



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Futures

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/futures](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/futures)

# The co-creation of regional futures: Facilitating action research in regional foresight



Ulla Higdem\*

Lillehammer University College, Department of Economy and Organizational Science, Centre of Innovation in Services, Norway

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 18 January 2014

### Keywords:

Regional foresight  
Action research  
Co-creation  
Regional strategy-making

## ABSTRACT

This article presents the interconnected phases of a regional-foresight process in an AR perspective within the context of a complex regional dynamic of actors with distinct local and regional political presences. The analysis is based on a Norwegian case of AR on regional foresight. The article reflects upon and develops the concept of action research (AR) as it relates to regional-foresight practices in connection with regional planning strategies (policies), according to Norway's new Planning and Building Act (PBA, 2008). Both AR and regional foresight are broad terms within a number of domains, and several contributions have sought to show how these are interlinked Ramos (2006). The focus is on how AR and action researchers both contribute to the co-creation of regional and sub-regional formulation of planning by regional-foresight processes, which are driven by decision-making regional bodies. This article contributes to the understanding of how an AR strategy of 'strategic facilitation' may improve the overall foresight capacity of all regional actors, both in concert and as single stakeholders. Also it furthers the understanding of how an AR approach may assist in transforming the foresight practices and the strategic decision-making into a more transparent process.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1960s and 70s collaboration with local communities emerged as important to planning practices. Since then such collaborative efforts have developed into several strands: planning in action, such as collaboration in planning, the planner's role, communicative planning, and planning to enhance local and regional capacity and capability.

In similar ways as this approach to planning, action research (AR) is concerned with the collaboration between various stakeholders as a way of solving problems. Indeed, strong similarities are evident between AR and foresights [1–5]. There are also similarities between AR and the planning literature that argues for societal democratic, deliberative, and participative approaches to creating knowledge about possible futures, for establishing views and decisions on long-term visions, and for outlining strategies for collective action [6–11]. Despite these similarities in the academic literature, however, there has been little emphasis on the practice of AR in planning.

This article shows how AR may contribute to and facilitate the co-creation of regional and sub-regional formulation of planning. The instrument is in this case a process of regional foresight applied to regional planning strategies, which includes the opportunity to discuss regional and sub-regional policies for future development.

\* Tel.: +47 48245688; fax: +47 61260750.

E-mail address: [ulla.higdem@hil.no](mailto:ulla.higdem@hil.no)

## 2. Regional foresight for strategy development

The methodology of foresight is often defined as ‘a systematic, participatory, future intelligence gathering and medium-to-long-term vision-building process aimed at present-day decisions and mobilizing joint actions’ [12,13]. Regional foresight is the application of foresight methodology to territorially defined contexts. It can also be used for the development of shared goals and visions among different groups of participating actors because this process guides and coordinates individual actors’ choices and develops networks [14]. Foresight strategies have over the years developed from ‘traditional’ expert-driven foresights and into more participatory and communicative-based methods, like the Regional Development Platform Method (RDPM) [4] and Anticipatory action learning/action research [5,57]. Further, the critique raised against the communicative and deliberative methods points to the ‘impressionistic nature’ of such foresight exercises, and this runs the risk of its not being rooted in a scientific basis [15]. Another challenge of foresight processes is the problem of failing legitimacy due to loose, haphazard connections between the foresight activity itself and the actual decision-making [16]. This creates a knowledge gap between researchers and the strategic policy-makers, which Uotila et al. [16, p. 853], referring to Sotarauta et al. from 2002, call ‘the black hole of regional strategy-making’. These critiques on aspects of (regional) foresight stem mainly from the foresight disciplines of technology, economic development or innovation, and their combinations.

Regional foresight in the sense of foresight methods applied to a territorially defined context, however, may denote regional development in the broader sense of the word so that it encompasses economic, cultural, social, and environmental development. Regional, territorial-based development is a vital part of European thinking and the focus of strategy-making and planning [9,17–20]. Regions are seen as the site of economic development [21] and are therefore also vital contributors for the creation of public welfare for a region’s inhabitants. The regional focus of development is evident also in the Nordic and Norwegian contexts [22–24]. In the latter, the county councils are in charge of the process of developing regional planning strategies [25]. They are also given the task of creating and facilitating regional networks for strategic development, planning, and the enhancement of regional capacity and capability. With the new Planning and Building Act (PBA) [25], the county-municipalities (CMs) have strengthened their role as *coordinators* of public authorities on a different level, and have become responsible for formulating Regional Planning Strategies in close cooperation with such designated partners as the local municipalities, the regional state bodies, and private interests. Thus, the CMs represent the most important public authorities for enhancing regional development, and their main instrument in this regard is regional planning.

Accordingly, some researchers have regarded foresight as an input for regional strategy-making in a regional-political context [13]. As Durand (2006) puts it, (...) *foresight is about describing the variety of potential futures in order to allow stakeholders to prepare for this variety and to contribute to shaping the outcomes in the direction they wish. In this sense, foresight is an input for strategy. Foresight thus lies at the heart of strategic management*’ [26, p. 130].

In a framework of working out regional development strategies, the regional foresight is set within a complex, multi-level structure of governance with several types of actors, both private and public [19,27–29].

When regional foresight is put into use for regional strategic purposes in a Scandinavian context, in this case, Norway, it takes place within an institutional framework which should provide the following conditions. First, there should be a strong linkage between those who engage in foresight practices and the regional political decision-making body. In this way one should expect a high degree of legitimacy. Secondly, the regional setting of many local and sub-regional decision-making bodies, which have stakes in and influence on regional strategy-development in collaboration with other public bodies and private-sector actors, encourages the insistence that the regional foresight process remains inclusive and democratic. Finally, when the participating research team in this process also co-produces, they act as action researchers and are thus also responsible for the result. This article contributes to the discussion on how an AR approach to regional foresight, which must face up to the challenges of democracy and legitimacy, may be practised through several interconnected stages and how action researchers may contribute to the process.

The article is based on empirical case in which AR has been applied. This offers illustrative examples relevant to both planning and foresight perspectives. This case study is a process of regional foresight conducted by the CM of Hedmark in Norway (as part of the formulation of the regional planning strategy). The author has been participating as a facilitator of the process in cooperation with the CM while at the same time assuming the role of action researcher [5,30–32], with the objectives of learning and analysing from the process. The empirical basis comprises all documents connected to the Regional Foresight of Hedmark, documentation from workshops, newspaper articles, contributions in the newspapers submitted by participants in the foresight process and others, and Hedmark CM’s website. The notes from this researcher’s log are also included, which were written both before and during workshop period. My research partners and I have also incorporated the practitioners’ reflections as they related to both the process and the results [33].

## 3. Action research and regional foresight

Regional foresight contributes to regional development strategies by offering a systematic method for choosing the appropriate tools for analysing and establishing strategic and action-oriented strategies in cooperation with the involved actors [34]. Through foresight processes one may discover common grounds of open thinking on possible futures on which the development of strategic approaches can flourish. Strategies may be made either to enhance a desired future or to take actions to prevent possible non-desirable futures. At the very least regional foresight should inform current actions and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7424537>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7424537>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)