# An introduction to Transformative Scenario Planning

Sometimes social systems get stuck. There is not enough agreement among leading actors about what is happening or what could or should happen, for the system to be able to move forward. Confusion and conflict impede progress and create the risk of regress.

In such contexts, transformative scenario planning can be useful. This process enables politicians, civil servants, activists, businesspeople, trade unionists, academics, and leaders of other stakeholder groups to work together to construct a shared understanding of what is happening and what could happen in their system, and then to act on the basis of this understanding.

The focus of transformative scenario planning is the development, dissemination, and use of a set of two, three or four scenarios (structured narratives or stories) about what is possible. A scenario is a story about what *could* happen: an internally-consistent hypothesis about the future that is relevant, challenging, plausible, and clear. A scenario is not a story about what *will* happen (a forecast or prediction) and not a story about what *should* happen (a vision or proposal or plan).

Scenarios provide a shared framework and language for strategic conversations within and across stakeholder groups about the situation they are part of and what actions they can, must, and will take to address it. Transformative scenario planning thereby offers a way for social systems to get unstuck and to move forward.

The transformative scenario planning process consists of five steps:

- The first step is to enroll a team of people from across a whole system who want to— and together are able to—influence the future of that system. This system can be a community, a sector, or a country: any social-political-economic whole that is too complex to be grasped or shifted by any one of its parts.

- The second step is for the scenario team to build up a rough shared understanding of what is happening in the system of which they are part and which they want to influence. They come to this work with differing positions in and perspectives on the system, and so this process requires them to go beyond their established views and to see with fresh eyes. It requires them to see not just their part of the system but more of the whole system, and to open up and inquire and learn.

- The third step is for the team to construct a useful set of scenarios about what could happen in and around their system. To be useful, the scenarios must be relevant, challenging, plausible, and clear. Useful scenarios open up and enable movement in the thinking and acting of actors across the system.

- The fourth step is for the team to see what their scenarios tell them about what they can and must do. These conclusions may be about actions that they need to take to adapt to things they cannot influence, or about actions to influence things they can. These conclusions may be about actions that they need to take jointly or separately.

- In the fifth and final step, the members of the team act, with one another and with

others from across the system, to transform their situation. These actions can take any number of forms: campaigns, meetings, movements, publications, projects, initiatives, institutions, or legislation; private or public; short-term or long-term. The activities of this step, more than those of the previous steps, will therefore generally not be able to be foreseen or planned in advance. These activities will furthermore not necessarily be part of the scenario project as such.

Through these steps, transformative scenario planning produces five types of results:

- First, it produces cross-system *relationships*: an experience by leading actors from across the system—including some who have been locked in conflict—of working together constructively on complex shared concerns.

- Second, it produces systemic *understandings*: a set of scenarios that illuminate and clarify the past, present, and possible futures of the system.

- Third, it produces *intentions* that take account of the whole system: commitments, on the part of leading actors, about what they need to do in the light of these scenarios.

- Fourth, it produces, in and among the participating actors, *capacities* for leading systemic change.

- Fifth, it produces *actions* intended to transform the system: initiatives undertaken by these actors to create forward movement.