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Coping with Policy in Foresight¹

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Abstract

Governments are in need of anticipating systems changes to reduce risks and stimulate desired developments. Although policy-oriented foresight proves to be helpful and increasingly important for governments stimulate a forward-looking attitude, there is little reflection on how do futurists deal with policy in policy-oriented foresight. The text books state that future policy should not be included in the scenarios to allow policy-makers to "wind-tunnel" future policies. Based upon ethnographic analysis in the Netherlands and on a review of internationally developed scenarios, we examine futurists' strategies and struggles with the policy-free ideal.

Keywords: Policy-oriented foresight, foresight in action, ethnographic research, policy-free ideal, scenarios

Introduction

Governments are confronted with a large number of complex challenges, such as climate change, the depletion of natural resources and the financial systems. While facts are uncertain, stakes are high and decisions urgent (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1992). The various systems are in flux, governments are expected to consider and prepare for future change and take decisions that reduce risks and stimulate desired developments.

Such anticipatory governance (Barben et al., 2008; Guston, 2008; Fuerth, 2009) requires a forward-looking attitude which can be fostered with activities referred to as "foresight". There are different ways of looking at policy futures, with different challenges, opportunities

and important aspects, such as forecasts (exploring the most probable future), scenarios (exploring multiple possible or desirable futures) and speculation (e.g. exploring high impact, low probability futures) (Asselt et al, 2010a; Enserink et al., 2013; Veenman, 2013, Dammers et al., 2013). Policy-oriented foresight aims at increasing the effectiveness of decision-making processes by contributing to systematic thinking in the policy realm about the uncertain future. It seeks to inform the development of policy that is ‘robust’, meaning that it helps “to improve the probability of desirable ones [futures], decrease the probability of the undesirable ones, and gear up to coping with the inconceivable sure to come” (Dror, 2006: 90). Foresight exercises can be initiated by policy-oriented institutes or are carried out at the request of, or even commissioned by, specific policy makers. ‘Policy-oriented foresight’ (van Asselt et al., 2010b) refers to systematic study of what the future might hold, in which endeavour scientific knowledge is used, which is aimed at policy audiences. The target audience is “policy”, which is conceptualized in practice as a specific minister or ministry, or more vaguely as “policy makers” or “the government”. Policy-oriented foresight is deployed when thinking about the future becomes too complicated to do without any aid or ‘on the back of an envelope’ (van Asselt et al., 2010a).

Many policy-oriented foresights involve the development of a set of scenarios. A common and often used approach advertised in scenario text books is the development of “policy-free scenarios”. The underlying idea, which is rooted in experiences with scenarios in business contexts, is that future policy should not be included in the scenarios so as to allow policy-makers to test or ‘wind-tunnel’ their future policies: by confronting different (sets of) policies with various possible futures, it is analyzed which policy options perform relatively well across a range of scenarios. So the scenarios differ on various (uncertain) variables, but future policy is not included as a scenario variable. By implication, in such policy-free scenarios, it is assumed that policy makers do not act. In scenario exercises in which this ideal prevails, it is often argued that 1). varying policy across the scenarios would complicate policy-makers’ efforts to introduce and compare new policies and measures and to understand the impacts of different assumptions and 2). that policy makers can more easily dissociate from particular futures studies when (implicit) political assumptions or unshared perceptions are integrated (O’Keefe and Wright, 2010).

Despite its many exceptions (such as GEO-4 scenarios (UNEP, 2007) in which different policy choices are made explicit in the various scenarios), the policy-free ideal is often invoked by prominent members of the international foresight community. For example, the OECD (2008) states that their study “reflects how the future economy and environment might evolve in the absence of new policies or unforeseen disturbances” (OECD, 2008, p.513) and that “the Baseline [scenario] reflects no new policies, or in other words it is “policy-neutral”, it is a reference scenario against which simulations of new policies can be introduced and compared” (OECD, 2008, p.35). The IPCC SRES (2000) scenarios are presented as “no-climate-policy-scenarios” (Leggett et al., 1992). These scenarios reflect how the future might evolve in the absence of new climate policies: assumptions about the behavior of human systems, including that of policy makers, are held constant across the scenarios. Also the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) scenarios (Carpenter et al., 2005) exclude policy, except for one scenario that assumes climate

policy. So the “policy-free ideal” – despite a variety in its practical manifestation, is quite common in the policy-oriented foresight community.

In this paper, we examine how futurists actually deal with the policy-free principle in developing scenarios. As we aimed to achieve an understanding of the detailed activities that futurists perform in their effort to develop policy-free scenarios, studying actual practitioners is recommended (Schön, 1983; Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Knorr-Cetina, 1995). Informed by ethnographic research in the Dutch policy-oriented foresight community, we are able to question the policy-free ideal as a very complicated, ambiguous, if not counterproductive, ambition. We focused on Dutch practice, because policy-oriented foresight is relatively big and highly institutionalized in the Netherlands and because Dutch experiences serve as source of inspiration for foresight endeavours internationally.

In section 2, we discuss the prominence of the policy-free ideal in the foresight literature. In section 3, we elaborate on our research approach, while in section 4 we analyze actual practice around the policy-free principle. In the concluding section, we discuss the implications of our findings for anticipatory governance. With our empirically informed analysis, we aim to stimulate reflection and discussion about the policy-free principle among practitioners and academics. We argue that the question of how to (better) deal with policy in foresight is critical in view of the aspirations summarized in anticipatory governance.

The policy-free ideal

The practice of policy-oriented foresight is strongly rooted in organizational foresight, i.e. futures studies aimed to explore relevant futures for a particular client, such as a company or a governmental service, and more particular in the so-called Shell scenario tradition (Schwartz, 1991; van der Heijden, 1996; Grant, 2003; Sharpe and van der Heijden, 2007). The idea of policy-free scenarios, i.e. a scenario that does not make any assumptions about future policy, is common in this branch of foresight.

Authors deal differently with policy within their scenarios. Sometimes, the ideal is called “policy-free”, but also other approaches are used in which policy plays at least a fuzzy role, such as “non-intervention scenario”, “baseline scenario” “(current) trend scenario” (Alcamo et al., 2005 and Girod et al., 2009) or contextual scenarios (Howard et al., 2002). Although not mentioned explicitly, (most of) the types of scenarios these authors refer to, do imply that the foresight study focuses upon the variables and dynamics that are not directly influenced by the institution for which the scenarios are meant. In other words, policy does not play a role in these scenarios. Possible alterations in the policy, which are at the basis of the different scenarios, are not mentioned.

The body of literature that focus on policy-oriented foresight in particular is rather small, but, the idea of assessing the future in the form of policy-free scenarios is, implicitly or explicitly, endorsed (Ringland, 1998, 2002a, 2002b; Nekkens, 2006). Scenarios should describe possible futures which are the upshot of interplays between various driving forces in which it is assumed that the client of the foresight would not act. As the assumed or targeted clients of this type of foresight are policy makers, the policy-free principle implies that no future policy is included. As the driving forces and the interplays are uncertain, it is still possible to construct a set of scenarios that significantly differ. Also in such publications it can be read that

policy-free scenarios allow users (i.e. policy makers) to test or wind tunnel their future strategies, measures (policy options) and develop robust policies.

So the policy-free principle is associated with a particular mode of use for which the scenarios are arguably developed. This mode of use is routinely referred to as “wind tunneling” or “robustness testing” (van der Heijden, 1996; Ringland, 1998; Grant, 2003; Sharpe & van der Heijden, 2007; Nekkers, 2006; Lempert et al., 2006): the scenarios serve as means to test policies in order to figure out whether a particular policy is “robust”, i.e. policies “that appear to trigger a favorable future, that seem to avoid highly undesirable ones, and that are flexible enough to be changed or reversed if new insights emerge” (van Asselt, 2000, p.5). In other words, a set of policies is confronted with a range of scenarios in order to test their robustness. Robust policies indicate that it performs, across a range of scenarios, relatively well. More specifically, by confronting different (sets of) policies with various possible futures, it is analyzed, which policies can be implemented in any or in some of the scenarios, which policies should not be implemented in any scenario and/or which policies should be implemented immediately or later on (Dammers et al., 2013).

The idea is that scenarios in which future policy is integrated cannot be used for wind tunneling and robustness testing. In other words, expectations about the use of the scenarios play a role in framing the foresight endeavor as a necessarily “policy-free exercise”. This is for example visible in Carpenter et al. (1995), leading authors of Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) scenarios, who observed that there is in particular a strong interests among policy-makers “in being able to evaluate the “costs” and “benefits” of long-term climate goals vis-à-vis the situation without climate policy” (p.575-576).

The idea that experts should assess the future through the development of policy-free scenarios is also prominent among foresight practitioners. In water management and climate change literature, for example, it is popular to present scenarios as a means to find robust strategies and policy (Lempert and Groves, 2006; 2010; Biesbroek et al., 2009; Hallegatte, 2010; Wilby and Dessai, 2010; Haasnoot 2013). The policy-free ideas expressed in foresight literature are obviously part of the practitioners’ frame of reference, as the following futurists’ quote taken from Dutch foresight practice illustrates:

“I want that the people from VROM [the former Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning] could use our scenarios to analyze policies. If you already incorporate policy [in the scenarios], you cannot use the scenarios to that end” (field notes, March 23, 2004).

Also van der Heijden himself, generally considered one of the leading authors on the Shell approach, contended that policy-free foresight ends up “overemphasizing how far the context limits the scope for (...) action” (Ramírez & van der Heijden, 2007, p.97). They qualify this approach to the future as “reactive”. Ramírez & van der Heijden (2007) wonder how it is possible that “scenarios have ended up lodged in this rationalist positivist corner, while its origins were of a more exploratory nature” (p.97-98). In this context they refer to the original idea of foresight phrased by Herman Kahn as “to think the unthinkable”. So the question is whether the policy-free principle, routinely referred to in descriptions of how to do foresight, is well grounded and well thought.

Notwithstanding this critique, the policy-free principle is part of the majority view in contemporary foresight literature on how to assess the future. Nevertheless, how this principle is practiced is not examined and discussed in the scholarly literature on foresight. Moreover, it is difficult to find publications that address the related topic of including or excluding an endogenous actor (Tapinos, 2013). Dilemmas with regard to contextual or ‘non-intervention’ scenarios in policy-oriented foresight are outlined (Van der Steen and van der Duin, 2012; De Smedt et al., 2013), but without examining the idea of policy-free scenarios. Through observing foresight in action, we, however, witnessed how this principle served as an ambition in Dutch foresight practice, while concurrently it was also clear that the futurists agreed that for good reasons a truly policy-free foresight is not defensible. Below we will detail how this ambivalent attitude played out in practice.

Researching foresight in action

In this paper, we describe foresight in action informed by observations in and around six Dutch policy-oriented foresight studies at two governmental institutes charged with policy advice. Dutch policy-oriented foresight is an attractive site for studying foresight in action for a number of reasons. In the Netherlands, policy-oriented foresight is relatively big and highly institutionalized. Furthermore, Dutch experiences serve as source of inspiration for foresight endeavours elsewhere. For example, the Environmental Outlooks of the Dutch environmental agency (RIVM) (RIVM, 1988; 1991/1992; 1993; 1997; 2000) inspired the United Nations to produce the Global Environment Outlook series and served as a benchmark for foresight activities of the European Environment Agency (EEA). The Dutch environment agency is actively involved in international environmental foresight, such as in the IPCC scenario endeavours. Some Dutch studies are available in English, like the “Scanning the Future” and “Four Futures of Europe” reports produced by The Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) (CPB, 1992; de Mooij & Tang, 2003). The Scanning the Future-report is cited in English, French and Spanish publications, involving articles in peer-reviewed journals (ranging from Ecological Economics to Journal of Business Ethics, from Transportation Planning & Technology to the Journal of Housing & Built Environment) and various scenario studies and foresight endeavours, such as Bertrand (1999), Gallopín (2004), Raskin (2005), and the IPCC Fourth Assessment report (IPCC, 2007). This illustrates the role of Dutch foresight in the international scene.

Informed by intense observation in Dutch foresight practice, we examined what futurists actually do when they (try to) develop policy-free scenarios. We aimed to “inscribe” (Geertz, 1973/1999) real-time mechanisms at work (Knorr-Cetina, 1995) by means of so-called thick descriptions, which are informative stories attentive to details. Such in situ monitoring or “participant observation” as a research approach is generally associated with ethnography, a research style which is rooted in anthropology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995 for a well-referenced introduction). We are not unique in applying it to foresight (Dobbinga, 2001; Brooks, 2004; Burt et al., 2010; O’Keefe et al., 2010).

What does it mean to inscribe? The researcher “writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted” (Geertz, 1973/1999, p.19). Our empirical research in foresight practice enabled us to produce

thick descriptions of what futurists active in the context of public policy actually do. Through the stories told², we aim to inscribe and explicate how professional futurists in policy-oriented foresight deal with policy in general and with the policy-free principle in particular. The aspiration is that our reflection-on-action account will help futurists—in the Netherlands and elsewhere—to understand and recognize the complexities of their endeavor and we aim to provide insights that they can benefit from.

In this five year research endeavour, we have observed futurists in action in two Dutch institutes, namely the Netherland Institute for Spatial Planning (then RPB, now integrated in the PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency) and the energy research centre ECN. Per institute, we included three foresight endeavours in our field work. These observed foresight project had some characteristics in common: interdisciplinarity (e.g. the RPB project teams consisted of various disciplines, such as: econometry, sociology, demography, public administration, geography, environmental science, and/or design), a complex project structure (the projects consist of thematic teams - such as team “housing and mobility”, “nature, agriculture and water”, “big cities”, and ‘energy – and a core team with the leaders of the thematic teams and the project coordinator(s)) and cooperation with a large number external institutes with particular knowledge (e.g. statistics), tools (e.g. quantitative models) and expertise. In addition, all the foresight endeavors included in our research were explicitly policy-oriented. They all aimed at being relevant to actors in the policy realm and to policy makers (civil servants and politicians) in particular. The observed foresight endeavours ranged from rather qualitative assessments (e.g. the “SCENE”-project³ (RPB, 2003a)) to more quantitative (e.g. the “WLO”-project⁴ (CPB, MNP and RPB, 2006); ECN contributed to this foresight with an assessment of energy futures (unpublished papers), which provided the basis for the energy chapter in CPB, MNP and RPB, 2006) and baseline scenario exercises (the so-called “Referentieraming”⁵-project at ECN (van Dril en Elzenga 2005)) and from exploratory (e.g. the “VVR”-project⁶ (RPB, 2003b)) to more hybrid scenario exercises, involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g. the “BETER”⁷-project which ran from 2002 until 2004⁸).

In the period 2001–2006, we pursued extensive participant observation among practitioners involved in actual foresight endeavors in the Netherlands. We chose to reside to what we came to call “ethnographic moments” over the course of these 5 years instead of a shorter period of a couple of weeks or months of full-time participant-observation. In this way it would facilitate us to endorse a fresh view on the practices. Also, many foresight endeavours we observed took 1-2 years or even longer (planned or unplanned). For our research interest in the development process, it was important that we could be involved over the full course of a foresight project. This approach enabled us to cover six foresight endeavours in action and more than 140 ethnographic moments.

During these ethnographic moments, we made notes on what we saw happening, on what we saw futurists doing and on what we heard them say, including non-verbal behavior in project meetings and workshops and monitored phone calls or bilateral chats. We talked with them and asked questions, both informally and in arranged open interview settings. In addition, we collected documents produced by the futurists, and other texts which featured in the futurists’ activities. We retrieved and received e-mails, we took pictures, we audio recorded many meetings and

transcribed the tapes. We shared some observations with the futurists and recorded their feedback.

We employed a *multi-method* approach. In addition to the participant observation in the two Dutch institutes, we investigated other foresight practices (see for examples van Notten et al., 2003), which enabled us to reflect on our findings. Furthermore, we scrutinized a large number and a wide range of foresight reports (see for an overview of studies van Asselt et al., 2001; van Asselt et al., 2005 and van Notten et al., 2003), we carried out a retrospective case-study on a particular European foresight endeavour (van Asselt et al., 2005), and we ran an experiment to explore particular foresight approaches in practice⁹. We furthermore benefitted from revisiting earlier empirical research in Dutch foresight practice (van Asselt, 2000; see also van Asselt et al., 2010b). This field work constitutes the core of our empirical study of foresight practice.

In addition to our research in Dutch foresight practice, for this paper, we also examined three highly influential international scenario studies: the IPCC SRES (2000), OECD's Environmental Outlook to 2030 (2008) and UNEP's Global Environmental Outlook (GEO-4) (2007). Unlike the IPCC and GEO-4 scenarios, the OECD report does not present a range of possible scenarios, but a baseline scenario. We analysed the ways of dealing with policy through document analysis, literature review and exchanges with experts involved in the international scenario endeavours. We do not claim that this multi-method approach enables us to generalize. However, it helps to put our observations into a broader context. The additional research activities facilitated us to evaluate which of our observations are typically Dutch, and which reveal more general insights into foresight practices.

Based on this empirical data, we were able to tell different stories about foresight in action, e.g. about how professional futurists practice the scenario matrix (van 't Klooster and van Asselt, 2006; van't Klooster, 2007; van Asselt et al., 2010b), how they deal with prospective uncertainty (van Asselt et al., 2007; van Asselt et al., 2010b); about the meaning of time in foresight (van Asselt et al., 2010b van 't Klooster and van Asselt, 2011) and how futurists deal with policy (van Asselt et al., 2010b and this paper).

Coping with the policy in foresight practice

Although policy-free scenarios are presented in foresight literature as the ideal and supreme approach to the assessment of the future, futurists involved in actual foresight exercises often in the same breath consider developing policy-free scenarios as unachievable and even undesirable in their foresight endeavor. We heard futurists arguing “fully policy-free is impossible”, “we cannot assume that in the future policy makers are blind. That is not realistic” and “the [future] world is not without policy” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004). In another meeting, a futurist warned: “We should not define policy away” (field notes WLO-project, May 11, 2004). When there will be new circumstances (for example, “huge economic growth”) or “bottlenecks” (for example with regard to mobility), “policy makers will respond. That is what policy makers do.” Or in other words: “It is not realistic [to assume] that from today onward no policy will be pursued” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

In the IPCC scenario practice, Girod et al. (2009) observed comparable struggles between the policy-free principle (to which they refer as “non-intervention”) and

the actual scenarios. Whereas the SRES scenarios are classified as “non-intervention scenarios”, i.e. scenarios that do not include additional climate initiatives, the scenario classification was strongly criticized (see for example the comments on SRES drafts (IPCC, 2000c) and Raskin et al., 2005). Main point of critique was that implicitly different input assumptions with regard to policy were used in the different scenarios, as in some allegedly “non-intervention scenarios” assumptions were made about climate policies to reduce greenhouse gases. Girod et al. (2009) therefore conclude that the classification of the SRES scenarios as ‘non-intervention’ scenarios “is undoubtedly misleading” (p.114). They suggest that also in the IPCC SRES scenario process, implementing the policy-free principle was not a smooth endeavor.

The various observations indicate that foresight practitioners search for a kind of compromise with regard to dealing with policy. For example, in one of the foresight projects observed, it was the explicit assignment “to forget policy as much as possible”, which was in line with the policy-free principle. At the same time the addition “as much as possible” already indicated that fully policy-free was considered difficult or even impossible to achieve. Notwithstanding the implicit and explicit recognition that policy-free is a difficult, if not unattainable, ideal, the “forget policy” assignment was apparently upheld and further referred to as “VROM neutral”, that is assuming no change in the policies of the Ministry of Spatial Planning and Environment (in Dutch abbreviated to VROM). At first glance, the “VROM neutral” starting point may seem to be in line with the policy-free principle. However, it actually assumed that current policy will extend into the future and/or that policies currently proposed will be implemented. So this interpretation actually meant a shift: neutral meant no policy *change* instead of no policy. The VROM neutral principle thus prompted inclusion of policy in the scenarios. In practice, in all of the observed endeavors, the futurists diverted from the policy-free principle and included policy in their outlooks in one way or the other.

Why do the futurists in foresight practice continue to perceive the unattainable policy-free principle as the supreme ambition? Policy-free is associated with a-political, “value-free” and “scientific” (various field notes), which is considered the preferred stance for experts. In various exchanges and statements uttered that it is important for futurists to be a-political. For example:

“Our work is to refer to what actually happens, and to base our assumptions [on that knowledge] instead of reasoning from desired futures” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

and

“We cannot prioritize, because we don’t have a normative frame. That means that we cannot say anything about what would be better, (..) worse or nicer (..), because that is a political choice” (field notes WLO-project, November 18, 2004).

We concluded that foresight practitioners search for a kind of compromise with regard to dealing with policy: both policy-free as well as government as a truly endogenous actor are considered unachievable or undesirable ideals. The attitudes with regard to the policy-free principle are ambivalent. On the one hand, the policy-free principle is still casted as the supreme or desired approach to assessing the

future. In our view, this preference is sustained because of the aim to do a-political policy-oriented foresight. The a-political stance is interpreted as “scientific”, which is the kind of qualification the futurists aim at. On the other hand, policy-free is considered an unattainable or even undesirable ideal. The futurists regard the assumption that in the future no policy is pursued as unrealistic. In their view that would yield trivial outcomes. Furthermore, policy is considered an essential driving force in society’s development. The futurists cannot imagine how it would work in a policy-free world: governments are crucial actors, who respond to changes and bring about change. So they fear that wholly policy-free scenarios are either of bad quality and/or useless for policy. In this situation of ambivalence, the futurists aim at finding a middle ground between policy-free assessment and including government as an endogenous actor. Below, we will attend in detail to the construction of such compromises.

The “no (significant) policy change” principle

In all foresight endeavours observed, the futurists departed from the policy-free principle. Policy was in one way or the other, to a smaller or larger extent, a component of assessing the future. Informed by our observations, we conclude that futurists preferred a stance between the unattainable policy-free ideal on the one hand and policy as a fully endogenous part of the outlooks on the other. This stance, to which the observed futurists referred with terms such as “neutral”, “policy poor” and “minimally differentiated trend policy”, can be characterized as *no (significant) policy change* (see box 1) compared to current policy. This stance means that the futurists use current policy as a basis to construct future policy. This construction involves a kind of extrapolation of current policy over the time period covered in the foresight. The futurists themselves also referred to this approach in terms of “extrapolating policy” and “extrapolating the developments [in policy] of the last years” (various field notes). It also entails that this constructed future policy is ideally kept constant over the different scenarios, although we witnessed that slight adjustments in the spirit of the scenario are considered acceptable. In this way, the futurists tried to balance the a-political, academic ambitions on the one hand with ideas about good and relevant content.

Box 1. Minimally differentiated trend policy

Each project adopted, implicitly or explicitly, the no (significant) policy change stance as its point of departure. This was most explicit in the Welvaart en Leefomgeving (WLO) endeavor. In the foresight practice, the futurists proposed the “minimally differentiated trend policy” principle as their compromise between policy-free and endogenous government. This concept was the upshot of earlier experiences, serious thoughts and discussions.

How was minimally differentiated trend policy conceptualized? The basic ideas behind “trend policy” and “minimally differentiated” were introduced as follows:

In presenting the WLO endeavor to other colleagues, one of the project leaders explained that “minimally differentiated trend policy” is

an important attribute of the scenarios. Futurists T explicitly admitted that the scenarios will not be “fully policy free”. Trends in policy will be extrapolated. However, because the futurists consider this extrapolation of policy “not so realistic”, some room for manoeuvre is incorporated. For each scenario, especially after 2020, policy will be assumed that is in line the scenario, while it minimally differs from the extrapolation of current policy (Field notes, 21 August, 2003). This approach was also described in another session as “we are not groping in the dark with regards to [future] policy”. There will be changes in policy, but we assume “adjustments in the spirit of current policy. That needs to be consistent” (field notes, 23 March 2004).

The various foresight endeavors adopted, implicitly or explicitly, the no (significant) policy change stance as their point of departure. In one project in particular, the futurists proposed the “minimally differentiated trend policy” principle as their compromise between policy-free and endogenous government. This concept was the upshot of earlier experiences, serious thoughts and discussions.

How was “minimally differentiated trend policy” conceptualized? The basic ideas behind “trend policy” and “minimally differentiated” were introduced as follows:

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“Trend policy” is referred to as the continuation of governmental policy in the past decennia and recently established policy. “Minimally differentiated trend policy” is a way of enhancing the plausibility and consistency of the scenarios by slightly varying future policy (and related consequences) across the scenarios.

Although the policy-free principle obviously resonated on the level of ambitions, in none of the foresight endeavours observed did the futurists seriously attempt to apply the principle. In practice, the “no (significant) policy change” principle served as starting point.

Questioning “no (significant) policy change”

Notwithstanding the prevailing consensus with regard to the “no (significant)

policy change” principle, at the same time this starting point continued to be critiqued. The overall question “what is current policy?” was raised in a critical sense in various meetings. In such discussions, it was questioned whether the idea of reasoning from current policy assumed in this approach was actually feasible. For example, in the following exchange the “no (significant) policy change” starting point was openly put into question:

One of the futurists asked: “How are you going to do that [extrapolating policy], when there is no policy? In that case, you put policy in the scenarios”, on the other hand, in extrapolating policy: “it is assumed that the current government will be 40 years in power. We should not assume that. It is possible to reverse, to adjust policy and laws. Also today’s policy impulses do not necessarily define the future” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

and

Futurist J. stated: “A trend break [in government policy] is not what we want”. Futurist C. objected: “It is not about what we want. The question is what the scenarios tell us”. In his view, the foresight should be about possibilities: “I just want to understand how it could work”, with as consequence that “in the one scenario the government wants to do something and the government doesn’t want to act in another scenario” (field notes WLO-project, November 18, 2004).

In the latter scene, also the prescription that future policy is the same in each of the scenarios is questioned. We witnessed that more often. For example, we heard a futurist suggesting:

“Couldn’t we formulate (..) policy per scenario? (..) I don’t think it [policies] has to be similar in all scenarios. That is the other extreme” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

Both kinds of doubts, pertaining to whether it is possible to extrapolate policy and whether it is needed to keep the constructed policy constant in all scenarios, are expressed in the following contribution:

“Is trend policy still defensible?”, “Shouldn’t we differentiate per scenario?” and “Wouldn’t it be better if we incorporate different perspectives on government in the different scenarios?” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

The most fundamental criticism voiced pertained to whether “no (significant) policy change” is as a-political as the futurists (and text books) wanted it to be. Policy is by definition political. Also current policy is the upshot of a particular political process. Assuming that current policy is implemented and extended into the future is, in the end, favoring a particular set of political choices. Various futurists warned that different normative opinions exist on “what is considered good in current policy”, indicating that a “neutral” position in a normative sense with regard to current policy is impossible.

This kind of questioning of the “no (significant) policy change” principle (and

the associated idea of policy kept constant over the set of scenarios) could be heard now and then. However, we observed that this kind of criticism, although present, remained marginal, in the sense that the “no (significant) policy change” principle continued to be endorsed.

Struggling with policy

In all foresight practices observed, the “no (significant) policy change” principle continued to be the central point of reference in the foresight endeavors. However, we witnessed that this starting point yielded a number of issues, which turned out difficult to solve or address. These issues involved questions such as:

- which policy documents to take as basis for defining current policy?
- how to deal with policies formulated over the course of the foresight endeavour?
- who is the policy maker?
- how to extrapolate policy?

The first issues refer to *what* to take as points of reference for defining current policy. The last issue refers to *how* to construct future policy from the points of reference. We will elaborate the issues pertaining to points of reference and constructing future policy with some salient observations. In some of these, the doubts about the “no (significant) policy change” principle discussed in the previous section reappeared as problems in practicing this principle.

Struggle 1: Which policy documents to take as a basis for defining current policy?

The futurists struggled with the issue which policy document to take as basis for defining current policy. In one of the projects, the “no (significant) policy change” stance was translated into the “VROM neutral” principle. In doing so, the issue which policy documents to take as a basis for defining current policy was narrowed down to the policy documents of the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning. But it turned out that this was not enough to solve the issue. In one of the project workshops (field notes SCENE-project, December 14, 2001), it was argued that various memoranda from the Ministry existed, which are not all geared to one another. So the question which documents to take was narrowed down, but not solved. In another foresight endeavor, various policy memoranda from various ministries were listed as relevant for the foresight endeavor (various field notes, VVR-project). Thus, in this case it did not just involve various competing policy memoranda from one ministry, but it concerned policies from various ministries as well as policies on the national, provincial and local level. The policies were listed without explaining how they would be used and how tensions between the different policies ought to be dealt with.

Struggle 2: How to deal with policies formulated over the course of the foresight endeavor?

We also witnessed intense debates on how to consider new policy. In particular, because the issue also had a temporal dimension, i.e. “what to do in case of recent policy change?” This quandary is visible in the following positioning:

“We take the policy change as starting point. We have said, we first look

at the last ten years, and then we consider the last two years. If something is proposed [in recent policy], we have to include that in a sound way” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

The issue was further complicated as *during* the foresight endeavors, which usually lasted one to two years or even longer, also policy was produced. How to deal with such new policy was a serious challenge in various foresight endeavors. For example, during one of the projects, the “Nota Ruimte”, the long term spatial policy plan of the Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning, was launched:

“This memorandum did not exist last year, it has appeared during our process” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004). In discussing the issue, one of the project leaders stated explicitly: “The connection with policy (..) is difficult. If we allow trend policy to deviate from new policy, our foresight is difficult to sell”. Also in this discussion, the question what to take as basis is observable: “Current policy is not the Nota Ruimte. I have heard that there are two positions in the Cabinet”. Furthermore “the Nota Luchtvaart [air transport policy] will follow. Are we sure we have to consider all [new policies]?”. Another futurist objected that she perceived the Nota Ruimte “as a further implementation of the [policy] change of the last years”. “To what extent does the Nota Ruimte differ from [what we consider] trend policy? How serious should we take the Nota Ruimte?”, asked another futurist. Futurist C. stated that he takes the past as starting point: “it has happened that way in the past years, and we take that as our starting point, independent of what has been written down. We extrapolate past policy responses and we don’t honor each desired future. One can write down everything in a policy document.” Futurist N. reacted: “In that case, you deviate from the Nota Ruimte”. Futurist C. admitted and added: “I don’t mind”. Futurist N. agreed: “Neither do I”. One of the project leaders concluded: “We won’t solve this now” and another proposed “to postpone this issue” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

In the above scene, it is visible that the futurists not only struggled with the question which policy documents to take as basis for defining current policy in general, but also how to deal with new policies (proposed policy that is not officially established or new policy that deviates from “trend policy”), launched in the course of their foresight, in particular. Some preferred to use the newest policy as their point of reference, while others disqualify (particular) policy documents as merely desired futures, which should not provide the basis in their assessment of the future. The issue was not resolved.

The scene above also illustrates that the “no (significant) policy change” principle provided limited guidance for foresight in action.

How did the futurists proceed? Instead of resolving the issue at a strategic level (how to deal with the Nota Ruimte), it was delegated to other futurists or in time. It was asked whether and how in the various working groups the Nota Ruimte was dealt with. It was also explicitly suggested that dealing with the Nota Ruimte should be delegated to the working groups. Another proposal was to organize a “lunch lecture” about it, but that idea was fired: “You can read it. The Nota is publicly available”. Another proposed: “If we are ready, we have to check the Nota Ruimte

systematically”. Over the course of the discussion, the attitudes diverged from a coping approach to advocating serious consideration in which the project leaders should take the lead:

“We could not let this pass. I can check how in the various text pieces [i.e. their own texts] the Nota Ruimte is treated and propose how we can deal with it. We have to do more than just wait and see what happens [in the working groups]” (field notes WLO-project, May 11, 2004).

But the discussion was not settled. It continued to sweep from one immature option to the other. The following remark is illustrative for the futurists’ struggle with how to deal with new policy: “I think, the problem will vanish in time” (field notes WLO-project, May 11, 2004). In an earlier discussion on this issue (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004), the futurists felt that they were struggling. One of them even ironically proposed “ignoring [the Nota Ruimte]” as the easiest approach. Both this ironic contribution and the fierce response: “NO!! Intelligent dealing [with the Nota Ruimte] is not ignoring it”, illustrate how tense the futurists’ struggle was.

Struggle 3: Who is the policy maker?

In this context, it was also brought to the fore that the government is not the only actor deciding about policies in modern societies. This raised questions about who the policy maker is, as is visible in the following excerpt:

A senior futurist argued: “Next to government other actors are active.” In his view, the question “Who actually chooses and decides?” is not so easy to answer. He took business parks as example to illustrate his concern: “Is that due to market mechanisms or do we consider that government policy? Who is going to invest? Are new institutions necessary?” (field notes WLO-project, November 18, 2004).

The latter questions pertaining to investments and institutions also bring the issue of uncertainty with regard to the realization of planned policy to the fore. Even in case business parks were attributed to government policy, the question was whether it was realistic to assume that plans are implemented as planned in case other actors have to invest or new institutional structures have to be built. In the follow-up discussion, it was concluded that the “no (significant) policy change” principle implied the assumption that there would not be significant institutional change either. So they would not consider the possibility “of a private actor interested in public transport infrastructure. In fact, we take the current institutional setting as given” (field notes WLO-project, November 18, 2004). Another futurist concluded that:

“The behavior of the government is captured in trend policy. But the scenarios might differ in how market actors operate within that context. (...) So trend policy only applies to the [Dutch] government.⁴ We have to realize that other actors can respond with surprises” (field notes WLO-project, November 18, 2004).

The futurists thus struggled profoundly with the question “who is the policy maker?”. Issues that complicated the matter are competing policy documents which are not attuned, recent policy changes, newly issued policies, which appeared over

the course of the foresight endeavor as well as how to isolate government policies from actions of other actors. In our view, the above struggles, which were not solved at the strategic level, if solved at all, indicate that in foresight in action the practitioners' compromise of "no (significant) policy change" could not be applied straightforwardly.

In international scenario exercises, defining the policy maker and drawing the line between endogenous and exogenous policies seem even more complicated, as "the policy maker" is even more diffuse. The complexity can be illustrated by the way policy was defined in the IPCC (2007), where the scenarios were presented as "non-intervention scenarios" as far as climate policy was concerned. At first sight, this demarcation seems clear. However, in practice, drawing a line between climate policy and other related policies with climate impact is not straightforward. For example, is energy policy introduced against air pollution in China just energy policy or (also) climate policy? This illustrates that also in international foresights it is not straightforward to define what counts as policy intervention and what not.

Struggle 4: How to extrapolate policy?

The next issue that appeared on stage was how to extrapolate current policy? There were obvious mismatches between the time horizons of policies and of the foresights. So it was clear that in defining future policy, the futurists had to go beyond what was written down in policy documents. Even long term policy plans used to have time horizons that did not extend as far into the future as the foresights aimed at. See, for example:

"With regard to infrastructure, much is already determined [in policy plans]. Till 2020, not much can be varied [between the scenarios] (...). We build the same infrastructure in the four scenarios till 2020. Afterwards, we will differentiate slightly, dependent on whether more or less budget is available" (field notes WLO-project, October 19, 2004).

In one of the observed foresight endeavors (field notes VVR-project, December 3, 2002), it was argued "there are no fixed policy plans for the next 30 years", so they had to assume housing policies. Two other futurists agreed explicitly. One of them explained that in the models, it is, for example, assumed that in the future after 2005, in which year the current national spatial planning policy plan would expire, every municipality would build³ according to the local demand. This served as an example of the kind of assumptions about government employed in constructing future policy.

With regard to the issue of extending current policies into the future, various difficulties were identified, for example, whether it was realistic, helpful and/or desirable to assume that current policy would be implemented as planned. Most futurists argued that considerable uncertainty exists with regard to the realization of planned policy. Therefore questions such as "How certain do we have to be about building policies in order to incorporate them?" (field notes VVR-project, December 3, 2002) were raised. The futurists also struggled with the question how to extrapolate policies without creating friction-free, utopian futures (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004). One of the futurists suggested that he wanted to extrapolate not the policies as such, but the tensions on the housing market that accompanied these policies. He proposed to extrapolate the friction between supply

and demand, “which has historically been accepted by the government and [we assume that] it will be accepted in the future”. But also this proposal was debated: “Let’s assume that there is a tension due to shortage of policy. You extrapolate that into the future, while the recent trend is to push back the deficit. What do you take as starting point? The friction or the policy effort of the last 2, 3 years?” (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004). In the follow-up discussion, it was, furthermore, questioned whether the friction idea could be applied to all kind of policies and it was warned that they should not “wrongly introduce bottlenecks in the scenarios”. With regard to infrastructure, it was argued that “[we] can reasonably assume that roads will be build. (...) About mobility, [in the scenarios] we have to respond to bottlenecks, that is what policy-makers do”. One of the other futurists felt lost: “Which bottlenecks do you want to solve [in the scenarios]” by assuming policy, and which not?”. The futurists then talked about standing midway between driving blind and defining bottlenecks away by assuming perfectly adequate future policy.

We read this course of debate—in which a proposal presented as a solution (to counteract friction-free, utopian futures) degenerated to an unclear compromise stance – as an example of how the futurists struggle with the, at face value simple, idea of extrapolating (past and present) policy into the future.

With regard to constructing future policy, we also witnessed intense struggles at the strategic level and very pragmatic ways of dealing with policy at the tactical level, which were not necessarily in accordance with the idea of “no (significant) policy change”. Although this idea was already constructed as a compromise in view of the unattainable and undesirable policy-free ideal, we observed that new intermediate positions had to be constructed and very pragmatic choices had to be made in order to proceed.

Coping with policy

The futurists explicitly deviated from the policy free principle, which was considered unachievable and undesirable, but they did not want to include the policy maker as an endogenous actor either. In the foresights observed, a compromise was formulated which we inscribed as the “no (significant) policy change” principle. We, furthermore, observed that the futurists struggled with applying this principle in their actual assessment endeavor. Both with regard to defining the points of reference and with regard to constructing future policy from these points of reference, issues could not be solved at the strategic level. Coping with policy is a more adequate description than dealing with it, which suggest some kind of coherent strategy. We conclude that the “no (significant) policy change” principle provided inadequate guidance for how to deal with policy in foresight in action. It was, however, not disregarded. Notwithstanding the fact that criticism was voiced, it remained the common frame of reference.

We conclude that neither the policy-free principle nor the “no (significant) policy change” principle facilitate the futurists in dealing with policy. Neither of the principles provides sufficient, if any, guidance what to do at the practical level. In our view, the state-of-affairs in policy-oriented foresight is adequately described as struggling with policy, which, we think, is exemplified in the following scene:

Futurist T. argued that with regard to “the question how we will deal with policy [in this foresight] (...) we need to make a thinking turn”.

Informed by the discussion, he concluded that “we are now essentially back to the start of this endeavor”. As they obviously wrestled with the issue, the project leader suggested “postponing” the issue of dealing with policy and to discuss it in another meeting with other people (referred to as “the coordinators”) “both in practical and strategic terms”. Later in the meeting, another futurist tried to return to the issue, but that discussion was immediately cut with reference to the appointment that it was delegated to the coordinators (field notes WLO-project, March 23, 2004).

In this exchange, the futurists explicitly admitted that they struggle with how to deal with policy. Their coping strategy is to delegate it, either to other futurists or in time. We consider this scene exemplary for what we observed in foresight practice with regard to the question how to deal with policy in the scenarios of the future. The futurists agreed that in one way or the other, the scenarios should include future policy, but they struggled with doing so, both on the strategic level of principles and guidelines as well as on the tactical level.

Policy-oriented foresight and anticipatory governance

Policy-oriented foresight is potentially an important input or even necessary part of anticipatory governance, as it provides policy-makers with long-term insights. So far, policy-oriented foresight has rarely been studied as a particular branch of futures studies, with its own requirements. Too easily it has been assumed that principles useful in organizational foresight can, or even should, also guide policy-oriented foresight.

In this paper, we examined how policy-oriented futurists deal with policy in actual foresight practice. We observed the text book ideal of policy free scenarios, which is associated with a particular mode of use, referred to as wind tunneling and robustness testing. This ideal is transplanted from organizational foresight to policy-oriented futures studies, without due consideration. Our analysis reveals that notwithstanding the lip service paid to the policy free ideal, also among policy-oriented futurists, the policy-free principle is considered an unattainable and/or undesirable approach in actual foresight practices. So the text book ideal is practically disregarded. This is, however, not realized in many publications and front stage portrayals of foresight endeavors.

We demonstrated that in practice, policy-oriented futurists struggle with how to deal with policy in their scenarios. They have to include policy in their scenarios in one way or the other, but they dismiss the idea of treating the government as endogenous actor. We witnessed that they try to find a middle ground between two extremes – policy-free and government as an endogenous actor. We inscribed the favored compromise as the “*no (significant) policy change*” principle. Although this principle sounds simple and straightforward at face value, we have indicated that it is not. It requires extrapolating past and present policy into the future, which actually favors a particular set of policy choices. We demonstrated that futurists struggle with what to take as points of reference and how to construct future policy from these dubious points of reference. These issues were not solved at the strategic level, but delegated to the tactical level. So in practice, the “no (significant) policy change” principle provides inadequate support for policy-oriented foresight. Informed by our analysis, we argue that this issue of dealing with policy in foresight

receives systematic attention, both in the scholarly literature and in communities of practitioners. The policy-free principle is tied to a particular mode of use, referred to as wind tunneling and robustness testing. Our analysis implies that also this preferred use of scenarios needs rethinking.

Notwithstanding actual practice, the myth of policy-free scenarios is sustained. This is not a harmless state of affairs. Policy-makers who want to use seemingly policy-free scenarios may be surprised and might wonder how to proceed. But also the futurists are left alone with their struggles, which may impair the further development of policy-oriented foresight.

If policy-oriented foresight wants to be relevant for anticipatory governance, innovation is needed. Experiments are needed with ways to accommodate policy. The pros and cons, the options and impossibilities, of government as an endogenous actor should be more critically examined to inform decisions in foresight practice. The issue of policy in foresight should not only be a topic among practitioners, but such experiments should be discussed and evaluated in the scholarly literature on futures studies. Such a collective (and demanding) effort is urgently needed. This is also requires systematic attention to the modes of use of policy-oriented foresight, while attending to the particular characteristics of this type of futures studies and its context of use. The issue of use of policy-oriented foresight is critical to the ambitions subsumed in anticipatory governance.

The first step towards innovation of policy-oriented foresight is to openly acknowledge that “policy free” is an unattainable and undesirable ideal. Scholars and practitioners should join forces in this paradigmatic change. The second step is to be explicit in actual policy-oriented foresight endeavors about how policy is dealt with, also when primarily pragmatic and tactical choices have been made. More transparency is needed with regard to the nature of the exercise, as we did in this paper from an outsider’s perspective. Which policies are accommodated in the assessments, which are not and why? How are they accommodated?

Explicating struggles and the choices made would benefit anticipatory governance in at least two ways. First, by being more transparent, underlying policy assumptions and assumptions about (anticipatory) policy-making will be outlined. This might “help (...) to question what kind of knowledge becomes produced, how and by whom” (Andersson, 2010, p.255). By having this discussion, different stakeholders and their perspectives can be included. The conflict that might rise by explicating the assumptions about policy will stimulate essential debates not only about the traits of policy-oriented foresight, but also about (desired and desirable) futures. Second, policy makers are better informed about the pros and cons of the foresight study and as such they are better able to use it properly in developing future-oriented policies. In the end, the issue of use is primarily the policy-makers’ responsibility, but futurists have an obligation in making transparent what they offer and in suggesting what are proper modes of use. Our study of foresight in action suggests that to date futurists do not live up to that obligation, hampered as they are by the “policy free” discourse. Releasing them from this heritage will seriously improve the prospects for anticipatory governance.

Notes

- 1 First of all, we thank our informants in foresight practice. Without their participation, we would not have been able to write this paper. We reserve a special word of

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An earlier version of this paper appeared as book chapter in van Asselt et al. (2010b).

- 2 The story told in this paper about the dealing with policy in foresight is just one of our stories about what foresight practitioners actually do. See van Asselt et al. (2007; 2010b), van 't Klooster (2008) and van 't Klooster and van Asselt (2006; 2011) for empirically informed stories on how futurists apply tools (the scenario matrix), how they struggle with uncertainty, how futurists trained in various disciplines interact and how they try to accommodate change.
- 3 An abbreviation for “een kwartet ruimtelijke **SC**Enario’s voor **N**ederland”, which can be translated as “a quartet scenarios for the Netherlands”.
- 4 An abbreviation for “**W**elvaart en **L**eeftomgeving”, which can be translated as “the future of the Dutch Natural and Built Environment”.
- 5 Referentieraming can best be translated as baseline scenario.
- 6 An abbreviations for “**V**erkenning van de **R**uimte”, which can be translated as “an exploration of space”.
- 7 An abbreviation for “**ECN** **B**eelden en **D**ata voor de **T**oekomstige **E**nergievoorziening”, which can be translated as “visions and data for the future energy supply”.
- 8 The project documents and outcomes were primarily for internal use within ECN. So there is not a publicly available report on this foresight endeavour.
In the observation period also the single authored ECN 50 years celebration publication “The next 50 years: Four European energy futures” (Bruggink, 2005) appeared, which was loosely related to the foresight endeavours observed. We had an interview and some exchanges with the author, which contributed to our insights in ECN foresight practice.
- 9 For a detailed description of the experiment, see van Notten (2005, chapter 6).

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