Visions and visioning in foresight activities

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The paper discusses the roles of visioning processes and visions in foresight activities and in societal discourses and changes parallel to or following foresight activities. The overall topic can be characterised as the dynamics and mechanisms that make visions and visioning processes work or not work. The theoretical part of the paper presents an actor-network theory approach to the analyses of visions and visioning processes, where the shaping of the visions and the visioning and what has made them work or not work is analysed. The empirical part is based on analyses of the roles of visions and visioning processes in a number of foresight processes from different societal contexts. The analyses have been carried out as part of the work in the COST A22 network on foresight. A vision is here understood as a description of a desirable or preferable future, compared to a scenario which is understood as a description of a possible future.

Visioning processes are understood as processes where a vision is developed or where visions get a role in societal discourses. The actor-network approach is used as the theoretical background. The theoretical part of the paper describes different characteristics of visions like • The time horizon • The scope (society, sector etc.) • Whether the vision is an end-point presenting a future and whether it includes descriptions of the paths towards the desirable future • The roles given to different actors and objects (actants) like a certain technology area • The peripheral characteristics of the vision like the expectations to the surrounding society, its infrastructure etc. • The differences between the present conditions and the future which the vision describes. An important part of a vision is the visioning processes leading to the development of the vision. In visioning processes actors, objects, societal discourses are inscribed into a vision through co-shaping of the vision and its elements. This may include creation of an obligatory passage point, where certain actors, technologies etc. are given roles, which all other elements in the vision have to relate to. Another important aspect of visioning processes include the types of actors participating in the processes and the types of expertise included in the processes (scientific, lay, business etc.). The empirical part of the paper analyses eight national foresight activities from Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Slovak republic and The Netherlands and the role of visions and the visioning processes within and/or following the foresight activities. The analyses of the eight cases show three overall values as basis of visions in foresight (national competitiveness, environmental protection and human development). Technologies were in some cases playing a central role in the visions. It has not been possible in most of the cases, to assess the robustness of these expectations and the co-shaping of actors and technologies. Visions have had three intended roles in the cases: as frame for development of strategies, as inspiration for discussions about future development and as products of stakeholder dialogues. A societal impact is seen in three cases (on research, legislation and the national training system). The societal impact of several of the other visions seems to have been limited or absent. There is not enough information about the visions and their role afterwards to assess the mechanisms behind impact or lack of impact. The impact of the visioning processes and the dialogue between different stakeholder groups in the foresight activities seems in some cases to have been bigger than the role of the visions and may lead to further co-operation among stakeholder groups that may not have co-operated before.

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