



A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SCENARIOS

What Are Scenarios?

Scenarios draw from science and the imagination to provide a plausible account of alternative futures. In essence, scenarios are credible stories about how the future might unfold from existing patterns, new factors and alternative human choices. These stories are told in the language of both words and numbers. The narrative gives voice to important qualitative factors shaping development such as values, behaviors and institutions, providing a broader perspective than is possible from mathematical modeling alone, while quantification offers structure, discipline and rigor. Scenario analysis is a means to illuminate the vast range of possibilities in a structured way.

Scenarios have been used by businesses, governments, and advisory bodies for about 50 years. Some examples of how Scenarios have been used follow:

Georgia Basin Futures Project

The Georgia Basin region around Vancouver, British Columbia is using scenarios as a means to engage citizens in designing alternative futures for the Georgia Basin and exploring the environmental, social and economic consequences of these alternatives. The effort considers many dimensions of social change, including policy objectives and instruments, institutional reform, as well as public acceptance and feasibility. Workshops with project partners, other organizations, and citizens in the region are the primary forum for exploring these strategies. Through use of interactive modeling software participants evaluate the trade-offs and consequences involved in various policy and behavioural choices (e.g., related to transportation, housing, lifestyle, land use, government, industry) that can be made over the 40-year time horizon of the scenarios. In so doing they have the opportunity to change their preferences about those options, and see the consequences of such changes. For more information see: <http://www.basinfutures.net>.

South Africa's Mont Fleur Scenarios

In 1990, Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, and the ban on the African National Congress (ANC) and the other black and left-wing political parties was lifted. The Mont Fleur project took place during a complex period when many negotiations about how to make the transition from apartheid were taking place. There was a series of official constitutional negotiations and also hundreds of different “forums” where multi-stakeholder groups worked on issues of health, transport, education, economics, etc. The team came up with three scenarios: Ostrich, Lame Duck, Icarus, and Flight of the Flamingoes. For more information, go to http://www.arlingtoninstitute.org/future/Mont_Fleur.pdf.

UNEP: Global Environmental Outlook 3 (GEO-3)

The scenarios developed for GEO-3 have an environmental focus but recognize that the environment cannot be discussed without also considering what may be happening in the social and economic spheres. The scenarios therefore span eventualities in many overlapping areas, including population, economics, technology and governance. Moreover, though many issues are of global concern, some take on special relevance or sharper focus when viewed at a regional or smaller scale. The role of policy choices in shaping the future is highlighted in the scenarios wherever possible, although this influence can be hard to judge because other policies and independent developments may cloud the effects of any single policy. Four scenarios were developed: Markets First; Policy First; Security First; and Sustainability First. For more information, see <http://www.unep.org/geo/geo3/>

Global Scenarios Group

The Stockholm Environment Institute convened the Global Scenario Group in 1995, as an independent, international and interdisciplinary body to engage in a process of scenario development. GSG developed three different global scenario types: Conventional Worlds; Barbarization; and Great Transitions. These were further broken down into the types shown below.

Conventional Worlds

Continuity of institutions and values, rapid economic growth, convergence toward industrialized country norms

Market Forces

Mid-range population and development projections, typical technological change assumptions

Policy Reform

Strong, comprehensive and coordinated government action to achieve greater social equity and environmental protection

Barbarization

Social, economic and moral underpinnings of civilization deteriorate, as emerging problems overwhelm the coping capacity of both markets and policy reforms

Breakdown

Unbridled conflict, institutional disintegration, and economic collapse

Fortress World

Elites control an impoverished majority and manage critical natural resources, while outside the “fortress” there is repression, environmental destruction, and misery

Great Transitions

Visionary solutions to the sustainability challenge, including new socio-economic arrangements and fundamental changes in values

Eco-communalism

Bio-regionalism, localism, face-to-face democracy, small technology, and economic self-sufficiency

New Sustainability Paradigm

Seeks to change the character of urban, industrial civilization and to build a more just and sustainable world