

Civic Scenarios as a Tool for Making History

By Adam Kahane, Generon Consulting

"We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed, then we decided."
From the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Q'iche people of Guatemala

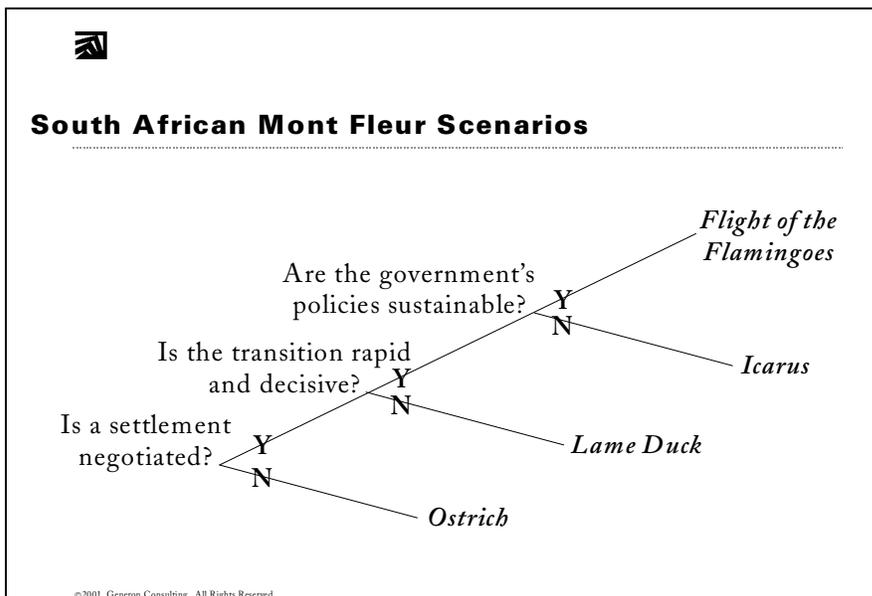
"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Generon Consulting has been developing the use of scenario thinking as a tool for effecting societal change. In a civic scenario project, a group of influential leaders, drawn from a broad range of sectors and organizations, works together to understand what is happening, might happen, and should happen in their city, region, or country. They then act in concert on that shared understanding and vision. This note summarizes Generon's experience with this work to date, the process we have developed, and the kinds of results it has produced.

Experience to date

We first used scenarios as a tool for societal problem defining and problem solving when we led the South African "Mont Fleur" project in 1991.¹ During the tumultuous transition away from



apartheid, this project brought together 22 prominent people from across South African society, including community activists, conservative politicians, African National Congress officials, trade unionists, academics, establishment economists, and corporate executives. Their objective was

¹ See Pieter le Roux *et al*, "The Mont Fleur Scenarios", *The Weekly Mail and Guardian*, July 1992 and <<http://www.gbn.org/scenarios/fleur/fleurIntro.html>>.

to develop a set of alternative stories about South Africa's future, in order to provoke debate and propel forward movement in the country.

The "Ostrich" scenario pointed out the risk and futility of the white government's trying to prevent or avoid a negotiated settlement with the black majority. A second scenario, "Lame Duck," envisioned a prolonged transition with a constitutionally weakened government. Because the government "purports to respond to all, but satisfies none," investors hold back, and growth and development languish amidst a mood of long, slow uncertainty. This was an important scenario because, in 1991, the majority political parties were negotiating a coalition government. The Lame Duck scenario allowed people to see potential dangers in certain ways of organizing the coalition and how these could be mitigated.

Another scenario, "Icarus," suggested that a black government could come to power on a wave of public support, embark on a huge, unsustainable public spending program, and consequently crash the economy. This was the first time that a team including prominent left-wing economists had discussed the possibility of a new government trying to do too much. Finally, the "Flight of the Flamingoes" scenario outlined the broad parameters of a positive and successful transition: everyone in the society rises slowly and steadily together. Overall this project contributed to the building of a common language for talking across groups about the opportunities and challenges facing the country, and hence about a way forward.

Since Mont Fleur, Generon has developed and extended this process in many settings. We have led major civic scenario projects in Canada, Colombia, the United States, and Guatemala, and smaller ones in Cyprus, Northern Ireland, and Japan.² Other people have led similar projects in Indonesia, Kenya, India, Burundi, Sweden, and Finland, in many cases with explicit reference to Mont Fleur.³ The United Nations Development Program is now a major supporter of both project and research work on these civic scenario and other dialogue efforts, especially in Latin America.⁴ Generon has also borrowed from Mont Fleur in consulting to tens of corporate, governmental, and non-governmental clients in North America, Europe, and Southern Africa.⁵

Our civic scenario work rests on two additional substantial bodies of theory and practice. The first is the well-developed application of scenarios to corporate strategizing that has grown out of the work of Royal Dutch/Shell's famous global strategy group, which several Generon partners led in

² See Adam Kahane, "Changing the Winds: Scenarios for People Who Want to Change the World", *Whole Earth Review* Spring 1999 and <<http://www.wholeearthmag.com/ArticleBin/222.html>>, and "How to Change the World: Lessons for Entrepreneurs from Activists", *Reflections: The SoL Journal*, MIT Press, January 2001. The Colombian work is summarized in Manuel Jose Carvajal *et al*, "Destino Colombia", *Deeper News* Volume 9 Number 1 (Emeryville: Global Business Network, 1998) and <<http://www.gbn.org/scenarios/colombia/>>. The Canadian scenarios are at <<http://scenarios.competitor.net/>> and the Guatemalan ones at <<http://www.citel.com.gt/visionguate/>>.

³ The Indonesia project is at <<http://www.imd2010.org/>> and the Kenyan one at <<http://www.kenyascenarios.org/index.html>>.

⁴ See <<http://www.undp.org/rblac/scenarios/>> for information on the UNDP's work, including the report of an international conference held in Antigua Guatemala in November 2000, and "learning histories" of the Mont Fleur, Destino Colombia, and Vision Guatemala projects.

⁵ See <<http://www.generonconsulting.com>>.

the early 1990s.⁶ The second is Generon's own research on strategy processes and practices, which over the past few years has focused on studying the specific bases for entrepreneurial creativity—bringing forth new futures—in the new economy.⁷

Results of the process

On the basis of these experiences, our conclusion is that civic scenario processes produce four types of results:

1. Reframed mental models.

All of us operate from maps or models in our heads about how the world works. Sometimes these maps are accurate and helpful representations of reality, but they can also be woefully incomplete, inaccurate, and misleading. Scenario thinking helps us to improve the quality of our models by articulating them, sharing them with other people who have different perspectives and models, and together trying out new models in the process of developing alternative stories (scenarios) about how things have worked, do work, and might work in the future. A primary result of scenario work is therefore a “reframing” of our pictures of the world—a shift in how we look at what is going on around us.

- One of the major reframings at Mont Fleur involved the recognition that a successful move away from apartheid would require navigating not only the political, military and constitutional transitions that were receiving most of the attention at the time, but also an economic one, which was not. Furthermore, the obvious economic solution—quickly redistributing wealth from rich whites to poor blacks—could not work.
- A significant reframing of *Visión Guatemala* was that understanding the country's past, present and future required understanding the reality of the country's indigenous majority, including of their distinct “cosmovision.” This enlarged perspective put the previously marginal issue of multi-culturality into the center of the national strategy conversation. The *Visión Guatemala* scenarios showed that development of such shared understandings in the society at large is a prerequisite to Guatemalans being able to construct a better future together. One government participant said, “I believe the greatest contribution of the project is that the country has now a group of persons who can, and have the capacity to, see things from a different perspective and, therefore, can help others do the same.”

⁶ See <<http://www.shell.com/royal-en/content/0,5028,25432-50913,00.html>> and Kees van der Heijden, *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (New York: Wiley, 1996). An excellent bibliography of the field can be found at <http://www.gbn.org/public/gbnstory/ex_bibliography.htm>.

⁷ See Joseph Jaworski, *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996) and *Leadership in the New Economy: Sensing and Actualizing Emerging Futures* (Beverly: Generon Consulting, 2000).

The Visión Guatemala Scenarios

The Illusion of the Moth. The moth's path is dangerous; it flies towards whatever light it sees and is therefore often dazzled and even burned. In this scenario, economic conditions do not improve and diversity and interculturality are not really taken to heart, so discrimination of all types persists. National reconciliation is shallow and polarization and social conflict continue. People cry out for political messianism and authoritarianism. Labor instability and unemployment rise and international cooperation decays. The economy is characterized by short-termism. Tax revenues are not sufficient to pay for social necessities. The national spirit is pessimistic, mediocrity prevails, the rule of law is absent, and the atrocities of the civil war era remain unacknowledged and unpunished. Overall the process is one of people being worn down, with expectations unmet and solidarity eroded in the face of selfish agendas.

The Zigzag of the Beetle. The back-and-forth flight of the beetle is erratic and directionless. In this scenario, advances in political, economic and social life occur side by side with regressions. There is economic growth along with unequal participation in its benefits; interculturality along with exclusion and discrimination; and citizen participation along with apathy and lack of representativeness. Environmental degradation increases. The state is incapable of achieving real fiscal reform. Reconciliation and dialogue coexist with deep woundedness and fear. Overall the pattern is one of mixed results and no clear progress.

The Flight of the Firefly. Each firefly illuminates its own way and also that of others; together a group of fireflies pushes back the darkness. In this scenario, Guatemalans recognize their history and construct a model where tolerance and educational transformation create interculturality and eliminate discrimination. Holistic development is reflected in a nation with its own identity, and with pluralism, fairness, the rule of law, and genuine consensus. A democratic state grants equal opportunities to all. A fiscal pact reduces gaps between sectors. Citizen participation and productivity increase. Optimism spreads with the real reconciliation that comes with sustained and fair economic growth.

2. Shared commitment to change developed through dialogue.

No one person or institution alone can effect societal change. Yet, for collective action there must be some measure of shared perspective: a common mental model, a shared vision, a jointly-told story. Scenario processes that are organized as open and constructive conversations among stakeholders help build the mutual understanding, trust, and sense of community that make this possible.

- In South Africa, the Mont Fleur process—together with countless other projects, workshops and meetings—built the foundation of relationships on which the “miraculous” 1994 shift to majority rule could be built.
- In Visión Guatemala, the team members were able to see and listen to each other with empathy, and this opened the door to honest and open dialogue, including about areas of wrenching disagreement. Out of that dialogue emerged the shared moral values that inform the scenarios. The team has become an important symbol and model of cross-sector networking and collaboration in Guatemala.

3. Regenerated energy and optimism.

Achieving collective forward movement requires energy, which in turn requires hope.

- In the fearful and confused South Africa of the early 1990s, the Mont Fleur team's message that a positive *Flight of the Flamingoes* future was possible had a strong impact. One of the team members said, "We mapped out in very broad terms the outline of a successful outcome, which is now being filled in. We captured the way forward of those of us committed to finding a way forward".
- The Visión Guatemala team went further in explicitly developing a preferred scenario or vision in *Flight of the Fireflies*. They were conscious of constructing these stories as a tool not merely to study or anticipate the future, but to contribute to shaping the future, by engaging in dialogue with their fellow citizens.

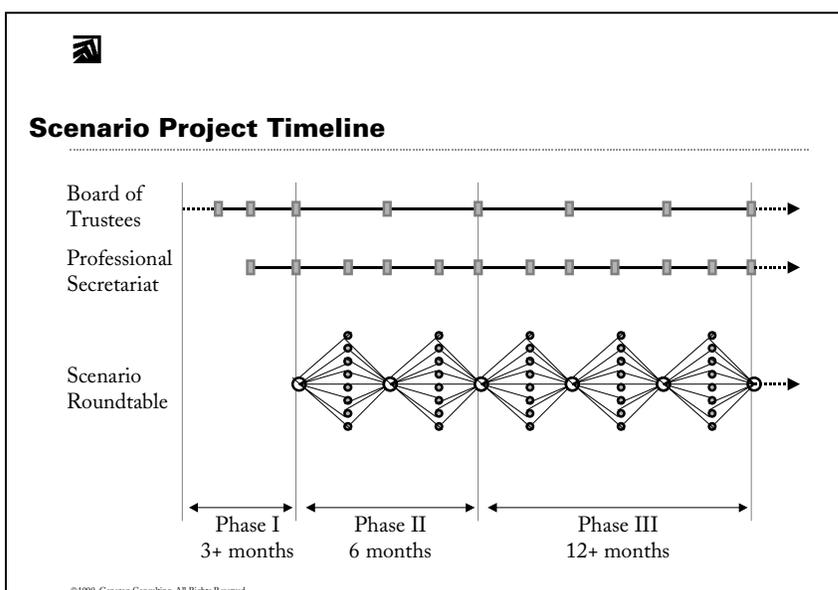
4. Renewed action and momentum.

Ultimately change requires not only new thinking and relationships and energy but also the new action that these developments allow and catalyze.

- Although the link between scenario processes and specific actions is difficult to establish, Mont Fleur probably contributed to the way in which some of the South African political parties approached the pivotal and ultimately successful constitutional negotiations; and it certainly contributed to the surprising shift in economic policy of the victorious African National Congress. Even in 1999, eight years after the scenario project, one of the members of the Mont Fleur team, upon being appointed Governor of the South African Reserve Bank said, "We will not be an Icarus."
- Visión Guatemala has sparked ambitious and purposeful action, specifically in the promotion of dialogue processes to re-knit the country's torn social fabric (see examples in the final section below).

Overview of the civic scenario process

In a civic scenario project, three groups of people work together and with others, in three phases, over two years or more, to envision the future and to shape it for the better.

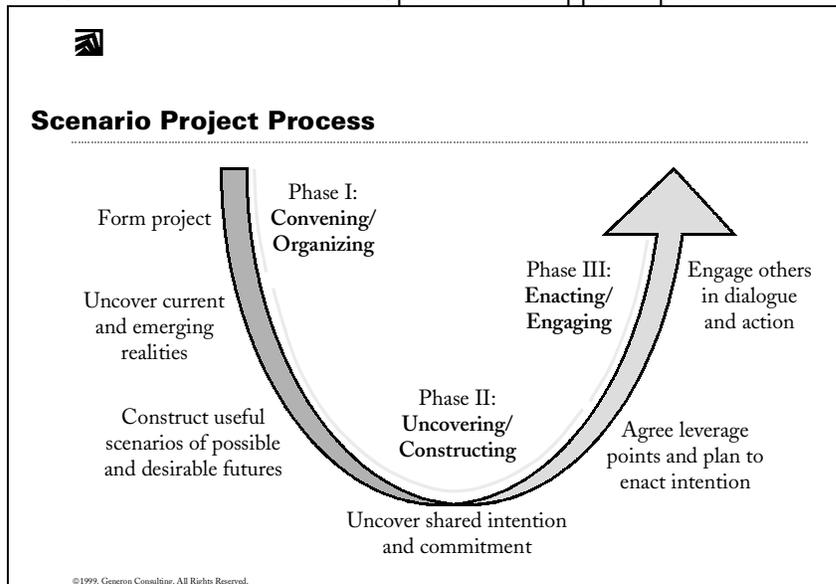


The three groups are:

1. A broadly credible *Board of Trustees*: 4-6 prominent persons who convene and lead the project and guarantee its integrity.
2. A broadly influential *Scenario Roundtable*. This is the core team. It is a diverse group of 20-30 civic leaders (including most of the Board members) who do the work of dialogue,

scenario-building, and then acting on the shared understanding that results.

3. A small *Professional Secretariat*: a Project Coordinator, who works with a team of Process Consultants and Technical Specialists to support—provide an infrastructure for—the work of the Board and Roundtable.



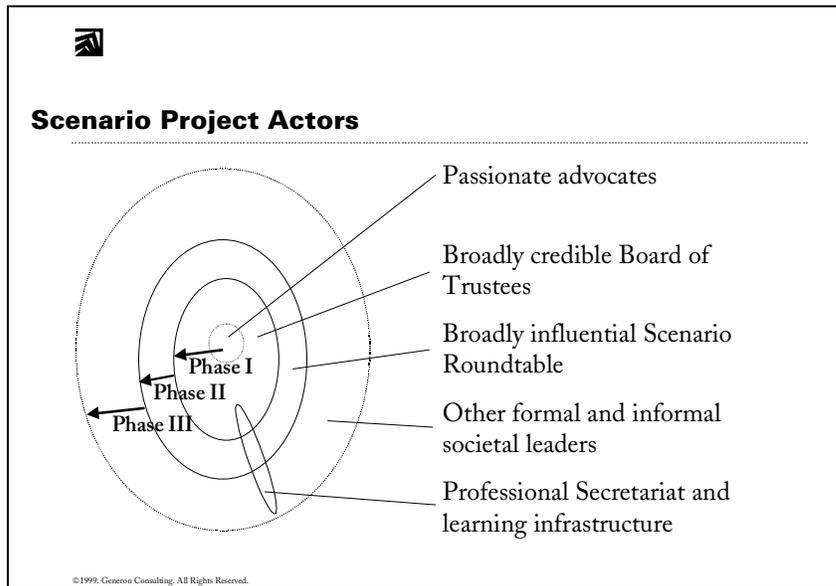
The three phases are:

- I. *Convening/Organizing*. The Board forms, usually at the invitation of one or two project instigators. The board then chooses the Roundtable, hires the Secretariat, articulates the project purpose, and raises funds. The result of Phase I is a planned and energized project.
- II. *Uncovering/Constructing*. The Roundtable meets in three 3-day workshops. Team members work together and with outside resource persons to understand current and emerging reality, construct useful scenarios of possible and desirable futures, uncover/discover their shared intention, and agree on the leverage points and a plan of action to enact this intention. In between these workshops, Roundtable members (individually and in sub-teams) engage with other civic leaders and with resource persons to deepen and test their understanding of what is happening and what they must do. The result of Phase II is a published set of stories about how the future might and should unfold (several scenarios and a vision respectively), plus a plan, commitment, and momentum towards bringing this vision into reality.
- III. *Enacting/Engaging*. The Scenario Roundtable implements the plan it has developed in Phase II. The purpose of this phase is not to disseminate or market the scenarios and vision as such, but to engage with other civic leaders in dialogue, moving to action. The Roundtable meets three more times to share successes and failures and to adjust its course of action on the basis of this learning. The Professional Secretariat continues to provide support. Phase III ends when the Roundtable concludes it has achieved the project's purpose.

Process specifics

Scenario projects—like the better futures they aim to bring forth—come to pass because a small group of passionate advocates dreams of them and works to bring their dream into reality. The process is an expanding circle of dialogue, trust, understanding and commitment, starting with the advocates, who assemble a Board of Trustees, who in turn invite the Scenario Roundtable, who in turn engage with each other and with the large system of which they are a microcosm and which they wish to influence.

Phase I: Convening/Organizing



The first task is therefore to find the *Board of Trustees*. It will provide the initiative, credibility, independence and wisdom to launch and guide the project, and to invite others to participate. Board members must be seen to advocate the process rather than any particular outcome. In *Visión Guatemala*, for example, the trustees included six of the

country's most prominent citizens, including a Cabinet minister, a leading human rights activist, the rector of a Jesuit university, a prominent Mayan woman, the ambassador to the UN, and a top businessman. The Board in turn has four principal tasks.

- It selects and invites members of the *Scenario Roundtable*. As a group, these people must have the influence and capacity to effect change, and must represent as broad as possible a range of relevant perspectives, with none dominating. They are invited to participate in their personal capacities, not as formal representatives of any organization or interest. The Roundtable team must be diverse enough (demographically, socially, politically, geographically, etc.) for most stakeholders to be able to see their views reflected. For example, the *Visión Guatemala* Roundtable included academics, corporate leaders, community leaders, entrepreneurs, former guerillas, former military officers, government officials, human rights activists, indigenous people, journalists, national and local politicians, religious leaders, trade unionists, and young people. The participants should be respected thought leaders in their own communities, senior enough to be influential, but not so senior as to be unable to participate in such an informal exercise. Finally, an important criterion for selection is the capacity to be curious, reflective, and open minded.
- The Board hires the *Professional Secretariat*. The key person is the full time Project Coordinator, who will champion, organize, and manage the entire process. He or she must be zealous, competent, and ethical. The coordinator hires and leads a technical support team, mostly part time or contract staff, including: process consultants, designers and facilitators; administrative and financial support personnel; people to document and communicate the work of the Roundtable, such as writers, filmmakers, webmasters, graphic recorders, learning historians; and other support personnel, such as workshop organizers, translators, transcribers. *Visión Guatemala* employed a Coordinator and two support staff full time for more than two years.
- The Board must articulate a *compelling project purpose*. Initially, it must be able to answer the question, "Why should I support/participate in this project?" It is important to recognize,

however, that the purpose, intention and orientation of the work will naturally evolve as the project unfolds.

- Finally, it is up to the Board to raise the *necessary funds* and in-kind contributions. It needs to raise enough money to sustain the project through Phases I and II and to provide the core infrastructure for Phase III. The plan for Phase III will only begin to emerge during Phase II and therefore cannot be completely budgeted at the outset.

Phase II: Uncovering/Constructing

In this phase, the scenario team, convened as the Roundtable, does the core work of the project by developing a set of stories about what is happening and might happen (the scenarios) and what they want to happen (the vision). This work is challenging, because the stories must simultaneously be:

- Relevant: illuminating current circumstances and concerns of team members and linking into current their mental models
- Emergent: making the invisible visible by surfacing underlying assumptions and challenging current mental models
- Plausible: fact-based and logical and contributing to systemic understanding
- Clear: distinct, accessible, and memorable.

Phase II has four major milestones:

Workshop 1

The team starts its work with people getting to know one another;. It sketches preliminary versions of driving forces, scenarios, and visions. It also works on clarifying the project purpose and identifying subjects it needs to know more about in order to better understand what is happening and might happen.

Learning Journeys

One of the most important and difficult parts of this work is for participants to see what they have not been seeing. An excellent way to do this is to venture out of their familiar settings and circles to observe and interact with relevant and different realities. The team splits up into small groups, and each person goes on at least one Journey to Remarkable Persons, Organizations or Places. These are experiences that help team members see the world from new perspectives.

Workshop 2

The team comes back together for a second, intensive workshop, in which participants review and make sense of what they have learned. They may invite additional Remarkable Persons . At this workshop, they create the scenarios and vision.

Workshop 3

At the final workshop of Phase II, the team refines and agrees on the texts of the scenarios and vision, as well as on the lessons and conclusions arising from them. The team also makes a Phase III plan for broadening the work, enacting the vision, and contributing to changing society.

Phase III: Enacting/Engaging

In this phase the team uses its prior work together as a trigger and catalyst for contributing to enacting their vision for and with the larger society. The substance, process, and duration of Phase III must emerge from the discoveries and creations of Phase II and therefore cannot be specified in advance. In previous projects, however, Phase III has consisted of:

- Working with print, television, radio and Internet media to disseminate the work and promote dialogue about the issues it raises.
- Engaging around the scenarios and vision with other societal leaders from various sectors and various levels, both one-on-one and in different kinds of meetings and workshops. For example, the Visión Guatemala project trained 65 “multipliers” of the scenario process— younger leaders drawn from all sectors—and prepared multi-media presentation materials on the scenarios and scenario-building process. Within a year of the completion of Phase II, these resources made it possible to share the work with more than 3000 people, including key leaders in political parties, business, Mayan groups, cooperatives, universities, non-governmental organizations, the media, workers’ organizations, the military, and the church. The primary result of the project has therefore been less other citizens ‘buying’ the national vision *product*, and more them reproducing the intersectoral dialogue *process*—including recently on a large scale at the municipal level.
- Connecting with other, more traditional political, negotiating, and problem solving activities. Visión Guatemala team members played an important role in their country’s 1999 national elections, as candidates, political platform drafters, and non-party public figures. They have also been influential in several key policy debates and official commissions, including on post-war truth-telling and reconciliation; vital and sensitive constitutional amendments; a new pact on national governance; and a major restructuring of the system of taxation and government spending.
- Promoting specific initiatives identified as critical for achieving the vision. For example, Visión Guatemala team members have worked for change in a variety of ways, including educational reforms in universities and in the public school system; a new national anti-poverty initiative; and local development projects in Quetzaltenango, the second largest city.

The ultimate objective of Phase III and of this work as a whole is to engage the whole society— hearts, minds and bodies—in the process of creating a better future. Our experience so far is that the civic scenario process helps this happen.