

Policy makers and politicians are expected to take responsibility for society's future by foreclosing undesirable futures and by facilitating futures worth pursuing. However, it is impossible to precisely predict future developments. Moreover, future changes might occur that are fully out of sight in the present. Future-oriented policy demands anticipation of possible yet uncertain developments. Thinking about the long term in policy and politics can be done in various ways. Futures studies offer a way of doing this systematically. But what counts as good policy-oriented futures studies?

In the study *Out of sight: Exploring Futures for Policymaking* (Uit zicht: toekomstverkennen met beleid), Dutch practices around futures studies are examined and an up-to-date conceptual framework is presented that helps to reflect critically on futures studies. Some major pitfalls and challenges are indicated. *Out of sight* offers a basis for thinking about the long term and for using futures studies in policy contexts. In so doing, it contributes to the quality of the long-term orientation in policy.

The Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid) in The Netherlands is an independent advisory body for government policy. The Council focuses on policy issues with long term social, economic, technological and political significance, which, as a consequence, transcend the policy domains of the various ministries.

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## Exploring Futures for Policymaking

SYNTHESIS OF 'OUT OF SIGHT: EXPLORING FUTURES FOR  
POLICYMAKING'

WRR

## *Exploring Futures for Policymaking*

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# *Exploring Futures for Policymaking*

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SYNTHESIS OF 'OUT OF SIGHT: EXPLORING FUTURES FOR POLICYMAKING'

Summary of WRR-Verkenningen 24 *Uit zicht: over toekomstverkennen met beleid*, Marjolein van Asselt, Nina Faas, Franke van der Molen and Sietske Veenman (eds.) (ISBN 978 90 8964 263 9), published by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR)/ Amsterdam University Press 27 September 2010. The complete version (in Dutch) is available on [www.wrr.nl](http://www.wrr.nl).

Design: Studio Daniëls BV, The Hague

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## CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Open but not empty	8
The meaning of policy-oriented futures studies	9
Critical questions	11
Approaches to future studies	12
Problematic preferences and pitfalls	14
Challenges	16
Order information	18



# 1 INTRODUCTION

The future is the actual playing field of power. Policymakers are expected to take responsibility for the future. Public administration must anticipate and respond flexibly and appropriately to changing circumstances. Furthermore, solutions to today's problems may result in new and as yet unforeseen future challenges. While some policies have an explicit long-term orientation, every policy document has a 'time-print', albeit often implicitly: the effects of policy interventions cast their shadows into the future.

Nevertheless, the future is uncertain. Experts cannot predict what the future will hold nor can information about the future be verified in a classic scientific manner. The uncertain character of the future poses a challenge for policymakers to take long-term considerations into account. In such an uncertain context, policy-oriented futures studies aim to contribute to systematic thinking about the future and to the development of future-oriented policies. 'Policy-oriented futures studies' refers to the systematic study of what the future might hold, using scientific knowledge. It is used when thinking about the future is too complicated to be done without any aid or on the back of an envelope.

Our study *Out of Sight: Exploring Futures for Policymaking*<sup>1</sup> focuses on the contribution of policy-oriented futures studies to policymaking. Do futures studies have meaning for policy and in what way(s)? What, to date, are considered good policy-oriented futures studies? What are sensible ways of exploring the future in a policy context? What are crucial pitfalls and challenges?

To answer these questions, we offer an updated conceptual framework that facilitates thinking and communicating about the future. Therefore, two complementary types of research were performed. Firstly, we carried out a literature review, in which we studied both classic and contemporary works in the interdisciplinary field of futures studies. We also examined reflections on the future and explorations of the future in academic literature in other disciplines and fields of research, such as policy sciences, history, psychology, science and technology studies and economy. Secondly, we explored practices of futures studies connected to policymaking in the Dutch national government. This empirical study encompassed interviews with strategists in each ministry, analyses of 24 practices of futures studies our interviewees brought up, and an investigation of the role futures studies played in three policy dossiers: ageing, reform of the Dutch healthcare insurance system and climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the literature used, see the Dutch publication: Van Asselt, M.B.A., A. Faas, F. van der Molen and S.A. Veenman (2010) *Uit zicht. Toekomstverkennen met beleid*, WRR-Verkenning no.24, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.



## 2 OPEN BUT NOT EMPTY

The literature review and the empirical study led us to conclude that the future is conceptualized as *open but not empty* in all serious forms of contemporary futures studies. The future is not determined, nor is it an empty space in which we move unhindered. The future is uncertain and subject to influence. The future cannot be designed, but it is in the making. The challenge for futures studies is to appropriately address both its open and its non-empty character.

The idea of a future that is open but not empty is at odds with the ambition to predict the future, which has been recognized in many writings on futures studies. Statements in most futures studies are of the ‘what if...’ and ‘if...then’ type. We observed, however, that the illusion of prediction is still alive in policy contexts. The illusion of prediction nourishes unrealistic expectations and stimulates problematic practices, typified by intolerance of uncertainty and forms of deterministic thought. This hampers a proper exploration of the future and frustrates the sensible use of futures studies. Futures studies should not be asked to predict. Therefore, we suggest that the term ‘prediction’ can and must be banned in favour of the central idea of the future as open but not empty.

### 3 THE MEANING OF POLICY-ORIENTED FUTURES STUDIES

The meaning of one single futures study in policymaking processes is difficult to trace. Therefore, we started from the policy perspective. In various policy dossiers, we examined whether and how futures studies were used. This analysis led us to conclude that futures studies *do* have meaning in policymaking processes. A series of futures studies produced over a period of time by different actors may have a cumulative impact on policy. This phenomenon we call 'beat'. The topic of ageing, for example, did not receive much public attention in the eighties, when just two or three reports touched upon the topic. In the late nineties, several institutes engaged in futures studies, which indicated ageing as a plausible future, which in the end led to action in policy and politics. So, even when a single futures study may seem poorly timed from the perspective of a particular policy process, it may, like a single stroke of a drum, contribute to the larger beat of long-term orientation. Timing is, as such, important but not always necessary, whereas the beat of futures studies is more than the sum of its parts.

Ambitions and expectations with regard to the meaning of policy-oriented futures studies may differ strongly and are closely connected to the image of the policy process. In *Out of Sight: Exploring Futures for Policymaking*, we roughly distinguish between two images of policy. In the speaking-truth-to-power perspective, on the one hand, policy and decision-making are seen as linear and rational processes that prefer 'certainty' as a basis for action. In this context, futures studies are used in order to restrict uncertainties involved in policy problems and solutions. In recent years, for example, political discussions in the Netherlands about climate change have been dominated by demands for greater scientific certainty and more detailed knowledge of future climate changes. In this perspective, futures studies are expected to provide a firm foundation for policy by offering certainties about the future or at least a 'strong account' of the future. The speaking-truth-to-power perspective fuels an unconditional preference for forecasting as a means of constructing a single image of the future.

In the arena perspective, on the other hand, policymaking is considered to be a process of interaction among actors. Policymaking is interpreted as the battle for problem definition and, therefore, implicitly, for 'future definition'. In this view, politics is a form of collective action in which different opinions, interests and experiences are brought together, in order to take reasonable decisions by way of discussion and deliberation. In the case of the Dutch health care system, for example, futures studies were done during the implementation of the policy. Different actors were invited to discuss several possible futures. In these cases, futures studies served as a framework for a productive 'game', inspiring long-term oriented policies. Futures studies in this perspective are often organized as participatory processes. In contrast to the

speaking-truth-to-power perspective, the content of futures studies is less important than the process in which thinking about the future, is challenged or stretched.

Although the case studies also showed that a great variety of futures studies was used, a preference for futures studies that focus on one single image of the future was discernible. This preference may encourage problematic practices of futures studies.

## 4 CRITICAL QUESTIONS

As a tool for choosing the appropriate approach of futures studies given the level of uncertainties that are in play, we identified two critical questions. These questions can help researchers and policymakers to navigate through available studies, commission new futures studies or do futures studies themselves.

1. Is it sensible to assume continuity and stability?
2. Is it sensible to assume normative consensus?

The answers to these questions indicate what type of futures study is (most) appropriate. What approach is preferred also depends on the policy perspective (speaking-truth-to-power or arena). These two questions address two types of uncertainty. Firstly, futures studies involve cognitive uncertainty. Dynamics in society, economics, politics or natural systems may be too complex to assess possible outcomes, let alone control them. Reflexivity is another source of uncertainty. Expectations about the future influence human action and, therefore, change the course of future developments. In this way, self-fulfilling or self-denying prophecies may occur: either images of the future materialize because people act according to them, or futures are prevented from materializing because images of the future invoked actions to avoid materializing. Secondly, futures studies involve social and normative uncertainty: uncertainty about who the stakeholders are, what interests with respect to the future are at issue, what images of the future different actors consider desirable or possible and what values are at stake. This type of uncertainty is about normative values, possibly diverse or even conflicting ones, relating to future developments. The first critical question refers primarily to cognitive uncertainty whereas the second critical question pertains to social and normative uncertainty.

In what cases can these questions be answered in the affirmative or in the negative? It might be sensible, for example, to be sceptical of assuming continuity and stability when surprises concerning comparable policy areas have taken place in other countries, or when discontinuities occur in adjacent policy areas, or when the present situation is obviously not sustainable or when there is little information about a topic. It is sensible to presume stability and continuity when the topic deals with laws of nature, or when it concerns social-constitutional fundamentals. Normative consensus cannot be presumed when social actors or political parties clearly have very different perceptions of a problem, especially when these actors have to cooperate. On the other hand, it is sensible to assume normative consensus when stakeholders have organized consensus in a particular policy domain, or when futures studies serve as input for further decision-making of an explicitly normative kind. In the latter case, it may be desirable for futures studies to avoid normative issues.

## 5 APPROACHES TO FUTURE STUDIES

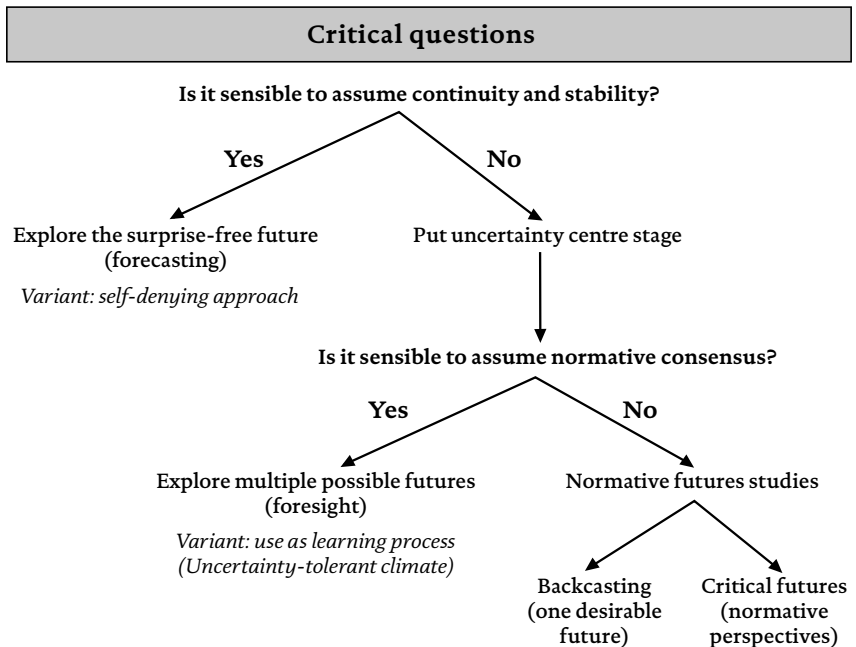
Depending on how the two critical questions are answered, different approaches to futures studies are most appropriate. Three basic approaches to policy-oriented futures studies are distinguished here: forecasting (exploring the surprise-free future), foresight (exploring multiple possible futures) and normative futures studies (exploring or questioning desirable and undesirable futures).

If it seems sensible to assume continuity, stability and normative consensus, then the future can be seen as the logical result of the past. Under these conditions, studying the surprise-free future by means of forecasting is appropriate. The surprise-free future is a smooth transition, extending past and present patterns and trends into the future. Past-based scientific knowledge is considered a very reliable basis for making statements about the future. Though forecasting is often regarded as being equal to 'prediction', good forecasts are based on the idea that the future is open and, at least partly, subject to human actions. However, the chances of radical changes or big surprises are either considered small or are left aside for other reasons. For example, forecasting can be used to investigate what the future would look like if, without new or additional policies, current trends were to continue. In this case, forecasting is employed with a self-denying objective: the goal is to provoke policy interventions that prevent the surprise-free future from materializing. The idea that the future is open and, hence, uncertain is often expressed by means of a bandwidth, as an indicator for cognitive uncertainty. Social and normative uncertainties are usually not addressed.

If it is not sensible to assume continuity and stability, foresight (exploring multiple possible futures, often referred to as scenarios) is advocated. Cognitive uncertainty is put centre stage: because multiple futures are possible, multiple futures should be explored. This is often done by developing scenarios, but other methods, such as horizon scanning or weak signal scanning, are also possible. Foresight is often seen as means of learning to deal with uncertainties collectively. Therefore, this approach fits quite easily into the arena perspective on policy. Although it addresses cognitive uncertainties, social and normative uncertainties are usually left aside. The images of the future are not accompanied by statements of desirability or undesirability, values or political standpoints. Hence, like forecasting, foresight is often perceived to be a 'normatively neutral' approach to futures studies: images of the future are implicitly or explicitly depicted as 'objective', that is, as independent of any normative perspective.

However, it is not always sensible to assume consensus with regard to values, perspectives and interests, in which case normative futures studies may be considered. In normative futures studies, social and normative uncertainties are explicitly taken into account. Images of the future are presented in terms of desirability/undesir-

ability or related to values or political standpoints. Within the family of normative futures studies, we distinguish two approaches. Backcasting, firstly, aims to collectively develop a single image of a desirable future and, from there, to reason backward in time in order to explore how this desirable future may be brought about. Backcasting has an explicitly self-fulfilling ambition: its goal is to stimulate actions in order to realize the desirable future. Critical futures study, secondly, is an approach in which the future is questioned from the perspective of a diversity of normative perspectives. Critical futures studies emphasize that images of possible futures are not neutral but represent particular desires, values, cultural assumptions and world views. As a consequence of this value-laden nature, futures studies are at risk of reproducing and reinforcing images from a specific set of expectations, leading to an overly narrow orientation on, or even ‘colonization’ of, the future. In other words, the future becomes a ‘territory already occupied’ and certain futures are ‘foreclosed’, often unreflectively.



We do not advocate one approach over the other. If it is sensible for good reasons to assume continuity, stability and normative consensus, a demanding foresight process or a challenging normative endeavour is a waste of time. Similarly, in situations governed by complexity, dynamics, reflexivity and innovation, it is inappropriate to propagate forecasting as the central approach. A categorical preference for forecasting is as problematic as an a priori preference for foresight or normative futures studies.

## 6 PROBLEMATIC PREFERENCES AND PITFALLS

In the speaking-truth-to-power perspective, with its preference for certainty as a basis for policymaking, futures studies are expected to restrict uncertainties and to deliver hard information on the future. This fuels an absolute preference for forecasting as a means of constructing a single image of the future. Forecasting is preferred because it enables us to approach the future as if it were predictable. In other words, in this perspective it tends to be forgotten that the future is not only not empty, but also open. In this setting, there is a tendency towards deterministic accounts of the future: accounts of the future as being determined for example by historical patterns (historical determinism) or by technological development (technological determinism). Furthermore, this perspective on policy tends to go hand in glove with projecting classic, positivist scientific expectations onto futures studies. The associated demand for 'certified truths' easily involves intolerance towards uncertainty. This positivistic pitfall leads to expectations about certainty and truth that the discipline of futures studies will never be able to live up to. On the other hand, the strength of the speaking-truth-to-power perspective lies in the fact that it enables policymakers to foreground a particular image of the future. This can be very effective if forecasting is employed with a self-denying objective.

Another pitfall is linked to the arena perspective and resides in overly focusing on the process. Futures studies can focus on the process of learning about future uncertainty to the extent that they erode into mere experience. In such a context, the quality of the content of images of the future, their informative value and their sense of reality may be so subordinated that equal value is attached to logical impossibilities, mere speculation and well thought and worked out scenarios. In such processes, it is easily forgotten that the future is not only open, but also not empty. The challenge here is to prevent one-sidedness and to balance process and content. Furthermore, emphasizing diversity may be at the expense of paying attention to convergence. In this way, exploring multiple futures may lead to a situation of 'full empty hands'.

An overly bureaucratic approach may lead to a division of roles in which politics has a monopoly on normative issues, and civil servants are restricted to providing value-free input. This may fuel an unquestioned preference for 'normatively neutral' and politically correct futures studies. Such a context fosters an inclination to assume normative consensus by default. In the Netherlands, we observed a blind spot concerning normative policy-oriented futures studies, and we suggest that this is a class of futures studies approaches that should also be considered. In our empirical study (case studies, analyses of futures studies), we found few normative futures studies. Explicitly or implicitly, either the future is approached as value-free, or a 'politically correct' approach to backcasting is advanced in which the desirable future as defined in coalition agreements serves as the point of departure. In the latter case too, normative diversity is ignored. Groups in society may feel that the future is be-

ing colonized by a perspective they consider undesirable. Normative futures studies might help to bring different perspectives on social issues to the fore, to prepare for political debates and might even contribute to mutual understanding. The knowledge infrastructure in the Netherlands is not geared to the production of normative futures studies. With a view to this dominant institutional logic, it seems difficult for advisory and planning agencies currently involved in policy-oriented exploration of the future to take up this type of futures studies.



## 7 CHALLENGES

Informed by the state of the art in futures studies and by current tendencies in the practice of policy-oriented futures studies, we identified three overarching challenges:

1. cultivating uncertainty acceptance and enthusiasm for openness;
2. appreciating both process (learning) and content (informing);
3. using scientific knowledge in innovative ways.

Firstly, uncertainty acceptance and enthusiasm for openness are needed. The WRR advisory report *Uncertain Safety* (2008) pleads for a paradigm shift towards general uncertainty acceptance. This plea is also relevant in view of policy-oriented futures studies. Uncertainty intolerance gives rise to problematic practices in futures studies and stimulates an inappropriate use of futures studies. Uncertainty acceptance provides a context in which critical questions about continuity, stability and normative consensus can be asked and openly reflected upon.

On the other hand, futures studies may also support the requested paradigm shift. Pluralistic futures studies (foresight, critical futures) provide those involved in policymaking with the opportunity to experience uncertainty. Experience with futures studies as learning process has been gained in recent years and could be pushed further.

Secondly, we conclude that, in the process perspective, a sense of reality of images of the future has slipped away and the motto of ‘thinking the unthinkable’ needs to be complemented. Not every thinkable future is possible, and not every possible future is relevant for policy. After the lesson of uncertainty has been learned, the need for working with serious, realistic images of the future arises. Could the thinkable be possible, and does it deserve to be paid serious attention by policymakers?

Thirdly, there is a need for new ways of using scientific knowledge in futures studies. Besides trend extrapolation, there are hardly any alternative ways of using scientific knowledge. Alternative approaches are needed to do greater justice to the openness of the future. Innovation is needed because futures studies risk being drawn towards deterministic pitfalls. From both theory and practice, we extracted a set of suggestions that deserve to be tested:

- Use multiple histories: multiple interpretations of history are possible. Uncertainty in and multi-interpretability of historical knowledge can be used proactively in futures studies. Considering different ‘pasts’ and ‘presents’ may be a basis for exploring multiple possible futures. This can even be done through extrapolation, by taking multiple histories as points of departure.

- Create extreme images of the future: scientific knowledge can be used to seriously evaluate extreme images of the future as a way of exploring openness and the limits to openness.
- Make clever use of dissonant analogies: events that occurred elsewhere or in the past can be seen as possibilities for the future. Single analogies should not serve as moulds for the future, but the use of dissonant analogies can help to create mental space for contrasting expectations of the future. These expectations can help to sketch possible futures.
- Use theories of change: scientific insights into the dynamics of change can be used more explicitly by using theories of change in futures studies: coherent systems of ideas or hypotheses concerning how, why or under what conditions changes could occur.

Furthermore, we suggest considering involving non-scientists: stakeholders or citizens may provide new and unconventional viewpoints, they may critically question scientific claims that are taken for granted by other actors and their participation may create public support for policies informed by futures studies.

Finally, it is advisable to demand ‘instructions for use’ with each futures study. Serious reasoning is needed about the ways in which a futures study may be used or should not be used. It should be made clear what type of information it does and does not provide. This can counteract false expectations and improper use. Moreover, it is difficult for policymakers to make use of multiple images of the future. The ‘instructions for use’ forces scenario analysts to provide concrete ideas on how to use their scenarios in policy practice.

These suggestions aim to improve policy-oriented futures studies both in terms of the quality of the endeavour and the ways in which they are used. Good futures studies are in need of uncertainty acceptance and enthusiasm for openness. We argued that, in this context, a ban on prediction is recommended. We also call for attention to be paid to normative futures studies, and we underline the use of multiple images of the future as a learning process. Innovation in using scientific knowledge and in applying instructions for use may also stimulate makers and users of futures studies to reflect on good use of futures studies. In such a context, good futures studies can contribute to better policies, in the sense that they may help policymakers to respond flexibly and to be on the right track when the unexpected future presents itself.

## 8 ORDER OUT OF SIGHT: EXPLORING FUTURES FOR POLICYMAKING

*Uit zicht: toekomstverkennen met beleid* (ISBN 978 90 8964 263 9) is available in bookstores and Amsterdam University Press, [www.aup.nl/](http://www.aup.nl/) [info@aup.nl](mailto:info@aup.nl). The full version of the publication is downloadable on [www.wrr.nl](http://www.wrr.nl).





