



## 'Branching scenarios' seeking articulated action for regional regeneration – A case study of limited success



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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 25 January 2017

#### Keywords:

Scenario method  
Delphi analysis  
'Branching scenarios'  
Regional regeneration  
Fragmentation  
Lock-in  
Stakeholder engagement

### ABSTRACT

In this article, we outline and discuss a novel augmentation of scenario method combined with Delphi analysis to engage multiple actors in analyzing complex and contested problems. In particular, we present 'branching scenarios' as an approach that breaks potential chains of perceived causality from the national/global level to drive local outcomes. The approach focuses on generating debate on local agency. The project discussed formed part of a larger research program in North West Tasmania to study the possible processes for economic and social regeneration. In engaging key stakeholders from public, private and non-governmental organizations, the team faced issues associated with participants' geographical dispersal and lack of time. In addition, the region may be considered as characterized by 'lock-in' to extant structures and, perhaps, resistant to the change necessary to achieve economic regeneration. For these reasons, our scenario intervention was deliberately designed to provide a cognitive 'jolt' to these senior, time-poor individuals – seeking to prompt their articulated action to achieve the jointly-held goal, regeneration. We document our approach and evaluate and analyze the degree to which we achieved this jointly-desired outcome. We present a new conceptual framework for broad social inquiry that will promote deep stakeholder engagement.

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### 1. Introduction

In this article, we outline and discuss a novel augmentation of scenario method combined with Delphi analysis to engage multiple stakeholders in addressing the challenge of how to prompt and promote regeneration in a region of socio-political fragmentation and socio-economic disadvantage. The project discussed formed part of a larger Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded program to explore the potential role of unions in supporting economic regeneration in North West Tasmania. The region has been characterized in the recent past as one of low participation in education, rising unemployment and community fragmentation (ABC News, 2014; Walker and Fairbrother, 2015). The research aimed to engage senior decision makers from across the region and from across organizations – both public and private sectors as well as unions – in a structured debate of possible regional futures and potential responses. However, the engagement process was hindered both by issues of geographical distance and lack of time as well as by differences in viewpoints among key stakeholders.

The formal governance arrangements for the North West Tasmania region comprise; nine local government areas (LGAs), Tasmanian State agencies, Commonwealth agencies, as well as a local government economic development agency covering the nine LGAs (Cradle Coast Authority, hereafter, CCA). CCA's programmes are supported by funding from the Tasmania Government's Partnerships Agreement Program and the Commonwealth Government's Sustainable Regions Program (McDonald et al., 2013). The region has been subject to ongoing debate about its future, particularly during the 2000s (Tasmania, 2002).

The subject of the effectiveness or otherwise of scenario methods in prompting action in the sphere of public policy development has been subject to debate over recent years (cf. Bowman et al., 2013; Bryant and Lempert, 2010; Cairns et al., 2013; Hughes, 2013; Nieto-Romero et al., 2016; Rickards et al., 2014a, 2014b; Volkery and Ribeiro, 2009), in particular when dealing with time-poor senior decision makers (Cairns et al., 2016; Pincombe et al., 2013). The question of the effectiveness of scenario methods as a means of engagement must be placed in the broader context of debate about both opportunities for leaders to facilitate interaction (Storper, 2013) and problems associated with inter-organizational collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2003, 2012; Vangen et al., 2015). In this project, we sought to engage senior decision makers from a broad range of organizations in a geographically dispersed and fragmented region (see Map 1) – with variable transport networks,

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Map 1. North West Tasmania region in context.

diverse political and organizational perspectives, and with evidence of four distinct economic zones (DIER, 2013).

The first aim of the overall research program was to determine whether there was some shared understanding of the critical issues facing the region (cf. Allison et al., 2013; Skills Tasmania, 2008; Stratford, 2006) on which to build so that a common basis for seeking regeneration could be identified and nurtured. The second aim was to question whether or not current barriers to collaboration were grounded in 'lock-in' (Grabher, 1993; Hassink, 2010a, 2017) and, if so, could these be broken down. Broadly, lock-in refers to how a "combination of historical contingency and the emergence of self-reinforcing effects steers a technology, industry, or regional economy along one 'path', rather than another" (Martin, 2010, p. 3). Three forms of lock-in have been

identified: *Functional* where close ties between businesses foster relationships that fulfill 'functional specialities' rather than firms developing their own capabilities; *Cognitive* where a common mind-set exists that might "confuse secular trends with cyclical downturns" (Hassink, 2010b, p. 193); and *political* where cooperative and symbiotic relationships between networks of organizations; such as trade unions, business and government; and patterns of behaviour can obstruct industrial reorganization and political innovation (Grabher, 1993). Extending the analysis, Hassink (2010a) argues that even after deindustrialization, lock-in can remain because social and political milieus change more slowly than industries, and that the strength of lock-in thus impacts on industrial regeneration (see also Hudson, 2005). Here, we were particularly interested in; i) whether critical issues facing the

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