

# Scenarios in Action: Comments and New Directions

**Fabrice Roubelat**  
**University of Poitiers**  
**France**

When scenarios become so fashionable that their use in corporate strategy becomes almost common place, witness the dramatic expansion of scenario planning since September 11 (Rigby & Bilodeau, 2007), it is for a futurist a particularly good occasion to wonder if it is worth to promote and to practice scenario planning, as to do research in the field.

As a researcher and practitioner who has based on scenario planning a major part of his works and papers for the last two decades, it seems to me that scenarios remain a subject of inquiry on two major issues concerning:

- their real functions, as their dysfunctions, to provide a framework to understand why scenario planning practices can be successful or on the contrary be a cause of disappointment,
- their interactions in action processes, to pay attention on the way scenarios can follow one another, on the oscillations that can occur between two or more scenarios and on the possibility for scenarios to be played simultaneously.

## Scenario Planning as a Networking Process: Functions and Dysfunctions

As a networking process helping organizations to explore new views of environment and corporate futures (Roubelat, 2000 & 2006), scenario planning provides the occasion to connect a large range of actors – top and middle managers, academics, public policy makers, NGO members... – in questioning their individual and collective world views – in the German meaning of *Weltanschauung*. In such a process, the ideological function of scenario planning became as important as its analytic one: the major issue is not only to serve as a decision support system but also to challenge the strategic paradigms of organizations, to rethink their internal and external borders, i.e. to assess how they can change and move.

In its analytic function, scenario planning will try to bring some "scientific" evidence from analyzing trends and emphasizing uncertainties in models, so that world views can be challenged or strengthened. This function will mainly use experts, e.g. people having a scientific knowledge or a staff positions in organizations. In its ideological function, scenario planning will also focus on beliefs about the future from actors such as policy and decision makers, either top or middle managers, NGO members... to question organizations' strategies, emerging ways of seeing the world, or even utopias.

In a scenario planning process, the most critical management issue is to produce a mix of these two functions to pay attention on long range processes as on innovating views of the world. During the process many risks will be faced to avoid disappointment, as participants will ask if it was worth to do scenarios that are not so new. Among these risks, leadership and groupthink are the main dysfunctions which are often connected with a lack of heterogeneity of the people who participate in the process, so that either a leader or the group itself will reduce the range of possible futures. Thus, the usefulness of scenario planning will rely on "structural holes" (Burt, 2000) to increase the benefits of scenario planning from connecting non-redundant world viewers and accessing new fields of thought to break the "network closure" that often characterize shared visions in organizations, institutions and industrial communities.

However, case studies show that it is not always easy to avoid such pitfalls even in companies which have practiced for a long time scenario planning, like energy ones, often presented as success stories of scenario practices. One can easily understand that members of a company engaged in a risky business and whose main competences cope with managing risks will resist to question the competences which made the company success. In other cases, dealing for example with deregulation issues, some dystopian scenarios could be considered as self-fulfilling prophecies, so that it can be difficult to face this first step to go beyond dystopia to use Richard Slaughter's phrase (Slaughter, 2004). Such a case is not new as a study of foresight practices during the sixties shows that some actors had anticipated a prospective major change in the oil industry but did not want to accelerate their occurrences by communicating on it. This time gap between the perception of changes and its emergence as a strategic issue for organizations often explain the separation that is made between scenarios and strategies, as well as inertia in strategic decision making (Wright, Van der Heijden, Burt, Bradfield, & Cairns, 2008). Such a separation is connected with two strategic questions. Why would companies challenge successful strategies because of prospective scenarios? And why would not companies build strategies that would be either robust or flexible to be ready for all plausible futures? In both cases, one could wonder if it is worth to do scenarios, as it would be more efficient to be myopic and interactive. Another answer could be to question the time gaps and the related strategic issues by merging scenarios and strategies, as even flexible organizations such as networks know major changes when they are studied in a long range perspective (Marchais-Roubelat & Roubelat, 2009).

### **Playing Interacting Scenarios: Exploring Time Gaps Through Action Processes**

Although scenarios have become a paradigm of futures studies (Mannermaa, 1991) the needs expressed by Mannermaa for an evolutionary paradigm shows how crucial the question of time is. Excepting work based on operations research, time processes do not really frame scenario planning, so that futurists are experiencing the paradox of timeless scenarios as time horizons and scenario dynamics are often forgotten to be replaced by alternative world views.

To go further and to study the issue of the transformation of scenarios in time, we suggest to introduce action processes into scenarios using a phenomenological approach which was implemented and developed from various experiences such as Euromediterranean futures or risk scenarios to 2020 (Marchais-Roubelat & Roubelat, 2008).

To design models of action processes, this phenomenological approach is primarily based on the longitudinal study of the social construction of events in their inner and outer contexts to induce rules to anticipate possible futures. In this approach, scenario design is the result of the combination of four main steps:

- Making sense through an action rule: the rule structuring an action process during a scenario is the key element insofar as it shapes the context of the environment, as well as it makes sense to the actors' strategies. As this rule changes, the context moves from one shape to another, and actors enter a new scenario in which their former behaviors can no more play efficiently the new game.
- Shaping the context of the action: in a scenario, the context of the action process is summed up by sub-systems - e.g. political, economic, social...-, also called environment dimensions, which are selected through their ways of evolution, described by trends of variables implementing the rule and by speeds of implementation of the rule. The evolutions of these dimensions as their interactions make sense for actors which will evolve in these dimensions and use them to assess their strategies.
- Assessing actors' strategies around the action rule within the context : actors' strategies have to be assessed according to the action rule and to their abilities to play a role in the game. That explains that institutions or companies have in some scenarios to be split into departments or offices when they do not have the same position towards the scenario rule. The various actors - transnational institutions such as European ones, nongovernmental organisations, corporations - act within the dimensions of the context. In some scenarios, actors can emerge or disappear.
- Exploring rule shift patterns and gaps: the shifts may create huge complexity and different patterns for possible futures. First, several different rules can simultaneously emerge so that actors may have to play different scenarios either on different areas or on different dimensions of the environment. As the rules don't follow the same rhythms, gaps may occur when an actor plays the old rule when another one plays a challenging new one. Oscillations may also occur when two rules are alternatively played, so that the patterns remain the same, as issues and actors could have moved and changed.

For example, in the risk scenarios study, the working group came to scenario planning from a trend based and dystopian scenario named the *Old maid*, by analogy with the card game. The members of the working group did not seem to like such a scenario that much, even if the *Old Maid* could seem a rather convenient way to manage local risks (e.g. industrial accidents, waste management, social protests). In the *Old maid* scenario, responsibility is never definitively assumed by any actor, but as the old maid card is transmitted from an actor to another one, pictures of the future seem to be different as various risks may occur when the rule – i.e. the scenario - remains the same.

To manage risks in different ways, the group challenged the *Old maid* with new rules as in the *Happy Families* scenario where local authorities specialize in the management of risky businesses, such as managing polluting industries, research and industry in highly contagious diseases, for which they developed core competences. In the *Tarot* scenario, local authorities create participative democracy systems to manage new risky projects with all stakeholders, including NGOs. But when local authorities fail to coordinate stakeholders or to assess the risk, these local management based scenarios may shift to the *Meccano* one, in which the National state manages risks by making decisions in a educative low participatory process. As during a shift actors often do not play the same rules, dysfunctions and misunderstandings increase. Thus, according to the different ways actors assess the risks, scenarios may for example oscillate between the *Old maid* and the *Meccano*. On the one hand, the national state may choose to transmit the Old maid card thanks to long legal procedures. On the other hand, it can keep the old maid card and thus enter the *Meccano* scenario when the urgency and/or the impact of a risk needs a strong dominating actor. Then, it can either sell the risk to private companies to enter a *Monopoly* scenario or share it to play simultaneously all other scenarios.

### Further Directions: Futurizing Shifts in Historical Processes

Considered as action processes, scenarios have to be more than alternative futures but have to be explored through shifts connecting them together. In such an approach, scenario planning goes beyond worldviews and explores how these worldviews move in time, as in the fragmented world of globalisation, actors have to play, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes alternatively, sometimes lonely different former and new rules, with players who can be former or new ones, but who move and change.

Through these moving interactions, scenarios can be viewed as the result of an action process, rather than a structure or a situation. Such an action process draws a historical process during which one or more actors make choices, use and sometimes create rule shifts. Considering scenarios in an action based approach attempts to replace them in a longitudinal perspective and thus to provide also an exploratory framework to develop the relationships between history and futures studies (Flechtheim, 1966; Inayatullah, 1998).

Such research will not have the objective to find historical analogies to be applied to futures research which would risk anachronism, but to propose models of analysis to support scenario planning as its critical issues remain to understand how shifts occur and may be thought, as to question the future models of thought of action players. This would help scenarios planners to think new games where rules always change as the number and properties of pieces, to use Berger's metaphor (Berger, 1957). This would also question them on a missing dimension of scenario planning concerning the role of individuals in action processes. As scenarios draw patterns for future history, they are actually based on a structuralist point of view, forgetting that individuals can contribute to shape action processes.

When imagining future organizations, we maybe have to imagine future leaders too. As an evolving field, scenario planning could thus have a look on the lessons

from history to include individual projects and behaviors, to discuss some of its too fashionable scenarios and to avoid anachronism in the way futures are built and read.

## Correspondence

Fabrice Roubelat  
Associate Professor  
University of Poitiers – Graduate School of Business  
Email: froubelat@iae.univ-poitiers.fr  
IAE - 11 rue Archimède – 79000 Niort - France  
Phone: 33 5 49 77 05 91

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