In 2016 and 2017, the Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Centre for Global Cooperation Research will place great emphasis on research on scenarios, futures, and forecasts and their relation to problems of global cooperation such as climate change, migration, and terrorism. In this context, the Centre will host a series of events featuring renowned experts to further reflect on and engage with this growing field. How is relevant knowledge in different policy fields constructed through research instruments of making sense about the future?

This workshop tackled this goal by exploring the use of qualitative methods and their refinement within the field of future research and scenario building. Various methods such as scenario building, the Shell method and counterfactual thinking were examined in detail. Furthermore, these research tools were not only presented as forecasting instruments but were also explained in terms of practical experiences. All in all, this workshop provided essential insight into how to complete research through scenarios, futures, and prognoses using innovative qualitative methodology.

Opening Remarks

At the opening of the workshop the organizers—Tobias Debiel, Rainer Baumann and Frank Gadinger (KHK/GCR21)—emphasized that the topic of time had so far not been a focus at the Centre. A way to address this missing focus is to take a look at scenario building, an approach whose origins lie in the military and later on was used regularly for strategic purposes by private companies. Although scenario building has been growing in importance since the 1980s, the organizers emphasized that it has remained a niche in academia. This begs the question: Are scenario planning / building approaches different than “mainstream” academic approaches in the social sciences? And if so how? The organizers asked participants to keep these questions in mind throughout the event.

Options and Pitfalls of Scenario Building and Future Research – Edgar Göll

After briefly introducing the research focus of his home institution, Edgar Göll (IZT Berlin) provided a comprehensive overview of scenario building and future research. To begin, he emphasized that is simply impossible to completely predict the future. However, there are many potential futures and these futures
can be influenced by coming up with creative solutions to problems using criteria for scientific quality. Relatedly, methodologies in future research have generally gone from quantitative, single, and passive methods to more qualitative, mixed, and pro-active approaches. As such, it was highlighted that scenario building has become far more open in its methodology. Next, Göll presented a scenario ‘cone’ featuring the different kinds of ‘futures’; this included: possible futures (could happen), plausible futures / probable futures (probably will happen), and preferable futures (normative wishes). The cone provides a structure to find out how researchers and practitioners can use scenario building to achieve and arrive at those various points. Additionally, selecting a scenario requires looking at megatrends; that is, currents of transformation to select important issues facing the world. Furthermore, to actually come up with a scenario, their various pitfalls and qualities have to be taken into account, including contextual and cultural specificities. These qualities and pitfalls are plausibility, consistency, selectivity, transparency, degree of integration, participants, reception quality, workload, and potential wild cards.

The question and answer section generally dealt with the application and practicality of scenario building, including some inquiries into the special features of this approach. Rainer Baumann (KHK/GCR21) wondered how scenario building is able to take non-linearity into account systematically. Göll explained that it is basically impossible to fully capture complexity, but added that certain aspects such as growing pressures can be added to the process to reduce the potential problems. Tobias Debiel (KHK/GCR21) added that megatrends are important in terms of uncertainty because they can influence the future. Christian Scheper (INEF/University of Duisburg-Essen) wondered what the core function of scenario building is in terms of what people will achieve when engaging with this approach. Göll emphasized that scenario building gives people an opportunity to think about the future, which is not done very often. Furthermore, many different projects deal with vastly different subjects, and so it is applicable to various fields.

**Scenario Building Using the Shell Method: Insight into Strategy Development Processes – Winfried Veit**

In his presentation, Winfried Veit (University of Freiburg) provided great policy on-the-ground insight into how the Shell method, originally developed by the oil company Shell, works. He focused on his personal experience in scenario workshops from South Africa to Bosnia applying this method. Veit presented three basic functions of the Shell method: the explorative and knowledge
function of scenarios; scenarios as a communicative process and network construction; decision-making and strategy building function of scenarios. Veit also highlighted the three basic steps that must be followed when applying this method on the ground when try to solve conflict: orientation, building, and affirmation. Orientation means first identifying the issue at stake; second, taking into account the present situation, the underlying assumptions every participant holds and learning more about the challenges the particular actor faces; and third, exploring the many ‘driving forces’ that could shape the future. Building means telling ‘stories’ by the members of the scenario team or creating headlines of newspapers in the time horizon we are dealing with and iterating them. From these stories, practitioners can usually ‘cluster’ outlines of what will later become scenarios and which will be elaborated in working groups. Affirmation means testing the scenario outlines, if they meet four criteria: they must be relevant, challenging, plausible, and clear. Using the examples of workshops in Israel, South Africa, and Bosnia, Veit emphasized the effectiveness of this approach as a potential integral part of conflict resolution and building trust in global cooperation.

In her commentary on the presentation, Sigrid Quack (KHK/GCR21) asked participants to think about the juncture of policy and science. She explained that in the past a mentality existed whereby we could plan societies; these approaches seem to reawaken this spirit. With that in mind, she asked if this method can lead to more cooperation and also had questions concerning its impact and if there is intrinsic value in separating people from the everyday world into artificial scenario building workshops. Veit defended the shell method by stating it is the most effective way to bridge difference and solving blockades. It is an ideal way, for him, to solve matters because there is no hierarchy or dominating individuals in the process; everyone is working toward the solution through roundtable talks. Markus Böckenförde (KHK/GCR21) asked if there are crucial moments when needing to overcome conflict or differences in the process of scenario building. Veit stressed that one can never foresee crucial moments but must be prepared for this. Experts in these workshops are prepared through training in conflict resolution if an incident does indeed lead to a breakdown. He added, however, that the scenario process is never just about experts, but always involves a vast array of stakeholders.
Counterfactual Thinking in Security Policies: Scenario Building for the Past – Mischa Hansel

In the final presentation, Mischa Hansel (University of Gießen) went over the method of counterfactual thinking. He presented it as a method of both gaining knowledge on the factual by considering previously overlooked data and as a way to (in)validate alternative history. He first suggested that counterfactuals are ubiquitous in everyday life through the question ‘what if?’. There are three basic forms of counterfactuals: 1. Miracle world counterfactuals, which have hidden values judgements via questions such as ‘would the Court of Human Rights have launched charges against Western leaders?’. The second is the social science’s nightmare which plausibilizes nonlinearity and unpredictability. Finally, the third is the nomothetic or ideographic counterfactual, which seeks to gain knowledge on the factual by challenging conventional wisdom. Hansel expanded on the third iteration by asking ‘would the USA have invaded Iraq if Al Gore had been elected President?’. He then delved into a second example by taking a look at Germany’s role in the 2011 invasion of Libya and the party politics involved therein. After these insightful examples, Ulrich Schneckener (KHK/GCR21) provided commentary by questioning the basic premise of counterfactual thinking. He finds that it merely replaces consistency with another form of consistency; that is, counterfactual thinking replaces causal logic with another form of causal logic.

In the question section of the presentation, Frank Gadinger (KHK/GCR21) asked how counterfactuals take shifts in leaders’ philosophy into account. An example of this would be Angela Merkel’s decision to abandon her pragmatic approach during the refugee crisis. Hansel responded that this is very difficult to account for and needs to be worked on more systematically in the approach. Veit wondered what the practical value of counterfactual thinking is. Hansel emphasized that counterfactuals allow researchers to challenge people’s overdetermined perspectives on certain issues and usual ways of thinking. This is generally a healthy exercise in the civic arena. Schepel added that the innovation of this approach lies in how it provides insight in how people process facts, which was then echoed by Hansel in his response.

Summary and Discussion on Research Moving Forward

In the summary section the workshop organizers Tobias Debiel, Frank Gadinger, and Rainer Baumann provided some final thoughts and questions on the workshop. Gadinger began by stating that there is a tension between all three
methods; namely if these approaches resemble art or are actual forms of science. He concluded that while we need imagination and creativity in these approaches, they should simultaneously be taken seriously as a science. They need to therefore be understood as practical complements to what is already being accomplished. We need to also ask: Who profits from scenarios? What role do culture and context play? Who is chosen to participate in these activities?

Debiel found that this event proved that plurality and time issues need to be taken into account more seriously. Counterfactual approaches also evoke the question: in how far does counterfactual thinking deal with the uncertainties and contingency we face in society? Finally: if events are nonlinear, what kind of methods can we apply to better explain or understand situations? He pleaded for learning more about this form a methodological and epistemological view.

Baumann ended this event by emphasizing that there is a tension in these methods between a broad (scenario building) and narrow focus (counterfactual). He opined that these approaches are, however, not really opposed to one another. Future research does not try to explain in a causal fashion; instead, it explores what is possible. This explains the difference between established and more future-oriented research. It might also indicate that there is a tradeoff between openly thinking about the future and precisely explaining events. The more you go into causal analysis, the more it is necessary to look at a narrow path.

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