

Imagining sustainable futures for Europe in 2050

## The ‘Scenarios for a sustainable Europe in 2050’ project



In 2020, the foresight group within the EEA’s country network (Eionet) initiated ‘Scenarios for a sustainable Europe in 2050’ (SSE 2050). This co-creation project, developed and implemented jointly with the EEA, aims to produce a set of imaginaries offering engaging, plausible and clearly 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. For example, in 2022 and 2023, the EEA plans to use the imaginaries to support more detailed analysis of sustainable futures for Europe’s key production-consumption systems (e.g. food, energy, mobility, buildings). Further work could address the implications of the imaginaries for societies and ecosystems at national or local levels, as well as for policy design and governance in support of sustainability transitions.

### European and global futures

The SSE 2050 project primarily focuses on creating imaginaries for desirable European futures, considering them separately from global developments (both desirable and undesirable) that could influence the transition to a sustainable Europe. While this separation of European and global futures is artificial, it makes it possible to assess the viability and resilience of the different European imaginaries in varying external conditions (e.g. global shocks or trends) that are largely outside Europe’s control.

The imaginaries were developed through a participatory process, involving EEA staff, experts from the Eionet group on foresight, and external stakeholders. The project employed the well-established methodology of ‘key factor’ and consistency-based scenario construction (as outlined below).

### Key steps in the methodology

- The project team identified a broad range of ‘key factors’ that are expected to have an important role in shaping European or global futures. These included social, technological, environmental, economic and political drivers (e.g. economic growth, technological innovation, population growth). The team then selected a short list of those key factors that are considered most uncertain and impactful.
- For each of the short-listed key factors, the project team developed a description and a set of 3-5 plausible and strongly contrasting ‘projections’ of how the key factor could develop to 2050. The result was a very rich set of ideas about possible directions towards sustainable development in Europe.
- The project team then assessed and scored the consistency of the different key factor ‘projections’. On this basis, the ‘projections’ were combined into a draft set of internally consistent imaginaries for a sustainable Europe in 2050.
- The draft imaginaries were then further developed through participatory workshops, which helped to build a richer picture of each future, for example in terms of winners and losers, synergies and trade-offs.

### Characteristics of the four imaginaries

The overall result of this process is a set of four distinct imaginaries that capture some of today’s most prominent discourses on sustainability and explore their implications. In doing so, they highlight different approaches, strategies and measures to achieve sustainable development.

All four imaginaries are broadly aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, but they differ in how they prioritise the goals. In all imaginaries there are trade-offs, for example between the social aspects of sustainability (e.g. employment models) and innovations promoting sustainability, or between restoration of ecosystems and agriculture. Equally, each imaginary implies changes for economic sectors and communities, creating winners and losers from the transition, even if society as a whole is better off than today.

The imaginaries describe different futures, but they have a common foundation in developments or ‘megatrends’ that are fairly certain. For example, all four imaginaries presuppose demographic developments according to Eurostat projections. They all take into account climate change (in the range of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projections) with quite severe impacts

## Publications

on Europe. Digitalisation plays an important but contrasting role in all four imaginaries. As normative imaginaries directed at sustainability, all four assume that Europe delivers on the environmental goals of the European Green Deal.

In contrast, the imaginaries do not address 'wild cards', i.e. extreme developments with low or negligible probability of occurring. For example, none supposes that the EU completely vanishes in an instant; that there is a sudden breakthrough in nuclear fusion technology that solves all energy problems at minimal costs; or that there is a sudden enlightenment of all humankind. To be useful, imaginaries have to present combinations of realistic options and explore their implications.

All four imaginaries start with the same set of challenges for Europe, such as the need to mitigate climate change and promote social and territorial coherence in line with EU objectives. But the approaches and methods used to achieve sustainability and the main actors striving for sustainability differ between the imaginaries:

In 'Technocracy for the common good', sustainability is achieved through state control at the national level, which prioritises society's collective interests. Information and communication technologies enable unprecedented monitoring and control of social and ecological systems.

In 'Unity in adversity', Europeans respond to severe environmental, climate and economic crises by empowering the EU to use stringent, top-down regulatory and market-based measures to set rigorously enforced boundaries for economic activity.

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In 'The great decoupling', innovative companies are the central actors. They succeed thanks to technological breakthroughs, especially in the bioeconomy, enabling the decoupling of gross domestic product (GDP) growth from adverse environmental impacts.

In 'Ecotopia', stakeholders from civil society have brought about a shift in collective thinking and action. Local communities reconnect to nature while technology is used sparingly to enable sustainable lifestyles. Consumption and resource use are being scaled back markedly.

It is certain that none of the imaginaries will be fully realised. In the best case, the future may combine elements from the different imaginaries. Yet they can provide a valuable tool to inspire thinking about future pathways for innovation, policy, finance and society-wide participation that can drive the fundamental transformations needed in Europe and worldwide.

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