Participatory foresight: Preventing an impact gap in the EU's approach to sustainability and resilience

The concepts of 'sustainability' and 'resilience' have been steadily gaining prominence in the EU's political discourse. Most recently in 2019, the von der Leyen Commission placed the goal of increased sustainability – environmental, social and economic – at the heart of its European Green Deal set of policy initiatives. As the EU achieves higher levels of sustainability, it will be more resilient, that is, capable of better withstanding a future crisis or shock, whether in the form of another pandemic, an economic downturn or a climate emergency.

By putting sustainability and resilience at the centre of its strategic foresight framework, the EU can anchor specific policy objectives in broader narratives about its future. However, this may also carry a risk of creating an 'impact gap' – a mismatch between citizens' and stakeholders' expectations, on the one hand, and actual outcomes of policies, on the other. This briefing examines how participatory foresight can help to address a potential impact gap in the EU's endeavours related to sustainable resilience and strategic autonomy.

1. The EU's approach to sustainability and resilience

Sustainability and resilience are not new concepts in the EU policy discourse. In 2001, the European Council adopted the first EU sustainable development strategy, aimed at encouraging economic growth, social cohesion and an improved environment within the EU. More recently, the adoption in 2015 of the Paris Agreement and the UN Agenda 2030 with its 17 global sustainable development goals (SDGs), set important milestones that informed the European Commission's ensuing policy steps. For example, the European Consensus on Development, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU 2016 Global Strategy, as well as various mobility, climate, and clean energy packages adopted during the 2014-2019 Juncker Commission were considered parts of a renewed comprehensive and overarching approach to sustainability.

Resilience came to feature highly on the policy agenda in the aftermath of the 2007 global financial crisis. Initially seen as solely linked to the economy, resilience later became part of the wider EU approach to social, economic and environmental sustainability. As such, it was referenced in several initiatives of the Juncker Commission, such as the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change, the roadmap to a resource-efficient Europe, and the framework strategy for a resilient energy union.

In 2017-2019, the Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) developed an analytical framework for assessing the resilience of EU Member States recovering from the financial crisis. This framework contains several conceptual elements underlying the evolution of the EU policy approach to sustainability and resilience.
The framework regards people's well-being as the principal outcome of a ‘production process’. Resilience is closely linked to well-being as the outcome. Higher levels of well-being ensure stronger resilience. To measure well-being, the framework proposes a set of economic and social indicators such as happiness, health, household consumption, income inequality and social exclusion. As the JRC report states, ‘the final goal of resilience is functional to societal and individual well-being, and the main contributors to resilience are individuals, with all of their interactions, social ties and power structures’. According to the JRC framework, a ‘resilient society’ aims to sustain its level of individual and societal well-being across generations.

The framework defines resilience as ‘the ability to face shocks and persistent structural changes in such a way that societal well-being is preserved, without compromising the heritage for future generations. Hence, our society should be resilient in a sustainable manner’. Figure 1 shows the conceptual vision of how resilience and sustainability are interconnected. Resilience is regarded as a series of policy interventions at the level of inputs (resources), outputs/outcomes (human well-being), and various intermediate outcome variables, such as productivity, status of institutions or how markets are functioning. At the centre of the model is the ‘engine’ consisting of the socio-economic, political and environmental systems. One important aspect of the JRC’s conceptual model is that resilience as outputs/outcomes is interlinked with sustainability of the systems that comprise the ‘engine’.

Figure 1 – EU sustainable resilience framework


Another important aspect highlighted in the JRC framework is that these complex indicators of resilience (and subjective well-being) cannot be fully accounted for without involving individuals themselves in various participatory and consultation activities seeking to assess resilience. For example, the JRC surveys showed that European citizens regarded political stability and economic and social justice (and not only quantitative economic indicators such as GDP growth) as important categories when assessing resilience in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Measuring sustainability and resilience as well as using them as a basis for future policies cannot be done outside a continuous and institutionalised process of interaction between stakeholders, scientists and policy-makers.

The health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has once again called into question the resilience and sustainability of the EU ‘engine’. According to the latest JRC assessment, the crisis ‘has hit almost all parts of the “system”: the human and social capitals, the social-system services, all the institutions, communities, the production process, consumption and investment’.
Furthermore, according to citizens' perceptions, this situation came about due to the lack of resilience. At the same time, the Covid-19 crisis made many citizens aware of how many aspects of the production process (such as those related to waste, consumption and investment) were environmentally unsustainable. The pandemic underscored the main idea behind the EU's approach, namely, that resilience and sustainability are deeply interconnected. The Covid-19 crisis also provided an opportunity to deeply embed this holistic understanding of resilience and sustainability into the EU's economic and fiscal policies, as shown by the 'green recovery' budget plan (Next Generation EU) proposed by the Commission and adopted by the Member States in May 2021.

2. Sustainability, resilience and an impact gap

As noted in the previous section, the use of sustainability and resilience as a kind of 'policy compass' is successful when it includes genuinely participatory stakeholder activities. If the link between citizens, scientists and policy-makers is not sufficiently strong, an impact gap may hamper or undermine the objectives of policies. Instead of increased levels of sustainability and resilience, there would be a growing gap between citizens' expectations and their assessment of the outcome of policies.

Scientists point out that, as policy concepts, sustainability and resilience are not 'impact gap proofed'. Firstly, they are two multi-dimensional concepts that are difficult to define, measure and compare. They are commonly associated with the positive ability to 'bounce back' in difficult times (resilience) and to 'keep a balance between spent resources and their replenishment across generations' (sustainability). Beyond that, uses and definitions of these concepts vary greatly, thus creating confusion among citizens and policy actors.

Secondly, it is difficult for citizens to relate their individual standpoints to a systemic and collective understanding of sustainability and resilience. Because the EU's sustainable resilience framework has been developed in a systemic perspective, its inherent complexity can be difficult to grasp and unpack. The concept of resilience indicates only the broader categories of activities that should be improved (learning, adaptability, agility, self-organisation) without providing any clear operational indications. If an individual dimension is not unpacked in terms of meaningful communication and interaction between citizens and policy-makers, the concept of sustainable resilience remains remote and less relevant, particularly in the event of a crisis. To avoid or narrow down an impact gap, both resilience and sustainability-centred policies need to be supported by scientific evidence, which in turn should be well understood by citizens. The 'truth' of scientific arguments, presented by some scientists, is often questioned by citizens, interest groups or other scientists. Scientific evidence may therefore play only a facilitating role in advising citizens of a wide and diverse range of impacts of a policy on resilience and sustainability.

Thirdly, it is difficult to find the balance between what scientists call 'transformative' and 'conservative' aspects of resilience. People have the tendency to return to the status quo ante instead of seeing resilience as something requiring their openness and preparedness to change their behaviour. The same challenge exists with regard to sustainability. Often sustainability-related policies require transformation, such as a change of behaviour, yet many citizens find this difficult to accept while being in favour of a more conservative policy course.

In order to understand how these aspects of a potential impact gap can be averted, it is important to take a more detailed look at the EU's policy environment in which the JRC model of sustainable resilience can be embedded. Currently, there are two EU horizontal policy agendas, that span specific domains and focus on the quality and methodology of EU policy-making: the Better Regulation Agenda and the Strategic Foresight Agenda. As the next section shows, sustainability and resilience feature in both of these policy agendas. For example, the Strategic Foresight Agenda defines sustainability and resilience as a set of interlinked capacities in the EU's social, economic, environmental and institutional systems, which are essential for anticipating and responding effectively to a potential or actual crisis. The question that needs to be asked is whether these agendas include the necessary elements that could make 'sustainable resilience' less conducive to an impact gap.
3. Better regulation and strategic foresight

The Better Regulation Agenda was formally launched in 2002 with the initial goal to reduce unnecessary regulatory burden, primarily on business, along with a focus on subsidiarity and proportionality issues. While the emphasis was on simplification and reduction of burden, the approach took into account the EU’s commitments to sustainable development to ensure that all 'major policy proposals include a sustainability impact assessment covering their potential economic, social and environmental consequences'.

Over time, the Better Regulation Agenda gradually took shape, with the introduction of procedures for the evaluation of policy performance and the choice of policy areas (the REFIT programme), the ex-ante assessment of economic, environmental and social impacts of the Commission’s legislative proposals, and a special methodology – the Better Regulation Guidelines – for conducting these impact assessments, including stakeholder consultation activities. With the 2016 Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-Making, the Better Regulation Agenda became common to all EU institutions with the European Parliament and the European Council developing their own roles and instruments for assessing impacts of EU regulation.

The EU Strategic Foresight Agenda was officially launched in 2020, when the first annual strategic foresight report was published under the auspices of the new Commission Vice-President, Maroš Šefčovič, in charge of foresight. The 2020 strategic foresight report sought to identify emerging challenges and opportunities as a way to inform major Commission initiatives aimed at designing future-proof policies and legislation. Sustainability and resilience are the principal themes of the 2020 strategic foresight report. The EU’s Strategic Foresight Agenda has been enshrined in the work of all EU institutions through the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS), an interinstitutional collaborative network among EU officials.

Both the Better Regulation Agenda and the Strategic Foresight Agenda have the potential to bolster EU policy-making towards attaining sustainable resilience as formulated in the JRC framework described earlier in this briefing. Strategic foresight is also relevant, particularly for identifying early signals of a potential crisis, while the ex-ante element of better regulation can help in assessing whether a new regulation can have a positive impact on resilience of the EU’s environmental, social and economic systems.

Making use of this potential appears to be the exact intention of the current EU leadership. According to the 2020 strategic foresight report, ‘strategic foresight could support the reflection on a new meaning for progress and wellbeing and on indicators that would be most meaningful for measuring these aspirations’. This aligns the Strategic Foresight Agenda with the earlier considerations of the JRC about well-being as a goal and a measure of resilience. In this regard, the EU’s strategic foresight intends to go ‘beyond GDP’ as the main indicator of societal resilience.

Both the Strategic Foresight and the Better Regulation Agendas appear, however, to be falling somewhat short of addressing the impact gap associated with sustainability and resilience as a ‘policy compass’. For example, the 2020 strategic foresight report provides ample detail on how to measure resilience across EU Member States with the help of five thematic dashboards (social, economic, geopolitical, green and digital) of resilience. Whereas these dashboards provide a very high level of data aggregation giving a comprehensive outlook on resilience, they do not give a clear enough picture of how citizens perceive resilience in terms of their own well-being, particularly in times of crisis.

As regards sustainability, the 2020 strategic foresight report notes that the Commission ‘is exploring the possibility of measuring the transition to sustainability by way of a scoreboard. Based on the annual monitoring reports from Eurostat, this scoreboard would provide an internationally comparable overview of all four dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental, social and institutional), with the aim of encouraging a broad public debate throughout the EU’ (p. 39). Indeed, as the literature on foresight and sustainability suggests, not only public debate but also active participation is crucial to avoid an impact gap.
A similar point can be made about the further direction towards citizens' participation in the context of the EU's Better Regulation Agenda. In 2019, the Commission conducted a stocktaking exercise for which it reviewed the quality of stakeholder consultation activities. The Commission's conclusion is that there is a need to explain 'more clearly' how the input of stakeholders is taken into account when assessing the impacts of future policies. Sustainability was not specifically addressed in the context of the stocktaking. In this regard, the European Economic and Social Committee called on the Commission to incorporate a 'sustainability check' in its Better Regulation Guidelines.

The Commission intends to link the Strategic Foresight and the Better Regulation Agendas further. As the 2021 strategic foresight report notes, the aim is to have 'a better monitoring of resilience to withstand challenges and undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair and democratic manner'. The report recommends using the resilience dashboards (first mentioned in the 2020 strategic foresight report) in the ex-post assessment of the EU's recovery and resilience strategy.

The 2021 report too recognises the risk of an impact gap, and therefore explicitly points out 'the need for participatory and inclusive governance to enhance trust and legitimacy at all levels. Institutions and processes need to increase their resilience, adapt and innovate to cope with new challenges and deliver results for citizens.' The report however does not specify how this potential impact gap can be narrowed down.

4. Participatory foresight as a tool to address the impact gap

Participatory foresight is a foresight approach specifically oriented towards activities that encourage integrated, citizen-focused engagement at multiple points in the foresight process, recognising citizen-generated artefacts as an important mode of communicating 'bottom-up' images of the future and expectations. Citizen participation in solving complex problems as part of the policy design process has been discussed in the academic literature as polycentrism and stakeholder participation.

The Nobel-Prize-winning economist, Elenor Ostrom, developed a concept of polycentric governance, i.e. a diverse process of multiple centres of decision-making that operate with some degree of autonomy and at different jurisdictional levels. What is interesting about Ostrom's model is that she specifically developed it for governing the commons (for example, natural resources). This fits neatly with the EU's thinking about sustainable resilience.

Furthermore, the EU is by its very nature a polycentric system with a great degree of diversity built into it. Adding participatory foresight to the sustainable resilience framework seems like a logical step that would increase resilience and at the same time reduce the risk of an impact gap by involving stakeholders in a critical and collective way of thinking about the future. In Ostrom's words, one needs to 'design complexity to govern complexity'. As Rosa et al. point out, the goal of participatory foresight is 'to strengthen people's capacity to recognize and embrace uncertainty while collectively shaping a preferable vision of the future'.

The literature offers three approaches to participatory foresight:

- **Citizen visioning** is understood as a method through which citizens develop a shared vision of their preferred future as a community.
- **Futures dialogue** provides a flexible framework for structuring future-oriented discussions between stakeholder groups and is often utilised when issues must be considered at multiple scales of governance.
- **Narrative generation** is a technique for creating qualitative storylines about the future. To be effective (in terms of their ability to shape the way people think about the future), these narratives need to be participatory, multidimensional and pragmatic.

Figure 2 shows a link between participatory foresight and increasing climate resilience at a community level.
It appears that the Commission has taken steps towards the practical application of participatory foresight in its climate policies. For example, the EU Climate Pact initiative launched in December 2020 includes three main venues for active participation of citizens as ‘climate ambassadors’: i) informing and communicating with those already active in climate action, as well as those ‘indifferent’ or ‘hard to reach’; ii) identifying and displaying good practices that can help accelerate the necessary changes, and managing the pact’s online platform, which will evolve as the pact grows; iii) engaging with citizens and stakeholders and facilitating meaningful participation, networking and co-creation of actions, e.g. by capturing local climate narratives, stories and ‘can do’ attitudes, and (co-)organising various types of participatory events.10 Another example of participatory foresight currently being tried out by the EU is the Conference on the Future of Europe, which has the aim of building a ‘resilient Europe’.11 These innovative steps, however, are not integrated with the Strategic Foresight and Better Regulation Agendas on the institutional level. It is not clear how the citizens’ input gathered under the European Climate Pact and the Conference on the Future of Europe will be used in informing the Commission’s foresight exercises. Finally, for these participatory activities to have a meaningful impact on policy-making, the access of citizens to scientific evidence is crucial.12

5. Options for tackling the 'impact gap' through EU participatory foresight

In the context of the EU’s limited experience with citizen participation and foresight, it is worth considering:

− making more effective and coherent use of concepts such as ‘sustainability’, ‘resilience’ and ‘strategic autonomy’ in different participatory foresight exercises and stakeholder consultation activities;
− integrating the resilience dashboards (i.e. monitoring tools for assessing the EU’s and Member States’ vulnerabilities and capacities) developed as part of strategic foresight in the Better Regulation Toolbox. In particular, the elements of the toolbox that concern stakeholder consultations can be useful in enhancing the monitoring of resilience for the purposes of strategic foresight;
− closely coordinating and integrating citizen participation with the help of existing and new platforms (e.g. ‘climate ambassadors’ of the EU Climate Pact, citizens’ dialogues on the Future
Participatory Foresight: Preventing an impact gap in the EU’s approach to sustainability and resilience

of Europe) into the strategic foresight and better regulation frameworks. This will provide the necessary feedback channels for citizens’ views and expectations to inform EU policy-making:

− making participatory foresight a familiar and effective method for cooperation and consultation across EU institutions through the ESPAS network.

NOTES

2 Resilience | EU Science Hub (europa.eu)
3 See for example, a discussion of the difficulties in defining and measuring social sustainability, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, Social Sustainability – Concepts and Benchmarks, study requested for the EMPL committee, European Parliament, 2020.
5 European Commission, Communication on Better Regulation, April 2019.
6 Better Regulation stocktaking (communication) – European Economic and Social Committee (europa.eu)
11 Joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe.
12 See also the European Environment Agency’s State of Europe’s Environment Report 2020 (SOER2020), which mentions foresight use as an important instrument in understanding systemic challenges such as resilience and sustainability, SOER 2020, p. 61.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

stoa@ep.europa.eu (contact)
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/stoa/ (STOA website)
www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)
http://epthinktank.eu (blog)