

PREFERRED FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES 2112

AT SEMINAR 2 WE PRESENTED SKETCHES OF TWO SCENARIOS AND GOT SOME INITIAL REACTIONS AND THOUGHTS FROM PARTICIPANTS. HERE AT SEMINAR 3 WE PRESENTED THE SCENARIOS AGAIN AND MADE THEM THE OBJECT OF GROUP AND PLENUM DISCUSSIONS.

By Søren Steen Olsen and Steen Svendsen, futurists and partners House of Futures

In the afternoon session participants were asked to discuss, what they thought of the two outlined scenarios, and secondly if they had ideas for a new and third scenario. They were given the opportunity to discuss these questions in pairs as they walked the 15 minutes distance from the tipi where lunch was served by an open fire, and back to the lecture hall. Here, they were let loose to give their impressions, which they duly did, in a constructive, critical, thoughtful and idea-rich manner.

This input is extremely helpful to the House of Futures team and the further development and qualification of the scenarios. Below, we have summarised some of the main themes and comments.

META: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE SCENARIOS?

Not all participants are used to working with the scenario tool so commonly applied by futurists and there was a certain uncertainty as to what the purpose is. This is a meta-discussion which is highly relevant and reasonable. The answer is they are intended to represent different ways of achieving sustainability, including giving different stories and understandings of what sustainability actually means.

Thus, they are a means of conceptually reducing the vast complexity of looking 100 years ahead, while still leaving room for different views and approaches to the discussion. Also, they would provide useful sketches of visions for the 100 year future – in the sense that if we have a positive vision of the future, we can start planning and working towards them in a systematic way, thus considering our present actions in the light of the preferred in a fruitful and constructive way. “In 100 years – starting now!”, as the by line of the project goes.

A line of comments touching on this meta-theme came actually from one of the futurists present. He questioned whether the two scenario sketches are really scenarios at all, given that they are not really descriptions of a future 100 years from now. This is true, and is one reason

that we call them sketches. They describe two different mindsets rather than two different futures.

WE NEED BOTH!

Perhaps as a consequence of the mindset-oriented approach, the scenarios weren't perceived by all participants as being mutually exclusive. On the contrary, some saw the “Man-Made World” mindset as a necessary consequence of the equally necessary “Power of Nature” mindset. This was based on an understanding that humans are part of nature and that we need to realise this before we can face up to our responsibilities – and the formulation becomes, as one participant put it: “We have to know who we are, before we can decide what to do”. The implication is, roughly, that the “Power of Nature” scenario would be the one defining our thinking, while “Man-Made World” is defining our actions. Based on these assumptions we are getting closer to the one preferred future for sustainable societies.

ESSENCE: ARE WE PART OF NATURE?

The above mentioned line of discussion was interwoven with an even more fundamental and/or philosophical one concerning the relationship between man and nature. The emphasis in the “Power of Nature” scenario on humans as one with nature – and their assumed deep realisation of this – sparked a debate on how to perceive this relationship.

Are we nature, and if so, how can we consciously re-define our relationship with nature/ourselves? Comments like “We are nature reflecting on itself” and “Our consciousness is founded on an ability to dialyse – to perceive ourselves as entities distinct from the world around us. Small children cannot do that”.

Some participants reflected on the power of nature to quickly take over abandoned human structures, like buildings. Others pointed out that even these human buildings must be considered part of nature, given that humans are part of nature. It's a debate that touches on fundamental concepts and perceptions with aspects of philosophy, identity, anthropology, and even spirituality and religiosity.

Given the scope of the scenarios and, indeed, the project 'In 100 Years', it is not surprising that this discussion comes up. Whether it can be resolved is another matter, but it reminds us of the importance of these dimensions when we are working with sustainability and growth in a 100 years' time frame. To some extent this is what the project is about – opening up the well-established and institu-

tionalised agenda on sustainability and moving the issue beyond environment vs. growth; optimism vs. pessimism; alarmism vs. complacency.

WHERE ARE THE SPECIFIC STEPS TO SUSTAINABILITY?

Coming from the other end of the spectrum from philosophical debates, some comments drew attention to the lack of specifics of the scenarios. Sustainability as an end goal is all very well, but we need to think through how to get there, and to grapple with the massive barriers that any effective steps and policies will run up against. For instance, reducing or eliminating emissions of GHG will require radical changes to our pattern of production and consumption. Is it even feasible in practice to reduce car traffic in modern society? Is it feasible to reduce our consumption of meat in favour of a more ecologically sustainable diet? Will we, for example, be able to devise, adopt and implement tax regimes that promote such behaviour? Some participants felt that such issues are immediately pressing and seem to demand more attention than the scenarios are giving them. One response to this would be that the two sketches are aimed at the underlying question of which type of mindset that might facilitate and drive the effective addressing of such issues.

WHAT ABOUT THE NOT-PREFERRED FUTURES?

Positive visions and preferred futures may be important, but some participants saw a need for stressing the consequences of not taking action, or not succeeding in actions taken in order to achieve sustainability. “Business as usual is not an option” as one buzzword goes. But what if we fail to change our business as usual ways? “We don’t want 90% to die”, as one participant put it.

The House of Futures team recognise the need for this perspective and will draw the contours of a baseline scenario in order to demonstrate the need for transformation. IPAT and IPCC scenarios lend themselves easily to this objective.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THIRD SCENARIOS

Participants had a number of ideas for additional or

alternative scenarios to supplement the two that were put forward. At least the following came up:

- “Redesign man” – Given prospective developments in genetic engineering, biomimicry, materials technology, medicine etc. it is eminently conceivable that we in the course of the next 100 years will be able to improve and enhance the human body. This could be done in general, but also conceivably in a conscious effort to adapt humans to any changed and/or unfavourable conditions in our environment. Just to suggest the scope of imagination: We could produce human bodies without lungs that don’t depend on breathing oxygen.
- “Ants” – Ants is a highly successful species which inhabits almost every part of Earth and on some estimation have a combined body mass exceeding that of humans. This has been achieved without upsetting any ecological balance the way humans are doing it. So, how about a scenario in which we learn from ants?
- “The uncivilised world” or “nature for nature’s sake” – scenario title that came up as alternatives to “Power of Nature”. The idea is to have one scenario take nature’s perspective instead of having an exclusively anthropocentric view of the future
- “More time” – it was put forward that if you ask children what they wish for, most will tell you that they want more time with their family. Not Play stations or other material gadgets – more time together. This point to the notion that we should aim at channelling our pursuit of material things which impacts negatively on environment and sustainability into other pursuits that are ultimately more meaningful to humans. Human relationships, music, the arts, communication, etc.

Obviously the scenario sketches are far from being final scenarios. But they are a beginning, and this session gave us a lot of inputs and inspiration for their further development. We are very grateful for all the excellent contributions that we received. There is a lot to work with as we are approaching the conclusion of the project.

CAVEAT/DISCLAIMER ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF SCENARIOS

Sketching out a baseline scenario for sustainability and growth for the next 100 years is virtually a fool’s errand. It is scarcely possible to make any plausible straight extrapolations from historic trends a hundred years into the future. To see this, one needs only look back 100 years and try to find the historic trends that would extrapolate in any direct fashion from 1911 to now. And if that seems difficult even with the benefit of hindsight, try imagining people in 1911 attempting to predict a century of so much change and turmoil as the one we got.

Depending on your perspective today, the world of 1911 looks stagnant and boring, or poor, cruel and dangerous – or maybe pure, harmonious and innocent. It is definitely very foreign to the world we live in now – yet it undeniably contained the seeds of the present. In the same way the present contains the seeds of the future, but it’s very unlikely to unfold in any straightforward way. That is why we need scenarios to get a better feeling of the enormous range of possible futures in the next 100 years, including how we might try to shape the future and create the ones we prefer. Read more about how House of Futures work with sustainable societies in the long run at www.in100y.dk