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COST Foresight 2030 - Living the Digital Revolution

The European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) launched an interdisciplinary strategic initiative, called "COST Foresight 2030", in December 2008. The aim of the initiative was to understand how new technologies stemming from the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) could be used by scientific and societal actors to tackle future challenges that are likely to emerge by 2030. As the areas of interest and application of ICT as enablers of future development are numerous and in order to be able to deliver promising insights and results, COST Foresight 2030 focused on the fields of life enhancement, energy, food security, natural resources management, and organisation of society. The starting point was an analysis of the Digital Revolution and the impact of this revolution on our daily lives today.

The initiative started off with a meeting of the international Advisory Group. This Group gathered a restricted number of experts on foresight and on the specific selected research areas. These experts defined boundary conditions and specified the priority areas for forecasting.

Following the recommendations of the Advisory Group, six workshops took place, starting from the ICT/CCST workshop, followed by four parallel workshops on life enhancement, energy, natural resources management and food security. The last workshop on society called "Living the Digital Revolution" took place in October 2009 and focused on the future organisation of society. The outcomes and recommendations from the previous five workshops and the socio-economic implications that emerged during the workshop on society gave rise to final policy recommendations from the Foresight 2030 initiative.

This narrative mainly focuses on the last workshop entitled "Living the Digital Revolution", which took place in October 2009 and focused on the future organization of society. It also re-examined the scenarios and recommendations from the previous workshops in the light of the socio-economical implications that emerged during the course of the workshop and revised them accordingly to produce final policy recommendations.

Selection of the experts

Following the recommendations of the Advisory Group and the co-chairs, the focus of the workshop was narrowed down to three macro areas: social organisation, governance and quality of life. These three areas were used as framework for the selection of the invited experts. The idea behind this was to have the three areas covered by an equal number of experts. In addition to scientists with experience in the three macro areas, foresight experts (generalists) have been invited too, in order to help the organisers with the conduction of the workshop. The selection of the invited experts was based on a) recommendations (by the Advisory Group members and other relevant contacts) and b) research done by the workshop co-chairs. When composing the group of experts, the co-chairs strived for balance, in terms of gender, age, geography and expertise. The experts

were contacted by e-mail. The scientific interaction with the workshop participants before and during the workshop was in the hands of the workshop co-chairs, while the administrative arrangements were being dealt with by a conference officer.

Background documents for the experts prepared before the workshop

Before attending the workshop, participants were provided with some background material, such as a report on the first workshop on ICT/CCST, a summary of the results and recommendations coming out from the parallel workshops on food security, life enhancement, natural resources management and energy and a baseline scenario picking up on the outcomes of the previous workshops of the COST Foresight 2030 initiative. They also received a non-exclusive list of societal trends with a potentially high impact on the future of the European society. The proposed trends that had been compiled by the workshop co-chairs included: an ageing society; changing higher education and knowledge management; globalisation, regionalisation and the reorganisation of space; an individualised society; migration; science, technology and society in knowledge economies. In addition, the experts were asked to answer three questions that focused mainly on the participants' opinion on the proposed or additional future trends, their potential relevance and impact and their link with disruptive technological changes. The participants' written replies together with a list of open questions derived from them were compiled before the workshop and served as starting point for the discussions. The participants received also additional information on the European Social Model which was used as a normative reference for the whole exercise.

Workshop structure

The 2 ð-day workshop was organised in both full plenary and parallel brainstorming working group sessions. During the working group session, experts broke into three sub-groups to consider changes to the European society within the following macro areas: - Social organisation ? including issues such as social composition, gender, labour flows, migration, cities, families, and education. - Governance ? including the notion of 'good governance', accountability of decision-makers, improved decision-making, legitimacy, and citizen involvement. - Quality of life ? including well-being, health, environment, food security, and questions of sustainability.

In the first brainstorming sessions, each group had to analyse the changes and trends they were expecting to happen in the three macro areas and to suggest three to four major changes which they considered as the most important and most likely to happen. The groups were also asked to identify wild cards in order to explore possible disruptive events. The inputs from the three groups were collected and further analysed in a context of fast technological progress emerging in the ICT. The later was used as a common base for an initial forecasting of possible developments of European societies and their implications for the European Social Model, as well as policy recommendations.

In order to reach a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the future challenges and possible answers to them, the experts used different approaches for the development of possible scenarios describing Europe in 20 years from now. Two of these working groups adopted an exploratory perspective, i.e. they started from the present and tried to envisage potential futures stemming from events and trends previously identified by the group of experts. One working group instead adopted a normative approach, i.e. they described a best and worst case scenario and cast against these two possibilities the events and trends previously identified.

The purpose of dividing the experts in subgroups was in line with the emphasis of the workshop on diversity of opinions and openness of explorations. However, although developed separately, many common themes were

identified in the three exercises. Finally, the results of the three working groups were then presented in a plenary for further discussion and exchange of views that emerged from different working groups.

Outcomes

The major outcomes of this workshop were: ? A general dissemination report gathering the major outcomes of discussion and conclusions. ? Policy recommendations targeting European, national & regional policy makers.

Furthermore, the collected outcomes of 6 workshops have been presented to the COST Committee of Senior Officials - CSO (COST governing body composed of representatives from the Ministries of Research of COST member countries) in order to disseminate them at national level. Moreover, some of the results have been used as inputs for the preparation of the Joint Programming Initiative ?Demographic Change?, promoted by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) on behalf of several EU member states (for more information, please consult: <http://www.jp-demographic.eu/>). The overall outcomes of the initiative as well as the experience of running a foresight exercise have been presented also at the preparatory workshop of the 11th Bled Forum on Europe 2010 ?The Future of Information Society and Challenges for Good Governance? (Bled ? Slovenia, March 10-12, 2010), dedicated to the launch of a new foresight exercise called ?Western Balkans Future 2020 project? (for more info, please consult: http://www.bled-forum.org/index_eng.html).

Main difficulties & Greatest benefits

The awareness that not all experts involved in the initiative had previous foresight experience was one of the reasons why we decided to have an external Co-Chair already with foresight knowledge and experience. His support was crucial for the preparation of the workshop and of the background documents. As solid knowledge of foresight methodology and terminology is crucial to obtain successful outcomes, it was important to dedicate some time at the very beginning of the workshop to reaching a common understanding of the foresight terminology. Moreover, the multi-disciplinary character of the exercise added another level of complexity to the workshop as the experts had very different backgrounds and were used to different ways of working and approaching problems. In some cases it was somewhat difficult to find a common basis for discussion. Besides the difficulties, we were very pleased with the workshop and its outcomes. The discussions were animated and fruitful and generated a lot of ideas. Although some further development was necessary after the exercise to gather and ?polish? them, we were very content with the final results, and we hope to be able to disseminate them further.

Thanks to this experience, we realised how important is a background knowledge of foresight methodology in achieving successful outcomes. Active support of a foresight expert is highly recommendable from the very beginning of the workshop, even during the planning phase. This is crucial for a correct implementation of the project and its success. In addition, it is important that the people organising the exercise have a good knowledge of foresight methodologies as well and early training is therefore highly advisable too. This would ensure a thorough planning of the foresight activity and of the development of clear and realistic ideas on the expected results and on how to utilise them.

Links

"Living the Digital Revolution" workshop on COST website:
http://www.cost.esf.org/events/foresight_2030_society