

Foresight for policymaking: preparing for challenges and promoting desirable futures

Foresight-informed policy factsheet

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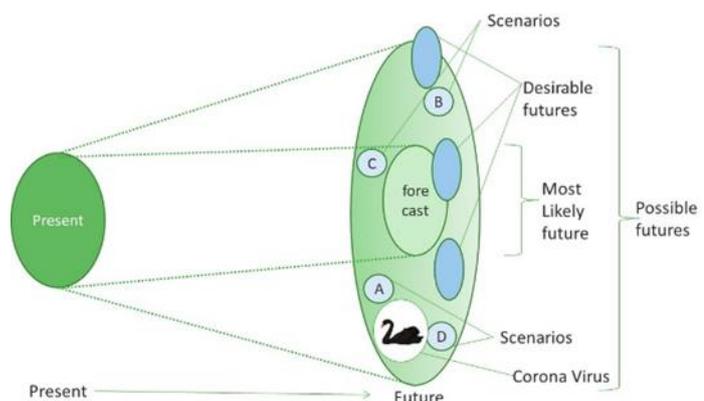
Key messages

1. **Foresight provides a systematic, participatory, and vision-building process to explore future challenges and support present policymaking.**
2. **Foresight does not predict the future; rather, it explores it through plausible scenarios that consider uncertainty.**
3. **Foresight is participatory by nature. It involves relevant stakeholders and promotes discussions about desirable futures.**
4. **More advocacy is necessary to further develop foresight in public health and health policy.**
5. **Foresight can be included in strategic planning and the research agenda of the health policy cycle.**
6. **Foresight provides insights of the effects and (in)direct impacts of COVID-19 in Public Health, for example in Mental Health, Lifestyle and NCDs, and Healthcare.**

Importance of strategic foresight

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts showed that we were not prepared for uncertain health events and resulting societal consequences.

Foresight provides a systematic, participatory, and vision-building process by providing a better understanding of possible futures and their impact on society and public health. It includes methods like horizon scanning, scenario development, and knowledge translation. Foresight enables better informed present-day decision-making and thereby better short-term and long-term preparedness in European Union (EU) Member States (MS) and the European region for possible future health crises.



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Benefits of foresight for policymaking

Foresight enables policymakers to explore strategic decisions that need to be made in the present to be better prepared for the future. Using foresight to formulate long-term decisions supports setting priorities, planning budgets, spending to address health threats and challenges, and learning how to cope with challenges while keeping resilient and sustainable health systems.

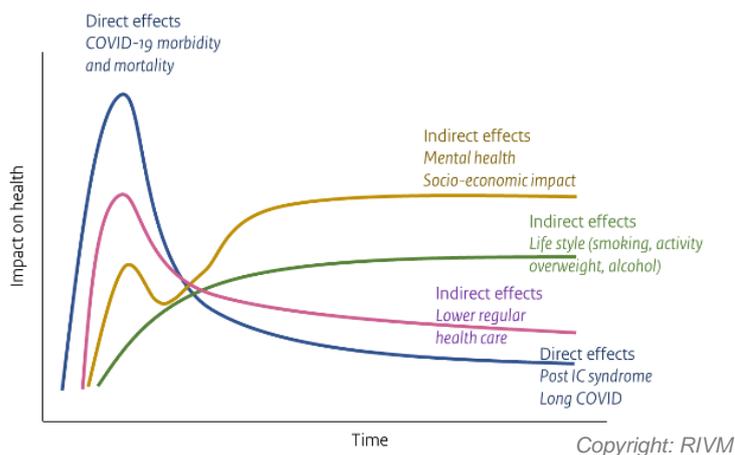
Foresight explores uncertainties in the future. These uncertainties not only regard the obvious limited knowledge of the future, but also comprise the differences on what people consider as important in a desirable future. This is especially applicable to the policymaking process where specific policy targets are defined. Possible targets could be to reduce health inequalities, stimulate patient-centred healthcare, promote healthy lifestyles, protect the population from health risks, address mental health of the population, or obtain a sustainable level of healthcare spending. The foresight process provides a platform for long-term thinking and discussions to identify and explore challenges and opportunities emerging from driving forces that shape the future⁽¹⁾. As a result, possible solutions can arise to address challenges between targets, though often these solutions cannot be achieved all at the same time. Foresight can make this explicit and allow detecting of options, opportunities, and alternatives in policymaking.

How can public health foresight studies support present policymaking towards desirable and sustainable futures?

Applying foresight to address impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis made it clear that Public Health Foresight Studies (PHFS) may be more necessary than ever to gain insight in possible future health impacts of the pandemic. The pandemic showed clear direct impacts such as cases and mortality due to COVID-19, and the possible long-term effects of Long-COVID. In addition, increased knowledge is revealing the indirect impacts of the pandemic, including the scaling down of regular healthcare services with possible longer-term impacts, changes in mental health and lifestyles, and impacts on non-communicable diseases, economic hardship, and socio-economic developments.

Therefore, PHFS can allow the exploration of the short- and long-term impact of COVID-19 in public health and healthcare, particularly in current and emerging concerns. Exploring these impacts can enable discussions of emerging challenges and decisions on how to address them in the present and in the future. The PHIRI policy briefs* provide some insights of foresight exercises and the implications in policy making in the fields of mental health, in digitalisation in primary care, and on climate and healthcare.



PHFS explore scenarios that consider uncertain trends in the future to raise awareness of the possible impacts of these trends and to improve preparedness for these possible futures. Policymakers can use PHFS and the resulting scenarios to set priorities following a common vision to develop strategies and interventions that can mitigate risks and manage impacts while keeping resilient and sustainable health systems⁽²⁾.

*The other PHIRI policy briefs:

- Aigner et al. [Integrating climate, health, and equity for a climate-resilient Europe](#)
- Peyroteo et al. [Unlocking the Future of Primary Health Care: The Digital Era Unleashed](#)
- Gruber et al. [A pandemic's impact on mental health](#)

What can public health foresight studies do for policymaking?

- PHFS can support policymaking in **navigating the “uncertainty of the future and explore alternatives in a structured way”⁽³⁾**.
- PHFS provide a **systematic approach for exploring the future**. They provide an overview of plausible outcomes and challenges to be addressed, and place these on the political agenda to set priorities.
- PHFS explore trends and their evolution into the future within **different plausible scenarios that can provide insights into challenges that can be addressed through policy action in the present**. They provide the means to consider multiple risks, opportunities, and possibilities that society and public health can encounter. Therefore, multiple interventions and strategies can be considered to mitigate negative impacts and/or strengthen positive trends.
- Using PHFS as strategic tools can **improve the democratic process in health policymaking** due to their participatory nature. They provide a platform for policymakers and stakeholders to discuss desirable futures, their challenges and opportunities, and the options to address these in the present and in the future. This platform can allow divergent ideas to become convergent and conflicting interests to reach compromise.

Policymakers should consider that PHFS do not:

- ✗ **Predict the future.**
- ✗ **Provide evidence-based recommendations.**
Rather, they explore plausible scenarios and provide recommendations accordingly.
- ✗ **Generate new evidence.**
Instead, they discuss trends, plausible scenarios, and how they can evolve and be shaped in the future.
- ✗ **Provide ‘bullet-proof’ solutions.**
They provide a platform to discuss the future and open the discussion for policy action.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. **Public health policymakers can greatly benefit from including PHFS into their strategic planning and as part of the policy cycle.** PHFS can support proactive policymaking instead of reactive policymaking.
2. **Policy experts and policymakers should advocate to establish and implement foresight as a standard tool in policymaking.** For example, countries have implemented foresight into the policy cycle through legal mandates or the establishment of dedicated foresight units, like Singapore⁽⁴⁾, the UK⁽⁵⁾, Finland⁽⁶⁾, Australia⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾, Germany⁽⁹⁾, and the Netherlands⁽¹⁰⁾.
3. **Further development of PHFS is needed to exploit their full potential.** Therefore, investing in foresight capacity and resources to build their capability and capacity can contribute in developing the field and improve strategic planning and policy processes.
4. **Due to its participatory nature, foresight can bring stakeholders together resulting in a more democratic manner of thinking, discussing, and deciding about our future.** Foresight can support decision-making, resulting in desirable outcomes, setting agendas and priorities, policy planning, and open discussions about future challenges⁽¹⁾.
5. PHFS are resource, capacity, and time intensive. **Experts and policymakers need to consider the allocation of appropriate resources and capacity** to carry out the exercise and advocate towards the allocation of enough time for stakeholder participation. Additionally, the development of guidelines and availability of other resources can support the implementation and the process of PHFS.
6. **PHFS will require access to data** to be able to quantify future projections where possible, such as making use of trend extrapolations or simulation models. The [European Health Information Portal](#) (HIP) provides a platform to access data sources from EU MS to support such quantification. It can enable international comparisons that can enrich the PHFS.
7. **The impact of PHFS can be fully achieved and realized if the exercise is done frequently** (for example every 4 to 5 years). Doing the exercise repeatedly can shed light into emerging relevant trends that can support the shift in priorities, interventions, and policies.
8. **Implementing PHFS and exploiting their full potential in policymaking can be supported by the exchange of results, experiences, lessons learned, etc.** Stimulating the exchange of experiences and knowledge in the field by experts and MS with a more established capacity in foresight can support the development of the field of foresight in public health and health policymaking.

Towards Foresight as a Strategic Tool in Policy Making

Strategic foresight can provide the platform to bring together stakeholders in health policy and public health. This platform can allow active participation of these stakeholders to discuss plausible futures, interventions, and policy measures to proactively address challenges in the present to be better prepared for the future.

Foresight does not predict the future, rather, it explores it. It moves from past-to-present evidence towards present-to-future decision-making. It supports proactive policymaking rather than reactive policymaking through discussions of plausible solutions for future challenges.

Including foresight as a strategic tool for policymaking can shed light on the present and future impacts of health issues aiming at discussing interventions and policies that provide present and future solutions. Foresight can support policymakers in creating resilient and sustainable policies and public health systems.

Foresight within PHIRI:

The Population Health Information Research Infrastructure project (PHIRI) was developed to facilitate and generate the best available evidence for research on the health and well-being of populations impacted by COVID-19. One tool to support this is public health foresight studies (PHFS), which aim at gaining insight in possible future health impacts which policymakers can act upon.



Building capacity in public health foresight studies:

- Follow PHIRI's [training course on foresight](#)
- Refer to PHIRI's [Compact Guide to Public Health Foresight](#)
- Seek support and share experiences with other foresight professionals (see [LinkedIn group](#) on public health foresight and [EUPHA Foresight Section](#))
- Follow WHO's [learning course](#) and [practical guide](#) on Foresight approaches in global public health
- Refer to the [EU Parliament guidelines for foresight-based policy analysis](#)
- Advocate to include a mandate on conducting foresight studies at an institutional level to include reflections and outcomes in the policy cycle
- Advocate for the implementation of foresight dedicated teams or sections at the institutional level

References – Want to learn more?

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