

# An Overview of Multi-Stakeholder Civic Scenario Work

*“We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed, and 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

The purpose of a civic scenario project is to build the leadership to change the course of a country’s history. A group of influential leaders—a microcosm of the society, representing all the principal stakeholders—works together to uncover what has happened, is happening, might happen, and should happen in their country, and what they must do—what they cannot *not* do—to enact that vision. Through a structured process of action and reflection, with each other and with other societal leaders, they build the shared understanding and commitment necessary to bring forth a better future.

Generon Consulting has led such multi-stakeholder scenario projects in North, Central, and South America, and in Europe, Africa, and Asia, as well as more than 50 major corporate, governmental, and NGO scenario projects. This note synthesizes the learning from these experiences and outlines a state-of-the-art civic project.

## Two project examples and the results they produced

Two of the most important projects Generon has led were Mont Fleur in South Africa (1991-92) and Vision Guatemala (1998-2000):

### Mont Fleur

During the tumultuous transition away from apartheid, this project brought together 22 prominent people from across South African society—left and right, black and white—including community activists, conservative politicians, African National Congress (ANC) officials, trade unionists, academics, establishment economists, and corporate executives. Their objective was “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 possibility that many people in power at the time still believed was feasible.
- *Lame Duck* envisioned a prolonged transition with a constitutionally weakened government which, because it “purports to respond to all, but satisfies none,” leads investors to hold back and growth and development to languish. This was an important scenario because at the time the political parties were negotiating a constitutional agreement and *Lame Duck* allowed them to see and mitigate certain critical dangers.

- *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 that included prominent left-wing economists had discussed the possibility of a new government trying to do too much, and this discussion had an important impact on the policies and actions of the later-elected ANC government.
- *Flight of the Flamingoes* outlined the broad parameters of a positive and successful transition, with everyone in the society rising slowly and steadily together.

### Vision Guatemala

This project, launched after the signing of the peace treaty that ended 36 years of brutal civil war, brought together a broad and influential group of Guatemalan leaders (somewhat larger, more diverse, and more senior than the Mont Fleur team). Their objective was not only to provoke debate and dialogue, but also to develop a shared vision for the country and help to enact it. They constructed three scenarios, which together clearly illustrated what could happen and why:

- *“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.”

From these two examples and others, four types of project results can be seen:

#### 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 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 by 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. *Icarus* specifically pointed out that the obvious economic solution—quickly redistributing wealth from rich whites to poor blacks—could not work.
- A significant reframing of Vision Guatemala was that understanding the country’s past, present and future required understanding the reality of the country’s indigenous majority. This enlarged perspective put the previously marginal issue of multi-culturality into the center of the national strategy conversation. The Vision 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 now has a group of persons who have the capacity to see things from a different perspective and can therefore help others do the same.”

## 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 Vision 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 imperatives that inform the scenarios. The team has also 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 Vision 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.

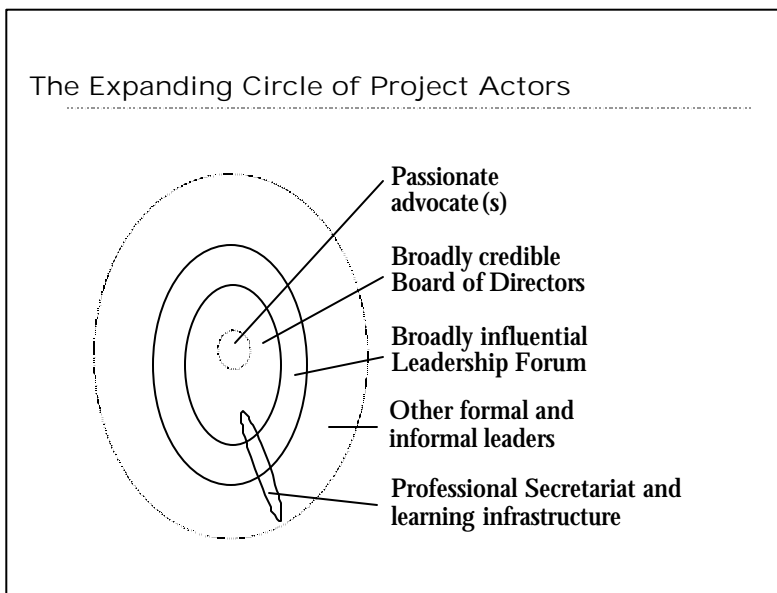
#### 4. Renewed action and momentum

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

- Mont Fleur contributed to the way in which some of the South African political parties approached the pivotal and ultimately successful constitutional negotiations, and to the surprising shift in economic policy of the victorious ANC. Even in 1999, eight years after the scenario project, one of the ANC members of the Mont Fleur team, upon being appointed the first black governor of the South African Reserve Bank said, “We will not be an Icarus.”
- Vision Guatemala planted seeds of action in many vital fields. Team members played key roles in their country’s 1999 national elections, as candidates, political platform drafters, and non-party public figures; they were influential in central policy debates and official commissions, including on post-war truth-telling and reconciliation, vital and sensitive constitutional amendments, and a major restructuring of the system of taxation and government spending; and they promoted important initiatives including educational reforms in universities and in the public school system, a new national anti-poverty initiative, and a country-wide series of multi-stakeholder municipal-level development dialogues.

#### Project participants

A civic scenario project is an expanding circle of multi-stakeholder dialogue and action. These projects—like the better futures they aim to bring forth—come to pass because one or several *passionate advocates* dream of them and work to bring their dream into reality. The advocates assemble a Board of Directors, who in turn invite the Leadership Forum, who in turn engage



with each other and with the larger system of which they are a part and which they wish to influence—all supported by a Professional Secretariat.

The first task is therefore to find the *Board of Directors*. These 5-10 eminent persons provide the initiative, credibility, independence, wisdom, and energy to launch and guide the project and to invite others to participate. In the Vision Guatemala project, for example, the directors

included six of the country’s most prominent citizens: 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. It is the Board’s responsibility to convene the project and articulate its

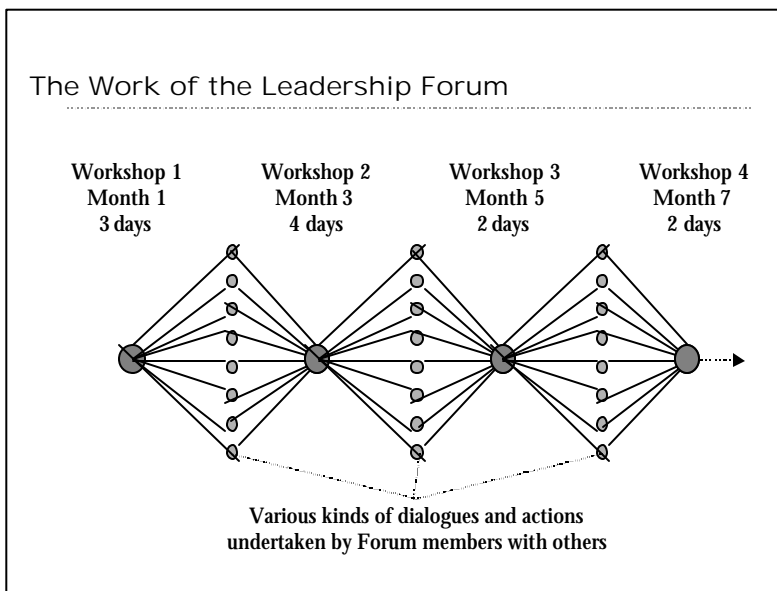
purpose, to raise and safeguard the project funds, and to provide guidance and support to the Executive Director and the Leadership Forum. Their leadership task—to be advocates for a process with integrity, rather than for any particular, partisan outcome—is challenging because the project is, by definition, emergent (the results will be generated by the participants and cannot be determined in advance) and extraordinary (across and beyond existing institutions).

The Board selects and invites the 25 members of the *Leadership Forum*. The Forum, in four workshops and in between, does the core thinking and acting work of the project. 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 Forum team must be diverse enough (demographically, socially, politically, geographically, etc.) for most stakeholders to be able to see their views reflected. For example, the Vision Guatemala Forum 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. They need to be curious, reflective, and open minded.

It is of utmost importance that both the Board of Directors and the Leadership Forum be reasonably representative microcosms of the society they are trying to understand and influence.

The Board also hires the *Professional Secretariat*. The key person is the full time *Executive Director*, who will champion, organize, and manage the entire process. He or she must be zealous, competent, and ethical. The director hires and leads a technical support team, mostly part time or contract staff, including: scenario consultants, designers and facilitators; administrative staff; and people to document and communicate the work of the Forum, such as writers, filmmakers,

webmasters, project historians, etc. Vision Guatemala employed a director and two support staff full time for more than two years.



The primary, direct way in which the project creates changes in the future of the country is through the changes in the thinking and acting of the members of the Leadership Forum. The broader, indirect impact is through the influence of these members in turn on the much larger circles of other

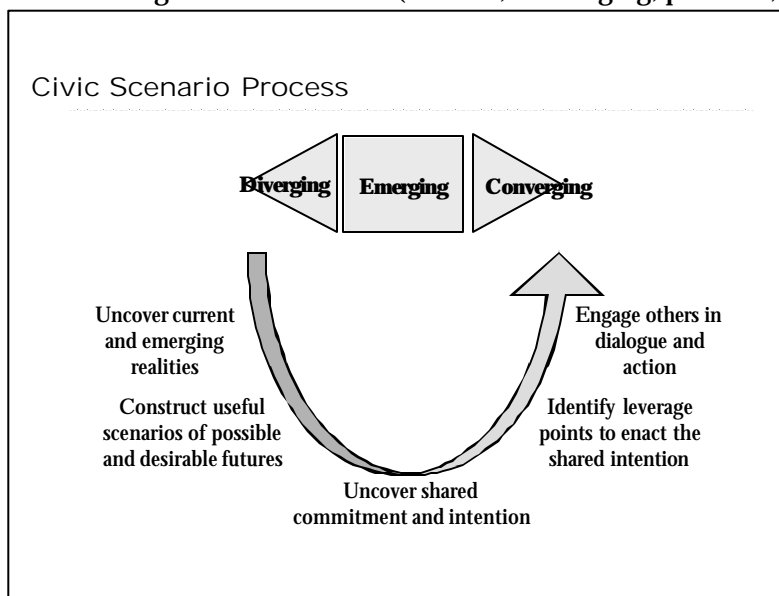
*formal and informal societal leaders* with whom they talk and act. The project's contributions to the country's ideas, visions, commitments, relationships, and strategies ripple out through the work of the Leadership Forum between and beyond the workshops.

What the project participants do

Once the project has been convened by the Board of Directors, it runs for seven months or so. During this period, the members of the Leadership Forum meet four times in intensive, multi-day, “residential” workshops, and in between these workshops continue the work individually and in sub-teams.

The Forum engages in the following activities:

- Developing a *systemic understanding* of the current and emerging reality of the country and its contextual environment, through dialogue with each other and with other leaders and resource persons (in the workshops and through inter-workshop activities such as Learning Journeys).
- Constructing a set of 2-4 useful (relevant, challenging, plausible, and clear) *scenarios* as to how



the future might unfold, including a *vision* as to how it should unfold.

- Identifying the *leverage points* at which societal actors (including themselves, and not just government) can affect which scenario occurs.
- Undertaking *actions*, in their own spheres of influence, to help bring forth the

vision, and then engaging in disciplined “After Action Reviews” on the results of these actions (i.e., a learning cycle of acting separately and reflecting together).

- Engaging other leaders, in their own constituencies and beyond, in *broader circles of dialogue and action*.
- Synthesizing their learning from all of the above dialogues and actions, in terms of a further-developed set of scenarios and leverage points, and *publishing their synthesis* through various media.

The overall process dynamic can be described in two ways. Overall and within each activity, the participants follow the creative sequence of diverging (surfacing different perspectives and options), emerging (letting these perspectives “cook”), and converging (choosing the way forward). More fundamentally, they undertake a collective uncovering of what is going on around them and of their own intention, and then enact that intention to bring forth a better future.