



The responsibility of futurists in strategic foresight – Hungarian examples

Erzsébet Nováky*, Gergely Tyukodi¹

Corvinus University of Budapest, Futures Studies Department, Fővám tér 8., Budapest, H-1093, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The Futures Studies Department at the Corvinus University of Budapest conducted a few strategic foresight projects at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The goals of two projects were to increase the regional competitiveness of two towns in Hungary; whereas, two other projects dealt with the long-term, 15- to 20- year-long, macro-development opportunities of Hungary. They focused on defining social trends that influence the long-term decision-making environment of the regions and the country. The two types of experience made it possible to enhance strategic foresight by defining the role and responsibility of professional futurists and average, everyday people.

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1. Introduction

Hungary experienced a radical change in the 1990s: a mix of political transition from socialism to democracy, an economic change and, as a result, a social transformation. The change shocked the country in many ways. First, the adaptation of the national economy resulted in a sudden decrease of economic production while the social transformation included the quick impoverishment of the elder and undereducated. After the transition, Hungary was quickly introduced to the world of uncertainties, thus this young democratic society had to learn how to navigate and make decisions.

The new game required new rules. The long-term mechanical planning used during the socialist period proved to be a useless tool for making decisions in such a turbulent world, but still, the need for looking ahead persisted. Scenario-making and strategic foresight became popular decision-making tools in business and regional development related to the future. As the Hungarian economy opened up to international business, multinational companies from more developed Western societies quickly introduced foresight tools to the Hungarian international business sphere. Hungarian-owned businesses, mainly small- and middle-size enterprises, were not likely to apply those methods, since they had a more simple strategy at that point: their main goal was to survive, to make some profit, and become suppliers for bigger international retailers in order to have possibly long-term contracts. At the same time, the academic field started to pay more attention to foresight and futures studies as it came to realize the need to think about the future in the more complex and uncertain environment. Interestingly, the public sector was more open to these new tools, especially with the promise of joining the EU in the mid-1990s. Regional planning thus started to gain momentum in public affairs while academic knowledge met public demand.

2. From local to national foresight

One of the main driving ideas that supported the application of foresight came from the European Union guidelines [1] to enhance regional competitiveness. In the field of futures studies, the Futures Studies Department (FSD) at the Corvinus University

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +36 1 482 5319.

E-mail addresses: erzsebet.novaky@uni-corvinus.hu (E. Nováky), gergely.tyukodi@uni-corvinus.hu (G. Tyukodi).

¹ Tel.: +36 1 482 5319.

of Budapest focused on innovative futures methods, on the renewal of futures studies methodology including foresight. The FSD applied the new methodology and new tools to research projects in the field of foresight. Four examples will be introduced here.

2.1. *Local foresight projects*

As the new millennium began, the FSD conducted two projects that sought to increase regional competitiveness in two Hungarian towns. One was a small village, Tuzsér, close to the Ukrainian border with Hungary, in one of the most underdeveloped parts of the country [2]. The other project was carried out for a regional center, Kiskunfélegyháza, a medium-size town in south-eastern Hungary, an area characterized by intensive agricultural activities [3]. The aim of these strategic foresight projects was to create a long-term sustainable strategy for the regions. In order to ensure success, a complex approach involving local stakeholders in a participatory collective decision-making process was applied in the projects.

In the case of Tuzsér, the Delphi method was chosen in order to collect the ideas and opinions of participants. More specifically, it was a Policy Delphi [4] that aimed at structuring and discussing diverse views of the preferred future that was applied. Three public Delphi rounds formed the basis of the process that gave the opportunity to participants, stakeholders (community leaders, members of municipalities, company representatives and ordinary citizens) to come up with a joint vision where they imagined the community would be in different time frames (from 5 up to 20 years). The goal of the first round was to address the key areas that the community should have focused on, the second round concentrated on the possible developments of the region and on identifying key actions of implementation. An important part of the process was to define the required time frame of the alternatives. The research targeted at making the vision more robust and ready to handle uncertainties, thus in the third round of the survey, scenarios were created as participants grouped the possible actions according to their priorities and time frame. The explanation of the alternative scenarios added a strong narrative element which helped participants to visualize and internalize the stories and discuss the advantages, disadvantages, plus the opportunities and threats of the scenarios (to read more about the narrative aspect of scenario-building see [5]). After the participants discussed the importance of the alternative scenarios, the first draft of the vision was adjusted with the new comments, and participants came up with major milestones and strategic actions required to implement the vision.

The second local foresight project in Kiskunfélegyháza was very similar; however, the different situation of the two towns required reorganizing the flow of the research. Similar to the previous case, the Kiskunfélegyháza project consisted of a three-round public Delphi process, but this time it focused on three critical areas in all three rounds, specifically to find:

- o the external forces that influence the societal-economic areas of the town;
- o the forces inherent in the local management; and
- o the civil communities' and citizens expectations for the future.

Based on the outcomes of the survey, alternative scenarios were created for the possible development of the community. Key areas were defined to which the stakeholders had to pay in order to implement the preferred scenario.

A new element in the projects was the participatory dimension as not only experts, but also stakeholders were involved in this process which offered interesting results. One of them was the realization of how the combination of different methods (in our cases public Delphi with a participatory approach and scenario building) can lead to a significantly better decision-making process and to a more complex foresight activity. The Delphi survey was suitable to collect all stakeholders' opinions and contrast the different views, while the scenario-building phase then offered a deeper insight into the Delphi results by "making the alternatives come alive".

Another important experience was finding out how to make people cope and work together in order to make common decisions. This was something they had not known in the earlier 40 years of the socialist era. People were not at all used to anything like interest articulation and representation. Some of them (especially ordinary citizens) had problems even identifying their very own interest. In Hungary, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are still weak. There are simply not many interest groups and only a few grass-roots movements that could help and make people practice both finding and articulating their interests. The main challenge of the projects was to apply these futures studies methods in these circumstances; in other words, to motivate people to participate then support them in identifying their individual interests, to accept the community's values and objectives and to come up with new ideas. Socialism established a special social defence system whereby people were not allowed to express their views and interests. As a result, it became the norm to undermine top-down decisions, not to follow the official expectations, thus to find one's own (secret) way of success. The system and the people in it were very individualistic. The challenge in the foresight project was to come up with not only the sum of the individualistic decisions, but rather to harmonize them, and to help the community to find its goals. The members of the community needed a path that they could walk together since in the long run it is certainly more effective for all participants to cooperate.

2.2. *National foresight projects*

The other two strategic foresight projects dealt with the long-term, 15 to 20-year-long, macro- development opportunities of Hungary. These projects focused on defining social trends that influence the long-term decision-making environment of the country in order to identify the key areas that could strengthen the role of the country within Central Eastern Europe. Various futures studies tools were applied to find the relevant forces and, based on the issues addressed, possible scenarios were built for 2025.

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