

REPORT

The first WFSF Asia-Pacific course: the futures of development

Sohail Inayatullah, Rick Slaughter and Tony Stevenson

Is development theory dead? It seems to be, if the thinking of some young people at a futures course in Bangkok is any indication. The course, 'The futures of development: historical roots, present trends and alternative futures', was held in Bangkok 23–30 August 1992 by the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF), with sponsorship from UNESCO and the Communication Centre of the Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

In his presentation on the futures of development, Sohail Inayatullah compared linear, circular and spiral concepts of community and national development. During discussion, the 29 participants from 13 countries criticized traditional development theory as linear, since it subscribes to a deterministic, mechanistic paradigm. With Inayatullah, they called for replacement of the word development by something like community.

Inayatullah argued that linear models of development place the responsibility of poverty at the hand of a particular nation or individual forgetting larger structures such as the international division of labour. Linear theories create the justification for cultural and political colonialism as they assume that the strong have a duty to transform those 'behind'. In linear

theory the present becomes the end of history, the viewpoint from which to judge others.

Cyclical models of development, while providing an alternative structure of rise and fall (thus giving hope to the periphery), are however, often fatalistic (that is, they are missing the notion of progress).

What are needed, he argued, are not models of development (in itself an outgrowth of Europeanisms) but new visions of the future that: (1) are spiral (past and future or cyclical and linear); (2) sensitive to gender equity; (3) have a theory of the transcendental (where the transcendental is both cosmic and individual but not nation or race or elite based); (4) provide models of resource growth and resource distribution; (5) are epistemologically pluralistic (many ways of knowing the real); (6) are ecologically conscious with rights for animals and plants; (7) have a range of representational structures (theories of governance); (8) provide a range of alternatives to structures and mechanisms of organization (such as tensegrity and cooperatives instead of merely pyramidal and corporations); and (9) balance individual, community and planetary needs.

Rick Slaughter introduced three

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'maps' of the futures field and some core concepts. He outlined the foundations of a critical futures approach in contrast to the dominant empirical tradition. The workshop that followed considered four themes: attitudes to futures/dealing with fears; social learning and social innovation; the possible nature of a wise culture; and an agenda for the 21st century.

In a later session a range of methodologies was introduced. They ranged from simple space/time grids, to cross-impact matrices, the QUEST technique and the design and implementation of institutions of foresight. Particular attention was given to critical futures methodology, a major goal of which was described as 'interpretative autonomy'. Slaughter suggested that this in part involved: the renegotiation of values, purposes and meanings; the possibility of revising world-view assumptions; and beginning to activate qualitatively different futures with grassroots support. Such a perspective makes it possible to begin to discuss the promise of the 21st century, rather than merely rehearsing the problems.

Godwin Sogolo provided an introduction to the history and alternative futures of African development. Development presently is a colonial package, he said, a continuation of the Western paradigm of economic and social development. Sogolo outlined three African futures:

1. *Giving up.* This is a future where poverty, war and ethnic struggle continue and Africans basically give up.
2. *Retracing the past.* In this future, traditional precolonial institutions and knowledge practices are revived, particularly the extended family. This is difficult since modernity does not allow a return to the past.
3. *Continuity with change.* In this, Sogolo's preferred future, technology is grafted, like a plant rather than a bulldozer, on to local culture. Core traditional cultures continue but Africa adapts to external cultures. Both traditional and modern medicine coexist in this model.

Violeta Lopez-Gonzaga drew on the Philippines experience in community development to examine the future forms of governance necessary for restructuring

power, alleviating poverty and realizing peace and justice. While agrarian reform remains a popular remedy, the few success stories have been implemented under authoritarian government. In praxis, she argued, effective implementation of agrarian reform is incompatible with democratic government.

Two other presentations dealt with communication. Terushi Tomita argued that basic needs are not merely survival-based but rather identity-based as well. For example, we might desire T-shirts to clothe ourselves but the message they carry is as important as how they cover us—indeed, in a post-industrial society, like Japan, far more important. Thus economics can no longer be seen merely in technical terms; rather knowledge and identity are now central to what constitutes a political economy.

Tony Stevenson highlighted the central role of human communication in envisioning alternative futures. Our images of the future are formed from our understandings and misunderstandings about it. However, communication, as shared meaning, is largely culture-bound and is more easily achieved among people from a common culture. The challenge is for individuals to be mobile across diverse cultural contexts in order to create shared meaning without destroying cultural diversity.

He argued that studying the futures of communication was now urgent, given that the global telecommunications system—the biggest artificial contrivance known to humankind—had the potential to mediate world governance, even to become the world government, in a sense. It could certainly facilitate worldwide collaboration.

Participants in the Bangkok course came from: Australia, India, Japan, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua-New Guinea, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Ukraine and the United States of America. Course coordinators were Tony Stevenson (Australia) and Terushi Tomita (Japan). Other resource people were Rick Slaughter (Australia), Sohail Inayatullah (Hawaii/Pakistan), Violeta Lopez-Gonzaga (the Philippines) and Godwin Sogolo (Nigeria).

The course was designed to parallel

the annual futures studies course organized by WFSF at the Interuniversity Centre (IUC) in Dubrovnik since 1975, until last year when the site at the Interuniversity Centre was bombed.

Participants in Bangkok pleaded, unanimously, for present decisions and actions by world leaders that would produce a global consciousness of cooperation among diverse cultures. They also called for an attitude of stewardship for the planet with an exclusive switch to recyclable products.

Possible scenarios for alternative futures were developed in answer to such question as: what if women held half the important positions in government; what if genetic engineering factories replaced traditional procreation; and what if the centre of the world economy shifted to

South Asia? Another task was to investigate the way people in different cultures live in different concepts of time, where some ideas of time are founded in traditional culture and spiritual values, while others have a basis in the modern need for efficiency. The course also discussed the possible future of a world free of national boundaries, where traditional nation-states were replaced by a global network of local communities.

A second Asia-Pacific course is planned for next year, most likely in Thailand or the Philippines. For further information contact Tony Stevenson at The Communication Centre, Queensland University of Technology, GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland 4001, Australia (Tel: (617) 864 2192; Fax (617) 864 1813; E-mail: t.stevenson@qut.edu.au).