Re-imagining systems: Foresight entrepreneurs and the challenge of institutional change

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Short abstract

This paper addresses the question of what it means to attempt "systemic change" from the vantage point of organizational actors who use foresight methodologies as cultural technologies for addressing public problems. Systemic reform is slow and difficult, due to the stabilizing effects of institutional routines and practices. However, past research has shown that institutional reformers can sometimes exercise agency in ways that lead to organizational change. In this paper, we focus on the role of "foresight entrepreneurs" -- that is, organizations and individuals that attempt to disrupt consensus and generate new cultural understandings of future possibilities that (they hope) will lead to deeper social and political change. We examine such entrepreneurs through an analysis of 82 transnational "public interest" scenario projects related to democracy, development, peacebuilding, and climate change. We investigate how scenario projects invoke the mechanisms that organizational scholars say are important for institutional entrepreneurship, i.e., the mobilization of resources, political coalitions, and links with legitimating authority. We also assess the degree to which they delve into the future-ideational component of institutional change, moving beyond simply imagining futures to making explicit policy recommendations, laying out road-maps for change, and proposing infrastructure for tasks and plans. By studying public foresight projects through the lens of institutional entrepreneurship, we contribute to the specification of the material, relational, and cultural conditions under which such political change efforts emerge. In this way, we shed light on both the disjunctions and the connections between imaginative visions of social change and actual institutional change practices.

Extended abstract

Introduction

In this year of multiple intersecting crises, calls for "systemic change" have become a rallying cry for reformers across many sectors. A year of pandemic and protest has brought attention to structural inequities in health care, education, and the criminal justice system, on top of ongoing problems related to climate change, energy production, food security, and the organization of workplaces and urban space. None of these are new problems -- reformers and activists of various types have attempted to address these repeatedly in the past, operating under both radical utopian and more incremental or "meliorative" visions of future possibilities. And

yet change -- when it has happened at all -- has for the most part been slow, piecemeal, and frustratingly inadequate for addressing the magnitude, complexity, and institutionally entrenched quality of these so-called "wicked" problems.

This paper tackles the question of what it means to attempt "systemic change" from the vantage point of organizational actors who use foresight methodologies to address weighty public problems both within and across institutional settings. One of the reasons why systemic reform is so hard is that organizations change slowly; decades of organizational researchers have noted the stabilizing effects of institutional routines and practices, contributing to the reproduction of social structures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Hannan and Freeman, 1977; Levitt and March, 1988; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Zucker, 1987). Moreover, entrenched and conflicting power dynamics can contribute to institutional inertia and disrupt or reverse efforts at change (Garud et al., 2002; Jepperson, 1991). Given these constraints, it is difficult to see how attempts at systemic reform can gain any real traction, despite the optimism, engagement, and social pressure of activists and reformers.

At the same time, past research has shown that organizational change is in fact possible under certain conditions. Institutional reformers are sometimes able to exercise agency in ways that lead to the intentional reorganization of relations, projects, and practices (Holm, 1995; Seo and Creed, 2002; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). This literature suggests that one important mechanism of these change efforts has to do with the role of "institutional entrepreneurs" in mobilizing resources, coalitions, and legitimating authority in order to bring about desired changes (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988). However, research on such entrepreneurs tends to focus on material and relational resources, and underplays the role of intentional ideational change efforts in processes of institutional change -- and in particular, the role of explicit attempts to disrupt consensus and generate new cultural understandings of future possibilities. Although institutional entrepreneurs strategically mobilize discourses and institutional logics to justify the legitimacy of change efforts (e.g., Maguire et al., 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), most research has focused on the instrumentality of such ideational interventions in convincing audiences, rather than in creating visions and roadmaps for change.

In this paper, we focus on the role of "foresight entrepreneurs"-- that is, organizations and individuals that organize, sponsor, and engage others in intentional efforts to rethink possible futures in ways that (they hope) will lead to "systemic change" in response to complex public problems. We examine such entrepreneurs through an analysis of 240+ transnational "public interest" scenario projects addressing issues related to democracy, development, peacebuilding, and climate change. In these projects, reform-oriented actors engage in facilitated, cross-sectoral conversations that employ a range of "foresight methods" -- including scenario building and related techniques -- to help participants imagine possible future worlds. These "cultural technologies" are designed to help collectivities understand systemic constraints while engaging

flexibly and imaginatively with multiple possibilities. They hope to use these scenario-building exercises to provoke action towards the futures they want and away from those they don't want.

However, while most of these scenario projects involve the explicit intention to address "wicked" social and political problems, their links to actual institutional change processes are far from clear. Their proposed pathways from "imagined futures" to "systemic change" vary considerably in their degree of detail and specificity. We propose a framework for assessing the degree to which these "foresight entrepreneurs" -- who are trying to provoke people into new understandings of the future -- are also engaging in serious, plausible attempts at institutional change. In particular, we investigate how organizers of scenario projects invoke the mechanisms that organizational scholars say are important for institutional entrepreneurship, i.e., the mobilization of resources, coalitions, and links with legitimating authority. We also investigate the degree to which they delve into the future-ideational component of institutional change process, that is, the degree to which they move beyond simply imagining possible futures to making explicit policy recommendations, laying out road-maps for change, and proposing structures for delegation of (and accountability for) particular tasks and plans.

In this way, we hope to shed light on both the disjunctions and the connections between imaginative vision of social change and actual institutional change practices. This in turn will help us understand how collective ideational processes can plausibly contribute to shifts in individual and organizational behavior in ways that promote systemic reforms -- and where (and why) such efforts often fall short.

Theoretical Background

From local governments and civil society organizations to private businesses and international governance bodies, numerous organizational actors resort to foresight methodologies to envision and plan for the future. Scenario planning is one of the tools in a portfolio of methods by which multi-sectoral actors gather to consider a problem or a question and identify future trajectories for how this situation could unfold under varying conditions. Scenario planning aims to bring together actors with distinct -- and even conflicting-- perspectives for "challenging conversations," as a way of imagining multiple alternative future possibilities (Ramirez and Wilkinson, 2016). In these "sites of hyperprojectivity" (Mische 2014), heightened future-oriented public debate allows for tacit assumptions to be expressed and challenged as collectivities negotiate visions of the future.

Practitioners and advocates have argued that the process of envisioning alternative possibilities can facilitate systemic change towards greater democracy, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and peaceful resolution of conflict by motivating present behaviors through future images (Boulding, 1988; Finlev, 2012; Kahane, 2012). Indeed, scenario planning

projects that address overarching structural problems such as the climate crisis, public health disparities, or urban informality often claim to have taken the first step towards systemic change. However, both in the scenario projects and the academic literature on scenarios, the process through which change happens remains unclear. Scholarship on institutional entrepreneurship provides a fruitful analytical framework for analyzing whether scenario planning projects actually do the institutional work necessary for systemic change.

When individuals or organizations embedded in institutions engage in efforts to change the institutions they are part of, they are called institutional entrepreneurs. The process of institutional entrepreneurship has two primary components: creating a vision for change and mobilizing support (Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2007). For creating a vision, the entrepreneurial actors must first diagnose the problem with the existing institution that is the target of change. Then, the actors must provide prognostic and motivational frameworks to convince the audience as to why their proposed alternative is superior and more favorable. Institutional change also requires popular support, political coalitions and resourceful allies as the entrepreneurs legitimate and implement their change efforts.

By using the lens of "institutional entrepreneurship," we can develop a critical framework for assessing the systemic change efforts of scenario projects. First, we can assess whether the project explicitly challenges specific institutions and proposes concrete changes in organizations or practices, rather than simply scoping the future ambivalently or idealistically, and/or offering familiar action templates within existing institutional frameworks. Second, we can assess whether the project moves beyond the critique of specific institutions to offer a prognosis, i.e., a desired alternative future. Third, we can inquire into whether the project has access to material resources and is backed by a coalition that includes powerful actors who possess formal authority and high levels of social capital. Fourth, we can determine whether the project proposes policy recommendations, an implementation plan, and follow-up mechanisms to oversee the process of change. We argue that only if these criteria are satisfied can scenario planning projects be considered as being "conducive" to systemic change -- that is, having the facilitating conditions that make it possible to change institutions (whether or not they accomplish this change is a different matter). We call actors who use foresight methodologies in this manner to attempt systemic change "foresight entrepreneurs."

While recent scholarship on organizations has shown that systemic change can be enabled through institutional entrepreneurship, the conditions that favor or obstruct institutional entrepreneurship are understudied. While scenario planning projects have the expressed intention to create future visions in order to re-orient action in the present, they often do not succeed in doing so. By studying such foresight projects through the lens of institutional entrepreneurship, we can contribute to the specification of the material, relational, and cultural conditions under which such political change efforts emerge.

Data and Analysis

In order to test our claims about how foresight entrepreneurship enables efforts at institutional change, we draw on an original database of 240+ public interest scenario planning projects across all world regions, carried out between 1990 and 2017 by a wide range of organizations (including think tanks, research organizations, civil society groups, governments, foundations, corporations, labor unions, and other institutions). The database is created from formal reports, videos, and additional textual and visual materials on each scenario planning project. Based on the data collected from these materials, each scenario project is coded for numerous variables, including scenario type, region, time frame, and the various roles of organizational actors (as initiators, funders, partners, or represented sectors). To identify whether scenario projects have the characteristics associated with effective institutional entrepreneurship, we will use this coded data as well as additional textual analysis of a subset of scenario documents. For the purposes of this paper, we will study 82 scenario projects from three regions: Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

We will first assess whether a scenario project incorporates the following elements of institutional entrepreneurship (see Table 1): (1) the project explicitly challenges at least one institution; (2) it has access to material resources; (3) it is backed by a broad coalition; (4) it has support from powerful actors; (5) it makes policy recommendations; (6) it presents an implementation plan; (7) it proposes a follow-up infrastructure to oversee implementation.

Table 1: Data on foresight entrepreneurship

Challenges to existing institutions?	Access to material resources?	Backed by a broad coalition?	Support from powerful actors?	Policy recommendations?	Roadmap for implementation?	Follow-up infrastructure?
Scenario documents (exec summ, scenario narratives, conclusions)	Coded data (funding organizations)	Coded data (partner organizations and represented sectors)	Coded data (partner and funding organizations)	Scenario documents (executive summaries, conclusions)	Scenario documents (executive summaries, conclusions)	Scenario documents (executive summaries, conclusions)

To understand the conditions that facilitate or obstruct foresight entrepreneurship, we look at how the presence or absence of the elements mentioned above vary by (1) type of scenario, (2) region, and (3) the sectoral composition of organizers, sponsors, participants. We have coded the scenarios into seven types, determined by the goals and relational composition of the projects (see Table 2). We expect variation in the degree to which different types of scenario projects engage in the entrepreneurial strategies noted above. We also expect that attempts to bring about institutional change will vary depending on the region and scope of the project; while some scenario projects are concerned with specific villages or cities, others are concerned

with entire continents. Lastly, each scenario project brings together a cross-sectoral "ensemble" of organizational actors. We expect that different combinations of sectors will facilitate different kinds of conversations, thus enabling or impeding efforts at institutional change.

Table 2: Sources of variation in scenarios

Variable	Categories
Scenario type	Conflict/impasse dialogues, Reformist critique and consensus building Community resilience and adaptation Expert/stakeholder interfaces Sectoral planning and problem solving Elite scoping, intervention, and control Public platform for citizen consultation and engagement
Region and scope	Africa, Latin America, Asia (national, regional, municipal, etc.)
The sectoral composition of the scenario "ensemble"	Research/experts sector Government/public sector Academics Civil society/NGO sector Business/private sector Local communities/residents Social Movements/activist sector International/multilateral organization Cultural production/media sector Foundations/private donors Labor/workers

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