



Understanding normative foresight outcomes: Scenario development and the ‘veil of ignorance’ effect



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 November 2011

Received in revised form 11 September 2012

Accepted 22 September 2012

Available online 26 October 2012

Keywords:

System foresight

Normative scenario

Participation

Original position

Consensus

Holism

Deliberative democracy

ABSTRACT

The article approaches the question of the extent to and the ways in which the participatory construction of normative narratives in system foresight influences the shape of the outcomes. We discuss foresight as a system of inquiry into decision-making problems characterized by three key features – distancing, holism, and participation-intensiveness. We put forward the hypothesis that participative approaches to normative scenario development, which are structurally similar to a Rawlsian “original position” setup, generate a concern with the procedural arrangements governing the future world in the scenario, rather than simply with the events or states in the story of the future. This concern with “constitutional basics” may be regarded as an expression of participants’ attempt to ensure that, in the future world, each party will have a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. As a result, the construction of normative narratives may be interpreted in terms of an effort to smooth out tensions that are inevitably embedded in scenarios. The hypothesis is illustrated, in the article’s final section, with a recent exercise on the future of higher education.

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1. Introduction

The question we asked ourselves as we approached the final stages of a large-scale, participatory, vision-oriented process was: “What kind of normative narrative should one expect from a system foresight exercise”? At the most basic level, the answer is, of course, plain: the picture of a somewhat distant future which is recognized by the participants in the exercise as desirable and as an appropriate guide for future policy action. But does this type of output have some structure- or substance-related characteristics or features that are generic, i.e., which one would expect to encounter in most normative scenarios in system foresight, or at least in those arrived at by similar routes?

While the literature on scenario building and scenario planning has recently been enriched by typologies and taxonomies [28,2,24], none of those we consulted adequately responded to this question. Van Notten et al. [28], for example, distinguish between normative and what they somewhat misleadingly refer to as descriptive scenarios, but do not systematically relate either of them to other features within their three typological dimensions (project goal, process design, and scenario content).¹ Bishop et al. explicitly point out that, while they initially intended to distinguish among scenario techniques in terms of a “descriptive” and a “normative” approach, it “turned out that each technique could be adapted for one or the other...” [24, p. 21]. Borjeson et al.’s [2] discussion of normative scenarios is confusing (as we show presently), among others because it appears to

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¹ There is one exception, namely their claim that backcasting scenarios are normative “by nature” [28, p. 429]. We discuss this question further down, in the subsection on normative scenarios.

include in this class only so-called developmental or event-sequence scenarios, but not also end-states or snapshot scenarios. Other taxonomies, though clearly framing normative scenarios as a separate class, are hardly more specific in pinpointing any distinguishing outcomes.

We therefore return to our question: does the added normative (as opposed to exploratory) dimension of scenarios in system foresight exercises influence the shape of these narratives in predictable or recognizable ways? The expectation that such scenarios have defining features would not be far-fetched. It is a commonplace of post-positivist theories of science that the structure of the system of inquiry partly determines the outcomes [17]. Our claim in this paper, which we put forward as a hypothesis to be tested by future research, is that participatory system foresight exercises yield normative narratives which tend to focus, explicitly or implicitly, on the basic values and procedural arrangements governing the desired future world.

The article's first main section looks at system foresight as a system of inquiry, that is, as the paradigm within which the type of scenario building we are interested in is undertaken. We highlight those assumptions in foresight which, in our view, are conducive to the kinds of outcomes described by our hypothesis. This also provides an appropriate context for clarifying the meaning of the term “normative” as employed herein.

The hypothesis is properly fleshed out in the second section. To this end, we suggest an analogy with a famous thought experiment in political philosophy – John Rawls's “original position”/“veil of ignorance”. While appealing to such an analogy may seem surprising, we note that scenarios themselves are thought experiments (“heuristic devices ... for attempting to break away from conventional thinking” [35, p. 149]). Indeed, as thought experiments the “original position” and normative scenario building share several very significant structural features.

The third section spells out some implications of our hypothesis for the development of normative narratives. We also suggest a less traditional perspective on working with scenarios, specifically as a normative conversation on “fields of tensions”.

Finally, we provide an outline of a recent large-scale system foresight exercise in higher education, focusing on its scenario development phase. This serves as a case study which lends *prima facie* support to our hypothesis. However, we leave it to subsequent analyses of past and future foresight endeavors to determine whether the hypothesis may be properly generalized at all and, if so, to what extent.

It must be emphasized that, while “foresight” is a concept which covers a wide array of prospective practices, we are concerned here with one particular, albeit relatively broad, type. Although, for the sake of convenience, we will employ below the phrase “system foresight” without further qualifications, what we have in mind is a type of practice that (a) has, as its object, large social institutions and the associated systems of organizations (such as education or Research, development and innovation); (b) entails a participatory process involving diverse categories of actors and stakeholders; and (c) aims to deliver, among others, a shared normative narrative of the future (often, a vision) as a guide to action. Furthermore, this normative narrative usually emerges as the result of some form of consensus among participants and therefore claims for itself a degree of representativeness (though not in the statistical sense) or, at least, of inter-subjective agreement.

Each and every one of the features above is essential to our argument. Conversely, we do not claim that the hypothesis put forward here holds with equal force beyond this qualified understanding of system foresight, in foresight for small organizations, for example, or in scenario-building efforts that do not allow the normative narratives to emerge through some manner of agreement achieved in a mostly bottom-up process.

2. Foresight as a system of inquiry and the role of scenario building

To set the stage for this section's discussion, it is worth commencing with the observation that the type of foresight alluded to above – large-scale, participation-intensive, and systemic – is today ripe for exploration, among others because of its substantial growth over the past few decades. Miles et al. documented a rather remarkable accumulation of “national” foresight exercises between the early 1990s and the middle of the last decade [14], while Slaughter found a few years ago that government dominates “the world of FS/foresight work” [36, p. 9]. National foresight is today complemented by regional endeavors, while the original S&T (Science and technology) focus of system foresight has also been broadening, as with the higher education foresight discussed in the final section of this article. The national or regional – as opposed to organizational – dimension of recent foresight has had an impact on specific practices, introduced new challenges, and, perhaps most importantly, created new expectations [14]. Scenarios and visions for complex national or regional institutional systems – and even continental ones, judging by foresight's “footprint in the further consolidation” of the European Research Area [37] – render questions such as the one asked here quite timely.

This being said, it is difficult to do justice to foresight in terms of a brief characterization or a set of features, particularly given the number of foresight schools and the wealth of foresight practices currently in use, some of which do not even attach to themselves the “foresight” label [14]. Although, in our discussion, we strive to capture several relevant core assumptions of foresight in general, we are particularly concerned with the variety which is applied to large-scale social institutions (to institutional systems or “organizational fields”) [38], relies on participatory processes, and employs normative scenarios as a key method. This will be referred to as “system foresight”. While this approach obviously restricts the range of foresight practices tackled here, it covers a sufficiently wide gamut of exercises and experiences to lend a broader interest to our argument.

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