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Visioning Labs with displaced academics as a design strategy for sustainable post-conflict reconstruction

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Visioning with Displaced Academics
A strategy for sustainable reconstruction?

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Abstract

Post Conflict Futures is an ongoing project, where displaced Syrian academics meet in Visioning Labs and a global scenario group to jointly reflect on possible future developments and to look for actionable leverage points to work proactively for sustainable transitions. The collective visioning aims to identify aspects that may be critical in strategies for sustainable post conflict reconstruction, notably in the socio-technical implications of different infrastructure options.

A crisis such as that in Syria creates shocks to infrastructure and people. These shocks generate emergencies and responses. But the collapse of existing structures can also open opportunities for a paradigm shift. In several cases, infrastructure shocks have opened opportunities that enable higher order learning with the potential to catalyse a transition towards sustainable and resilient structures (Broto et al., 2014). This has implications to the design of processes and practices to rebuild communities.

Importantly, and considering the complexity of the challenges, holistic reflection is supported by the compression that results from fitting highly complex issues into an ongoing conversation in a small group of people, with diverse backgrounds. The format makes it possible to draw on tacit and cultural knowledge, as well as the differing professional experiences of participants.

Introduction

The impact of the Syrian conflict has been devastating. UN envoy Staffan de Mistura estimated the death toll in Syria to at least 400,000 already in the Spring of 2016, while in December, UNOCHA reported 6.3 internally displaced and 13.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. As of December 4, 2016, more than 4.8 million Syrians had registered as refugees with the UNHCR. The ongoing conflict has destroyed human, cultural, social and physical capitals and led to brain drain and loss of academic capacity. Education and schooling has been interrupted for large segments of the population. Neighbouring host countries are experiencing severe pressures, and several other zones of the region are in conflict and to varying degrees afflicted by war-related challenges.

When the armed conflict ends, massive reconstruction efforts and investments will be needed. However, the challenges around reconstruction are complex and multidimensional. As we have seen in a number of recent post-conflict reconstruction settings, technological choices, prioritization and strategies have serious consequences for success. Large-scale capital intensive projects involve strong actors who tend to set the agenda and shape overall structures. In such contexts, against a discourse of urgency that addresses the immediate crisis; small and medium-sized projects of importance for local populations may be deprioritized. Neglecting

effects of long-term overall structural aspects in society-building has impacts for vital 'soft' areas such as education and conditions for livelihoods, leading to despair and loss of know-how and capacity in entire generations. Widespread unemployment, inequalities and frustration with local authorities' inability to provide basic services and functioning infrastructure ultimately sets the scene for new conflicts.

In contexts of conflicts and sharply diverging interests, taking a purely technological approach to the challenges is not enough (Aggestam, 2015). The aim here is therefore not to evacuate the political, but to revisit the issues from another angle. Back-casting uses discontinuity creatively, making it possible to step beyond the conceptual constraints of a status quo, but to subsequently re-anchor the strategy in concrete specifics of the present to make it actionable. While certain technical choices have the potential to support reconciliation and empowerment of the most vulnerable, other infrastructure elements can function as mediums of isolation/domination. Such effects can be seen around settlements in Palestine, for instance, and similar developments are found in camps. In cases such as Bosnia or Afghanistan, devoting insufficient resources to clearing out mines and military waste has had paralyzing effects on the economy. In the case of Syria, when the conflict ends, there may not even be a labour force either trained or large enough to bring the economy back to pre-war normalcy.

Project outline

Post Conflict Futures is the working name of a project with displaced Syrian academics, aiming to create spaces for discussing, reflecting on and generating strategies for socially and environmentally sustainable reconstruction. The project will serve as a platform for catalysing strategic knowledge using the impetus from infrastructure shocks which result from the ongoing conflicts in the region. In the Post Conflict Futures Visioning Labs, holistic and integrating understanding of complex and uncertain issues is supported by approaching the issues 'diagonally' across institutional and technological scales, by using geographical localisation as conceptual scaffolding anchored in the material, and by focusing on the structuring and distributive implications of infrastructure options over time.

The International Institute of Industrial Environmental Economics (IIIEE) and Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at Lund University have currently launched a project to run Scenario Workshops and Visioning Labs, uniting displaced scholars and students in a collective reflection process on the future. The VLs will give displaced academics the opportunities to engage in post-conflict reconstruction scenarios, as well as a chance to connect with Swedish reconstruction initiatives and research. It is hoped that a dynamic network can be created of departments and research groups involved in work relating to post-conflict reconstruction and recovery issues, as well as establishing links to external actors. In this context, the 'Post Conflict Futures' initiative will focus on critical aspects in the collective, multiscale and transdisciplinary strategic planning of knowledge development and institutional capacity needed for post-conflict reconstruction.

This initiative is centred on the idea of turning the experience of displacement into a point of departure for thinking about sustainable reconstruction of their home lands. It is double-edged in intent since it both acknowledges the condition of displacement of the individual experiencing upheaval, and their capacity to contribute constructively to restore: city, community, well-being in a place of origin that has experienced devastation.

The overall project combines two forms of collective visioning work:

1. *Scenario Workshops*
A series of three 2-day meetings have been held in 2016. Participants were a group of thirty Syrian academics and a small facilitating team. The visioning in these workshops was open-ended, working with the long term and aimed to produce narratives with global scenarios for the region. The participants had a mixture of backgrounds and professional profiles. Several were active in other initiatives and a few had experience working with different types of scenario methodologies. All the participants had experience of teamwork and collaboration, working with wide networks of national and international partners, both within academia, in NGOs and in society at large. They had an interest in and experience with experimenting innovative approaches that open up new fields of knowledge, developing new methodologies, and new modes of collaboration. Above all, they brought with them a curious and open mindset to the project. To ensure that the full span of competences and perspectives were integrated into the group's reflection, the central questions were treated collaboratively by the team as a whole.

2. *Visioning Labs*
As a follow-up to the scenario workshops, the initiative will run Visioning Labs with invited participants from the diaspora community of displaced scholars, professionals, students and civil society. The Visioning Labs take the form of multiple half-day events each hosted by a different hosting institution. The aim is to have a 50/50 mixture of displaced academics and local Swedish participants. Cross-cutting topics that benefit from the mixture in participant perspectives will be prioritized. The aim of the Visioning Labs is to formulate relevant problems in the reconstruction and recovery processes, as well as identifying feasible entry-points. The Visioning Labs also serve to put the displaced academics in contact with environments and networks that can serve to support future implementation processes.

The partners and hosting institutions for the Visioning Labs and other activities emerging from the Scenario Workshops will be invited so as to provide varying perspectives on the reconstruction challenge, tapping into the relevant knowledge areas and potential of the host institution for each Visioning Lab, such as water management and governance, urban systems and governance, resilience and recovery, to challenge existing thinking about post conflict rebuilding and contribute to building trans-disciplinary knowledge that can inform future reconstruction efforts. In the workshops, there will be opportunities for the participants to meet and dialogue with representatives from local and regional authorities, cities and companies in the region, and learn about sustainable solutions in infrastructure, utilities, water and energy systems, housing, and service delivery including health care.

The work in the subsequent phases of the project will contribute to creating ways to upscale and amplify the impact of the Scenario Workshops and Visioning Labs, using the impetus arising from displacement in constructive ways to expand, influence and shape the debate on post conflict reconstruction. That is why we need new and creative ways of communicating visions and mobilizing resources. The narrative aspect as well as the immersive experiential aspect will play central role in our strategy.

Rationale & Purpose

Scenarios and visioning allow us to reflect strategically in settings of extreme uncertainty characterised by rapid and unpredictable changes. They offer advantages by not being limited to

a particular course of events, and by not presupposing agreement or consensus. Offering a framework for collective conversations and continued reflection, scenarios thus have eminently dynamic and heuristic qualities. They are particularly valuable in the face of extreme uncertainties (Schwartz, 1991). Rather than focusing on 'problems' or 'solutions', emphasis lies on exploring different possibilities and their implications. This helps envisage action in the face of uncertain futures, but also supports openness in imagining and discussing various options.

Conflicts rip apart the social fabric, and undermine relations of trust and solidarity that are needed to mobilize populations and support collaboration across communities. Problems in the coordination of reconstruction efforts involving multiple types of actors at different levels can lead to blind spots, bottlenecks and a loss of long-term vision. In the wake of open hostilities, frozen conflicts may emerge, involving locked situations with absence of responsible government, or factions deliberately attempting to aggravate the situation and damage other parties.

When the conflict ends, massive reconstruction efforts and investments will be needed. Large-scale capital intensive projects involve strong actors who tend to set the agenda and shape overall structures. While certain technical choices have the potential to support reconciliation and empowerment of the most vulnerable, other infrastructure elements can function as mediums of isolation/domination. Infrastructure choices have consequences for livelihoods, relationships between communities, or access to and distribution of resources. They also create relationships of long term dependency and interdependency within and beyond national borders. Importantly, characteristics in initial structures will have implications for subsequent developments.

While post-conflict settings thus give rise to serious challenges, the overt failure of existing arrangements also opens opportunities for change and learning. Transitions (Geels & Schot, 2010) depend on simultaneous significant change. They involve changing 'culturally accepted beliefs and associated regulations' (Broto et al. 2014). Such shifts might come about when there is a 'general attitude towards paradigm questioning' (ibid.) Broto et al. further argue that: "reimagining infrastructure may require anticipatory learning for innovation, of the type that reflects multiple values in society and acknowledges the uncertainties inherent to understanding a complex world".

A crisis such as the Syrian one creates shocks to infrastructure and people. These shocks generate emergencies and responses. But the collapse of existing structures can also open opportunities for a paradigm shift. In several cases, they open opportunities that enable higher order learning with the potential to catalyze a transition towards sustainable and resilient infrastructure. This has implications for designing approaches to and practices around reconstruction of infrastructure and rebuilding of communities. The project therefore aims to serve as a space for catalyzing strategic knowledge, using the impetus from infrastructure shocks which result from the ongoing conflicts in the MENA region.

Sweden is in a privileged position to make contributions to post-conflict reconstruction in Syria and other affected areas. To be effective and provide relevant support, there are, however, a number of problems in connecting knowledge development processes in Sweden with MENA contexts - culturally, socially, economically and in terms of institutions. The countries of the region present a highly volatile context, where the political framework can change rapidly, and it

is therefore difficult to maintain long-term strategies to serve the needs of the communities for functioning infrastructure, livelihoods and services that ensure prospering societies, trust in the future and the best quality of life. Besides the armed conflicts, climate changes and demographic pressures combine to the collapse of many existing structures and adversely affect the basis for livelihoods.

Institutional capacity is needed to develop coherent needs-driven strategies that will support the reconstruction of functioning societies in contextually relevant ways, rather than proposing piecemeal technical solutions at the demand of isolated actors. The longer term objectives of the project are therefore to contribute to capacity-building; creating institutional structures, methodologies, networks and partnerships that support strategic planning of knowledge development for post-conflict reconstruction in collaboration with displaced scholars and other actors in Sweden, Europe and the MENA region.

Scenario thinking was initially developed as way to deal with extreme uncertainties, and not lose capacity to work with long-term projects in rapidly changing and unforeseeable environments. Scenario thinking and Visioning Labs, if designed properly, improve decision propensity for dynamic futures, build and bind a network of actors, serve as a bridge between different perspectives and contribute to shared learning.

Post Conflict Futures aims to make use of creative potentials arising through exile: meetings with host societies, experiencing other social structures, and different academic traditions. For exiled academics, the situation can involve meeting scholars from other disciplines that they would normally not have encountered. The magnitude of destruction forces us to rethink everything from the start, and gives scholars in exile a strong motivation to build a more resilient society. We thus believe that displaced academics and diaspora communities can play an important role in reshaping knowledge development processes, both for host countries and for countries of origin.

Process challenges

Working on strategies for resilient and socially sustainable structures in the reconstruction of an entire society is an extremely complex area, where multiple perspectives and areas of expertise are required. Such issues can only be solved through dialogue between different disciplines and preferably also external stakeholders, concretizing mode 2 science. Considering the difficulties encountered in other recent reconstruction processes, the process here also requires strong innovative thinking. Several of the participants in this initiative belong to institutions that are already based on an interdisciplinary paradigm, enabling them to approach complex problems from multiple angles and using a wide array of methodologies.

The ongoing conflict is a major challenge to the processes of collaborative visioning and strategy development. While personal investment in the issues provides both insights and motivation, diverging visions and perspectives will tend to be strongly emotionally charged. The collaborative effort thus requires considerable good will and tact from all involved participants. Additionally, to achieve impacts outside the core group of participants in the scenario work, dialogue needs to be engaged with wider groups. Organizations and citizens relevant to efforts for sustainable societal reconstruction are in this case spread across numerous countries, as well as being grouped in locations where reconstruction efforts take place. Engaging multiple actors in

the process of jointly reflecting and deciding on different options requires the capacity to present the issues and possible future developments in a holistic and interactive manner.

Scenario and visioning work creates flexible frames of relevance and prioritization anchored in human cultural significance, which is vital for both engagement and communicability. The communicability of such narratives is a key factor for shaping collaborative multi-stakeholder alliances across disciplines, sectors or localities. Transitions depend on mobilizing concerted collective action. There therefore is a need for shared visions that are convincing, understandable and anchored in cultural and material realities, both for self-organizing and in order to mobilize and synchronize efforts. Working on strategies for communication and dialogue with societal actors and a wider audience who have not themselves participated in the visioning processes will therefore constitute an important challenge in upscaling and building on outcomes from the workshops.

Narratives can function as bridging artefacts beyond the group where they were initially shaped, to the extent that they give sufficient contextual detail for abstract patterns of thought to be related to lived experiences, while not depending on disciplinary jargon or existing institutional framing. Further significant characteristics are that they support action by including designation of responsible social agents, clarifying developments over time, and providing suggestions concerning possible causal links and consequences. Scenarios can thereby offer scaffolding to become a starting point for further discussions, and provide a conceptual structured space for reflection, suggesting how different details fit in, are interconnected, and may evolve over time.
For certain more directly action-oriented outcomes, subsequent steps in the project aim to support implementation and connect initiators with institutional contexts, networks or other resources required to move forward. A final challenge will be to find forms to support continuity and organizational capacity in the network of participants, without locking processes into a rigid institutional form. External funding will be sought to strengthen and upscale the VLs, and maintain continued networking capacity after the conclusion of the workshops. Considering the nature of this initiative, it is important that a base is shaped for the initiated processes to continue for several years to come.

It is today highly uncertain when and under what circumstances reconstruction will commence. Looking at historical precedents, however, such as Bosnia or Vietnam, it is certain that reconstruction and recovery processes run over extended periods of time, and that the long term perspective needs to be focused from the very outset, since initial measures tend to shape subsequent developments. Outcomes from the initiative have potential applicability in other cases around the world, involving volatile contexts and similar challenges for proactive knowledge development planning in dialogue and partnership with concerned populations.

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