

Discussion: Prospects for a Decentralization Scenario in the Era of Urban-Rural Multidimensional Circulation: Viewpoints and Issues

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1. Introduction¹⁾

As to the way to rural redevelopment posed by scholars who consider local/rural areas as an essential part of a national territory, endogenous and autonomous in human and material resources, small-scale and niche initiatives have been attracting attention. Transition theory, which has evolved in studies on the history of technology and society, indicates that novel but niche innovations may break out to develop regime-level socio-economic transformation, and finally lead to landscape-level change (Geels, 2001). In contrast to the incremental view that the niches would converge on a combined alternative development path, political intervention with a clear goal can also contribute to a practical mobilization for rural restoration. Our current world calls for shared and clear goals to grapple with problems originating from system failures. The deterioration of rural vitality in Japan is one of the system problems. Only policies with resolute intention can avert the crisis.

2. Method of Backcasting

Backcasting is one of the planning methods that can escape from the conclusion resulting as an extension of the current trajectory. The term ‘backcasting’ was used for the first time in the title of an article on energy policy written by Robinson (1982), and thereafter he insisted on adopting the method of backcasting rather than forecasting in order to settle emerging global socio-environmental problems because they require long-term perspectives (Robinson, 1990). We live in the era of Anthropocene, where human activities impact seriously on the whole globe. We social scientists should recognize that human intention makes our future, while considering scientific theory on human behavior based on causality.

Figure 1 shows a difference between forecasting and backcasting methods conceptually, setting the goal of rural sustainability. We currently standing at **A** can choose multiple policy directions in order to achieve the goal. In the

case of forecasting based on empirical causality, policy options are confined within former experiences and their trajectories fluctuate in the lower level below a ceiling separating failure and success for rural sustainability, just like passing the point of **B** or **C**.

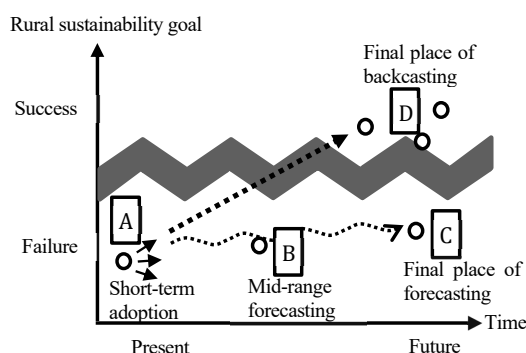


Figure 1. Forecasting and backcasting

Note: modified by author based on Dreborg (1996: p.815).

In contrast to forecasting, the backcasting method sets a final goal in the relevant distant future above the ceiling of sustainability in the first place. If a goal is set 30 years into the future, the goal is broken down into a series of stages backward, for instance, from a goal for 20 years later to one for 10 years later, and practical policies are built for each stage to achieve the goals. The most advantageous characteristic of this method is that various policies scattered in policy fields but related to the goal can be made to converge in the direction of achieving the goal. The issue of rural sustainability is connected to vast policy fields because the problem of rural deterioration emerges from the problems of the whole system governing every part of our society. To tackle such an intertwined problem, most policies must be harmonized with the common goal, shown as a point around **D** in Figure 1.

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¹⁾ The comment is originally based on Akitsu (2020).

3. Scenario Building

Then how do we create the goal placed at **D**? Building a policy goal in far distant future involves uncertainty. To construct the goal with reality while considering uncertainty, scenario planning is used. As Dreborg says, ‘Clearly backcasting is a kind of scenario study’ (1996: p.816). The backcasting is conducted concomitant with scenario planning. There are some studies on the combination of scenario planning and backcasting: focusing on the countryside in England (Mahroum, 2005), and local ecosystem management policies (Palacios-Agundez, 2013), to name two.

Kahene (2012) proposes a more radical and broadly influential model derived from his own experiences as a facilitator. His scenario planning, which aims to transform social formation, is divided into five steps. The first step is to ‘enroll a team of people from across a whole system who want to ... influence the future of the system’ (p.27). Retreat workshops involving them are held several times over four to ten months. The second step, to ‘Observe What Is Happening’ (p.37), works on finding uncertain but most effective factors for the future as well as sharing common concerns. The third step, called ‘Construct Stories About What Could Happen’ (p.51), devotes itself to building four scenarios which are derived from either a deductive method with the above uncertain factors or an inductive one with brainstorming among the participant stakeholders. In the fourth step, to ‘Discover What Can and Must be Done’ (p.61), the participants select the best scenario from the four, while crystallizing their intention as a team. The last step is to ‘Act to Transform the System’ (p.69). Various actions not only in governmental policies but in other channels are mobilized for the goal in the process of backcasting.

Table 1. Four scenarios for the goal of rural restoration

	Ultimate adoption of technology	Moderate adoption of technology
Decentralization	Cut Vegetable	Carrot Covered With Soil
Centralization	Supplement	Shriveled Cabbage

Note: made by author.

Table 1 is just a sample version of scenario building for setting the goal of Japan’s rural restoration. Based on Kahene’s steps, scenarios should result from continuing discussions among stakeholders. Imagining that I were one of the participants, I propose four scenarios produced by two sets of opposed factors which seem to be influential.

The four scenarios are named one by one. **Cut Vegetable** results when decentralization policies are introduced and high technology is allowed to prevail ultimately. Then the rural population will be maintained or increase but an intimate contact with agriculture will be lost even in rural areas. **Carrot Covered With Soil** is the scenario most recommended. Decentralization policies and moderate adoption of technology collaborate harmoniously and a proper number of people live in rural areas, keeping a close relation with agriculture. Organic agriculture and products supported by scientific analyses becomes common among farmers and consumers. **Supplement** shows the most rational and utilitarian view of a rural future. The farming areas with intensified high-tech methods are designated definitely separate from urban and natural conservation areas. The last one, **Shriveled Cabbage** is on an extended line of current policies with no clear and intentional goal.

4. Stakeholder Workshop and Policies

A process of policy making through backcasting with the selected scenario still remains. The most urgent matter, however, is to hold the stakeholder workshops hosted by central and/or local governments to share a common goal of rural future sustainability.

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