

A Brief History of the World Futures Studies Federation Background for the Spring 2008 Refreshing Exercise

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The World Futures Studies Federation (the Federation) membership is engaging in a series of questions during our “refreshing exercise” for assessing the state of the Federation. This brief history is in two parts: 1) three pages of brief descriptions of the formation, activities, and recent events of the Federation, and 2) four pages of brief excerpts from the June 2005 issue of *Futures*, which is entirely devoted to 10 papers and which give various perspectives on the history and significance of the Federation.

We are Operating in Crisis Mode

The Federation has been faced with some difficult operating conditions in recent years and this history is intended to be brief but to highlight material so all members have some reminders of times past. Some examples of the changes include: 1) the world had changed since the formation 35 years ago (more futures organizations, new ways of communicating, and constraints on travel and available time for members, 2) Federation changes were made at the Turku World Conference in 1993, including a revision in the constitution and a modification in the selection of Executive Council members (the executive council replacements were previously named by the executive council, rather than through the current election process), 3) the operational difficulties of managing the Federation have increased (bookkeeping, web support, organizations that contribute support or meeting sponsorships), and 4) people sense there is a problem (a series of resignations of Executive Board members, a series of critical concerns identified by the President, and a general organizational malaise within the membership). Details are listed below.

Formation

The participants in the World Futures Studies conferences in Oslo (1967), Kyoto (1970) and Bucharest (1972) provided the foundation for forming the World Futures Studies Federation in 1973. The Federation is an international non-profit and non-governmental organization, organized and operating under international law, with registration in Paris. The current constitution was adopted in 1995 in Nairobi, Kenya, and took effect in December 1995. It was amended (minor) in December 1999 in Bacolod City, Philippines. The constitution included objectives, functions, membership, general assembly, president, secretary general, executive board, and procedures for dissolution and constitutional amendments. A copy of the constitution is on the Federation website – <http://www.wfsf.org>

Federation Objectives

The complete Federation objectives (from the current constitution) are:

1. The main objectives of the Federation are to introduce futures-oriented thinking in all branches of knowledge and action; promote futures studies in general, and in particular encourage, innovative, interdependent and critical thinking across all disciplines, cultures and people; and promote networking between individuals and organizations concerned with futures.
2. The Federation shall also work to promote awareness of threatening futures problems and of prospects for better futures, as well as the permanent need for institutionalized futures studies to help resolve these problems and realize better futures.
3. The Federation will promote complete liberty of inquiry, discussion and thought in all its activities and in its supportive and cooperative undertakings with other organizations.

Federation Activities

1. General Assemblies. These have been held each approximately each two years (as required by the constitution) in countries represented by the membership; in some cases regional conferences were held. Such

meetings generally have been summarized for Federation archives and the Futures Bulletin, and in annual reports from the officers. The Federation has considered research projects of a particular focus in selecting the topic and location of the Federation meetings and provided educational seminars and workshops for members and others at the General Assemblies. The Constitution provides for “virtual general assemblies.”

2. Electronic Communication. An all member listserv began in the early 1990s and is managed by Reed Riner at Northern Arizona University. Its content includes: a) announcements for meetings, events, new publications, b) posts and reactions to news events or articles about the future and presentations by members, and c) and general information of interest to the membership.

3. Bulletin. The Futures Bulletin is the formal publication of the Federation has taken a range of formats, recently has been published entirely online. The most recent issue (Volume 31) was distributed in November 2006.

4. Coordination with Other Organizations. Working with other organizations has lessened over recent years and the original intent is not clear for the relative focus for a federation of institutions vs individual members. The Federation is classified as a Category II Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with the United Nations (UN), has formal consultative status with UNESCO, and enjoys close cooperation with the UN University, UNDP, UNEP, UNITAR, ILO, FAO and WHO. It is an associate member of the International Social Science Council (this is what is posted on the Federation web page <http://www.wfsf.org>

5. Research Activities. These include conferences, symposia, and other meetings often in cooperation with others and with a specific focus. In a few cases there have been special reports developed by the Federation for others (particularly UNESCO).

6. Educational Programs. These have often been integrated with Federation conferences, which have often had a formal educational component for short courses, either focused on graduate students or Federation members. Summer sessions and workshops for teaching, and “story telling” sessions.

7. Special Studies. Over the years specific reports or studies have been developed. These include a listing of all “futures courses” at universities (worldwide), an online center for pedagogical resources in futures studies for UNESCO, and categories for futures resources (with examples of format and content). These are examples as it is difficult at present to compile a complete listing.

8. General Discussion. Providing a forum for general discussion learning from each other, and exposure to new perspectives and cultures is an underlying theme of the Federation. Vehicles for these activities has change over the years as electronic mail became generally available in the early 1980s and the capabilities of the world wide web became evident in the early 1990s.

9. Wikipedia. The Wikipedia entry for the Federation was updated by members of the Federation to be more reflective of actual activities. The Wikipedia site is http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Futures_Studies_Federation (and a general page on futures studies is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futures_studies).

Support

The Federation is primarily supported by membership dues. In addition, it has often had in-kind services provided by the institution where the President and the Secretary General were located and throughout its history, WFSF has been supported by various national, regional, and international groups such as Mankind 2000, The Club of Rome, IRADES, Futuribles, the Secretariat for Futures Studies in Sweden, the University of Hawaii in the U.S.A., the Turku School of Economics in Finland, the Communication Centre at Queensland University of Technology in Australia, and the University Research Center of the University of St. La Salle in the Philippines.

Management and Membership

Selected management information is below. A complete listing is in the constitution (<http://www.wfsf.org>).

The General Assembly consists of all members of the Federation, is the main decision-making body of the Federation, and meets in session at least once every two years and in virtual session as agreed by the constitution or the Executive Board. Decisions and proceedings of the General Assembly must be recorded and published in the official journal of the Federation.

The Executive Board is responsible for supervising and conducting the entire work of the Federation within the framework set by the General Assembly between the General Assembly meetings. The two principle officers are President and Secretary General.

There are four types of members: General members, student members, institutional members, and Fellows. Presently there are about 200 general and student members combined, 11 institutional members, and 54 Fellows (nominated by membership and elected by Executive Board). To be elected president, the candidate is required to be a Fellow of the Federation.

Recent Activities Relevant to the Federation Crisis

1. Beginning in the mid 2000s the cumulative impact of a series of changes, or signs of the times, began to affect the well-being of the Federation. Operational costs increased, the workload of everyone (Executive Board, members and others) increased, other (and newer) futures-related organizations offered some similar services, and the role of information technology broadened considerably for all aspects of society. In addition, the structure of the Federation, where people serve brief tenures as officers or Executive Board members but are located all over the world, added to the management complexity by allowing a variety of methods financial accounting and managing Federation membership information. There is no paid staffing or individuals with a “relatively” permanent management role.

2. During 2006 and 2007 several attempts were made to assess needed changes. A Council of Past Officers was approved by the General Assembly (Johannesburg) to be advisory to the Executive Board and officers, with the membership consisting of all past presidents and secretaries general. An auditor was appointed to review the financial and membership records and bring consistency in formats; the goal is to allow the Federation to productively use the information that it has collected. Some members of the Executive Board were unable to contribute the necessary time to the Federation because of changes in their own activities, and this necessitated the changing of board members (following procedures defined in the constitution). An electronic records systems was established for Federation archives and Executive Board activities. The web support was transferred from on institution to another, but maintenance and access problems continued; a new provider has been found and a resumption of an effective web site should follow soon. Finally, UNESCO had provided some funding for travel and programs for certain meeting attendees and this has been reduced because of UNESCOs own funding reductions.

3. These changes in external and internal events are all manageable if taken one at a time, but when so many changes came together at about the same time, and the cumulative effects of not addressing some of these issues when they were small, has caused a mini-crisis in the Federation.

The Refreshing Exercise

The need for change has been see by the officers and Executive Board (evidenced by the attempted changes over the last several years) and by the membership at large (evidenced by some entries on the listserv). The purpose of the refreshing effort is to see how we need to change.

However, futurists need to know history as a backdrop to the future. This brief summary is intended to provide some of that history so any changes are suggested are forward looking but backward compatible with the principles of the Federation.

Excerpts from the Journal *Futures*, Volume 37 (5), 2005

This complete issue was devoted to the World Futures Studies Federation and edited by Richard Slaughter. The brief selections below from the 10 papers give a flavor of the history of the Federation and some of its unique features.

1. World Futures Studies Federation: Histories and Futures. Introduction. Richard A. Slaughter (5 pages). Slaughter is a WFSF Fellow, a current member of the Executive Board, and a former WFSF President.

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 Futures Studies exist. 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.

2. The First Fifteen Years: a personal view of the early history of the WFSF (1967-1982), Bart van Steenberg (6 pages).

*Sometimes meetings of the WFSF were part of a research project mostly in cooperation with other institutions. A good example of that was the meeting of some 25 futurists on 'Visions of alternative Societies' which took place in Mexico 1978 and which was a joint venture of the WFSF, the Mexican CESTEEM, (the Center for the Social and Economic Studies of the Third World) and the United Nations University in which Eleonora was so active. It was part of the Human and Social Development program of the UNU, of which the aim was to investigate new ways and new ideas on development that would involve the whole human being. The results were published, first in Spanish, *Visiones de Sociedades Deseables* (15 contributions, 450 pages) within 1 year after the conference (the translation must have been a hell of a job) and a few years later in English by Pergamon Press under the title *Visions of Desirable Societies*. The more neutral 'alternative' in the original title of the project had made place for the more positive and normative 'desirable'. As Eleonora Masini and I wrote in the introduction: "Visions are no longer to be considered a luxury...they are the stimulus to change the present. The vision itself is an expression of the possibility of change, of building a future which is different from the present".*

3. Reflections on World Futures Studies Federation (1968-1990). Eleonora Barbieri Masini. (9 pages). Masini was a founding member of the WFSF (1973 meeting), is a WFSF Fellow, Past President, and Past Secretary General.

The World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) began as an idea of a few visionary people. It developed with the contribution of different people around the world who thought that looking into the future as a set of alternative paths linked to the choices in the present, was crucial for humankind. Many of these people were well known scientists, writers in different areas, some were already involved in futures studies some became involved during their time in WFSF. This article traces the events through which the Federation developed and was enriched. The vision of the Federation is just as valid today as it was when the Federation started. It can still perform the role of a modest bridge between people who are concerned with building a humane world.

4. The WFSF and I (1966-1983). Jim Dator. (15 pages). Dator is a WFSF Fellow, Past President, and Past Secretary General.

The WFSF began as a group of people, primarily but by no means exclusively Europeans, who were horrified by the immediate past, frustrated by the present, and fearful for the future. Here they were, beneficiaries of what was said to be the very heart and soul of the world's most stunning achievement, Western Civilization, and what did that Civilization have to say for itself? Two gruesome World Wars, the second of which saw the most advanced portion of the world's most advanced civilization--Germany--attempt to eradicate an entire group of people, which war was ultimately brought to an end by actions of the most innovative portion of Western Civilization--the United States--inventing and using on Japanese civilians (not once, but twice) a horrible new weapon that was Brighter Than A Thousand Suns. The two World Wars were themselves interrupted by a wrenching Great Depression, while bloody excesses of colonialism and imperialism had so far marked the 20th Century--though there was reason to be hopeful that the decolonization process, then under way, would result in a fairer world order over the second half of the 20th Century.

5. World Futures Studies Federation (1993-1997) .Karoliina Lehtinen. (13 pages)

The five branches of the tree represented the main activities (of the Federation):

- a). publications*
- b) world and regional conferences*
- c) seminars and courses*
- d) 'market place' for futurists*
- e) other WFSF inspired activities.*

The leaves were the manifestations of the main activities: "(t)he trunk, through which the nutrients from the roots flow to the branches and leaves, represents the core competencies, the leading edges of WFSF in comparison with other activity networks". The trunk included: saving humankind; images of futures; a holistic approach; worldwide extension; networking with members and futures organizations; innovations and democracy; social commitments; and communication endowments. In addition, innovations such as Bulletin, FFA and WFA and task force groups had their own places innovations as a bird's nest and task force groups as birds

6. Sweet Memories of the Future: A Personal History of the World Futures Studies Federation. Sohail Inayatullah. (6 pages). Inayatullah is a WSFS Fellow and former Executive Board member.

For me, the Federation is certainly a family of friends--thus the listing of names in this short essay but it is also a professional academic organization. I've enjoyed both dimensions of the Federation and am indebted to it. It has certainly been my family. And it has been my education. Should it be a movement? It should encourage movements but the Federation needs to stay open, pluralistic, focused on alternatives and thus not part of any particular party or indeed epistemic politics. Of course the latter is impossible but still the effort should be to always have the seeds of change within the structure and culture of the Federation. One of my favorite quotes about the European Renaissance was that it was not solely about a new vision for Europe and the world, but an awakening to new visions.

It is this quest for unending pluralism while grounded in certain human (and nonhuman, and even post-human) universals that is unique to the Federation. Its global framework has embedded in it the tensions of various cultures and of various historical ages. There is no simple uni-cultural or uni-temporal hegemony, not even by the Future! However, the Federation should continue to play a strong gatekeeper role in helping individuals and associations better judge what is futures rubbish (marketing promotional material), what is futures propaganda, and what is uni-methodological and uniepistemological work, and what is effective, deep, multi-methodological and multi-epistemological. That is, the Federation must envision visions but not be overly excited by the latest futures fad and use its intellectual authority to help global citizens sort through the gems from the junk.

But where should it go in the future? The Federation has been my teacher and thus my hope is that it becomes part of the emerging world knowledge economy, an open university, intellectually rigorous but with a heart, a multiversity for all ages, for all of our futures.

7. Managing a Sphere of Influence: WFSF and its Institutional Members. Alexandra Montgomery.(9 pages).

The World Futures Studies Federation has nearly seventy Institutional Members from around the world. Combined, Institutional Members' day-to-day endeavors span an assortment of professional, academic, governmental and research areas. The activity and visibility of the Institutional Members was informally monitored during a nine-month period in 2002-2003 which resulted in a strong impression that, despite abundant access to Institutional Members, the WFSF is underutilizing its sphere of influence. The WFSF should initiate a strategy of outreach to Institutional Members that maximizes relationships and is mutually beneficial for everyone involved in the organization. The basis of this outreach should be focused on fulfilling WFSF's stated mission to promote Futures Studies and awareness for the future. WFSF is also strongly committed to promoting democracy, which must also underlie any effort in this context. In addition to the internal state of affairs there needs to be consideration of trends and current conditions outside the field of Futures Studies. By examining four scenarios this essay suggests ways in which WFSF can anticipate the future and increase its impact (note: the scenarios are lengthy and depend on a matrix of different alternatives and driving forces so they are not reproduced here).

The WFSF is a forum where the stimulation, exchange, and examination of ideas, visions, and plans for alternative, long-term futures can take place. The Federation promotes and encourages futures studies as well as innovative interdisciplinary analysis and critique by:

- 1. Promoting a higher level of futures consciousness in general*
- 2. Stimulating cooperative research activities in all fields of futures studies*
- 3. Planning and holding regional and global futures studies conferences and courses*
- 4. Encouraging the democratization of future-oriented thinking and acting*
- 5. Stimulating awareness of the urgent need for futures studies in governments and international organizations, as well as other decision making and educational groups and institutions, to resolve problems at local, national, regional, and global levels, and*
- 6. Assisting local and global futures research activities; encouraging responsibility for future generations*

8. Youth and the WFSF: a generational approach. Tamas Gaspar and Jose Ramos.(11 pages). Gaspar is a current WFSF Executive Board member.

Youth and WFSF--ideas and suggestions. Having established the need for youth and student participation in a broad context in order to help the WFSF with its own generational development and to help facilitate the generational emergence of futures thinking, we would now like to offer some ideas for practical implementation. While this is not a definitive plan of action, we do have strong ideas about what can be done. We want to open up debate on youth and generational futures in the WFSF which we hope will lead to aligned action from many WFSF members.

a.. We have recently dialogued on the possibility of launching a pilot survey in the near future, beginning with work between Jose Ramos, at the Australian Foresight Institute, Tamas Gaspar and Erzsebet Novaky at the Futures Studies Centre in Budapest and Chris Jones, the WFSF Secretary General. Together we may be able to support the development of a data base which can help us understand the prospects for student participation internationally. This survey research could have various dimensions:

(b) The relationship between values and action among emerging generations. Values held by emerging generations may demand different forms of action. We need to examine what forms of action youth prefer, the forms that fit their preferred values.

(c) How youth and WFSF have interacted and how they could interact better or differently.

(d) Information on the age structure of the Federation would contribute to a better understanding of generational change.

(e) Institutionalizing the efforts of younger members may help to create the database of young futurists, including their research fields--likewise, creating a survey on behalf of the WFSF could help create awareness of WFSF youth participation opportunities, and attract people for formal membership and other activities later.

(f) A survey project like 'reinventing the WFSF from the grassroots: students creating the future of the WFSF' could be undertaken. This might be an initiative to garner broad student participation to re-create the WFSF in new and better ways. The survey project could uncover assumption we have about the WFSF. We could ask students 'why, how and when would the WFSF be meaningful to me and future generations?'

9. Creativity, skepticism, and visioning the future.(World Futures Studies Federation).Wendell Bell. (4 pages). Bell is a WFSF Fellow.

Members of the World Futures Studies Federation share not only the usual professional goals of advancing and developing their field, but also an extraordinary commitment to envisioning and creating a future world of increasing human freedom and well-being. Both aims, obviously, would be moved forward if futurists could establish more futures studies courses, departments, and research centers than now exist at colleges and universities. To do so requires vigor, creativity, and elan, which futurists seem to have in abundance, but it also demands more logical and empirical rigor, skepticism, and critical capacity in futures work.

10. Memories and methods: conversations with Ashis Nandy, Ziauddin Sardar and Richard Slaughter.(Interviews by Jose Maria Ramos). Slaughter is a WFSF Fellow, current Executive Board member and former President. Sardar is a WFSF Fellow.

JMR: One last question. What has it meant to you to be associated with the World Futures Studies Federation?

AN: The WFSF opened my eyes to the real possibilities of futures studies. I had read the work of some futurists and had been taken aback by their rather mechanical conceptions of both human society and future studies, Herman Kahn for example. I was a little wary of that kind of future studies and uncomfortable with them. A majority people who led the WFSF during its initial years were not given to such mechanical constructions of the future. They were trying to bring into future studies a different kind of social and political awareness. I found that very attractive. It allowed me to rethink many issues. Also, I found these sensitivities more compatible with the dignity of non-western cultures and their systems of knowledge. Some of the younger persons we have mentioned during this conversation like Ziauddin Sardar, Richard Slaughter and Sohail Inayatullah have inherited these sensitivities.

ZS: One of our challenges is to not keep making the same mistakes. Part of the reason that we do is that we need a dynamic secretariat structure. A secretariat might move from Honolulu, to Turku, to yet another location. Each time we have to re-learn the whole process. You can see that in the Bulletin. Every time there is a new process to learn, which can be seen as counter productive. The model was very open (that's probably why it was developed in the first place) and people want the Federation to be everywhere, not just associated with a single country, or a single outlook. But I think that point has been made. On the whole, if you look at the history of the Federation, the membership, it's evident that we are a heterogeneous group, that we are not associated with any single country or any single community, or any single discipline, for that matter. So we don't have to keep apologizing for that any more. We do need to have, some kind of permanent secretariat. So the secretariat is free, to do other things, instead of repeating the same mistakes, and we learn. We also need a single place from where the bulletin comes out, and comes out regularly, and looks the same. At the moment when we look at all the bulletins from the last twenty years, each has a distinct format, shape and colour.

RS: And that's probably the charm and the beauty of the Federation. It takes a different form in a different context. But there are two particular strategies that can carry us forward. One is the notion of a virtual secretariat. Now that we have the internet, a lot of the software and knowledge that it takes to run the Federation doesn't have to be in one place. It can be spread across a number of places. So we're beginning to work with the notion of a virtual secretariat that can easily be in a number of places. Linked with that, is the idea of actually building up more of the regional centres. So, should something happen to the secretary general, or should there be real problems in one place. There are two or three other places where this work could be done.

(end of excerpts)