

# **The Role of Futures Studies in Reducing Global Risk**

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## **Abstract/Introduction**

The paper begins by defining the ‘civilisational challenge’, ie, the futures that will occur if present trends continue. A diagnosis of our historical predicament is offered. The paper continues by outlining what Futures Studies (FS) provides. This includes:

- \* a disciplinary foundation or FS knowledge base (eg. concepts, methods, tools etc);
- \* the capacity to construct the forward view; and
- \* contributions to reducing global risk.

A high-quality forward view is one that facilitates a ‘structural overview’ (not a predictive one) of the near-term future over the next 20 or so years. Such a view generates ‘signals’ or ‘messages’ for the present which permit the exercise of applied foresight. Foresight has many functions, including a protective awareness of future contingencies. During unstable times it has become a social necessity - but is not yet recognised as one.

The paper outlines some of the perceptual and organisational innovations that are needed to create low-risk futures. They include revising aspects of the Western worldview, reinventing economics, re-framing technology, creating and staffing Institutions of Foresight (IOFs). Such developments would allow us to move away from the high-risk path we are now upon and toward more advanced stages of civilised life. A useful model is that of a ‘wise culture’.

## **The civilisational challenge**

The current trends that are currently inscribed within the global system do not lead to a world of peace, prosperity and plenty. They lead to a world that is devastated and diminished in nearly every respect. It is a world that is mined out, polluted, denuded of other life forms and compromised beyond all hope of salvage or repair. How can this be stated with such apparent confidence? For several decades now the evidence has been available. It is there for anyone to see, hear and understand. It has been collected by scientists, researchers, scholars, writers and others. It has been written up in countless papers, articles and books. <sup>1</sup> It has been debated at length in many conferences and convocations of the wise. The evidence has been the subject of TV documentaries. It has been woven into films, novels, school curricula and no doubt other forms of media as well. Who knows how many column inches of evidence exist in newspapers or data banks, in archives and libraries around the world?

But humanity has taken shelter in some remarkable defence mechanisms, many of which have been taken up, exploited and reinforced by those directing large enterprises and state instrumentalities. It is a mistake to think that entire populations are avoiding reality as part of a conspiracy or cover-up. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact that present ways of life, modes of social and economic organisation, continue on their self-destructive path occurs because humans have construed their world in particular ways and they are not about to change habits of perception that are so deeply ingrained without confronting highly-persuasive reasons why they should do so. Unfortunately, social experiences of the kind that would be needed are themselves fairly terminal. Hence humanity drifts along in a kind of business-as-usual daze, largely unaware that the days of its proud and uncaring dominance are numbered unless it understands, and comes fully to grips with, what I call the ‘civilisational challenge’. This challenge is to clearly comprehend the historical

predicament humanity is in and to respond to it, not superficially, but with clarity, depth and commitment. But comprehension is limited when the worldview, the 'cultural software' widely available, belongs to an earlier age and when people in their daily lives have constant recourse to all the forms of denial, evasion and unreality that are plentifully available. <sup>2</sup>

There is an outer and an inner dimension to the civilisational challenge. The outer dimension is comprised of the processes of global deterioration that are reflected and reported in the ways I mentioned above. The inner dimension lies in the self-understandings of people and in the active principles that operate in the social structures and organisations they have created. The web of social and economic life that prevails on the planet at the turn of the millennium is one that was constructed painstakingly over many generations and in very different conditions to those that now apply. It is a huge achievement. But the frame-breaking proposition before us is that humanity must either move on or fall back into a much more primitive state. The road to hell may be paved with good intentions, but we need much more than these to learn our way ahead with diligence and skill.

### **Emergence of Futures Studies**

The field of Futures Studies (FS) emerged in the mid 20th century because people realised that they were living in the midst of profound historical shifts. For example, the long rise of science and technology brought with it new opportunities and dangers. The future would clearly be unlike the past. Increasingly it would be an artefact, a result of the actions and decisions made by people. From being an insignificant hominid species sharing the planet with countless others, humanity had progressively re-made the natural world to better serve its needs. It became the single most powerful force on the planet that often equalled, or excelled, that of natural processes. Within slow-moving traditional cultures the future was very similar to the past. Yesterday's solutions would continue to apply to tomorrow's problems. Wisdom was derived from understanding what the past had to teach, and then applying it. But in the fast-moving context of the 20th century, forward thinking became a necessity. Otherwise too much can go wrong.

Over several decades the field of FS experienced rapid growth as both the methods and the discourse were progressively developed, taken up and applied. At first the main applications were in strategic military analysis, paradigmatically expressed in Herman Kahn's work on cold war scenarios. But then corporations discovered the future and began to integrate a number of futures methods into their own strategic planning. They found forecasting and scenarios particularly useful. At the same time, a variety of educators, activists, writers and social innovators were pursuing the egalitarian implications of futures work. People such as Bertrand de Jouvenel, E.F. Schumacher, Robert Jungk and Hazel Henderson showed how futures thinking, futures tools, futures ideas and concepts, could be used to liberate people from prevailing assumptions and practices. The key word here was participation. FS could be used to 'colonise the future' on behalf of existing elites or it could be used to explore choices and alternatives for individuals and communities.

The first expressions of modern futures work were undoubtedly Western. This is due to the fact that it was the 'rich West' (ie. North America and Europe) which first encountered the full spectrum of modernising effects which flowed from the Industrial Revolution. It was here that the first freeways and supermarkets were built, that TV penetrated nearly 100% of homes, that oppositional youth sub-cultures first developed and that some of the costs of rapid technical developments were experienced most starkly in a series of well-publicised technological disasters. However, overall, the impacts of modernisation were, and remain, global. So as time passed, so forward thinking also began to emerge in the non-West. Today the drive to understand and use the forward view is a near-universal impulse that is felt and expressed in the vast majority of the world's cultures. So by the

late 20th century, FS had ‘come of age’. It was no longer mainly American or European. It had become a global concern.

### **Knowledge Base of Futures Studies (KBFS)**

The KBFS emerged in response to a felt need for a more widely shared account of what the field actually is and how the different parts of it reinforce each other. A special issue of the journal *Futures* in 1993 set out a provisional model and provided a number of commentaries on various aspects of FS<sup>3</sup> The issue received wide support and was subsequently developed into a substantive series of books<sup>4</sup> The first three volumes contain work by some 50 authors from around the world. The significance of the KBFS is that, first, we now have a collective statement about what the core elements of FS are. Second, and unlike earlier formulations, this account is not merely ‘Western’. Rather, it includes the work of people from many different cultures, east and west, north and south. Third, it incorporates notions of dissent and critique; the latter being seen both as a core methodology and as a part of the field’s own provision for quality control.

The current model is based on the following elements. The sub-headings in Figure 1 are from the sub-sections of the three existing KBFS books.

#### **Figure 1 Elements of the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies**

##### Volume 1: Foundations

- Part 1: Origins
- Part 2: Futures concepts and metaphors
- Part 3: The Futures literature
- Part 4: The foundations of Futures Studies

##### Volume 2: Organisations, Practices, Products

- Part 1: Futures organisations
- Part 2: Futures methods and tools
- Part 3: Images and imaging processes
- Part 4: Social innovations and futures

##### Volume 3: Directions and Outlooks

- Part 1: New directions in futures thinking
- Part 2: The outlook for the new millennium
- Part 3: The long view

Volumes 1 and 2 provide a systematic overview of core elements of FS - elements that enhance and reinforce each other. Volume 3 samples some of the high-quality interpretative knowledge that emerges from FS. It is significant for the role of FS within the wider community that such knowledge arguably cannot be derived from any other source. However, it is essential to note that the KBFS is not ‘foundational’ in the sense of constituting a set of monolithic, unchanging certainties. Rather, it will develop and change over time as a result of at least four processes:

\* Critique - the elimination of redundant aspects;

- \* Innovation - the incorporation of new ideas, methodologies etc;
- \* New voices - the emergence and participation of those from non-Western contexts; and
- \* Synthesis - new developments based on combinations of new and older elements. <sup>5</sup>

Hence what is considered 'foundational' now will not be the same as that in times to come. Nevertheless, the existence of this knowledge base provides a powerful stimulus to the further development and application of FS as a discipline in many fields. The availability of this and the other resources mentioned above clearly signal the emergence of FS as a maturing field of enquiry and action. Its applications are numerous and broad. Some are expressed through the notion of strategic foresight.

### **Strategic foresight**

Strategic foresight (SF) is the ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view and to use the insights arising in organisationally useful ways; for example: to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy; to explore new markets, products and services. It represents a fusion of futures methods with those of strategic management. As indicated above, most organisations operate primarily on the basis of priorities and principles laid down in the past, within a taken-for-granted worldview. They modify their underlying past-orientation with inputs from the current environment such as market information, economic signals and government regulations. But few attempt to bring these factors from the past and present into a coherent relationship with the forward view.

Strategic foresight is needed for a number of reasons. At the broadest, or 'macro' level, SF provides a number of ways of coming to grips with the 'civilisational challenge' - the exhaustion of aspects of the Western worldview and the industrial ideology that went with it. Though essentially superseded, both remain strong. They include such elements such as: the denial of limits, the single-minded pursuit of material (economic) growth, the commodification of human needs, the reduction of natural entities to the status of mere 'resources', exploitative trade practices and future-discounting. Such elements have contributed to what has been termed the industrial 'flatland' which, in essence, is an overly empirical, hence 'thin' and eventually self-defeating, view of the world. <sup>6</sup> Strategic foresight provides a way out of this cultural trap by helping organisations to grasp some of the major 'big picture' concerns about human purposes, cultural evolution and sustainability. Since the wider implications of such concerns lie 'in the future', they have been glossed over by mainstream economists and de-focused by conventional empiricist, short-term, bottom-line thinking. But SF brings them directly into the decision-making arena.

Second, strategic foresight is of direct use to organisational policy and practice on a day-to-day basis. While organisations will have to face the long-term issues eventually, their immediate priority must be to remain viable in the short-, and medium-term, present. Here, SF brings into play a new range of factors and possibilities. As noted, environmental scanning can alert an organisation to 'signals' in its operating environment that herald challenges to its business, new opportunities and the identification of new products and services. Again, the careful use of scenario-building techniques can provide a range of high-quality insights into the near-future environment. Armed with this 'foreknowledge' a variety of strategies can be explored under different assumptions and conditions. As a result, the organisation is not only alert to 'signals of change', it can also grasp opportunities to develop a range of possible responses. Hence, overall risk is reduced. Decisions can be made in a broader context and with greater confidence because the near-term future ceases to be an abstraction. It becomes a highly significant part of the immediate operating environment.

Third, strategic foresight can be developed to the point where it opens out what Hamil and Prahalad call 'future competitive space'.<sup>7</sup> This means that organisations do not have to wait for the promptings of competitors or the mythical call of 'market demand'. Instead, they can decide what they want to do and then put in place the means to achieve it. This sounds unexceptional until it is realised that the forward view contains many novel and unconventional possibilities. It is only by giving that view due attention that the latter can be understood or recognised. Here are insights into new industries, new ways of solving old problems, new sources of impact-free wealth-creation, the grounds of new business and civil cultures. Clearly, the forward view is a significant resource which can contribute to management and strategy in a number of ways.

To sum up: the underlying rationale for strategic foresight is that the world is changing rapidly. The forward view tells us that there are a number of very real dangers to avoid and an equally impressive number of opportunities to be taken up and developed. This pattern of dangers and opportunities is highly relevant to everything that an organisation attempts to do - even in the short-term present. Organisations that attempt to move into this turbulent, challenging, future without SF will find themselves overwhelmed by forces that were indeed visible for some time, but which were overlooked. On the other hand, while no futures method can imitate history and foresee all eventualities, organisations that routinely employ SF will find that they are better equipped to negotiate the turbulent conditions ahead. They will prosper and develop because they have understood the structure of the near-future context. In essence, a well-crafted forward view reduces uncertainty and the risks that attend it by revealing the grounds of otherwise-unavailable strategic options.

### **Perceptual and organisational innovations**

Properly understood, FS supports and encourages a wide range of perceptual and social innovations. Among these are innovations in worldview components and in institutions. This section looks briefly at some examples of each.

#### 1. Revising aspects of the Western worldview

##### The Dominance of instrumental rationality (IR)

IR is a powerful cognitive system that matches means to assumed, or pre-given ends. It permits the construction of devices and machines of enormous power: computers, rockets, body-scanners, automobiles and toasters. The physical infrastructure of our civilisation depends upon it. The point is not to eliminate IR, as we could no longer survive without it. The difficulty is that the way of viewing the world that IR encourages contains certain defects and is wholly inadequate for other non-instrumental purposes. IR contains no notion of limits and provides no rationale for seeing the world as other than a machine, or as a set of inert resources. Since IR is a system which only addresses the physical 'layer' of the world, it cannot supply useful insights about ethics, meanings or purposes. Hence, unless it is limited by some other (higher) principle, its applications can become dangerously over-extended. Arguably, this fate has already befallen Western culture. Alone, IR is a recipe for disaster, avoidable only by incorporating the wider map of human understanding.

##### Reductionism and loss of the transcendent

Reductionism narrowly defines a diverse range of qualities by considering only those that can be measured. Economics has fallen into this trap by regarding housework, for example, as literally being without value. Similarly, markets operate wholly on the basis of past experience. Regardless of the 'futures market' (which is an unproductive and esoteric speculative game for the rich),

markets have no methods by which to exercise prudence or foresight. They are crude mechanisms which use signals derived from past and present to govern their operations. Effectively, they make the future vanish, reducing temporality to a narrow band of self-interest in the here-and-now, which is ethical and ontological nonsense.

Reductionism is endemic in industrialised cultures. It says of phenomena 'this is only....' and then picks out some convenient characteristic. Hence, ecosystems basically provide 'services'. People are simply 'consumers' or 'human resources'. Religion is either useless or mere 'therapy'. The possibility that there could be spiritual or transcendent realities of a completely different order is simply overlooked. So far as IR is concerned, ethics, spirituality and futures all have less reality than ghosts. They can therefore be safely ignored.

#### Science and technology for irrational ends

Lewis Mumford once said of modern weapons systems that the means were rational, but the ends were entirely mad. He, among others, saw that once certain technical means become powerful enough, they become ends in their own right. This can be seen with modern information systems, which are expanding very rapidly, not out of some clearly defined 'need' or 'purpose', but from of the compulsive dynamism associated with competing capitalist economies and enterprises. The present period has even been called 'the information age', but it is by no means certain that this label fits. Information as such is not valuable. Indeed, too much of it can be harmful. Nor is it to be confused with knowledge or wisdom. The dynamics of expanding information systems are such that they lead toward ends that are largely unpredictable. In this process, means and ends tend to be confused. Similar criticisms can be made of nanotechnology. Here the threat of competition is used to fuel technical developments. But again, the ends are problematic. If successful, nanotechnology could well undermine the physical integrity of our world. Such an end is indeed irrational.

The key point is this: when powerful technologies are linked with inadequate worldviews or with primitive human impulses, they become irredeemably subversive. The power of this insight should not be underestimated. If science and technology are to help us move toward humanly viable futures they will need to be reconstructed on a different, non-instrumental basis. Hence, if there is a way out of the present cultural trap, it will clearly not be via science and technology as they are presently constituted. It may well be that the only lasting solutions will be through the re-establishment of ends that express the highest human motives and capacities human beings are capable of. <sup>8</sup>

#### The de-sacralisation of nature

In most traditional cultures there were strong injunctions to protect nature from over-exploitation. These injunctions drew power from belief systems that endowed the environment with specific values and meanings. Many of these entities were sacred, occupying a higher ontological level than that of mere use. They were not simply 'resources'. They could be worshipped, consulted, propitiated. They became sources of inspiration, metaphors, art - the substance of lived experience. Western cultures, however, developed according to a different dynamic provided by Bacon and Descartes, resulting in a culture that considered itself to be both separate from nature and also 'above' it. In this view, the Christian injunction to 'subdue the earth' could be completed, but at a price. Earlier cultures animated nature making it, in some sense, holy, or at least possessing an intrinsic value. In a real sense they 'knew' what they were doing. They retained access to a richer symbolic world while also protecting their own long-term well being.

The de-sacralisation of nature meant that all the world and its creatures were no longer special - no longer protected: whales could be rendered into oil and corset stays; whole forests could be burned or wood chipped; the atmosphere, oceans and soils became a sink for all the noxious products of human machine culture. The results are now obvious.

Understanding these worldview concerns at a deep level both provides a vital diagnosis of present-day dangers and dysfunctions and also prefigures attempts to reconstitute truly post-postindustrial worldviews on a very different basis.

## 2. Three institutional innovations

### Reinventing economics

The prospect of an 'economics of permanence' sends shock waves of terror and uncertainty through the economic establishment. How can we provide jobs without growth? How can we afford to clean up the environment? How can we make our industry leaner, improve competitiveness...etc? Foresight suggests that the worldview of conventional economics is very much part of the old industrial pattern. It follows that there will be enormous resistance to the kind of changes in prospect. But the fact is that many of the axioms of classical economics will need to be reconceptualised and re-chosen.<sup>9</sup> This means that the significance we attach to such pivotal terms as 'growth', 'wealth', 'security', 'progress' and so on will also change.

In a renewed world picture, we will understand that rapid exponential growth in material throughput is out of the question. Even if homo sapiens should one day mine the asteroids and find new sources of power in space, the resulting scale of human activity would still continue to wreck the ecology at home. This is unsustainable. Hence the real challenge is not simply to scour the universe for energy and resources, but to re-define our individual and collective purposes. The dominance of economics in social and cultural affairs needs to be re-considered. Why should everything be submitted to a diminished accounting of dollars and cents? Why should wealth be understood mainly in relation to material possessions? Why should the environment not be re-valued not just to reflect the range of services it provides, but its intrinsic value? There is no reason why the well-established trend of 'doing more with less' should not be applied to human beings. For it is a fact that many human powers and capacities are passed over, forgotten or lost amid the pressures of late industrial life.

Western society proudly held itself up as the model for enlightenment and progress, only to find that this particular trajectory cannot be sustained. Therefore it will find it increasingly necessary to go humbly to other cultures and to sit at the feet of the wise people who still have a valued role there. It is only by so doing that the processes of cultural editing will become clear enough to reveal what to Westerners will be new truths. A combination of foresight, critical thinking and cultural learning will show that there exists a vast range of options for re-valuing and re-constituting economics on a more permanent basis.

The environment and all its species will be re-valued. They will, in Berman's evocative phrase, become 're-enchanting', special, no longer subjected to careless exploitation. The prospect of a devastated world, in stark contrast with one that has recovered from industrialisation and moved on (see below), will stimulate people to perceive the sacred in every aspect of daily life. Thus, it will be remembered that the very oxygen that we breathe is itself a product of life, almost sacramental in significance. Work will no longer be exclusively linked with payment in money. A rich variety of types of work and types of reward, including intrinsic reward, will flourish. The long dole queues of today will be replaced with a wide range of cultural, artistic, caring and stewardship activities.

There is really no shortage of work to be done. The extent of the damage of the whole industrial stage - in both human and environmental terms - could well take another two centuries of healing and restoration to accomplish.

Finally, foresight teaches us that economics will necessarily take a long-term view. Future-discounting (the practice of reducing value as we look further ahead) will be drastically reduced or eliminated altogether. The practice of imputing value and importance to 'me', or 'us now' will be seen as typical of the immature, self-serving habits encouraged by the kind of society we will have emerged from. Instead, we will begin to see ourselves as immersed in a (very) long process of change and development. In that process, the unborn future will be re-valued, not discounted. We may even reach a stage when the consciousness of our role as the temporary guardians of life may make us more humble, more willing to conserve and enrich life's own innate ends.

### Re-framing technology

Throughout the whole industrial period a long series of technological innovations have re-shaped societies, cultures, economies and the entire physical and biological environment around us. One impact after another has modified and undermined old certainties and constantly created new ones. Within this vast macro-historical process, technologies have been imbued with two sets of qualities that are now in question. One is that technologies are just external, material, forms. The other is that they are held to be beneficial and to solve problems. However, to re-frame technology we need to question both of these sets of assumptions.

Technologies are not just the physical forms of the machines and devices that we can touch and use. They are also outcomes and manifestations of social processes, including those that arise from particular formations of cultural and financial power. As such, the visible aspects of technologies are really just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath them lie the social relations that led to their production. So, if we consider a car, a Boeing 747 or a computer, what each of these represents is the power of corporate enterprise, including the symbolic power of such entities to define what is desirable and what is available to us. Hence, when considering any technology, we should be prepared to examine the social interests embedded within them.

Take so-called free-to-air TV. The myth currently in operation is that 'free TV' is a social benefit. Yet looked at more carefully it is not at all free. In fact, it comes with some pretty heavy penalties. These include lowest-common-denominator standards, commercial control of programming and the constant projection of regressive consumerist values into society. Given the civilisational challenge we face, the consumer wonderland is a deeply subversive fantasy that arguably mystifies and misdirects entire populations. It only exists because industrial-era interests continue to promote it - at their peril and ours.

Technologies are constantly 'sold' to naive affluent populations on the basis of the new features, the benefits, the problem-solving capabilities they promise. But those who are engaged in the process of advertising and marketing seldom stop to consider the new costs, penalties, vulnerabilities that their products also bring with them. In all the hype about the 'information revolution' few considered the subsequent loss of privacy that now seems inevitable. No one explored the devastating new options for 'information warfare'. And the 'millennium bug' proves conclusively that unforeseen dangers are always to be expected. One writer who has studied this phenomenon carefully is Edward Tenner.<sup>10</sup> The central idea underlying his work is that new technologies should not just be seen as only providing benefits. Rather, when they are taken up, those involved should consciously seek to understand and communicate the new 'burden of care' that comes with them. It is ironic, therefore, that the tradition of technology assessment (which



deals directly with such issues) has not thrived in recent years. In fact the US OTA (Office of Technology Assessment) was closed down several years ago. This is an institution that must be reinvigorated and re-established to protect society from unanticipated technologically induced risks.

### Creating and staffing institutions of foresight

Institutions of foresight (IOFs) are purpose-built organisations with an explicit focus on one or more aspects of the future. As a group they are very varied; but in a review I carried out a few years ago I derived a composite view of some of their characteristic activities. In summary, they raise issues of common concern that are overlooked in the conventional short-term view; for example, issues about peace, environmental stability, inter-generational ethics, the implications of new, and expected, developments in a number of fields. Second, they highlight dangers, alternatives and choices that need to be considered before they become urgent. Third, they publicise the emerging picture of the near-term future in order to involve the public and contribute to present-day decision-making. Fourth, they contribute to a body of knowledge about foresight and the macro-processes of continuity and change that frame the future. Fifth, they identify some of the dynamics and policy implications of the transition to sustainability. Sixth, they help to identify aspects of a new world order so as to place these on the global political agenda. Seventh, they facilitate the development and application of social innovations. Eighth, they help people to deal with fears and become genuinely empowered to participate in creating the future. Ninth, they help organisations to evolve in appropriate ways. Finally, they provide institutional shelters for innovative futures work which, perhaps, could not easily be carried out elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

IOFs are needed to provide institutional locations where foresight work can be carried out in the public interest. One such existed in Australia from 1986 to 1998. It was called the Commission for the Future. In a survey of its chequered history, and in an attempt to learn from its successes and its failures, I derived a number of pointers for the design and implementation of future IOFs.<sup>12</sup> They include the following.

- \* The core purposes of an IOF should be carefully defined and linked with the main institutional functions.
- \* Funding issues should be tackled early on and a sound, diversified basis of financial support established.
- \* The knowledge gained from other foresight initiatives should be thoroughly understood and applied such that the learning curve can begin from a higher level and take place more quickly.
- \* Quality control must be a central principle of the organisation. Second rate futures work is worse than none at all because it provides spurious grounds for the dismissal of the whole enterprise.
- \* Employees should be fully qualified to carry out futures work. This will necessarily mean that a certain proportion of employees either have recent relevant experience of futures-related work or will undertake the necessary training as a condition of their employment contract.
- \* Robust methods should be used which integrate empirical, critical and ethical components.
- \* Finally, IOFs would benefit from participating in, and supporting, research into the nature and effectiveness of futures research and applied foresight.

If these guidelines were diligently followed, then future IOFs will have a greatly enhanced chance of success.

An outline research agenda for IOFs was set out by myself and Martha Garrett in 1995. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, the suggestions made at that time have not been taken up by any government department, university or research institute.<sup>12</sup> An earlier, but still-relevant, source is the evidence gathered by Clem Bezold and his associates from the use of state government foresight in the USA.<sup>13</sup> There are also occasional more general overview-type studies such as that carried out by Skumanich and Silbernagel in 1997. These researchers studied what they termed seven 'best-in-kind' foresight programs and concluded that the most successful ones had the following features.

1. They began with a perceived need to prepare for future challenges.
2. They each had 'program champions' during the start-up period.
3. They proved responsive to client needs.
4. They involved the relevant participants in the process.
5. They experienced a legitimising process.<sup>14</sup>

The above examples show that there is plenty of room for institutional innovations which, taken together, can help to create a climate very different from that now operating.

### **Conclusion: the role of Futures Studies in reducing global risk**

This paper has suggested that the forward view is a powerful new tool that has become available to us in the late 20th century as a result of a widely distributed social process. In brief, many people around the world have reflected on the implications of present trends, on world problems and at the other 'tsunamis of change' that can clearly be seen on the horizon. Their individual and collective concerns have found many forms of institutional expression. Not least among these has been the emergence of FS as a 'metadiscipline' with a newly defined knowledge base, a globally distributed network of practitioners and many futures-related organisations.

Within this developing infrastructure the forward view is generated, critiqued, revised and renewed on a continuing basis. The essence of the forward view is that it is dynamic, not static. Properly understood, it is a communication and learning process that flows through and around all the individuals and organisations concerned. The knowledge it generates is interpretative, or propositional, knowledge. The latter is assembled in human minds, and in groups of minds, where it reveals much about the overall character of the near-future context. Sustained immersion in this field of enquiry means that many aspects of the near-term future can be understood and dealt with consciously and well before issues become critical. The essence of applied foresight is to act with awareness and in good time, thereby reducing risk.

Unfortunately, the take-up of FS, of foresight work in organisations, is very slow. This means that there are substantial gaps in social administration and in many other fields. At present none of our major institutions have understood the significance of this field or have moved to implement it in any meaningful way. They are 'driving into the future via the rear-view mirror' and completely missing the significance of the civilisational challenge. Unless it is corrected, these oversights will cost society dearly. Universities who ought to be showing leadership are drawing back, rather than innovating. There are still not departments of FS or foresight in Australia. Education systems are blocked by administrative blindness and incompetence at the highest levels and have become mystificatory in effect, if not in intent. The view prevails that the closure of an IOF such as the Australian CFF means that such work is a waste of time and money, whereas, in fact, the opposite is the case.<sup>15</sup>

This paper has argued that the world revealed by the forward view is one in which the indices of risk grow alarmingly as pressure mounts on natural systems, as defects in industrial era worldviews and institutions (particularly economics) become more damaging and as powerful new technologies come on stream without being carefully and thoroughly evaluated for long-term social and ecological viability. It is an outlook which, as noted, has been consistently reflected in many ways, not least of all through the *State of the World* series published over the last decade. Lester Brown comments in the latest volume that:

if the world economy as it is now structured continues to expand, it will eventually destroy its natural support systems and decline. Despite the inescapable logic of this decline-and-collapse scenario, we seem unable to limit our claims on the earth to a sustainable level.<sup>16</sup>

FS has a significant role in drawing attention to, and helping us respond to, global risk. It does not operate at the level of detailed risk-assessments of particular issues or dangers, which is a skilled and specialised activity. Rather, it contributes to the overall framework of understanding and enquiry and helps to establish the context within which such work can be carried out. Moreover, by clearly describing worlds that are worth striving for and worlds we would be well advised to avoid, FS provides a rationale and grounding for all futures-related, risk reducing activities.

If the forward view emerges as the culmination and gift of high-quality futures work, risk-assessment becomes the detailed working out of the many practical implications for organisations and for a world in greater peril than it yet knows.

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