

Imagining sustainable futures for Europe

A co-creation project of the EEA and its country network Eionet

Achieving a sustainable Europe will require far-reaching societal change, engaging all areas of the economy and society. Faced with this complex governance challenge, Europe's governments and societies are increasingly looking to foresight approaches to explore possible futures and what they mean for policy and action today. In this context, the EEA and its country network Eionet have developed a set of imaginaries offering engaging, plausible and contrasting images of what a sustainable Europe could look like in 2050. By helping open up thinking about how the future could develop, the imaginaries represent valuable tools for forward-looking analysis and assessments.

The 'Scenarios for a sustainable Europe in 2050' project

Explore the four imaginaries:

1. Imaginary 1: Technocracy for the common good
2. Imaginary 2: Unity in adversity
3. Imaginary 3: The great decoupling
4. Imaginary 4: Ecotopia

The need for fundamental change

It is now widely understood that achieving a sustainable Europe will require far-reaching societal

change, engaging all areas of the economy and society. The European Green Deal identifies the need for ‘deeply transformative’ policies and actions in the coming decades to put the EU onto a sustainable path. Like the EEA’s 5-yearly report, *SOER 2020*, it highlights the need to fundamentally transform the production-consumption systems that meet Europe’s demand for energy, food, mobility and shelter. Yet there is also a growing recognition that achieving the EU’s vision of ‘living well, within environmental limits’ will require a deeper transformation of the socio-economic system.

In recent years, questions about the viability of the dominant economic paradigm have moved from the fringe of academic and policy debates into the mainstream (EEA, 2021). The language used is sometimes surprisingly radical. According to Martin Wolf (2019) of the Financial Times, for example, ‘The way our economic and political systems work must change, or they will perish.’ Klaus Schwab (2020), Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, likewise argues that ‘we will need to reconsider our collective commitment to capitalism as we have known it’.

Recurrent global crises have focused attention on the vulnerabilities of the existing socio-economic order and the deep uncertainty about what the future holds. The financial crisis of 2008-2009, the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and the recent war in Ukraine have each challenged widely held assumptions, for example about how best to organise and regulate the economy; where and how people can work together and socialise; the feasibility and desirability of increasing global trade and economic integration; and the outlook for geopolitical security.

These disruptions have generated enormous social and economic difficulties, and could trigger further risks, for example if they lead to increasing militarism or weaker commitment to mitigating climate change and biodiversity loss. Yet the same disruptions have also created windows of opportunity for new technologies, social practices and business models to break into the mainstream. They have necessitated fresh thinking about what a sustainable Europe might look like and how to get there.

Europe has seen these kinds of opportunities before, for example in the aftermath of World War II, when previously utopian ideas such as universal welfare and healthcare suddenly became integral pillars of European democracy. The question today is whether and how societies can turn current and future crises into opportunities; and whether they can shape the impact of new technologies and social innovations in ways that serve society’s interests, rather than reproducing or amplifying existing inequalities and environmental pressures.

The value of imagination

Faced with these complex and systemic challenges, Europe’s governments and societies are increasingly looking to strategic foresight approaches to support governance and enable public participation in exploring possible futures. Foresight methods can assist in a variety of ways, for example in scanning for emerging trends, innovations and risks; making sense of megatrends and their implications; drawing out tacit values and assumptions about the future; helping find common

ground among participants and build shared visions; and developing a shared understanding of the barriers and opportunities ahead.

Qualitative scenarios or imaginaries (i.e. plausible, well-researched and imaginative descriptions of possible and plausible futures) can play an important role in opening up new ways of thinking about how the future could develop. This is important. As Jim Dator, a leading foresight researcher, has noted, ‘we know from years of working in the futures field that “the future” that most people have in mind when they are first asked to think about the future usually is that “whatever is happening now will continue”.’ Imaginaries can help people to detach from seeing the present as fixed and recognise that rapid and far-reaching change might be imminent and could open pathways to diverse futures.

A sustainable Europe could also take very different forms, depending in part on society’s response to unexpected disruption, ranging from geopolitical and economic shocks to the impacts of disruptive innovations. Developing imaginaries can help societies to navigate these uncertainties and cope with challenges like climate change and population ageing because they expand the range of available ideas and options (Mulgan, 2021).



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Equally importantly, imaginaries provide an opportunity to explore different normative visions of the future. Different people may have strongly contrasting visions of a desirable future. For example, some might view a strong state equipped with abundant information as indispensable for coordinating action across society, while others would see it as a grave threat to individual liberty. Some people might see economic growth as a fountain of prosperity, while others regard it as an engine of self-defeating consumerism and environmental degradation.

The diversity of values across society means that there are many possible futures that are broadly consistent with the vision of 'living well, within environmental limits'. It is not possible to define a single imaginary for a sustainable future that will appeal to everyone. But this reality makes it all the more useful to crystallise possible futures in the form of fully elaborated imaginaries. This can help clarify the trade-offs between different sustainability goals; the winners and losers inherent in each future. It can also bring to the surface the implicit assumptions that the imaginary depends on, for example in terms of technological or social change. This, in turn, can help build a shared understanding of where society is currently heading, which alternative paths forward look credible or feasible, and what that means for policy and governance.

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