

The futures of Karachi

by Sohail Inayatullah

Given congestion, inter-ethnic violence, persistent pollution, and lack of clean water, is there a possibility that Karachi can be different by 2030?

15 experts in the areas of biosciences, media communication, child education and investing met for two days to explore the alternative futures of Karachi. Participants included: journalists Afshan Subhoi, Mubashir Zaidi, Sohaib Jamali and Syed Naeemuddin; Academicians Dr Aadil Nakhoda, Dr Saad Ahmed Khan, Dr Arsalan Khan and Dr Saad Liaquat; Entrepreneurs Abid Butt, Roger Dawood Bayat and Amir Jahangir; members of the civil society Syed Faizan Yasir, Salman Jawed, Lt-Gen Farooq Agha, ShaziaIsmat Javed and Habib Dadabhoy notably amongst others.

Karachi's used future. Image: Wikipedia.

The events was sponsored by Agahi, the Dadabhoy foundation and its Higher institute.

While many projects are national in orientation and thus have scale, organizers decided to focus on the city in that there is a greater ability to begin action learning projects that can make a difference. Moreover, with a population of over 15 million, Karachi has the size necessary to make a difference in the local and global economy.

Futures studies

Participants used the methods and tools of futures studies to move out of the current trajectory and explore alternative. These methods included the futures triangle to explore the preferred vision of the future (for example, Karachi 4.0), and the drivers that are creating it (advances in Artificial intelligence and increased ability of smart

phones), as well as the barriers to change (corruption, governmental silos).

Emerging issues analysis was used to explore disruptions in the next ten to fifteen years, such as the move to each home or block becoming an energy producer. The futures wheel to explore first and second order implications of futures event. The information about the future was consolidated via the method of causal layered analysis. This method moves beyond the litany, or information in daily newspapers to systemic causes, worldview causation and finally the deep metaphor. It is suggested that for deep change, both the data and the narrative must shift.

For example, participants imagined the narrative of Karachi shifting from the coal city to the emerald city. While traditionally important, coal could no longer power the city, moreover, the externalities of pollution and inequity and the dropping price of solar



and wind suggests a change is needed. Another group imagined Karachi moving from the toilet pit to the oceanarium, turning its face toward the ocean. A third group, focused on educational futures imagined Karachi moving from the factory to the double helix, that is producing cogs to creating scientists and start-ups in the new sciences - individuals who were masters of their own destiny.

The used future

Initially the future was opened up by asking the question, what is the used future, practices that we engage with in Karachi but are no longer working, that in fact ensure innovation and productivity lag. Many suggested the current clock-in/clock out culture ensures the factory approach to education, making students into cogs and not masters of their destiny. Others suggested it was the notion of going to work that was used - why not create connectivity so karachities could work from anywhere. Moreover, this would reduce congestion and pollution.

Facilitated by the UNESCO chair for futures studies, Professor Sohail Inayatullah with assistance from Puruesh Chaudhary, director of Agahi and founder of the Pakistan State of the Future Index, participants then explored scenarios or alternatives to the current.

The scenarios

These were:

1 Karachi as city of zombies. Continued violence between groups, water shortages, pollution, with serious disease outbreaks.

2 The water city. Karachi becomes the emerald of the ocean. Success in using renewables, plus cleaning up the ocean and city - banning plastic bags - developing tourism, creating new meta level skill sets to deal with inter-ethnic/class violence. Karachi creates a new relationship with the sea as the key. Recycling plus innovation in sanitation.

3. The global city alliance. Karachi helps create an alliance of Asian mega-cities focusing on similar challenges: climate change, massive populations growth, need for social and technological innovation plus sharing economies.

4. The great jump--Karachi 4.0. Given that the present is fraught with the density of corruption and systems that make life difficult, Karachi changes most systems to leap frog agricultural and industrial eras - innovation in building design, smart homes, fast connectivity change create a pivot in direction. The home not the highway changes the daily life for many. The old crumbles as the new emerges.

And what will Karachi look like? These questions cannot be nor should be answered since the foundational is moving from the future that was given to a future that can be created. ◀

The narrative of Karachi could shift from the city of coal to the emerald city

Action learning projects

After the scenarios, participants developed three action learning projects that could create change. To advise which projects were plausible, a panel of two under 25 years olds provided advice, giving the freshness of the eyes of youth.

Three action learning projects:

1. Clean up the ocean, use biomass for renewable energy, change the culture toward the ocean i.e face the ocean.
2. Develop new skill sets for adapting to challenges facing Karachi i.e teach and learn in different ways - the current factory model ensures the litany of problems worsen.
3. Educational apps that link industry with students.

All sensed that Karachi had intellectual and material gifts that were not being used. People were stuck in the past, in systems that destroyed creativity, ensuring conflict and stagnation.



Sohail Inayatullah is the UNESCO chair in Futures Studies. His recent book is Asia 2038: ten disruptions that change everything.