

Advisory Meeting on the "Food for Thought" (F4T) Scenario Set
(10 July 2008)

Information Products for Nile Basin Water Resources Management
(GCP/INT/945/ITA)

1. Introduction

Through a highly participatory process, FAO Nile developed a scenario set – called "Food for Thought" (F4T) – to examine the uncertain future of demand for agricultural produce in the Nile Basin in the horizon year 2030.

The exercise involved some 75 stakeholders from the basin and was well received. It confirmed the importance and potential of regional cooperation among the Nile riparians, and discovered possible areas for enlarging common ground. Notably these areas are not directly related to river flow and therefore offer better prospects for negotiated solutions.

The scenario exercise has reached its halfway point. Critical questions in the next phase include: 1) how can we effectively disseminate the scenario set, 2) how can we promote fruitful scenario based strategic dialogue beyond the group that was involved so far, and 3) how can we ensure that our proceeds of today effectively help create 'better futures' for all.

A one-day advisory meeting with 6 key stakeholders was organized to address the above issues. It took place at the premises of the Nile Water Sector in Cairo.

This report presents the insight gained and recommendations made at this meeting.

2. Recap about Scenarios

The word scenario carries various different meanings. We therefore reiterate the meaning of scenarios and scenario thinking before discussing their application.

Firstly: scenarios are stories about the external environment, not about 'us', about our strategies, or our (contingency) plans. These stories can help us to make sense of what might happen, structuring our views on a complex and uncertain future, creating new ways of perceiving, new insights and hopefully new shared options. In short scenarios are tools for perception and preparation.

Secondly, scenarios are not predictions, but stories about what might well be possible. We would fool ourselves if we contend that we can forecast the future. The longer term future is full of uncertainties and unknowns: it is much wiser to take such uncertainties into account, than to discard them or wrap them up in some kind of prediction.

Thirdly, scenarios must be used as a set. We cannot choose one of the scenarios for some reason. All scenarios are plausible, and should therefore be considered. Also, no probabilities should (and could) be assigned to the various scenarios.

In terms of process, it is useful to make a distinction between:

- a. building / developing scenarios
- b. using scenarios (developed by others).

An interactive scenario building exercise - such as the Food for Thought process is in fact an 'accelerated learning process'. The article "Supporting the Nile Basin Shared Vision with Food for Thought: Jointly Discovering the Contours of Common Ground" describes this process along with some of the important insights and 'common ground' produced. During such a process an 'appreciative understanding' tends to grow of views, opinions, and perspectives of others involved, and shared insights tend to emerge.

Using scenarios that have been developed by other parties (e.g. a team of scenario builders, corporate planners etc.) is a different matter. Here we are facing a situation where 'users' have not been exposed to the scenarios before and therefore have not been part of the learning process and lack ownership.

Involvement in both scenario building and their application is clearly preferable, but often impractical or impossible.

3. Meeting Process

The meeting agenda was designed to reconsider the overall relevance of the F4T exercise, and solicit advice from a small group of trusted insiders on how to continue the F4T process. It aimed to develop a sense of shared purpose, and come to a common understanding about what to do next.

Annex 1 and 2 present the meeting agenda and list of participants respectively. To ensure a safe dialogue space, the meeting adopted the Chatham House rules: "participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed".

The first session 'state of play' aimed to revisit the outcomes so far and recapitulate the status of the F4T exercise and the insights gained. It also discussed the expected termination of FAO Nile by 31 December 2008 and the need to maintain a vehicle for possible continuation of F4T.

The second session concerned a visioning exercise. Participants were requested to picture themselves in 2010 and reflect on a successful conclusion of the F4T process. It invoked questions like "what has been achieved", "what did we do to get there", and "what have we avoided".

A stakeholder mapping identified target audiences and which critical parties to engage in the F4T process, together with their possible interests in and benefits from the exercise. It also considered 'forces' that are driving or restraining the continuation of F4T, and means to influence them.

With the above as input, an open discussion completed the advisory meeting.

4. Findings

4.1 Relevance

There was a high level of agreement among the participants regarding the relevance of the F4T exercise and the need for it to continue. Relevance was related to:

New ways of thinking

The Nile issue concerns a complex and protracted negotiation on the use and joint development of the shared water resources. It is characterized by high generative and social complexity. Ongoing population growth puts unprecedented pressure on natural resources, infrastructure, and government capacity. Old solutions, e.g. increasing water supply or expanding irrigated areas, no longer work. New, unfamiliar, and often untested solutions are required. Some governments no longer feel 'in control' in this environment of unpredictability, which conflicts with long established practices of solving problems 'from above'.

The parties involved have very different views on the historic context and on key concepts like water security or the potential of rainfed agriculture. Positions have become stuck and polarized.

The meeting confirmed this assessment: "we have strong mental barriers and we need tools that help us lower or eliminate them". It also confirmed the relevance of F4T: "we need new ways of thinking - this is where scenarios and scenario thinking plays a very important role".

Kahane (2007) proposes that highly complex problems require an approach that is systemic, emergent, and participatory. F4T fulfills these requirements.

Stretching mental models

An individual's world view is the composite of experiences, values, knowledge and dispositions that formulate his 'mental model'. It serves as the perception and conception structure that dictates how one interprets, reacts, and acts in the world (Selin, 2007). In a stable and familiar environment, one's mental model typically serves well for informed decision making. This is no longer the case in a rapidly changing or uncharted world.

"... in times of rapid change and increased complexity...the manager's mental model becomes a dangerous mixed bag: enormously rich detail and deep understanding that can coexist with dubious assumptions, selective inattention to alternative ways of interpreting evidence, and illusionary projections. In these times, the scenario approach has leverage to make a difference" (Wack 1984).

The article "Supporting the Nile Basin Shared Vision with Food for Thought: Jointly Discovering the Contours of Common Ground" lists a number of insights that have resulted from the F4T exercise. More could be expected when F4T is used as backdrop to investigate relevant policy questions through a strategic dialogue. They stretch mental models and provide a fresh perspective on the Nile issues. So far only the core scenario group has benefited. It is important to share these findings with a much larger audience.

Supporting a negotiation process

Roger Fisher, Professor at Harvard Law School proposes “in fluid and turbulent times, it is better to think in terms of coping with conflicts than resolving them”.

This follows the observation that conflict and cooperation occur simultaneously in a typical (water) resources management context (Allan 2008). Managing disagreement, therefore, appears a more realistic task than resolving conflict. The focus here is on process: how to deal with the inevitable differences efficiently, peacefully, and at minimum costs.

Scenarios have proven effective in supporting such processes. By systematically probing the “what if” question – from the perspective of multiple stakeholders - in the context of four plausible but very different futures, parties broaden their perspective and get a better sense of their interlocutor’s perceptions. This is important: “if you want to change somebody’s mind, you first have to know where it is” (Fisher 1993). It also helps to capture a more comprehensive range of interests and options, and leads to fresh insights regarding the dynamics and underlying structure of the issue at stake.

When individual insight sets start overlapping, much broader shared insights are developed, and mental models begin aligning. Joint points of departure emerge. This is what you want to achieve in a negotiation or conflict management process.

Strengthening regional economic integration

F4T explicitly looks at regional cooperation. This is in line with ongoing efforts at various levels to strengthen regional economic integration and increase trade among Nile countries. COMESA and the EAU are just two examples. The potential benefits are substantial.

The Cairo meeting asserted that F4T could support this process by: 1) assisting to systematically identify areas where cooperation is useful or necessary for promoting regional agricultural trade or developing regional agro-processing industries, 2) helping to appreciate the necessary conditions for this, and how to capture the benefits and avoid the pitfalls, and 3) supporting the policy harmonization process required.

4.2 Targets

F4T is not a stand-alone product. The objective is not to produce a realistic scenario set but to support decision making and policy formulation in relevant agencies in the Nile countries (e.g. the respective ministries for water, agriculture, and trade). Process design is critical to reaching this objective.

The first question to answer is about purpose. What are we trying to achieve? The 2010 visioning exercise identified the following targets:

- ✍ F4T used to assist Nile countries in identifying potential areas of cooperation that support the Shared Vision;
- ✍ The insights gained through F4T disseminated to stakeholders beyond the core scenario group, and increasingly used to inform decision making, establish policy priorities, and support policy reform in the domains of food security, agricultural planning and development, water resources, and (regional) trade;
- ✍ F4T used for policy development to stimulate agricultural trade and agro-processing in the Nile region;
- ✍ F4T used to harmonize development and poverty eradication policies in the Nile Basin countries;
- ✍ Information and data increasingly shared among Nile countries; in particular data regarding agricultural market potential.

4.3 Key Stakeholders

A stakeholder mapping exercise prioritized target audiences as follows:

1. Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR)
2. Ministry of Agriculture (MoA)
3. Farmers Unions and Organizations
4. Ministry of Trade (MoT)
5. Nile TAC / Nile COM

It provided the following engagement advise:

MoWR: they serve as process champions and base for F4T; broaden their scope to agriculture and agricultural trade; only involve policy and legislative units.

Farmers Unions and Organizations: they have to inform the process and serve as advocacy towards policy reform; as economic players they have influence; treat them carefully because of political sensitivities.

MoT: they spearhead policy reform and make things happen; change their focus from protecting domestic markets to regional cooperation.

Nile TAC / Nile COM: keep informed, and focus in particular on possible areas of cooperation.

4.4 Activities

The targets identified in 4.2 roughly fall into two categories:

1. informing people of the scenario stories and their possible implications;
2. engaging people in a scenario-informed thinking process, thinking through implications and options for the future.

The former objective can be served by making a booklet available, accompanied by material on implications and some of the conclusions drawn by the F4T scenario building team. Alternatively, a scenario presentation can be given, followed by

'questions and answers' and some discussion around implications and options. In some cases a video is made available.

The second objective is clearly more ambitious, and takes the form of a workshop (or a series of workshops). Here the strategic conversation / dialogue plays an important role and the workshops must be run by a trained facilitator.

During such workshops the scenarios are visited one by one (remember all are plausible). The first step is to engage the participants in the scenario stories, to get them to understand their drivers and causal structure (logic). Secondly stakeholders enter the stage: which are the key stakeholders in the context of the scenario and how would they react or respond to the scenario conditions at hand? And thirdly – understanding all this – what would be the implications for "us" and what would we do if it happened?

The answers to this 'what if' question form a set of options for the future per scenario, but also – collectively – across all our scenarios. Looking at all the options (both new and existing ones) against the background of all scenarios, will give a feel for robust options, risky options, 'tickets to ride', what to avoid, timing etc. The workshop concludes with a dialogue about insights gained, question marks remaining, directions to follow, actions to take, and – hopefully - some contours of 'common ground' and ideas on how to bring the process to the next level.

More specifically, the above translates into the following activities:

- ✍ Form a group of national F4T champions who will disseminate F4T and the insights obtained to a broader audience with particular focus on the stakeholders identified in 4.3;
- ✍ Train the above group in facilitating scenario workshops, both to inform new audiences about F4T and to engage in F4T based scenario thinking;
- ✍ Produce very good communication tools for disseminating the scenario set beyond the core group; this should include a video; the aim is to facilitate engagement and F4T based strategic dialogue;
- ✍ Design and organize a series of national and regional workshops targeting the objectives listed in 4.2; aim is to broaden the scenario process and bring on board other sectors and critical stakeholders (as listed in 4.3); a flexible approach is required and each country can adjust its operation to national settings, priorities, and audiences; the project office can provide logistic support and assist in facilitating the first few national workshops;
- ✍ Cooperate with other networks – including Global Water Partnership (GWP) – in implementing the above;
- ✍ Keep regional economic institutions (EAC – COMESA) informed.

Of critical importance is that national scenario facilitators have fully internalized and mastered F4T and core principles of scenario thinking. They should be able to convincingly communicate F4T to new audiences, without going into lengthy discussions on the validity of individual scenarios. Thorough training of national facilitators is key.

Broad casting and narrow casting require fundamentally different approaches and have different impacts. Because of the nature of the subjects (trade, rural development policies, etc.) and its capacity to inform decision making – a technical debate - the F4T tool is better suited for engaging small audiences than for reaching

out to the larger public. This follows the advice: “Focus energy and resources on organizing and supporting scenario conversations by members of the scenario team with their own network of influence – not on mass communication” (Kahane, 2008).

While F4T now searches for common ground not directly related to the river, Nile cooperation regarding the river itself should not be dismissed. It was the entry point for the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and has attracted attention from both politicians and lenders. The proposed hydropower dams involve large investments and represents significant interests. Broadening the discussions to beyond the river will require a smooth transition.

4.5 Expanding and Updating F4T

The Cairo workshop emphasized the need to include a more detailed analysis of biofuels and biomaterials in the demand scenario set. Although not formally on the agenda, this topic came back into the discussions time and again. F4T follow-up will require examining the threats and opportunities posed by biofuels against the backdrop of the scenario set.

F4T may require occasional updating to ensure its relevance.

5. Conclusions

Data, data products, or tools that are not used have no value. If not supporting a decision making process, they do not represent ‘information’. The core value of F4T lies in engaging decision makers in a strategic dialogue that will stretch their mental models, open up new ways of thinking, and create joint points of departure for the Nile negotiations. If not continued, the impact of F4T will remain limited with its potential largely untapped.

The advisory meeting underscored the relevance and timeliness of F4T. Mental barriers hold back progress on the Nile negotiations, and new ways of thinking are required. Scenario thinking could assist in breaking this deadlock. There was a high level of consensus regarding the need to continue the F4T process.

Objectives, target audiences, and activities were identified, and implementation details discussed. The material obtained could serve as the basis for a detailed proposal for a follow-up project.

Annex 1: Workshop Agenda

Annex 2: List of Participants