

Scenario Timeline

Eliciting possible paths through a scenario*

All scenarios include a vision of the future, either arrived at by extrapolating from the present (a forecasting activity) or by envisioning a desired or feared possible future (a backcasting activity). It is equally important to consider the path between the present and the future. Developing a scenario timeline encourages thinking about the dynamic aspects of the system, the interrelation between different actors and their responses to events, and helps to assess the plausibility of different future visions. For policy scenarios, it also provides insight into possible external shocks, sources of resistance, and critical intervention points.

The Activity

The Scenario Timeline activity is to be carried out during a workshop. The work is mostly carried out in breakout groups. At the end of the exercise, each group should have produced a timeline for a particular issue with key events and actions by scenario actors.

Before this activity is carried out, workshop participants should already have determined key features of the scenario analysis: time and thematic boundaries, a list of key issues, and a list of actors.

Materials

Each participant should have:

- Paper and pen

Each breakout group should have:

- Large sheet of paper (such as from a flip-chart)
- Water-based markers
- Pads of sticky notes

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Procedure

Before breaking into groups, the facilitator should introduce the activity. Following the introduction, the following steps should be carried out in plenary:

1. Determine the issue to be discussed within each breakout group. (It may be appropriate to assign the same issue to each group, then compare the outcomes in plenary.)
2. Determine the actors whose actions should be tracked over time.
3. Discuss the worldview of each actor. It is important to the success of the exercise that the responses of actors approximate how they might respond in an actual situation. To help with this step, consider reading through Table 1 for a list of environmental worldviews that have been identified in the literature.
4. Specify the time boundaries of the exercise (the starting and ending year, intermediate reporting years).
4. Brainstorm events across the entire scenario. For example, these could be written on sticky notes and placed on a large sheet of paper with the time boundaries marked on it. These events:
 - Should be external to the social/ecological system being studied (e.g., the nation, watershed, etc.).
 - Can occur in any year, not just in “reporting years”. (For example, in Illustration 1, events could be posted for 2005 or 2017.)
 - Can be environmental, economic, or social in nature (e.g., a new trading regime, a fall in the price of a commodity, an unusually dry monsoon season).
5. Discuss and cull the list of events brainstormed by the group, and decide on a list of 2-5 events that will shape each of the timelines.

Within each group, participants should:

1. Label the large paper with their issue.
2. Draw a line at the top of the large paper, with years.
3. Label separate timelines for: *Events*, *System Changes* and each actor. (See Illustration 1 for an example.)
4. Assign actors to group members. (Depending on the number of actors and group members, some actors may be represented by more than one member, or one member may need to represent more than one actor.)
5. For each event, the group should:

- a) Brainstorm changes to the social/ecological system that result from the event, taking into account any changes that have happened so far in the timeline. (e.g., loss of topsoil from an unusually severe storm), then decide on 1-2 changes.
- b) Determine how actors will respond. This is set by the actors' representatives in the group.
- c) Brainstorm how the system changes due to actors' responses, then decide on 2-3 changes. In deciding on the changes, the relative influence of different actors should be taken into account.

Increasing frequency of El Nino events			
	2000	2015	2030
Events			
System changes			
Government			
Urban pop.			
Upland/ shifting cult.			
Small farmers			
Large farmers			
IMF			
NGOs			

Illustration 1. Sample timeline

At the end of this process, each group should have a timeline outlining the evolution of the system under the impact of different external events, with some details about the responses of key actors.

Wrap-Up

After the breakout groups have completed their work, they should report in plenary. The facilitator may simply ask groups to report or, if there are points of comparison, he or she could ask participants to discuss the differences and similarities between different groups. This activity can also be used as a lead-in to a broader discussion, for example on the prospects for sustainable development or possible responses to a new policy.

Table 1. Four Environmental Worldviews

Defining Characteristics	Worldviews			
	Class	Managerial	Individualist/Cultural	Individualist/ Market
Level of Analysis	Societal	Organizational	Individual	Individual
Key dimension of society	Economic/Class	Political/Power	Behavioral/Cultural	Behavioral/Cultural
View of problem	Accumulation, class exploitation and over-consumption	Policy inadequacy	Lack of knowledge and wayward culture	Constraints on economic initiative
Proposed solutions	Activism and mass mobilization, restructuring of north-south relations	Diplomacy, regime building, policy adjustment, regulation and management, economic manipulations, technological applications	Education and cultural transformation	Removal of economic constraints
Key agents of change	Countries of the south, grassroots organizations, NGOs	Government representatives and experts	Knowing and enlightened individuals	Freed and enlightened enterprises
View of Sustainable Development	Tendency toward opposition*	Support	Tendency toward opposition [†]	Tendency toward opposition [‡]

Source: From William D. Sunderlin. 2003. *Ideology, Social Theory, and the Environment*, Table 3.1. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

* “Many (but by no means all) proponents of the class paradigm object to ‘sustainable development,’ the most common formulation of policy efforts to confront social and environmental problems. Proponents who object to sustainable development say the concept is not (as claimed) an effort to address the short-comings of the development project in countries of the South, but rather a thinly disguised attempt by countries of the North to extend their control over the earth’s natural resources and thus maintain global hegemony, economic growth, and overconsumptive lifestyles.” (Sunderlin, 2003)

[†] “The deep ecology movement is the vanguard of the cultural tradition...Advocates of deep ecology adamantly oppose modern, Western, technocratic culture and favor a return to traditional, even ancient values and norms. The two key norms of deep ecology involve (1) striving for self-realization through transcending the Western tradition of hedonistic ego ratification and (2) a commitment to biocentrism – the belief that ‘all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization.’” (Sunderlin, 2003)

[‡] “Advocates of the free market tradition tend to oppose the concept of sustainable development, associating it with heavy-handed government interference in markets and with the whims of power-hungry bureaucrats.” (Sunderlin, 2003)