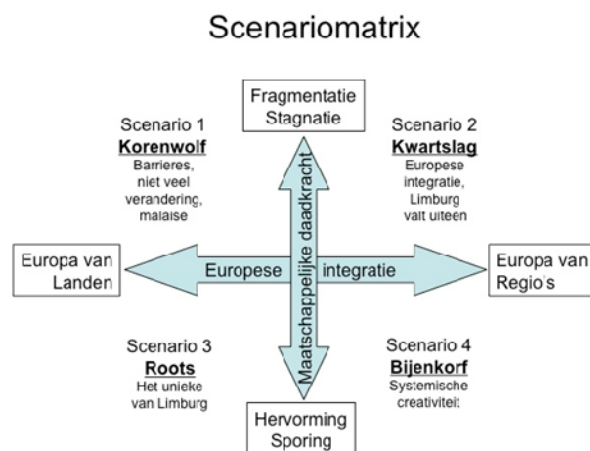


Future Search in Southern Limburg, thanks to Perspective

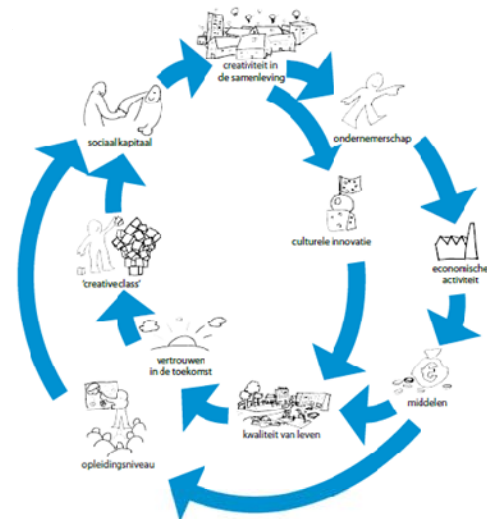
Tantalizing perspectives for the region

Early November 2011, a diverse group of fifty-two leaders gathered for a two-and-a-half-day Future Search on the socio-economic development of the Southern Limburg Region. Result: Seven inspired missions for 2020, backed up with concrete actions. Plus the energy, inspiration and connections for making them happen.

The Future Search was a milestone in the Nightingales Project that started in 2009. In that year, coordinated by the HIT-foundation (innovation platform for labor and migration), funded by the Province of Limburg and a European grant and with input from all parts of society, the Nightingales Scenarios were created. These scenarios vividly depicted the possible futures of the region (picture 1), which is struggling with an aging population and economic slow-down. In addition, the dynamic system driving socio-economic developments was revealed (picture 2). The combination of these two outcomes represented a tantalizing perspective: *If only* the leadership would pull together and *if only* we would be successful in crossing the borders to our neighboring countries, Southern Limburg should have plenty potential to compete with the best regions in the world!



Picture 1: Four possible futures.....



Picture 2: Causal relations in Southern Limburg

From insight to action

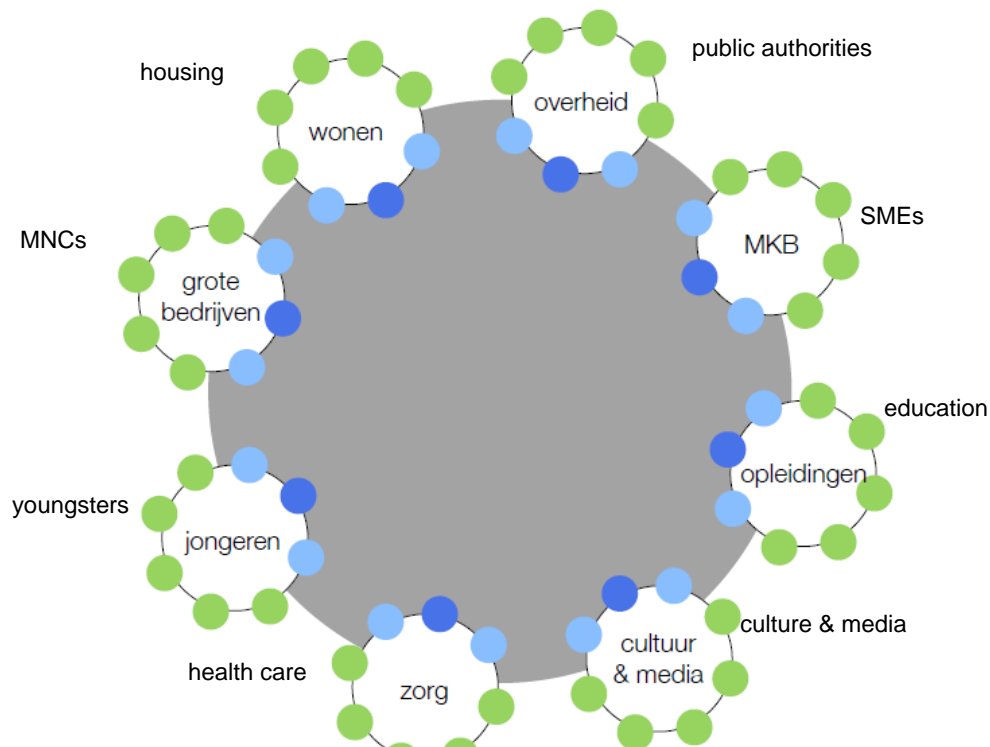
At that point, it was September 2009, Peter Schütte, who had been facilitating the Nightingales scenario-process together with Kees van der Heijden (former Scenario Planning expert at Shell, and now emeritus prof at Said Business School in Oxford), gave me a call. He was one of the actors at the start of Perspective, where he trained the group of founding members in scenario-planning techniques. He brought me into contact with Petra de Boer and Frank Bastiaens from HIT-foundation to discuss how to translate the insight gained in the scenario-planning exercise into coherent action. So, while savoring a nice pizza on an outside terrace in Maastricht, I found myself talking about the Perspective-ideas of dialogue enhancing processes for complex issues. It came to my mind that a Future Search could be an effective next step and this raised their immediate interest.

But for the short term they had another problem on their minds: The closing-event of the Nightingales Scenarios exercise still had to be organized and they were looking for something more appealing and participative than the obligatory “presentations-and-forum-discussion-conference”. They invited me to co-design this session and, putting one and one together, I introduced a number of FS principles in the event’s agenda:

- ▶ Boosting participation and empowerment by creating workshops for self-managed stakeholder groups.
- ▶ “Getting the whole system in the room”. As the representation of stakeholder groups in the event was quite unbalanced, we decided to make up for that through role-play. People got hats, indicating what group they belonged to.
- ▶ Enhancing creativity and “whole-system-thinking” by alternately differentiating and integrating these stakeholder groups.

It turned out a success and created the trust with the HIT-foundation to full-heartedly go for the next step: The Nightingales Dialogues, a Future Search with the leaders of Southern Limburg.

The scenario-planning and systems-analysis work provided very valuable inputs to this next step. From the dynamic system of the region eight relevant stakeholders for the Future Search could easily be identified. And the scenario-material told us what aspects to concentrate on when discussing the future of the region. In order to mobilize the leadership for the Future Search, we designed a “growth model”: for each stakeholder group first find and inspiring leader, then ask this leader to identify two other leaders and with the resulting group of 24, have a session to make preparations and commitments for the final Future Search (picture 3)



Picture 3: Stakeholder group “growth-model”

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A long and winding road

Putting this in practice did not prove to be easy. In talking with potential leaders, they generally showed a genuine interest; they sensed that this was something “out of the ordinary” that could initiate the participative and creative process that the region needed. But at the same time some of them were concerned that the outcomes might be competing with other initiatives in the region. These other initiatives were many and very good: they tried to address the fragmentation in the area on a municipal as well as provincial level. The most important coherent program resulting from these initiatives is Brainport 2020 / CampusPlan South Limburg. In this plan, the economic development in the region is boosted by private / public co-operations for innovative activities in material and life sciences around campuses in Geleen and Maastricht.

So, even though we argued that the Future Search would provide a broader, more deeply rooted and creative pendant to the blue-print plans of Brainport-2020 and would never conflict as all actions would be based on “common ground”, we seemed to progress with the hand-brake on all the time. Through a kind of “shuttle diplomacy” we nevertheless succeeded to get a group of leaders together for a breakfast-and-morning-session in the inspiring “Glass Palace” in Heerlen in January 2011. In preparation of this session, Perspectivity – colleague and professional Future Search facilitator Han Rakels had joined the project group. We drew up a program that was alternately informative and participative, culminating in a group dialogue which we hoped would lead to a clear definition of the central question to be answered through the Future Search and the commitment to go ahead with it. The whole program was highly successful, but for the closing dialogue. In this dialogue the group divided along the lines of those who were prepared to trust the process to come up with sensible and aligned solutions and those who wanted to impose restrictions in order to keep the outcomes in line with the blue-print plans of the authorities.

But sufficient enthusiasm was raised to keep the fire burning and after several sessions with the leaders it was possible to conclude on a shared theme for the Future Search: “How to accelerate the socio-economic developments of Southern Limburg, with Brainport 2010 as engine”. Through this theme, Brainport 2020 was recognized as the single most important driver for the knowledge economy in the region, but as an engine, not as an all encompassing blue-print. By doing this, doors were opened for small businesses, cultural institutions and entrepreneurs, youngsters and others to make contributions to the region that only they can identify, and only in interaction with each other.

Inspiration as a reward

So, finally, two years after the Nightingales Scenarios, the Nightingales Dialogues took place, financially supported by the Province of Limburg. With an excellent preparation and organization secured by the HIT-foundation, and Han Rakels (Perspectivity) and Kees-Jan Bender (Shell) guiding the process in a masterly fashion, how inspirational they were! Fifty-two leaders, from the mayor of Sittard-Geleen and the Chairman of the Managing Board of the Maastricht University Medical Center to young entrepreneurs, artists, school managers and social workers, found each other in surprisingly creative initiatives. I participated as a “small business” (Perspectivity!) representative. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, seven missions emerged, all contributing to the socio-economic development of the region, backed up by actions and motivated groups of people to make them happen. Most participants vowed to come back in the beginning of 2012, to follow-up on what was created. For a report of the whole meeting

and its results, please refer to the HIT-foundation website [Nightingales Future Search — A HIT Foundation project](#).



Picture 4: Plenary session during Nightingales Future Search

Perspectivity as it's meant to be

The co-operation with HIT-foundation in creating the Nightingales Dialogues is Perspectivity as it's meant to be. We were able to contribute to finding creative solutions for real-life complex issues by offering dialogue-enhancing processes. We instigated inspired dialogue and self-reflective learning and made completely new liaisons possible. And we can't summarize what was so "special" about it any better than by quoting some of the participants in what they put in the evaluation as most appealing:

About the process:

- "Diversity of participants; eight sector approach"
- "Interaction that creates; discovering interrelations"
- "Respect for each other"
- "Open character, safety in a diverse group"
- "New and especially young faces!"

About the results:

- "Awareness and new perspectives"
- "Concrete actions"
- "A breeding ground was born!"
- "Common ground and a sense of urgency"
- "Clear vision"

I am really looking forward to contributing further to this fantastic process that, apart from everything else, introduced me to dozens of interesting, committed people and reinforced my connection with the region where I live in a way that would not otherwise have been possible.

Hans Keijzer, Maastricht, December 2011