

## Civil Society's Engagement in Foresight Research: Opportunities and Roles

Research conducted as part of the Drug-Prep Project emphasises the pivotal role of civil society in foresight research related to drugs and drug use in Europe. By engaging in information exchange networks, civil society organisations can enhance national drug information systems, helping to identify emerging trends. They can equip decision-makers with the insights needed to develop and implement timely, accurate responses that can meet the needs of the communities they serve.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to preparing for possible future challenges, civil society organisations need to be proactive in detecting and adapting to emerging trends to stay relevant and agile. Integrating strategic foresight into their activities can help them anticipate changes, adjust advocacy strategies, and engage in evidence-based policy-making. This approach helps organisations formulate responses that are adaptable to future challenges and efficiently plan with their resources.

By envisioning future scenarios, civil society organisations can find innovative solutions to drive change. Proactive foresight can reinforce their collaboration with stakeholders and strengthen their sustainability. Foresight helps them identify new opportunities, challenge flawed assumptions, and recover quickly from difficulties. Engaging in foresight nurtures community ownership and collective forward-looking purpose, reducing fear of the unknown.

## Key Recommendations to Strengthen National Responses to Emerging Trends in the Drugs Field

1. **Enhance Monitoring Systems:** Encourage the use of real-time qualitative and quantitative monitoring tools within communities to better detect and respond to emerging drug-related threats, and complement existing monitoring tools with strategic foresight activities to identify possible emerging threats.
2. **Develop structured and inclusive responses involving a broad range of stakeholders** in the decision-making process, including civil society organisations, community groups, frontline service providers, and specific populations affected by drug policies. Their insights and experiences are crucial to identifying new developments and trends early and crafting effective, evidence-based responses.
3. **Collaborate Across Sectors:** Advocate for formalised coordination between different sectors, such as health, social services, and law enforcement, to enhance the effectiveness of drug information systems and ensure timely and accurate responses. Civil society organisations should be integral to these coordinated efforts.
4. **Strengthen Local Networks:** Build and maintain robust local networks for information exchange, ensuring that communities are well-informed and can act swiftly in response to new developments.
5. **Engage in Cross-Border Exchanges:** Invest in cross-border collaboration to share knowledge and strategies for addressing emerging drug-related challenges.
6. **Adapt Foresight Methodology:** Customise foresight methodologies to fit project objectives and capacities, ensuring transparency and stakeholder involvement from the beginning.
7. **Treat foresight as an ongoing, iterative process,** regularly revisiting and validating findings throughout the policy cycle to maintain relevance and effectiveness.

Foresight research is no silver bullet in creating more effective drug policies, but it can certainly contribute to better-informed policymaking. The integrated multisector, multi-professional approach involving input, discussions and engagement from researchers, policymakers and other relevant actors in the domain enables a 360-degree input, solid discussions and reflection on different trend scenarios and related policy options. The implementation of these recommendations can enhance preparedness and responsiveness to emerging drug-related threats, ultimately fostering a safer and healthier society.

# DRUG-PREP

## Opportunities of Foresight Research for Civil Society

### What is Foresight Research?

Foresight research is designed to bring more science into policymaking. It is a type of research particularly developed to support better-informed policy decisions and the drafting of more robust policies.

Foresight research is a process of investigating the future, envisioning different possible futures, and devising strategies to mitigate and navigate them effectively. Foresight allows the consideration of long-term issues and implications, which can greatly contribute to drug policy, where decisions significantly impact societal well-being. While widely adopted in fields like environmental discussions, national defence and technology, foresight research has only recently gained traction in social sciences.

It can integrate qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the forces driving societal changes, envision their evolution and shape possible future scenarios. It involves an extensive, collaborative process to gather insights about future possibilities, using these insights to advise current decisions and facilitate collective action.



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<sup>1</sup> Stegemann, L., van Gelder, N., van der Gouwe, D., & Smit-Rigter, L. (2023, December). *How drug information systems contribute to enhance preparedness. Correlation – European Harm Reduction Network*. Download at [drug-prep-project.eu/publications/](https://drug-prep-project.eu/publications/)

## Why is Foresight Research Important?

The increasing complexity and unpredictability of global challenges, such as climate change, political instability, and rapid technological advancements, demand proactive responses. Considering the challenges the fast-evolving drug phenomenon poses to EU Member States, this proactive attitude is particularly relevant in drug policy, which is nowadays dominated by reactive responses to past-time developments that have been witnessed. Responses can be more effective if they anticipate possible developments and create a certain level of preparedness for the things to come.

Current national drug information systems often lack the agility to detect emerging drug-related threats promptly. Although EU Member States have access to comprehensive data on recent drug-related developments in Europe, many national responses only rely on data from monitoring. A more future-oriented input provided by additional foresight research would enable more coherent and timely policies. The EU Drugs Strategy 2021-2025 highlights the need to enhance foresight capacities to tackle the growing complexity of the drug phenomenon. This strategic foresight is vital for building resilient and adaptive policies that can effectively respond to future challenges and crises. Through understanding key trends and building scenarios, foresight research can guide the development of effective, inclusive and proactive drug policies.

Foresight research not only aids in addressing developments in drug markets and substance use but also enhances the overall preparedness of national drug monitoring and response systems, and it allows the visioning of desirable/preferable scenarios. By integrating traditional and innovative monitoring tools with foresight methods, EU Member States can improve their drug information systems and implement more accurate and timely interventions that are based on a forward-looking approach and consideration of implications down the line which is shared among national stakeholders.

## How is Foresight Research Conducted?

Foresight research is a participatory approach that can combine various methods, including qualitative and quantitative ones. It involves systematic collective reflection among stakeholders, enabling countries to strengthen their preparedness and policymakers to make future-oriented strategic decisions.

Foresight exercises can be exploratory (starting from the present and exploring different possible futures) or normative (starting from an identified future and asking how to achieve or avoid it). As a first step, they engage in strategic thinking that takes into account the influence of the wider environment on the drug field to envision possible future developments and map upcoming challenges. The core activities of the approach include involving different stakeholders to avoid blind spots when thinking about the future, facilitating open discussions among these stakeholders to create a joint vision of future possibilities and translating the insights into collaborative action.

A wide range of methodologies can be used as part of the process, which can be customised and adjusted depending on the context and needs. Key tools and methods used in foresight research may include:

- Horizon Scanning: Identifying early signals of change through literature review (both academic and “grey” literature) to spot emerging trends and issues.
- Trend Analysis: Categorising insights to comprehend prevalent patterns and their possible implications.
- Scenario Building: Involving stakeholders to explore potential futures and develop adaptable strategies that can respond to these.

## Explore Further

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- Drug-Prep Project (2024). *Summary report on recommendations and best practices for national implementation of foresight strategies*. <https://drug-prep-project.eu/publications/>

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[drug-prep-project.eu](https://drug-prep-project.eu)

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