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Foresight for all: Co-elaborative scenario building and empowerment

Robin Bourgeois^{a,*}, Esther Penunia^b, Sonali Bisht^c, Don Boruk^d^a French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD), Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), c/o FAO-DDNG, Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00153 Rome, Italy^b Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA), Rm 206, Partnership Center, 59 c. Salvador St., Loyola Heights, Quezon City 1108, Philippines^c Institute of Himalayan Environmental Research and Education (INHERE), Masi Bazar-263 658, Dist. Almora, Uttarakhand, India^d Aliansi Petani Indonesia, East Nusa Tenggara Chapter, Boru, Flores, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

We present here a co-elaborative scenario building approach, called Participatory Prospective Analysis (PPA) and discuss its relevance for empowering local communities/organizations. This approach is adapted from the French “La Prospective”. It is used as an action research engaging local farming communities in expanding their understanding of their own futures. Three cases of local implementation at farmer community level in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines illustrate how this approach was implemented. They are part of a global project in the field of food, agriculture and rural development, aiming at balancing the capacity to use the future, which is currently not fairly distributed to the detriment of local stakeholders, organizations and communities. Our results focus on the emergence of futures literacy as a capability, its connection to local agency and societal transformation. Our discussion highlights what in this approach makes the use of scenarios empowering, beyond its participatory features. The capacity to use the future has a great potential for local agency, even if it does not guarantee that communities will have the power or the willingness to directly engage in actions. Nevertheless, this approach seems to be a promising avenue for making everyone a future-literate potential agent of change.

1. Introduction

In this article we present a co-elaborative scenario building approach, called Participatory Prospective Analysis (PPA), and discuss its contribution to empowering local actors at grassroots level as a response to the following research question: how can we make the use of the future an emancipatory process? This approach forms part of a grassroots foresight initiative undertaken through the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), which started at the second Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD2) organized by GFAR, where over 600 participants from agriculture-related sectors gathered to discuss future challenges for agricultural research (Holderness et al., 2013).

This research question is directly linked to the outcomes of GCARD2 where an inventory of Futures Studies on food, agriculture and rural development was prepared for, and reported during, its foresight sessions. The report showed that the capacity to use the future for shaping agricultural research and policy agendas, worldwide, regionally and nationally was not evenly distributed to the detriment of those who are the most affected by research and policies outputs, i.e. local

farmers and farmer organizations and communities (Bourgeois, 2012). With evidence of such an unbalanced situation, aware about the control those who can use the future have over political agendas, and convinced that the future can be used to better understand the present and open up avenues for actions (Blackman and Henderson, 2004; De Smedt et al., 2013; Slaughter, 2002; Wilkinson et al., 2014), farmers organizations at GCARD2 stood for their right to play a major role in determining their own future. They advocated for developing their own capacity to produce the knowledge required for exploring the future, to use that knowledge to engage in shaping the future the way they want it, to become pro-active, future-smart agents of change. They called for a grassroots foresight initiative supporting them in using the future as part of an empowerment process². Empowerment was considered at two connected levels: more pro-active grassroots organizations locally engaged in using the future to sense and make sense of the present, and more inclusive future-oriented global debates regarding agricultural research and rural development with pro-active contribution of farmer organizations.

The position adopted by these organizations reflected concerns about a situation that could potentially lead to policy and research

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: robin.bourgeois@cirad.fr (R. Bourgeois), estherpenunia@gmail.com (E. Penunia), sonalibisht@yahoo.co.in (S. Bisht), donborukdon@gmail.com (D. Boruk).¹ Present address: Centre for the Study of Governance Innovation (GovInn), Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, Hatfield Campus, South Africa.² See http://www.fao.org/docs/eims/upload/308765/Forward%20thinking-Forward%20acting_FINAL.pdf.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2017.04.018>

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agenda that would drive the future in directions that they did not wish for. Indeed, a substantial amount of knowledge from the literature of Futures Studies supports this concern. There is evidence that the capacity to engage in forward thinking, and turn the knowledge generated into actions, determines the future. De Jouvenel (2004), for example, considered that the particular view a dominant group in a nation has about the future, determines how the future of the nation unfolds. In their study on food scenarios van Dijk and Meijerink (2014) show that the scenarios are determined by the nature of the causal models. It has been argued that the global foresight work of the international community and advanced countries, in particular the UN Food and Agriculture Organization Outlooks (Alexandratos and Bruinsma, 2012), shapes the global research and development agenda (Grethe et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2013), affecting the lives of millions of people worldwide who are not in a situation to discuss its content (Jhirad et al., 2009).

From a theoretical point of view, the situation described in the inventory showing that Futures Studies on food, agriculture and rural development mainly focus on food security, rely on projections and quantitative analysis and are performed by institutions of advanced economies that are closely related with centers of global political influence such as the World Bank, FAO, G8 and G20, echoes with what some authors have called “mode 1 foresight” (Da Costa et al., 2003). In mode 1 foresight the use of the future supports the existing system through incremental improvement or optimization. In this mode Futures Studies are essentially conducted with a policy/decision making objectives. Futures Studies become an “implicit instrument of governance” whose purpose is more about reaching “*a consensus around certain pre-determined policy perceptions than the genuine search for alternatives*” (Ahlqvist and Rhisiart, 2015, p. 102). The persistent focus of most futures studies over the last 15 years on food security and productivity witnesses such pre-determined perceptions. The way the future is approached regarding food, agriculture and rural development can also be seen as a “model monopoly” with universal application. In a model monopoly, a group of initiated people understand the model and others have either to accept it or fight it (Ramos, 2010). This model monopoly can potentially create an “attractor state” in the sense that it could prevent from alternative future development paths to exist outside the pre-determined perceptions on which the future is explored (Derbyshire, 2016). It would then result in a lock-in situation as described by (Wilkinson et al., 2013), where in this case the future properties of the food, agriculture and rural development system become endogenously fixed.

The approach proposed here intended to respond to the legitimate concerns of GFAR constituencies, taking into consideration the practical implications of its conceptual formulation, and to prevent a situation where a model monopoly could potentially become the expression of “*specialised self-referential systems of thought veering into ideology*” (Ramos, 2010, p. 117).

The theoretical legitimization of the approach is that participatory action research grounded on integrative rather than integral futures has the capacity to balance the determinism of this “mode 1 foresight” with choice based on human agency and the responsibility to build the future we want (Derbyshire, 2016), inducing the emergence of a mode 2 foresight (Da Costa et al., 2003) where fundamental changes in the system can be discussed, promoted and implemented through the inclusion of new actors. It sought to impulse a bottom-up transition path that is empowerment dominated as identified by (De Haan and Rotmans, 2011), by introducing diversity as a means to disengage from such a potential lock-in situation that could keep the future of food, agriculture and rural development into a path dependent trajectory that will deprive most of the actors from the capacity to engage on shaping the future they want (Könnölä et al., 2007). In short, the intent is to move from a merely utilitarian dimension of Futures Studies to an emancipatory dimension (Ahlqvist and Rhisiart, 2015).

The initiative presented and discussed in this paper intends to

address the research question through an endeavor to develop local communities’ “futures literacy” as a capacity to sense and make sense of the present (Miller, 2015; Poli, 2015) through a learning-by-doing process. The methodology relies on participatory action research where local community organizations engage in, and use future thinking as producers of foreknowledge to reflect, and potentially act, on their own futures. The paper presents and discuss three cases. However, it does not intend to conduct a comparative study across the three cases as local-specific contexts would make generalization through comparison highly disputable. The heuristic dimension of the cases rests on the provision of practical experiences and understanding on how futures literacy can be built at grassroots level and eventually used for agency.

In Section 2 we first presents the research framework on which this approach was built, connecting the use of the future, scenario planning, empowerment, capability and action research. This framework serves then as a reference to characterize the main features of PPA and the research methodology.

Section 3 describes the research context and the implementation of the three cases in India, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In Section 4 we present evidence of the emergence of futures literacy as an empowerment process connected to local agency and societal transformation.

Section 5 focuses on what makes the use of the future empowering in the PPA approach. We discuss the contribution of co-elaborative scenario building to empowerment as a learning experience which enables local stakeholders to use the future to sense, and make sense of the present and open new opportunities.

2. Research framework: scenario planning, empowerment and action research

2.1. Connecting the future, scenarios, empowerment and action research

Special issues of major journals in the field of Futures Studies (including this Journal's 2010 special Issue on Strategic Foresight, its 2013 issue on Scenario methods and this Issue) and other dedicated articles have largely documented the use of scenarios. Scenarios in Futures Studies are amongst the most common and widely used methods (Popper, 2009). They are regularly acknowledged both as mental models and as methods permitting the exploration of the future (Ringland, 2010), supporting the posture of many futurists for whom using the future has two values, its content and its process (Mermet, 2009); the “what” and the “how” (Gertler and Wolfe, 2004). They contribute to using the future to both generate information and stimulate action (Bootz, 2010; De Smedt et al., 2013; Özkaynak and Rodríguez-Labajos, 2010).

Scenario planning has not only gained momentum in the literature (Varum and Melo, 2010), it has also been increasingly used in practice (Amer et al., 2013). There is also growing recognition about using scenarios not for predictive purposes (Amer et al., 2013; Burt and Wright, 2006; Curry and Schultz, 2009; Fortes et al., 2015; Harries, 2003; Inayatullah, 1998; Kok et al., 2006b; Neugarten, 2006; Pourezzat et al., 2008; Wodak and Neale, 2015), but as “*an aid to anticipation of the future under conditions of low predictability*” (Wright and Goodwin, 2009).

2.1.1. Diversity in scenario planning

Influential reviews of Futures Studies literature witness the diversity of concepts and practices related with scenario planning. Authors have developed typologies according to specific entry points or questions. van Notten et al. (2003) designed a scenario cartwheel representing a typology of scenarios built from three themes: project goal (why?), process design (how?) and scenario content (what?). Using a historical approach Bradfield et al. (2005) proposed a typology of scenario techniques referring to three different schools, the Intuitive Logics, the Probabilistic Modified Trends and *La Prospective*. After reviewing

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