



Towards improving the relevance of scenarios for public policy questions: A proposed methodological framework for policy relevant low carbon scenarios

Nick Hughes*

Imperial College Centre for Energy Policy and Technology, Faculty of Natural Sciences, London SW7 2AZ, United Kingdom



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 December 2011

Received in revised form 21 May 2012

Accepted 18 July 2012

Available online 27 August 2012

Keywords:

Scenario

Public policy

Low carbon

Actors

ABSTRACT

A previous review of the use of scenarios in public policy found that the evidence for their impact on policy making was limited. One of the reasons suggested for this lack of policy impact was the disconnection between the time scales explored in long range scenarios, and those typical of the perspective of the policy maker. This paper argues that scenarios can have a valuable role in connecting long term policy goals to their implications for near term decisions. Key to the effectiveness of public policy scenarios in this regard is an actor-based view of the system, which connects long term pathways to the implications of near-term actor decisions. The paper focusses on developing a methodological framework for low carbon scenarios. Reviewing scenario literature, it identifies 'trend based', 'actor based' and 'technical feasibility' scenario approaches, and argues that the insights derived from each of these modes of analysis is important to consider in low carbon scenarios. Moreover, the iteration between these levels as the scenario moves through time is equally important. The paper therefore proposes a 3 level methodological framework as a basis for constructing low carbon scenarios with high policy tractability.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Scenario techniques have been widely applied in business and military contexts, where they have been demonstrated to be, and are now broadly recognised as, legitimate and useful techniques [1–5]. Scenarios have also been used to support the consideration of questions of public policy, for example as part of the national planning in France during the 1960s [6,7] and during the transitional process of nation building undertaken in South Africa in the early 1990s [8]. However, aside from such notable examples, and despite the fact that national governments and other political organisations still maintain scenario or futures planning activities [9,10] the evidence of scenarios having a seriously influential role in policy processes is harder to come by. A recent review of the use of scenarios in public policy by Volkery and Ribeiro found that the evidence for their impact on policy making was limited [11].

This paper picks up from the conclusions of the Volkery and Ribeiro review to ask whether scenarios could legitimately be given a more prominent role in public policy making, and if so what benefits could arise from this. Drawing on the evidence from Volkery and Ribeiro's review, as well as from the broader scenario literature, it explores which combinations of established scenario methodologies could help to make the scenario product more tractable and useful for policy makers. To provide focus to the discussion the paper proposes a methodological framework intended to support the development of policy relevant scenarios within one particular area of long term public policy, that of the transition to a low carbon economy. The application of this

* Tel.: +44 20 7594 9306; fax: +44 20 7594 9334.

E-mail address: n.hughes10@imperial.ac.uk.

framework with the aim of developing policy relevant low carbon scenarios for the UK, will be the subject of future work by the current author.

Section 2 summarises the conclusions of the Volkery and Ribeiro [11] review and thereby identifies key challenges for scenarios if they are to become more tractable and relevant to the public policy making process. Section 3 refers to the scenarios literature to identify possible aims for scenario processes in public policy making. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the challenge of the low carbon transition and in what ways scenarios might be able to assist policy making in this area. Section 6 identifies aspects of previous scenario approaches which may be useful to low carbon scenario building, and Section 7 translates these into a methodological framework for producing low carbon scenarios with high policy tractability. Section 8 summarises the conclusions of this paper.

2. Scenarios in public policy – current status and issues

Volkery and Ribeiro [11] discuss a review of the use of scenarios in public policy, and their impacts on the policy making process. They find that scenarios are more often used in the early phases of the policy cycle, for ‘indirect forms of decision support’ such as ‘awareness-raising’ and ‘issue-framing’, but that more progress needs to be made with incorporating scenario planning into ‘processes of policy design, choice and implementation’. Reasons for this failure of scenarios to impact upon the hard end of policy making may be that ‘the heterogeneous nature of objectives and interests faced by governments makes it difficult to establish a key-client, frame the purpose and gain the participation of all relevant participants’. In addition, ‘policy-makers and strategists often have not only different time horizons than scenario planners, but also very different attention foci’. This can lead to ‘a mutual confusion about information needs, expectations and capacities’, and can mean that ‘the role and purpose [of scenarios] within the decision-making process is not always clear’. Ultimately, for the authors, ‘having an impact on the design and choice of policies remains a litmus test for the relevance of scenario planning’.

In summary, Volkery and Ribeiro argue that scenario planning techniques should have a role in informing policy design, choices, and implementation, as well earlier scoping phases of the policy cycle. However, they are currently not fulfilling this potential in part due to conflicts of perspective between scenario planners and policy makers. Policy makers have a number of competing issues which they must simultaneously manage, and naturally tend to focus on shorter time horizons and nearer term issues. Scenarios on the other hand, have a natural focus on longer term futures, which can be hard to connect with implications for day to day decision making. This mismatch appears to result in confusion about the very role and purpose of scenarios.

In responding to these concerns, this paper aims to clarify the possible aims of scenario processes and how these could relate to public policy making. Through considering the particular example of the low carbon transition, it further aims to show how scenarios could be a crucial tool in relating issues of long term concern to near term policy decisions, thus clarifying the role of long term scenario thinking in policy choice and implementation.

3. The aims of scenarios – protective, proactive, consensus building

The aims of scenario thinking are often summarised as being both protective and entrepreneurial – that is, scanning the future for both threats and opportunities [1,2,12]. Different scenario exercises will strike a different balance between these two objectives, with perhaps the most important factor affecting this balance being the agency of the scenario user in the context of the system being studied. Actors with low levels of agency to affect and influence the external system in which they find themselves, will primarily use scenarios as protective tools. Actors with greater agency in respect of the system in which they operate, may find more proactive or entrepreneurial uses for scenarios. De Jouvenel [7] thus writes that for any actor, the future can be divided into ‘dominating’ elements, which cannot be controlled by that actor but only reacted to, and ‘masterable’ elements over which the actor in question has some agency to exert influence.

Typically, scenarios conducted by businesses will find themselves more frequently in a protective mode – searching for external threats and planning accordingly. The classic example of such a use of scenarios is provided by the series of scenario exercises conducted by Shell during the 1970s [4,5]. By contrast, public policy scenarios, for which the implicit ‘scenario user’ is often the policy making body of a nation state itself, an actor with greater agency within the system, more elements of the future may be considered potentially ‘masterable’, hence the scenarios may operate more frequently in a proactive mode. A classic example of this approach is the Prospective school of scenario building, developed in the late 1950s in academic institutions in France but with an explicit intention to link to policy making processes, such as the five year French National Plans [13]. The language of La Prospective is clearly about proactively forming the future, as an alternative and preferable strategy to passively allowing the future to take shape. Thus, ‘it is not so much about divining the future as constructing it, not so much about foreseeing a probable future as preparing one that is hoped for. It amounts to making desirable ends a powerful enough lever to act on the present’ [6].

However, in many public policy situations, the model of the policy making executive as a highly powerful actor able to turn policy options on and off in line with centrally devised plans, would appear too simplistic. Governments may have options to take high impact policy decisions, but they are also subject to pressures, from public and media opinion which can have decisive effects through electoral cycles, and from industry lobbying. Thus in reality a policy process is often less about a simple proactive forcing of a strategy by one actor (the policy maker), and more about co-ordination and alignment of activities and viewpoints of multiple actors. In this context too scenarios can be used to illustrate the potential outcomes of different combinations of activities and alignments of multiple actors. A key example of this approach is the Mont Fleur scenarios process which occurred in South Africa

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/896720>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/896720>

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