



Introduction

World Futures Studies Federation: histories and futures

A look back at the origins of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) show that, in contrast with its larger US cousin, the World Futures Society (WFS), the WFSF was created by people who dissented from the emerging status quo in the world and who wished to ‘open up’ the domain to cultural pluralism. In his account of the first 15 years Bart van Steenbergen quotes Robert Jungk on the emergence of new futures techniques. He said that:

these powerful tools should not be restricted to a technocratic elite, for the future belongs to all of us and for that reason it is absolutely essential that future research is internationalised and democratised as soon as possible. [5]

Later Steenbergen adds that ‘there was full agreement that it should be a genuine international organisation and not one dominated by the Western world.’ [6] He also writes of the many debates and conflicts that took place but also identifies two other features of the organisation. It ‘played a major role as a breeding ground for future futurists’ and it attempted to maintain a suitable ‘distance from the powers that be.’ [7]

Thus, from the beginning the WFSF aspired to be a true world federation. As time passed it became rich in people, insight, idealism and effort. It has never yet been rich in financial terms. But its financial standing could improve if current initiatives bear fruit [3]. It has certainly created a tradition of flexibility and openness; a tolerant environment in which many voices can be heard and a variety of progressive agendas pursued. Behind this, and all-but invisible to the membership throughout *every* stage, a vast amount of unpaid voluntary work has been carried out by small groups of dedicated people. There have been 18 world conferences, many regional meetings and countless introductory courses in nearly every part of the world. And, while the WFSF archive is still being developed, a glance at the publications that have been produced—either by it, or in collaboration with members and others—reveals an impressive sequence of quality scholarship and applied effort. Then there is the *Bulletin*. It began as a modest collection of items collated in Eleonora Masini’s kitchen and moved through various stages and designs as the Secretariat moved from country to country. Currently it is expertly produced by Chris Jones and distributed both in ‘hard copy’ and via the internet. The latter, with all its attendant problems of equity, access

and misuse, enables members of the WFSF to be in much closer touch with each other than would have been thought possible in the early days. It is sometimes a mixed blessing.

As the 21st century dawned and all the hopes that many had for ‘new thinking’ in this ‘new millennium’ steadily faded, so both the WFS and the WFSF faced new challenges. Measured in terms of raw membership numbers it has been suggested by some that the ‘peak years’ of FS may be in the past. As globalisation went from strength to strength; as the abstract imperatives of the almighty market seemed to grow ever stronger and, through the world-wide assault of marketing, ever more invasive, so questions of viable, sustainable futures seemed to slip from the agendas of government and business. Short-term thinking, the bottom line, corporate greed and collapse coloured the early years of the 21st Century. So, of course, did the September 11, 2001 tragedy and, though it is far from the worst disaster to have befallen humans, the world has clearly not been the same since.

Given such turmoil and upheaval, it is not surprising that many Westerners are tempted to metaphorically ‘throw up their hands’ and give up, turn back on themselves, retreat to the comfort of their high-tech cocoons, their metre-wide plasma TV screens and endless re-runs of their favourite shows on DVD. It goes without saying that these are not the kinds of response being explored in the WFSF. While yet still relatively small in numerical terms, it contains within its ranks some of the most innovative thinkers, some of the most effective futures/foresight practitioners, the world has yet seen. Their common theme is that of active engagement with the civilizational challenges of our time.

Another widely overlooked factor is that, over recent decades, the quality of futures work has increased enormously. The shift from what could be called ‘mono-cultural empirical FS’ (i.e. considering exterior phenomena from within a taken-for-granted Western frame), to ‘multicultural and critical FS’ (embracing a range of cultural interior phenomena), and from there to integral perspectives and methods (balancing inner and outer phenomena in all cultures) has greatly increased the reach and power of this work. This process of ‘methodological renewal’ is bringing new vitality to older futures methods and also creating quite new ones [4]. Beyond this, generational changes are occurring. As an earlier generation departs it is the younger members of the WFSF (and, indeed, the WFS) that are beginning to take the initiative and further build the field for the demanding tasks ahead. Meanwhile, however, humanity clearly faces some highly intractable problems. A sometimes overlooked part of the task is to ‘clear the fog’ of conventional perception; to see our current world clearly; to know what, in our time needs to be done, and how to begin it. It is for these reasons that one of most productive things we can do is to ‘take issue with the way things are’. That is a theme that permeates many of the contributions included here.

1. WFSF histories

Just as it is a commonplace amongst futurists that there is no single ‘future’ it has become obvious that there is no singular ‘past’. What has been gathered together here, therefore, bears little resemblance to an ‘official history’. Rather, it is a series of overlapping accounts of the origins and development of the WFSF. Bart van Steenbergem gives a priceless participant’s account of some of the events of the early years. He is followed by Eleonora

Masini's account of her years as Secretary General and President. Indeed, it is often said that she is the 'mother' of the Federation. Be that as it may, Prof Masini's contributions helped to shape the WFSF during its early years and she will remain an enduring influence.

It was no easy task to praise an account of his experience of the Federation from Jim Dator. But the effort and the wait were certainly worthwhile. Of all the papers collected here, it is Dator's that most clearly, perhaps, captures what might be called the 'inner sense' of WFSF culture. Dator travelled endlessly, communicated widely, and inspired many—this writer included—to join in and work with the Federation. Karoliina Saajos ably covers the next period when the secretariat and presidency were located in Turku, Finland, with Pentti Malaska at the helm. This was another innovative period for the Federation, with a wide range of events, publications and conferences. Finally Sohail Inayatullah takes up the story of the move to Australia and Tony Stevenson's term as President. He skilfully chronicles some of the achievements and tensions of that time.

Overall, this collection provides what is may be the first historical overview of the emergence and development of the WFSF during its first 30 years. To see it merely as 'academic exercise' would be to miss the point. The main purpose is to *use* this knowledge of the 'why' and 'how' of its origins to inform and support its further development. Knowing our shared histories is a necessary prelude to co-creating humanly viable futures.

2. WFSF futures, interviews and narratives

Over the last couple of years efforts have been made to develop forward-looking materials that will help to sketch out where the Federation might go from here. Far more has been received than could be used in this issue. Some are part of a developing WFSF archive while others may well appear on the web site and in future publications. Two papers on WFSF futures are presented here. The first was written by Alexandra Montgomery during an internship at the University of Houston's Clear Lake program. She considers what may be involved in managing what she calls the WFSF's 'sphere of influence'. It is a challenging paper that looks briefly at a number of contrasting scenarios for WFSF's own futures. It is followed by Jose Ramos and Tamas Gaspar's paper on Youth and the WFSF. Here they set out a number of suggestions for engaging with, and encouraging, developments in this crucial area.

There follow two interviews carried out by Jose Ramos. One is with this writer and Zia Sardar; the other is with Ashis Nandy during a brief visit to Melbourne in 2003. Ramos has worked tirelessly as an AFI intern for the last couple of years and we are all indebted to him for his dedication and commitment. Finally a 'personal narrative' has been included from Wendell Bell which provides further evidence of the vitality of the Federation and its far-flung membership.

3. Role(s) of the WFSF

The World Futures Studies Federation is a relatively small NGO with several hundred members around the world. It supports the development and implementation of futures

thinking and policy in many places. It runs futures courses for young people and provides links for courses run in some 50 universities. It provides a context for dissenting views and visions of the future. It encourages the emergence of new voices from many different cultures into the futures conversation. It stands against hegemony—wherever and whenever it is found—and the ‘one true way’. Over time these contributions can have catalytic effects. Part of that is the need to promote good work and to stand against sloppy work, conventional thinking and the careless uses of power that Ulrich Beck rightly describes as currently ‘legal but illegitimate’.[1] There is no way around this. One cannot be sanguine about the current world order and its distorted *modus operandi* and, at the same, time expect solutions to emerge from dominant institutions. It will not happen. Lasting solutions will emerge, perhaps, wherever people of integrity are clear about what is going on, when they act out of positive shared values and where they refuse the current sugar-coated version of progress now being marketed throughout the world.

John Berger is someone who has known this for a long time. In one of his essays he wrote that:

the first step towards building an alternative world has to be *a refusal of the world picture implanted in our minds* and all the false promises used everywhere to justify and idealise the delinquent and insatiable need to sell. [2] (My emphasis)

He then added ‘another space is vitally necessary.’ The WFSF is just such a space where aspects of the current ‘world picture’ can be critiqued, worked through and re-negotiated. But it is more than that. It is a community, an environment, what Robert Jungk called a ‘seed bed’ for social innovation. Here, then, is a summary the themes that have created the WFSF and continue to inspire those working within it. They include the need to:

- critique power and stand apart from it;
- explore alternatives to the status quo;
- equip people with the means to define and explore futures of their choice;
- encourage the young to understand and take charge of their world;
- encourage a range of social innovations, especially futures in education;
- build the futures/foresight domain in both theoretical and applied ways;
- induct newcomers into the field; and
- collectively explore the grounds of futures beyond dystopia.

The WFSF, finally, exists for the same reason that FS exists. Both were called forth by the history we are living through and the wide range of acceptable and unacceptable futures that continuously spring from the moving present. This special issue suggests that, while its early work is over, there are yet more challenging times ahead for the WFSF.

It is time for a new generation to take up the challenge.

References

- [1] U. Beck, *What is Globalization?*, Polity Press, London, 2000.
 [2] J. Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, Vintage, New York, 2003.

- [3] One of the most promising connections is the shared ‘arena of interest’ between the goals of certain philanthropists and those of FS/foresight practitioners. At the time of writing the Australian Foresight Institute had just appointed a researcher in this strategically vital area.
- [4] See chapters 8–11 on Futures studies and the integral agenda, in R. Slaughter, *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*, Routledge Falmer, London, 2004.
- [5] B. Van Steenberg, *The First Fifteen Years: A Personal View of the Early History of the WFSF (1967–1982)*, Manuscript, 2003, p. 1.
- [6] B. Van Steenberg, *The First Fifteen Years: A Personal View of the Early History of the WFSF (1967–1982)*, Manuscript, 2003, p. 2.
- [7] B. Van Steenberg, *The First Fifteen Years: A Personal View of the Early History of the WFSF (1967–1982)*, Manuscript, 2003, p. 3.

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