

A reflection on the mass production of scenarios in response to COVID-19

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Abstract

In this short paper, we reflect on the recent accumulation of scenarios that have been developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Will they be of use to worried individuals and organizations? Or, are they artifacts of the very recent past? We conclude that these quickly-produced scenarios are not embedded in the realities of affected communities and that the scenario development process should be enhanced to either involve power-holding stakeholders or, more straightforwardly, to activate local consideration of how the affected community might/ might not/ wish to react to localised dilemmas. Both enhancements will provide action-orientated insights, beyond that of simply appreciating possible global/regional futures.

Introduction

Over the last 50 years, scenario planning has proved one of the most widely used methods for strategic analysis and planning by organizations across multiple sectors and geographic regions. Examples include multinational businesses (cf. Schoemaker et al., 1993; Wilkinson & Kupers, 2014), governments (cf. Goodspeed & Hackel, 2019; Habegger, 2010) and community organizations (cf. Vannier et al., 2019; Welling et al., 2019). Promoted as a tool for addressing unpredictable futures (cf. Cairns & Wright, 2018) and ‘critical uncertainties’ (cf. Oliver & Parrett, 2018) in the environment, scenario method has come to the fore in the current global crisis of the spread of COVID-19, particularly with publications from the major global consultancy organizations (cf. Deloitte, 2020; KPMG, 2020; McKinsey, 2020). Here, a range of broad-based scenarios that outline global possibilities for economic, political, environmental and social futures in a post-COVID-19 world are postulated. Similar scenario prospects are offered by a range of futurists (cf. Turner, 2020). As we write, many post-COVID-19 scenarios are appearing in both practitioner and academic outlets. In the public news channels, short “worst-and-best” case scenarios are a consistent theme within in-depth new reports.

In the majority of applications, scenario activity tends to be reactive and to take place at the point of great salient stress/threat in/to the organization’s activities (see Cairns and Wright, 2018, chapter 9). In the face of current global threat, organizations that have never used scenarios before now seek to do so. We might speculate that the consultancies with some expertise build exemplar scenarios now do so to seek to generate business from these worried organisations.

However, stressful/threatening situations may only be starting to unfold containing a string of outcomes of highly uncertain, perhaps unknowable, events, even in the short-term. As such, engagement in seemingly urgent scenario activity that is based on reactive response to “delivered” generic scenarios may be misplaced and naive – since the outcomes of the driving forces that have been activated in the crisis situation are only just starting to unfold and become obvious. Additionally, driving forces based upon broad-based, global scenarios may not be of direct or central relevance to the particular organizational setting. Information appearing on both organizations' and managers' radars is that of "late" – rather than "early" – warnings of events that may, or may not, become salient to those directly impacted by unfolding events.

How should the vigilant organization react in such active and rapidly unfolding situations? Scenario planning conducted on a day-to-day basis, if that is possible? Should it seek to develop “antifragile” positioning – such that the organization tries to “clip” the downside risk and remain open to some unbounded upside (see Derbyshire and Wright, 2014). Scenario planning is not in essence a dynamic activity – evidenced by the already-out-of-date COVID-19-inspired scenario materials that are being rushed into print.

While the almost-daily appearance of scenario sets might appear to offer guidance and advice on the possible nature of a future beyond COVID-19, we posit that there are some problematic aspects of their nature, namely:

1. While they present narratives of potential futures, they are by their very nature historical, in that they were written in the past (albeit recent) in a world that is changing almost by the minute. For example, as we write, in some countries (e.g. New Zealand, Australia) the COVID-19 virus appears to have been by and large controlled – and “lockdown” and social distancing restrictions are beginning to be lifted. In other countries, early views of the limits of control have been seen to be ill-informed (e.g. Sweden), or reversed in a second wave of infection (e.g. Singapore). Additionally, the unknown nature of the virus has led to debates/queries about: a) the degree of individual immunity after infection; b) the degree of seasonality of any resurgence of infection; c) the degree of mutation of the initial virus; and d) whether a vaccine can be developed at all or in what time frame. The resolution, as an outcome, of any of these major uncertainties – and the interactions between outcomes – has the potential to drive the unfolding of very disparate futures. Thus, the extant recently produced scenarios are largely artefacts that are frozen in time at their production, rather than living programs of ongoing refinement and adaptation of perspectives on the future.
2. They are generally global in nature and do not take account of subtleties and nuances that exist at the local – national or community – level in terms of potential and realisable societal and organizational futures. Importantly, the self-interested actions of the powerful (e.g., governments) are not modelled within the extant scenarios. As such, actions such as relaxing or reinforcing lockdown and social distancing are not incorporated.

3. Related to this, they are “delivered” by broadcasting to a general audience, often by commercial or academic organizations – whose thinking is necessarily bounded – rather than being developed within involved communities. For example, within the broad range of literature regarding a post-COVID-19 world, there are contrasting views about questions of *when* we might return to “normality” (e.g. Daley & Hewitt, 2020) and *if* there is a possible return to what might be termed “normal” (e.g. Albani, 2020). But, normal for whom? Knowledge workers? Health care professionals? Manual labourers? Children in schools? Care home residents? Hospitality workers? And this list does not look beyond the geographic/cultural norms of *our* own context as authors of this piece.

In short, the problems we see as inherent in many scenario approaches are that they:

- (i) are “designed and delivered” by external agents who are not embedded in or acculturated to the communities that are the subject (or, rather, object) of investigation
- (ii) develop scenarios which tend to be either entirely “good”, “bad” or “neutral” at all levels, from the global, through the regional to the local
- (iii) provide narratives of what a range of futures might look like as informed by meta-level PESTEL (political, economic, social, technological, ecological and legal) driving forces, but lack input to illustrate the impact of local agency and action

Defining a Focal Question and Approach

Taking account of all of the above, **our focal question is:**

How can we involve and engage local groups and organizations in developing meaningful scenarios that can inform their own agency and action to (re-)build sustainable communities?

Realistic scenarios should incorporate the actions/reactions of the powerful and the less-powerful as they act to enhance and preserve their own interests – as best they can – within the unfolding futures which are modelled at the macro- (i.e., PESTEL) level.

There are, we believe, two ways to achieve local realism and relevance, and to promote self-interested actions from involved participants. The first is to adopt the method identified by Gordon (2020). Gordon analyses the scenario process that produced the “Mont Fleur” scenarios at the point of the transition to black majority rule in South Africa. He shows how the emergence of a “normative” desired future scenario, to become the actualised external reality, was enabled by the deliberate construction of the scenario-building team – both in terms of representative stakeholder diversity and the current (and future) access-to-power of the team membership. In this way, Gordon argues, a desired future was facilitated, aided by achieved political reconciliation founded on the identification of a common goal – the desired future of the nation – within the group of power-holding stakeholders.

The second way is to involve only a focal group of affected stakeholders and then model the actions of powerful groups of other stakeholders at the national/international level, the latter not being part of the focal scenario development team. There are many examples of

programs that have engaged local communities in such “participatory scenario planning” (cf. Allington et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2016; Freeth & Drimie, 2016; Totin et al., 2018). We have engaged in programs of scenario-based research designed to engage local decision makers and community representatives over many years (e.g. Cairns & Wright, 2018, chapter 6; Cairns et al., 2017; Cairns et al., 2016). However, in both our own and others’ work, there is a general lack of clear, explicit demonstrable long-term success, in terms of showing sustained and embedded cultural and behavioural change at the local level. This points to the difficulty in achieving the aim of our key question above.

Lehoux, Miller and Williams-Jones (2020) focus on the design of public engagement methods to inform “anticipatory governance” – for situations in which technological innovations present future societal opportunities and problems. With foresight, such issues can be anticipated, such that appropriate policy and legal frameworks can be developed a-priori. These authors discuss how participation can be facilitated to articulate what the public believes should/should not happen in the future (i.e., in terms of governmental response to COVID-19) – so that ethical dilemmas are resolved early on. In their empirical study, participant reactions to technology-based scenarios were elicited, such that moral deliberations about the contents of the scenario could be captured – so-called “prospective deliberation”. This focus on “moral imagination” in the prospective deliberations allows public engagement to be enacted and then utilised by policy makers in their anticipatory governance.

Our own, earlier, response to this issue was the development of the “branching scenario” method (Cairns et al., 2017). In this approach, two high-level, global scenarios that outline, in simple terms, “best” and “worst” case futures, are then interrogated at the local level, by the affected community, to describe alternative action-orientated or in-action-orientated behavioural responses to each of the high-level scenarios. These alternatives prompt local consideration of the issue of how the community might/might not wish to react to these now-localised dilemmas, rather than merely understand and appreciate possible global-level futures. In considering potential post-COVID-19 futures at the local level, we can postulate two very different global/regional futures: a) one grounded in a new-found commitment to collaboration to seek stability, safety and security; and b) one where nation states fall into nationalistic self-interest, protectionism and remain blind to new and emerging threats (see Figure 1). However, no matter where the future unfolds along the continuum between these extremes, there will be opportunity (in most countries at least) for exercise of local agency and action. This might result in: a) either maximisation *or* waste of opportunities in the best case future and, alternatively, b) either seizure of *or* resignation to reduced opportunities in a worst case future.

Overall, we see a need for involvement of affected communities and organizations in development of scenarios that are relevant to – and take account of – local needs, wishes and culture. The relevance of local responses is particularly evident in the present COVID-19 crisis, where communities within countries and regions are demonstrating responses – e.g., refusing to lockdown or maintain social distancing – that are in conflict with global and national advice and guidelines, and where the latter are subject to change on a daily basis. In times of rapid, and seemingly random change, this need for local agency is one that requires

scenario development to be an ongoing, ‘living’ process of involvement and engagement, reacting immediately to evolving circumstances in order to both “very best guess” the immediate future and to inform a meaningful prospective in longer-term futures scenarios.

While such continuous – but less regular – scenario planning may exist in the domain of major organizations like Shell, or national governments like Singapore, we not aware of examples where such thinking has been embedded into local communities to enable them to practice day-to-day development and refinement of the types of scenarios outlined in the second tier of Figure 1, and to be continuously prepared to respond to the questions at the foot of each scenario outline. Moreover, we recognise obstacles to development of the required skill and knowledge sets in communities across the world. First, successful development of meaningful scenarios within a community requires skills to seek out and acknowledge global/generalisable knowledge that is relevant, while embedding local knowledge and wisdom. Second, both global and local myth and misinformation (“alternative truths” and “fake news”) must be recognised and countered. Third, development of the required skill sets in communities requires programs of education and training for which there may be limited resources – financial and intellectual – in a post-COVID-19 world. Fourth, any program to implement such skills nurturing will open the door to the “snake oil salesmen” of futurism and false promise. Finally, we must question whether academics will be willing/able to commit to necessary long-term engagement in communities from within their own world of short-term, publish-or-perish, metrics-based reward?

In summary, we believe that communities *can* be enabled to work autonomously to both recognise and respond to different circumstances and behaviours at global/regional/local levels and then to apply their own agency and action towards achieving A1 and B1 outcomes, avoiding the A2 and B2 outcomes outlined in Figure 1. The question is, are scenario “experts” willing and able to engage in enabling and supporting them to do so?

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| Global/National Conditions How would you describe the post COVID-19 world? | Scenario A – Stable and Safety Oriented Society Peaceful and collaborative Health and sustainability focused Long-term oriented Conserving and protecting people and resources Tolerant of differences Focused on benefit for global community | | Scenario B – Unstable and Self-Centred Society Fragmented and competitive/combatative Economy and business focused Short-term oriented Extracting value from people and resources Intolerant of difference and the ‘other’ Focused on short-term return on investment | |
| Local Response What are the alternative response behaviours at the local level, and how might <i>you</i> wish to react to each scenario? | Scenario A 1) – <i>Making the Most of...</i> Caring for all members Staying safe Building local resilience Building sustainable futures Investing in health and security Working together Relaxed and safe How do you act to achieve this future? | Scenario A 2) – <i>Taking the Most from...</i> Individualistic/Fragmented Taking risks Seeking individual satisfaction and pleasure Leaving “care” to professional carers For “the now” Tense and insecure How do act to avoid this future? | Scenario B 1) – <i>Making the Best of...</i> Taking the best care possible despite circumstances Resolving problems as best possible together Making the most of what is available Looking to a better future Uncertain but optimistic How do you act to prepare for this future? | Scenario B 2) – <i>Marking Time...</i> Fragmented/Dystopian Resigned/Helpless Hopeless Facing inevitable pandemic Taking the most from what can be appropriated Seeing no future Panicked and nihilistic How do you act to avoid this future? |

Figure 1. Based upon Cairns et al., 2017.