight experience ranges from traditional short term economic forecasting to longer term issues such as the environment, climate change, energy and infrastructure investment. Using foresight tools to influence policy design is complex and much work needs to be done to demonstrate the usefulness of this tool to policy makers.