

# Why scenario planning is a waste of time – focus on better understanding the past and present instead

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*Time past and time future*

*What might have been and what has been*

*Point to one end, which is always present.*

TS Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

A few years ago, I used to rock up for the occasional UK government-convened [scenario planning](#) exercise (I know, exciting life or what?). They were usually run by ex Shell or BP 'foresight people' turned consultants and boy, were they disappointing. Asked to identify trends, participants regurgitated what they had read that week in The Economist or Financial Times. We then spent a few hours discussing and clustering them into possible futures, and inordinate time trying to come up with catchy names for the inevitable 2x2 (see below).

Why? Well partly, there is always huge attraction in thinking we are somehow able to predict the future (the source of the magnetic attraction over politicians by the more unscrupulous economists). Scenario types always stress that there workshops are not about prediction, just mental gymnastics to prepare us better for the future. But I haven't seen much evidence of that.

I was reminded of this by a couple of conversations last week – a UNICEF foresights person dropped in to pick my brains, and I listened

to a Shell scenario-ista do apparently random thought association at a conference (those guys haven't changed). Before we break out the flipcharts and weird hexagonal post-its (beloved of scenario planners) to grapple with time future, I think we need to get much better at time past and time present (using Elliot's



language – if you haven't read the [Four Quartets](#), you're in for a treat).

**Time past:** our ability to capture how change really happens is pretty patchy. All too often, we succumb to the temptation to airbrush out all the interesting stuff: the accidents, unexpected twists and turns, the failures and how we respond to them. The pressure to produce shiny, smooth, positive evaluations for funders or bosses undermines our ability to truly learn from the past. I often say that in Oxfam we have two kinds of 'time past' narrative. A dumbed down 'thank you Oxfam for my goat, now my children are in school' fund raiser and the 200 page largely unintelligible evaluation. What we miss is the middle ground – 'stories for grown ups' that welcome messiness, doubts over attribution etc, and capture the enthralling complexity of change.

**Time present:** but our work on time past sometimes looks stellar compared to time present. Working in complex systems where change is intrinsically unpredictable and non-linear means above all, having fast feedback loops so that you notice when the system is changing, and respond to it. This is *really* hard for large organizations that try to maintain coherence and direction through a hierarchy of plans (organizational, departmental, team and individual). If, after spending months agreeing these plans, something changes in the context that suggests a new direction, it is far easier to ignore it than rip up the plan and start all over again.

Even if individuals in their personal lives are aware of big changes in the context (as we call real life in the development business), they don't bring that into their work. While he was at ActionAid, my friend Matthew Lockwood used to say that all his interesting discussions about politics and context took place in evenings, usually in restaurants or bars, but never moved into the office. When food prices took off worldwide in 2008, I'm sure Oxfam staff around the world were noticing the impact their shopping baskets, but the first we research works in Oxford knew of this major disruption in the world food system was when journalists called us asking for a comment. The feedback loops just weren't in place.

The exception to this is humanitarian work, designed precisely to respond rapidly to shocks. When the Arab Spring took off in early 2011, for several months it was only our emergencies teams who discussed it as a potential refugee crisis. Only later did the penny drop with the rest of us that this was a massive advocacy opportunity, and we duly began putting Oxfam's weight into advocacy partnerships at the Arab League and elsewhere.



Conclusion? If we want to pursue agility, flexibility and all those other words beloved of the managerial classes, the key is getting better at picking up the seismic tremors of social or economic change as early as possible, and learning to tell nuanced, intelligent, warts-and-all stories about change on the ground. Only then should we think about devoting a few hours on scenario planning. Otherwise, I won't be bothering.