

Applying Foresight Research for Drug Policy: Lessons from the DRUG-PREP Project

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Background

Foresight research is increasingly recognised as important in navigating the rapidly evolving landscape of drug policy. This innovative approach enables thinking, debating and shaping future trajectories. Foresight research includes a variety of methodologies, combining evidence-based analysis with creative and interactive approaches. In [DRUG-PREP](#), national-level foresight was conducted in six European countries (Belgium, Czechia, [Finland](#), Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal) aiming to explore the added value of conducting foresight at the national level and to build response capacity in the involved countries. Horizon scanning is an approach for collecting signals about current or imminent changes (events or trends) that are potential indications of new emerging issues.

Methods

A standardised research framework was developed for horizon scanning:

1. Trend identification through literature review
2. Describing trends and their implications
3. Expert validation through workshops with national experts to validate trends and consider potential impacts



A broad perspective was taken, covering societal, technological, environmental, economic and political aspects (STEEP). There were variations in methodological approaches: database selection, type of literature (e.g., scientific vs grey literature), focus on drug-specific or wider trends, design of expert panels (e.g., when/how to engage external experts). To identify lessons learnt, a survey was completed by all partners of their experience doing foresight, followed by a workshop to allow group discussion of the barriers and issues faced.

Lessons learnt

Key recommendations from DRUG-PREP on carrying out horizon scanning include:

- Ensure that the core team has sufficient training on foresight methods. Involve researchers with relevant research skills (e.g., experience with systematic review studies or thematic analysis in qualitative research).
- Be transparent about methodological choices. Describe the steps you went through to carry out horizon scanning.
- Define in advance how the findings will be used. This helps to justify methodological choices and facilitate stakeholder engagement.
- As a first step in the exercise, have a clear definition of the topic under study (i.e., define what the drugs field entails).
- Involve different experts from early stages to validate wider trends. Make sure to build on existing knowledge.
- Be aware that foresight research is an iterative process. It is important to validate and revisit findings throughout the process, by involving the core team at regular 'interview' moments and through multi-disciplinary input during the expert validation process.

Conclusion

The DRUG-PREP experience demonstrates the versatility of methods in foresight research to inform drug policy, underscoring its adaptability to different national and research settings. The foresight approach can help to address developments in drug markets, prevalence of drug use, and evolving challenges in drug policy, contributing to the field's advancement and in helping to develop national response capacity. Several recommendations underline the importance of the participatory approach which is crucial in any foresight research. Bringing together experts from different fields and communities allows a wider perspective to be taken.