A Fortnight of Foresight

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1   Introduction

The Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Centre for Policy Research and Training of the Organization of Islamic Conference's (OIC) Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation's (COMSTECH) recently organized a course on Foresight in Islamabad, Pakistan from 29 June to 10 July 2009 to enable STI policy makers and researchers to envisage what future may have in store for OIC member states. It was delivered by five experts in Future Studies and Foresight, Sohail Inayatullah, Professor at the Graduate Institute of Future Studies, Tamkang University, Taiwan; Ian Miles, Professor at the Manchester Business School, the University of Manchester, UK; Ozcan Saritas, Assistant Professor at the Manchester Business School, the University of Manchester, UK; Amer Qureshi, Managing Director, Capstone (Consulting, Training, and Outsourcing Firm), Dubai, UAE; and, Dr. STK Naim, Consultant, COMSTECH who directed the course. The participants represented two continents (Africa and Asia), four regions (Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa) and eight OIC countries (Egypt, Gambia, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Sudan).

2   Prologue

The course began with the opening salvo by Amer Qureshi on Strategic Planning which treated the idea of *Blue Ocean Strategy* (W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne) in detail as a way to beat competition by redefining the way in which business is run and adduced examples from the past and present world of business like Ford Motors, Dell Computers, and Indian Premier League in Cricket. He cited cases in Pakistan like Daewoo Bus Service, Geo TV Network and FM 100 Radio which were also instances of successful strategy.

Dr. Naim's lectures served as an appropriate prelude to prepare the participants to better understand the subsequent treatment of the subject of Future Studies/Foresight by Prof. Miles, Prof. Inayatullah and Dr. Ozcan. Her lectures were focused on the experience of Pakistan in the field of Technology Foresight. Since, Dr Naim is a former chairperson of the Pakistan Council of Science and Technology (PCST), and a key participant in the country's science and technology policy making, so during her lectures she was able to adduce various examples from different sectors in Pakistan where attempts to do foresight, or lack thereof, had had a telling impact on the country's socio-economic development. Her lectures, in part, proved to be an impromptu SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis for Pakistan. This eye-witness component of her lectures gave a sense of urgency to

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the need for conducting foresight exercises in all OIC member states but also helped animate the concepts in the canon of methodology of Foresight.

3   The semantics of future

Prof. Inayatullah's lectures and the exercises he conducted were based on familiarizing the participants with different possible ways of imagining the future; various modes of cognition (zero, single and double loops, and sensitivity to change); research epistemologies (empirical or positivist, interpretative or constructionist, critical or hermeneutics of suspicion and action learning); and, possible combinations of these methods and modes which could either foster or thwart thinking about the future. The methodologies used and exercises conducted were framed by six fundamental pillars of future studies – mapping, anticipating, timing, deepening, creating (alternatives) and transforming the future.

Prof. Sohail Inayatullah during one of the lecture seesions

Prof. Inayatullah then unraveled before the interlocutors his futures theory, Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) and its constituent four tiers –litany, system or social causation, discourse or worldview and myth or metaphor, required for a comprehensive excavation of different sediments of reality as it exists and appears to be – and explicated different methodologies like emerging issues analysis, the futures wheel, futures triangle, quadrants or 2x2 matrices for envisioning different alternatives, back casting and scenario strategies e.g. integrated, archetypal, organizational etc.

3.1   Shape-shifters

What was quite remarkable in terms of the CLA-based exercise was that once various proposed alternatives around issues nominated by the participants were made to pass through different levels, they always ended up with an image or metaphor drawn from the plant or animal world alluding perhaps to wo/man's proximity to nature, and maybe, the importance, registered at the deepest level of consciousness, of preventing ecological degradation for any viable future. There were times during the analysis by participants when bureaucratic red-tape, imagined as a shark, morphed into amicable administration, seen as a dolphin, in the alternative future; or, when the present seen as a desert sprouted trees and became a garden; or, yet again, when difficult circumstances, represented as a snake, turned into a rope which was given to the participants to explore the playing field for alternatives that may slumber in the cradle of time.

Back-casting carried out by participants for the best-case scenario of the end of terrorism and the establishment of egalitarianism in Pakistan led to the imagined happening of some really amazing 'events' along the back-to-the-future timeline such as the establishment of a youth movement; transformation of national and provincial legislatures into confessionals for things done wrong instead of purgatories of recriminations; circulation of "courtesy credit" based on exchange of good and kind behavior to regulate the economic and social life of future Pakistanis; manufacturing of an "anger-suppressant euphoric beverage" which would lead to an emotional revolution in the lives of future Pakistanis making them more cheerful and amenable to change; morphing of fanatics into fans of world music and the replacement of slogans with global rhythms.

Participants discuss during a scenario exercise

Quadrants made by participants on the theme of the future of water resources in OIC member states helped throw up interesting images of different alternatives. For example, the alternative marked by the full availability of water combined with zero purity led to it being named, "Triumph-cum-Crime of the Sewer" as against the "Garden of Eden" which was blessed by the full availability of pure water. Prof. Inayatullah's lectures also took the participants through a kaleidoscope of future possibilities in different areas forming what were truly mental peripatetics.

4   Foresight fore-grounded

The second half of the course consisted mainly of lectures by Prof. Ian Miles and Dr. Ozcan Saritas. Just as the first half of the course was primarily based on creative scouting for better future alternatives on a range of issues, shepherded by Prof. Inayatullah's genius, so the second half was characterized by the transfer of the magisterial erudition of Prof. Miles and Dr. Saritas on Foresight via video conferencing. Even the temporal logic of their lectures dovetailed with the topic at hand because they, in a way, spoke about the futures and foresight to the future itself, if we remember that Pakistan Standard Time is five hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time.

The topics their lectures dealt with included the genealogy of Foresight in the West; the relationship between Future Studies, Foresight and Innovation Studies; the use of ROAME (Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring and Evaluation) as a Foresight Programming Tool; the way in which the Foresight Cycle works with its various stages and phases; resources, organization, management, participation and outcomes of foresight; the tradition and practice of Technology Foresight in the UK; the experience of foresight in

countries like Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Sweden and the USA; modalities of supra-national, national and regional foresight; road-mapping, its process, architecture and elements; the methodology of foresight encompassing a range of methods and triangulation of foresight methods.

4.1　　Learning by doing

The lectures were interspersed with practical exercises for participants on scoping and scenario building. STEEPV (Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political and Values) analysis was also conducted for the topics chosen by the four groups of participants. The participants evinced a high degree of interest in and enthusiasm for the practice of foresight. They appreciated socio-economic, political, cultural and technological challenges facing OIC member states and the need to conduct foresight in the said areas of national development of their countries. This awareness on the part of the participants was manifested in the choice of topics that included *Future of Education in OIC Member States*; *Building Knowledge-Based Societies in OIC; Trade Liberalization in OIC Member States;* and*, Energy Sector in Pakistan.*

Participants engaged in the STEEPV analysis

The exercises were peppered with moments of creative exuberance coupled with anticipatory intelligence. For example, the group calling itself the '*Hekmat* (Wisdom) *Group*' comprised participants from Iran, Libya and Pakistani had worked on the topic, *Future of Education in OIC Member States*. They constructed some interesting alternatives with catchy names that succinctly conveyed the desideratum. One that postulated the coexistence of highly developed physical and social infrastructure needed for spreading high quality education and complete social consensus on the means of achieving the proposed goal in OIC countries was styled as *Flight of Flamingos.* One where the realm of possibilities was considerably vast given the existence of complete social consensus but insufficiently developed infrastructure was named *Yes! We Can* after the US President Obama's campaign slogan. These exercises were facilitated by Dr. Naim and myself, and since all the four groups were working in different conference rooms, we realized that going from one 'future' to another could be quite an exhausting task at times but one that was undoubtedly rewarding as well.

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5   Conclusion

The course provided the participants with an opportunity to get a handle on the discipline of Future Studies and the recognition of Foresight as a practice aimed at realizing not only the desirable future but taking concrete steps in the present to construct what is deemed desirable. This experience helped them understand, as Paulo Freire would have it, the three-dimensional nature of time comprising past, present, and future and grasp the mode of thought and action peculiar to each dimension. The knowledge that imagining future was a structured and methodical activity imparted a sense of increased confidence to the participants in dealing with issues confronted by their organizations, countries and societies. If it is remembered that 'future' tends to be an inevitable implication of all human action, whether, individual and private, or, public, structural and collective, then, perhaps, the most valuable insight of the course was that the route to the unknown was signposted with multiple events which could be turned to advantage if only anticipated properly in the midst of circumstances thick with contemporaneity. This insight carries immense liberatory potential in enhancing the agency of human beings in general and the inhabitants of OIC member states in particular so that they could reshape their existence in accordance with the principles of justice and freedom while riding the crest of scientific progress. Tangentially, the course emphasized the breadth of the discipline of Future Studies and spotlighted the potential of the discipline to transcend multi-disciplinarity towards what may, after due academic consensus, be called *metadisciplinarity*, a more comprehensive epistemic view of knowledge and its classification into various disciplines and one which recaptures in a more advanced manner the lost unity and the vantage point enjoyed in antiquity by philosophy. In sum, the course proved to be a twelve-day bonanza of lectures which were epistemologically rich and interactive workshops that gave a foretaste of what participatory future may look like for the OIC. It successfully ran the gamut of the praxis of foresight, covering its theory and practice. It is hoped that the participants of the course could become nodes for spreading the sum total of know-how about foresight received through the auspices of COMSTECH, which, when the time is right, could evolve into a Pan-OIC network of Foresight practitioners. This future-based pedagogy, it is also hoped, would become a major spur for the participants to plunge into foresight in their respective countries and fields so as to emerge orientated towards making the future brighter and better than the present.