

**A GUIDE TO CONDUCTING
FUTURES STUDIES
IN AFRICA**

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African Futures

**A guide to conducting
futures studies
in Africa**

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Foreword

Our times are mainly characterized by rapid change and growing unpredictability. As Gaston Berger puts it, in such conditions, we would have to be crazy to drive full speed ahead without looking where we are going. His metaphor illustrates why the field of futures research is experiencing such a boom. The OECD's database alone contains entries for no fewer than 8000 works written in the past ten years about problems of the future – an average of two publications per day, or three per day, not counting holidays and weekends. The output of such works rose sharply with the approach of the year 2000, which produced a tidal wave of media discussions about centuries and millennia.

One explanation for all this research on the future no doubt lies in people's concern about it – the idea or feeling that the future is no longer what it used to be. But another explanation for this remarkable outburst of creativity may be that the future is a field of research that lends itself to exploration, experimentation, and methodological innovation. "Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend", for there is no royal road to thinking about the future. There are rather a thousand different paths, some well marked, others less so.

Such methodological ferment is all the more justified when knowledge is expanding so rapidly and the boundaries between disciplines are becoming blurred. A truly epistemological revolution is taking place. All of these changes make it imperative to question the accepted wisdom in all disciplines, including futures research, which lends itself especially well to such inquiry, because it is itself unbound by an intellectual straitjacket.

But in places or environments like sub-Saharan Africa, where futures research is only in its earliest stages, such

questioning of first principles arouses some skepticism about certain so-called futures studies, especially since it is well known that all that glitters is not gold.

It was to limit the potentially devastating effects of such skepticism that, in 1992, *African Futures* began to publish a series of methodological guides intended mainly for African experts engaged in national long-term perspective studies in African countries. Until then, apart from the guide *Reclaiming the Future*, published in 1986, there had been no manual specifically targeting this category of stakeholders in thinking about the future of Africa. Hence that guide, published in four parts covering four separate topics (identifying key issues, analyzing the past, constructing scenarios, and designing strategies), was well received in Africa.

In 1996, however, *African Futures* issued an assessment in which it recommended that the UNDP project team go further and develop a manual that would explain what a futures studies process is, what phases of analysis it involves, how they relate to one another, and the advantages and limitations of the various methods it uses. *African Futures* recommended that all of this information be illustrated with examples selected from African countries or similar environments where possible.

Those who recommended the preparation of this manual wanted it to be a practical tool, not just a theoretical study. They thus wanted it to give a prominent place to the experience acquired by the teams that had carried out national long-term perspective studies in African countries. They wanted this manual to cover the difficulties that these teams had encountered, the ways that they had overcome these difficulties, and the post-project assessments that had been done either by the researchers themselves or by independent third parties.

But it quickly became apparent that while such a manual, drawing on all the experience acquired by the *African Futures* project, would certainly be worthwhile, it would be equally worthwhile to present this experience in a form that

could be used by a wider audience. Specifically, this manual could be made useful to all development practitioners in Africa – not only those dealing with the fate of entire nations, but also those dealing with individual administrative regions, departments or communities. These practitioners too needed to be able to think about and study possible and desirable scenarios for the future.

This, in a nutshell, was the thinking behind the development of the present *Guide to Conducting Futures Studies in Africa*.

Though *African Futures* is shown as the author of this guide and assumes full responsibility for its contents, most of the guide was actually written by Jacques Giri, a futurist whose works include a remarkable study on the future of the countries of the Sahel. Mr. Giri's approach to working with the *African Futures* team was exemplary. He did not hesitate to give us his views, even – and especially – when they were critical of our current practices in conducting long-term perspective studies.

For this reason, the assessments offered of various tools and methods of futures research at various points in this guide may seem to differ substantially from what might be found in the methodology notes published by *African Futures* itself. This should not be surprising, because, going beyond personal sensibilities, our understanding of the situation of Africa at the dawn of the 21st century has grown much richer, even compared with the early 1990s, when the first NLTPS guides were published. We all have a responsibility to try to see things through a new lens, to find methods better suited to a situation that has become much more complex and can be read in many very different ways. Because we did see things in different ways, dialogue was necessary. Our dialogue with Jacques Giri was highly rewarding, because it was open and guided by the desire not to gloss over our differences but to find a practical approach together – in the words of Jean Noël Kapferer, something that might be usable if imperfect, rather than something that was perfect but unusable.

Has the result of this collaboration matched our expectations? We will leave it to our readers to judge, and we invite them to write us to let us know what they think. For our part, we at *African Futures* are prepared to revise this guide as often as needed, because we firmly believe that where tools and methods are concerned, there is no truth so absolute that it does not have to be tested against harsh reality. This is why we will immediately begin revising the guides that we published in 1992, hoping to make them lively documents.

In conclusion, we wish to express our gratitude to all those people, too numerous to mention, who over the years have worked with us, without us, and even in some exceptional cases against us, to untangle the Gordian knot — always fascinating, but always difficult — of futures studies. These people include consultants at *African Futures*, experts from national teams, managers of planning departments, and participants in *African Futures* seminars, many of whom have drawn our attention to aspects of our methodology that needed to be rethought or simply more precisely defined. We owe a major intellectual debt to them, as we do to many special friends of *African Futures*. These include Souleymane Bachir Diagne, professor of philosophy at Cheick Anta Diop University in Dakar; Mamadou Lamine Diallo, mining engineer and technical advisor to the Primature of Senegal; and Mohamed Diallo, statistician and coordinator of the National Capacity Building Program for Strategic Management of the Development of Mali. All of them were kind enough to read the manuscript of this guide and offer suggestions that proved invaluable in preparing the final version. We wish to express our most heartfelt thanks to all of them here.

Alioune Sall
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African Futures

Chapter 1

Introduction to Futures Studies

Why is this guide needed?

Let us briefly review the origins of this guide.

In the late 1980s, no one could deny that development efforts in almost all of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa had been a failure.

Development plans had been prepared in most of these countries during the 1960s and 1970s. Some of them had really been little more than wishful thinking. Others had been implemented at least partially, resulting in some major achievements, but had proven powerless to relieve the crisis caused in particular by the continuing decline in the prices of African export commodities. The structural adjustment programs designed to restore the financial equilibrium disturbed by this crisis, and to create the conditions for sustainable growth, had achieved only a very small part of their objectives. Though these programs helped to reduce these imbalances, they clearly did not produce the expected sustained growth.

The many attempts to promote development in various sub-regions of Africa or in Africa as a whole — in particular the 1980 Lagos Action Plan for the Economic Development of Africa, in which many Africans had placed great hopes — had also clearly failed to produce the expected results.

In response to this critical situation, the Government of the Netherlands organized a conference on Africa, held in Maastricht in 1990 and attended by African governments and aid agencies.

The participants in this conference agreed that, contrary to what seemed to have been assumed in the past, Africa's development could not be achieved through economic measures alone. Though sound economic policies were definitely necessary, they have to be accompanied by changes in behaviour and in social, cultural, and political structures. The conference participants also agreed that **these changes would not occur without a vision of the future that was broadly shared** by the peoples concerned.

National long-term perspective studies (NLTPS) were regarded as a vehicle for achieving such a shared vision, and the Maastricht Conference recommended that such studies be carried out.

Over the following years, UNDP established *African Futures* as a regional project whose goal is to help every African country to conduct its own NLTPS.

The *African Futures* project began by identifying the methods used worldwide to study the long-term futures of human communities. It then evaluated these methods and selected those that seemed best suited to the situation of Africa at the end of the 20th century.

This preliminary phase resulted in the 1993 publication of a proposed methodology guide. A number of national studies were then done with the support of *African Futures*. These studies followed the proposed method to varying degrees, depending on the country.

As defined in the resolution approved by the Maastricht Conference, the objective of these studies was to identify each country's possible futures for a 25 to 30-year time horizon and to mobilize all of that country's strengths to achieve the desired future. Time will tell how well these studies have achieved this goal.

But since this approach was entirely new to most African countries, these studies inevitably encountered some problems. They encountered technical problems, due to the novelty of the approach. They also encountered political problems, because governments were not used to development studies that took place outside their own purview, and social problems, because some stakeholders were reluctant to have their strategies discussed publicly. Some of these problems may have had negative consequences for the studies concerned, but they also provided an opportunity to continue to refine people's thinking about the proposed method.

The purpose of this *Guide to Conducting Futures Studies in Africa* is to take advantage of the experience gained by the African Futures project and make it available in a form that will be useful to a broader audience.

Who is this guide for?

It emerged that this experience could be useful, not only **to people who may be directly involved in conducting national long-term perspective studies, but also to anyone in Africa who may need to examine possible and desirable futures in narrower contexts.**

A number of African countries have not yet undertaken national long-term perspective studies, but plan to do so in the coming years. Those countries that have already conducted such studies know that the resulting vision of the future cannot be regarded as final. The studies done to date do have some weaknesses. Even if they did not, this would not mean that the job of thinking about the future was over with. As we all know, African societies are undergoing profound changes. The world around them is also changing very rapidly, and the conflicts among all parts of the world are growing more numerous every day. It is thus necessary to re-examine the

long-term futures of these countries, both to take these changes into account and to take advantage of the progress achieved in futures research methodologies.

This guide is based on the experience acquired in the NLTPS conducted to date. It is intended, first of all, for those who must design and carry out such national studies in the future.

But these people are not the only ones who must deal with the problem of studying the future. The governments of African countries, local communities, businesses, and non-governmental organizations must do so as well. All of these institutions must view their activities from a long-term perspective and adjust them more closely to their own objectives and to their rapidly changing environment. The national studies will help them in these efforts, but many of these organizations also need to do research focusing on the long-term future of the individual sectors or smaller geographic areas that are their particular concern.

Let us cite just one example of a specific field where long-term thinking is especially necessary: water resource management. As we all know, water supply problems are now critical in a large part of Africa, and they will become even more so in future. For some decades now, there has been a worrisome decline in the amount of rainfall in Africa. Yet as the continent's population continues to grow, so will the demand for water by individuals, agriculture, and industry.

This guide is intended for people who must analyze these kinds of problems as well. By investigating the various methods used worldwide to study long-term futures, by attempting to select those methods that appear best suited to Africa today, and by reaping the experience gained in NLTPS, the *African Futures* project has developed this guide which may prove very useful to these people as well.

Why study the future?

Before moving on to the chapters that talk about how to study the long-term future, let us take a while longer to discuss **why we study the long-term future, and the characteristics of long-term futures studies.**

In these early years of the 21st century, the whole idea of taking a long-term perspective may elicit a skeptical response. Who foresaw the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet system in the 1990s, with all the consequences that this had for Africa? Who foresaw the end of apartheid? Nobody!

Many governments and major corporations look at failed past attempts to study the long-term future, and the problems encountered in current attempts, and then give up on the whole idea, deciding to focus on strategic exercises instead.

Yes, it must be acknowledged that the concept of the future has changed. Once upon a time, some people might have believed that they were living in an entirely determinate universe where it would eventually be possible to predict everything. Those days and that belief are gone, to say the least.

That belief has been abandoned even as regards purely physical systems in which there is no human intervention but that are nevertheless quite complex. We cannot say what the next rainy season will be like; we cannot even say with certainty what the weather will be like a few days from now. A farmer in the Sahel sows his millet while anxiously scanning the horizon for a tornado that the weather report said was coming, but that never materialized. The reason is not that the weather forecasters made a "mistake". As we now know, uncertainty is an intrinsic part of the systems that they study. The tiniest, imperceptible change in atmospheric conditions at a particular place and time can lead to very different weather several days later.

With even greater justification, determinism has also been abandoned with regard to systems in which there is human intervention, where humans use and sometimes abuse their freedom, thus introducing yet another dimension of unpredictability into the equation.

The complexity of human societies is growing. Their interdependence is growing even faster. Scientific knowledge is accumulating at an astounding pace, while technological change is accelerating with often disconcerting results. For example, very few experts foresaw the explosive growth of microcomputers or, more recently, the Internet. All of these factors make forecasting the future even more difficult.

Under these circumstances, when we know in advance that we cannot predict the future, why should we even try to study it?

The problem is that every day, despite growing unpredictability, **we all act**, individually or collectively, **based on the future**, the image of the future that we create for ourselves. Yes, we are subject to the **constraints of our environment and of our past**. Our environment, our personal history, and the history of our community all weigh, sometimes heavily, in our actions. But even when we allow for these constraints, it is our expectations for the future that drive us to act today and that shape the way we act. Of course, we give more weight to our expectations for the short-term ^a _n ^d the medium-term than for the long-term future. But all of us give at least some consideration to that distant future. Are there any among us who do not think about the future of their children, or even their grandchildren?

To go back to the example discussed earlier, how can we expect to manage the limited water resources of a particular river basin unless we have a long-term view of what resources will be available, and what the demand for them will be?

The problem is that because the **future** is undetermined, it can take many forms. It is open-ended, and at the dawn of the 21st century, it **is clearly more open-ended than ever**

before. Technological progress, and especially the explosive growth of information technology, has opened up avenues that used to be closed.

The problem is that when we are building the future, the factors that will have a significant impact on our efforts are more and more numerous, more and more complexly intertwined. They are also less and less limited to our immediate surroundings. The future of a province in Africa may depend on the actions taken tomorrow by persons unknown on other continents, who may turn out to be either potential clients or fearsome competitors. **Exploring possible futures is harder than ever.**

Precisely because the future is more open-ended and harder to predict than ever, a close examination of possible futures is more necessary than ever, and the methods of performing such an examination very likely assume more importance now than ever before.

Futures studies are a way of examining the possible futures of a human community. The goal of such studies is not to predict the future, but rather to help to build a future that will meet the community's aspirations, and to assist in making better decisions that will have a greater chance of resulting in the desired future. This is a difficult undertaking, and the method chosen to guide this effort is crucial.

How should we study possible futures?

When it comes to studying possible futures for a human community in a complex, changing world, there is no single, scientific method that can be recommended for all cases. In fact, a wide range of methods have been proposed and applied. How are they alike? How do they differ?

Common characteristics of futures-study methods

All of the existing approaches to futures studies are **comprehensive**, or, more precisely, **systemic**, which means that they look at a complex system — the human community whose long-term future they seek to explore — that is itself surrounded by a complex environment. Most methods used in futures studies assume that, the world being what it is, the future can never be determined by any single factor, but results from the interactions of numerous factors. Some of these factors are internal to the system, while others are external and beyond the control of the human beings who are attempting to study their own future.

So many different factors go into determining the future that the human mind cannot encompass them all, much less consider all their interactions. All futures research methods thus involve establishing a **simplified model of reality**. As we shall see, some of these models are highly simplified, for example, those that give a "driving force" a decisive weight in determining the future. Other methods use more complex models involving multiple factors.

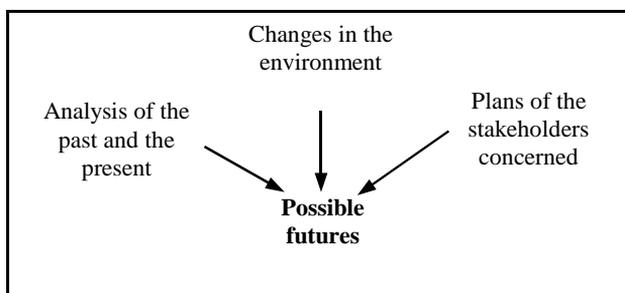
Regardless of what model a group may adopt to study the future, **choices must be made**. What choices will depend on how the group's members interpret the realities around them. In general, these choices will represent a compromise among different readings of the same reality, and they will **necessarily involve an element of subjectivity**. No examination of the future can ever be entirely objective.

Whatever factors the group considers, behind most of them there are people, stakeholders, and the future will largely depend on the action they take. Consequently, it is inconceivable to study the future without considering the people, the various categories of stakeholders who make up the community being studied and its environment. In general, every method must consider two different aspects of these people and their environment.

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- The first aspect is that the future will depend on what these people are and what history has made of them – and not just recent history, because what people are today is often rooted in their distant past. Most approaches to futures studies assume, to varying degrees, that the future will depend not only on the physical capital and knowledge that these people have accumulated, but on their cultures, how they have organized their societies and how they interrelate. All futures studies thus rely on **an analysis of both the past and the present**.
 - The second aspect is that the future that people build will depend on the plans that they form, explicitly or implicitly – the vision of the future to which they subscribe. Futures studies thus also require a **consideration of the plan or plans for the future that the various stakeholders have made**. Naturally, the relative weights given to the community's past and to its vision of the future vary from one method to another, but most methods generally regard the future as depending on both of these aspects simultaneously.
 - A third aspect must also be considered. People are surrounded by an environment, in the broadest sense of the word, and some factors depend neither on the past of the community that is studying its own future nor on its vision of that future. These **external factors are beyond the community's control**. They include natural factors (such as climate) and factors determined by other human communities (such as strategies of competing producers in other communities, or consumer demand for exports) or even all human communities (such as technological advances). The future of these factors is riddled with irresolvable uncertainties. Researchers conducting futures studies must thus make

assumptions about how these factors will evolve, or even assign differing probabilities to various alternative scenarios. This will generally introduce an additional element of subjectivity into the futures study.

These three elements – analysis of the past and the present, the plans of the people in the community being studied, and changes in their environment – are common to all futures studies.



It should be noted here that past, present, and future human actions always have multiple aspects. Each of these aspects is the subject of inquiry of a different social science (psychology, economics, sociology, history, and so on). This implies a **multidisciplinary approach** that draws on all fields of human inquiry.

Ways that futures-study methods can differ

Though they share a number of fairly common characteristics, methods of conducting futures studies are also highly diverse. Without going into too much detail, we can say there are two criteria that can be used to classify these methods into a few major categories.

The first criterion is **the extent to which these methods are formalized, which greatly varies**. Some approaches select determining factors, make assumptions about a number

of them, and then develop alternative scenarios for the future without applying any formal methodology at all, in a purely literary fashion.

In contrast, other methods use mathematical formulas of varying degrees of complexity to select the most influential factors, make hypotheses about them, and develop scenarios for the future.

It is important to stress here that though these more formal methods can be very helpful to futures research, they do not make it any more objective. They may allow the researchers to draw certain conclusions from their explicit or implicit ideas about the future, which a purely literary approach generally cannot, but they do not reduce the element of subjectivity in the study.

The second and more important criterion for distinguishing among futures-study methods, however, is **how much emphasis they place on a particular way of applying their analysis of the past and their vision of the future.** Here is the classification proposed by Philippe Hugon and Olivier Sudrie (see bibliography at the end of this chapter).

- Scenario methods describe possible futures which are themselves determined by long-term changes in key factors.
- Predictive methods are based on building formal models to describe the behaviour of the various stakeholders involved.
- Methods based on a linear view of history, that is, strong historical trends, which, however, are not necessarily continuous.
- Methods based on tracing the common thread of a "driving force" that will determine the possible futures.

The first three types of methods consider the weight of the past in various ways. They consider the vision of the future

by looking at the long-term changes in key factors or at discontinuities in strong historical trends (and these play a very small role in predictive methods, which limits their value for long-term studies). In contrast, methods in the fourth category place more emphasis on the driving force and the vision of the future that generally underlies it.

Hugon and Sudrie recognize that this classification is somewhat theoretical. They rightly stress that "in practice, it has been shown that to obtain concrete answers to the questions they are asking, researchers must apply a combination of these methods".

In short, though there is agreement about the major principles that apply to studying the future, there is also **a fairly large variety of approaches**. One aim of this guide will be to provide an overview of these various methods and some **suggestions** for using them to suit the objectives of the particular futures study.

The experience of the *African Futures* project

This guide is an **update** of the four-part methodology guide published by the *African Futures* project in 1993 and 1994. It reflects the worldwide changes that have occurred since then in methods of studying the long-term future. This guide particularly draws on the book *Futures Research Methodology*, published in 1999 by the Millennium Project with the support of UNDP (see the reference at the end of this chapter).

This new guide also reflects the experience acquired during this period in conducting national long-term perspective studies in Africa with the support of the *African Futures* project. As of this writing, such studies have been completed in Benin, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Seychelles, Uganda, Sao Tome, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

NLTPS supported by *African Futures* are being conducted in Mozambique, Namibia and Sierra Leone.

This guide thus reflects the experience acquired in these studies, including the problems encountered and how they were overcome. It also reflects post-project assessments of these studies, either by the study teams themselves or by independent third parties. Two workshops were held to learn lessons from these experiences, one in Entebbe in 1998, the other in Abidjan in 1999. The documents tabled by experts, the discussions held and the recommendations made at these workshops provided much of the material used in developing this guide.

In addition to updating the content of the earlier methodology guide, the present guide also **adapts it for use by a wider audience** than the researchers who carry out national studies.

The countries of Africa are evolving rapidly in a changing world. The methods proposed in the early 1990s are no longer necessarily entirely suited to the situation at the dawn of the 21st century. This guide seeks to reflect the changes that have occurred.

Contents of this guide

The methodology guide that *African Futures* published in 1993 and 1994 comprised four separate volumes on the following four topics: identifying issues, preparing the base of the study, constructing scenarios, and designing strategies.

The experience of recent years has led us to structure this guide somewhat differently.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 deals with the parties involved in futures studies and attempts to answer the question: who should conduct such studies? The experience gained in past national long-term perspective studies has shown that the answer to this question can be a sensitive matter and will greatly influence the impact that the study will have.

Chapter 3 deals with **preparing the base of the study**. Judging from the experience of past national studies, we decided that it was best not to separate identification of aspirations and problems from other steps in preparing the base of the study, as done in the earlier methodology guide. Whatever relative importance may be given to the weight of the past or the vision of the future, experience has shown that these two aspects must be linked in any study of the future. By addressing both of them in the same chapter, we wish to stress the importance of this linkage.

After covering the general aspects of preparing the base of the study, we felt it would be useful to provide at least some information about available tools to assist in this process. Chapter 4 is thus devoted to **tools for preparing the base of the study**. The purpose of this chapter is to provide enough information about the principles on which these tools are based and how they can be applied to enable researchers to decide whether they want to use them in their futures studies. This chapter also includes references to more specialized works providing more details on the use of these tools.

Chapters 5 and 6 cover two topics to which separate volumes were devoted in the earlier guide. Chapter 5 deals with **constructing scenarios**, emphasizing the principles involved and providing information on available tools to help in this process. Chapter 6 deals with **designing strategies**.

In Chapter 7, we conclude this guide by proposing general principles that should be applied in futures studies in Africa today. We also highlight not only the value but also the limitations of such studies.

In general, since the futures studies approach is still quite new in Africa, we have tried to emphasize the principles and the spirit of futures studies, rather than the refinements that have been made in this field.

For more information

This section does not attempt to provide an exhaustive or even an extensive bibliography of the publications available on futures studies and on how to conduct them successfully. Its purpose is rather to draw readers' attention to a few books, articles, and Web sites that may help readers to learn more about specific aspects of such studies.

In this spirit, we end this introductory chapter with a few general references on the design of such studies and the methods they use.

It is always useful to read or reread the writings of a discipline's seminal thinkers (when these works can still be located). Readers are referred in particular to Bertrand de Jouvenel's *L'art de la conjecture*, éditions du Rocher, Paris, 1954, and Gaston Berger's *Les étapes de la prospective*, PUF, Paris, 1967.

Another useful work is *Reclaiming the Future: A Manual on Futures Studies for African Planners*, prepared on behalf of the United Nations Development Program by the World Futures Studies Federation, the Association Internationale Futuribles, and the Association Mondiale de Prospective Sociale, London, 1986.

Fabrice Hatem's book *La prospective, pratiques et méthodes*, éditions Economica, Paris, 1993, relates the history of futures studies and reviews various methods and practices that have been used to carry them out.

A recent, excellent summary of the strategic futures studies method used in France, the concepts on which it is based, and a bibliography on this subject can be found in Michel Godet's *La boîte à outils de prospective stratégique*,

CNAM, Paris, 3rd edition, 1999 (distributed by Librairie des Arts et Métiers, 33 rue Réaumur 75003 Paris).

A very good brief presentation of the philosophy, basic concepts, and characteristics of the futures-studies approach can be found in an article by Hugues de Jouvenel, "La démarche prospective. Un bref guide méthodologique", *Futuribles*, No. 247, November 1999 (55, rue de Varennes 75341 Paris Cedex 07).

Futures Research Methodology, distributed on CD-ROM by the Millennium Project (American Council for the United Nations University, 4421 Garrison Street, NW, Washington, DC 20016) is a handbook written by several American and European contributors and published in 1999. It includes not only a general presentation on the methods and tools used around the world to study the long-term future, but also a very extensive bibliography (albeit one that places a great deal of emphasis on futures research for businesses).

Lastly, *Un bilan de la prospective africaine*, edited in 1999 by Philippe Hugon and Olivier Sudrie and published by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provides a good overview of the main futures studies conducted to date in sub-Saharan Africa and the methods they used, along with a brief evaluation of these methods.

Chapter 2

Stakeholders in Futures Studies

This chapter addresses the following question: once a human community has decided to conduct a study about its long-term future, who should conduct this study? Should the community entrust this task to a team of recognized experts, while limiting its own role to defining their terms of reference, monitoring their progress, and discussing their results? Or should the community participate in the study directly? If it does so, what form should its participation take, in what areas, and how extensive should it be? Under what conditions can such participation be most productive? Should futures-research specialists still play a role, and if so, what role? All of these questions are essential.

We will begin by discussing the **general trend** that has been observed worldwide in recent years toward greater participation by members of whatever community is being studied, or at least by some of them, through various methods such as "futures workshops". These community members then become the key stakeholders in the study, though they are usually assisted by specialists from various social science disciplines, as well as by futures-research experts, whose chief role is to provide methodological advice.

Next, we will discuss the experience of various NLTPS exercises that have attempted to adopt participatory approaches. What approaches have been adopted? How have stakeholders organized themselves? What difficulties have they encountered? In particular, how have they interacted with

government authorities in their countries? What attitude did these authorities take toward the principle of community participation? Did they consider its results in the course of these studies?

Since, in most cases, the participatory approach will be a new one and fairly different from the approaches traditionally adopted in government and academic circles, we will also discuss the question of how well prepared stakeholders were for their role in these studies. Were they adequately prepared? Did they have any problems in embracing the participatory philosophy, or any practical problems in implementing the participatory method?

Lastly, we will try to answer the following question: What lessons can be learned from these experiences and applied to national and other futures studies?

Studies done by consultants and in workshops led by consultants

When the first wave of futures studies began, the whole idea was so new that their sponsors had little choice but to hire teams of specialized consultants to carry them out. But the drawbacks of this approach quickly became apparent.

First of all, the consultants clearly had no legitimate status to decide what future was desirable for the communities they were studying. Only these communities or their representatives could do that. It soon became obvious that much could be gained by involving these communities in exploring their possible futures. For one thing, such involvement would let them make more informed choices about desirable futures. For another, at least some community members had intimate knowledge of these communities that could contribute a great deal to the process of exploring their possible futures. Lastly, the involvement of community members could provide the necessary continuity between the

futures studies and subsequent strategic planning, and the quality of this planning would generally be improved as a result.

In this regard, there have been two trends in futures studies in recent years. One has been to try to involve a large number of members of the community concerned, and various methods have been devised for this purpose (SYNCON, public Delphi rounds, etc.). The other trend has been to have presumably representative members of the community do most of the analysis of its long-term future, while limiting the futurists' role to proposing a method that these members can use, training them in how to apply it, and then leading workshops for this purpose.

The *African Futures* project has followed these trends. It has limited outside consultants to studying the international environments that Africa may face in the future, while firmly adopting the approach of having **national studies conducted by national teams** and involving the people of the countries concerned in identifying their aspirations.

Beyond the broad reasons just described, there were other reasons for this new approach. Only a limited number of long-term studies were conducted in Africa before the *African Futures* project began, and they were done by foreign consultants, with little or no participation by the members of the communities concerned. Apart from being of questionable relevance, such studies resulted in very little technology transfer. One objective of *African Futures* has thus been to "**decolonize the future**".

All of the national studies supported by *African Futures* have taken this new approach. As we shall see, these studies have encountered some problems, especially regarding the participation of civil society and the application of futures-research methods. Not all of them have achieved their goals, and not all of them are likely to have an immediate impact on the development of the countries concerned.

Nevertheless, this approach has yielded unquestionable benefits. National long-term perspective studies have sparked debate, stimulated thinking about the future, and opened up dialogue as never before.

Thus, the first lesson to learn from the NLTPS experience is that **much is gained by having the communities concerned do most of the work for studying their long-term futures**. This lesson obviously applies to future national studies, but also probably more limited studies.

That being said, what methods should be used to have communities participate in these studies is not a simple question. We shall now see what can be learned in this regard from some past studies in Africa, including not only those conducted through the *African Futures* project but also some others conducted outside this framework.

Long-term futures studies in Africa: past organizational problems

In this section, we will start by reviewing the organizational framework that *African Futures* recommends for carrying out national futures studies. Then we will quickly examine the forms of organization actually adopted by countries that have carried out such studies, and we will try to understand why they deviated to varying extents from the framework recommended by *African Futures*. Lastly, we will attempt to identify some lessons for the future that can be learned from the way these studies were conducted and the results they achieved.

Organizational structure recommended by *African Futures*

African Futures believed that no one person, government department or other institution should have a monopoly on studies of a nation's future. It thus recommended that to conduct an NLTPS in a country, an organizational structure should be formed for this specific purpose, separate from whatever administrative bodies had previously been responsible for planning and thus, at least in principle, for thinking about the future.

African Futures saw this separate structure as a forum for meetings, discussions and research on the future, all with the ultimate objective of taking action. *African Futures* suggested that this structure have the following three levels.

- **A National Leadership Group/Steering Committee** would be responsible for defining policy directions for the study, along with moral, political and, if necessary, operational support. For practical reasons, it was proposed that this committee be made up of no more than 10 to 12 people, who should be recognized for their experience, open-mindedness and credibility on social issues.
- **A National Core Team** of multidisciplinary experts from government, academia, and the private sector would actually conduct the study. *African Futures* proposed that this team consist of a coordinator who would be in charge of the project, together with experts who would be given time off from their usual responsibilities to work on it full-time. These people should be open to the differing ideas and sensibilities of the various groups within society and have reputations that enable them to enlist broad participation in the study. These experts should be recruited through a call for applications in the media, then selected by the

national government and the UNDP office, chiefly on the basis of their ability to conduct scientific research. According to the *African Futures* model, this team must maintain absolute political neutrality, and should never become either an antigovernment forum or a mouthpiece for government propaganda.

- **Multidisciplinary working groups** would be established, with their membership based on the needs of the particular study. The role of these teams would be to conduct research and discussions and to write reports on the subjects chosen by the National Core Team.

Organizational structures actually adopted in past studies

African Futures never intended to impose its proposed organizational structure as a straitjacket on every country that wanted to carry out a national futures study. On the contrary, the people who designed this structure intended for it to be adapted to each nation's own realities.

The first thing we can say about the way that national studies have actually been organized is that the organizing process itself has often taken quite some time. Negotiations have lasted 6 to 36 months, which is a sign of the difficulties that have been encountered.

In fact, many governments that decided to undertake long-term studies did invite organizations from civil society to play an active role. However, the problems encountered have shown that such partnerships between government and civil society are not achieved without effort.

Once these difficulties have been overcome, the organizational structures adopted, though all drawing on the *African Futures* model to varying extents, have differed a good deal from one country to the next. Some countries have created structures in addition to those proposed by *African*

Futures. Others have done without national leadership groups/steering committees, or have streamlined their organizational structures even further.

The organizational structure as a stumbling block in national studies

These variations in organizational structures are no accident. Political considerations have weighed heavily in the structures actually chosen. For example, in one country, political divisions among the elite ran so deep that no one could agree on ten or so personalities who could be regarded as above the political debate. Hence, this country decided not to form a national leadership group/steering committee. Instead, a larger committee was formed, but at the expense of its effectiveness.

These past organizational difficulties raise the issue of what might be called the **prerequisites for successful futures studies.**

A futures study is supposed to deal with the future of a specific community. Thus, if instead of one community there are actually several, and these communities are deeply divided or even engaged in confrontations involving various degrees of violence — if there is no minimum consensus that these communities want to live together and share a common future — then one may question the usefulness of conducting a long-term futures study.

If under such circumstances, a study is conducted anyway, one risk is that it may simply sweep the real problems under the rug, and simply go through the motions of studying the future without producing any useful results. Another risk in such circumstances is that if the study does address fundamental problems, by doing so it will merely exacerbate tensions without actually solving these problems.

Under such conditions, should all attempts to study the long-term future simply be abandoned? Not necessarily.

One approach, possibly facilitated by moderators from outside the communities concerned, would be to conduct an initial review of the history of the conflicts between them. If done properly, such an exercise might lead these communities to see their conflicts in a different light. It might lead them to realize that despite the historical and cultural differences that place them in conflict, and despite the friction, accumulated resentment, and even violence that these differences may have caused in the past, these communities would still be better off trying to build a common future together.

The long-term perspective study conducted in South Africa in the 1980s (described in the following box) definitely

**The Mont Fleur Scenarios
and changes in South Africa**

In 1991-92, a group of 25 representatives of various communities in South Africa met for six months to think about the long-term future of their country, which was then being torn apart by *apartheid*, and to develop possible scenarios for this future.

Though their views about their country's future widely diverged, the delegates gradually managed to construct four plausible scenarios for its future political, economic, social and cultural development.

These four scenarios contrasted sharply with each other. They were assigned evocative names: the ostrich scenario, the Icarus scenario, the lame duck scenario, and the "flight of the flamingos" scenario. All group members agreed that this last scenario was clearly preferable to the others.

In this case, the exercise of studying the future clearly helped people to recognize that the policies followed up to that time would lead only to dead ends, or to futures less favourable than the flamingo scenario.

Group members then went back to their respective communities and told them about their conclusions. There is no doubt that this played a role in the country's subsequent development.

played a role in ending *apartheid*. It provides an example of how, even under extreme conditions, such studies can have a very positive effect and help to kindle the desire to build a common future.

And if there is a **genuine desire to build a common future**, then a futures study can help the various groups to work together to determine the content of this common future and the best ways of building it.

The role of government

Suppose conditions are such that a study of a particular country's long-term future would be worthwhile. The problem then arises: what role should the government play in carrying out this study?

One possibility is that the government would not participate in this exercise. The study would be conducted by what is known as civil society, and the role of the government and/or political parties would then be to make decisions about the normative scenario or scenarios that this study proposed. In the case of futures studies dealing not with entire nations but smaller geographic areas or specific issues, the same possibility exists, but in this case it would be the authorities responsible for the area or issue, rather than the national government, that abstained from taking part in the study.

In Africa at the dawn of the 21st century, despite talk about the reduced role of the State, such an approach seems unrealistic, if only for financial reasons and because a large proportion of the people likely to conduct futures studies work for the national or local governments.

But there are some even more fundamental reasons why such an approach is unrealistic. As examples of successful development elsewhere in the world have shown, only the State can create the enabling environment for the realization of a desired future.

The experience of past NLTPS exercises has also shown that government intervention is useful if not essential to get

such studies off the ground. Experience has also shown the wisdom of requiring the National Core Team to be politically neutral from the beginning. It would appear to be essential for the entire process of preparing the base of the study and exploring possible futures to be carried out with the greatest possible objectivity, without any political interference. In fact, it can be said that the **freedom of action of participants in futures studies is a necessary condition for their usefulness.**

Such freedom is not always easy to exercise. Some analyses may touch on sensitive topics. Because these analyses attempt to take a critical look at the past and a different outlook on the future, authorities may easily perceive them as signs of opposition.

On the other hand, choosing a desirable future and strategizing to achieve it are eminently political acts, and government authorities or political parties are necessarily involved. In a democracy, for example, each of the major political parties might choose one of the possible futures identified in a futures study, then propose it to the electorate as that party's program for a desirable future, along with at least the broad outlines of a strategy to make that future a reality.

From the actual NLTPS experience in Africa, we can conclude that **the organizational structure that *African Futures* proposes for such studies**, with a National Leadership Group/Steering Committee, a National Core Team, and multidisciplinary working groups researching specific topics, **represents a useful model for organizing long-term studies, but this model must ultimately be adapted to the specific situation of the particular community being studied.**

Long-term futures studies in Africa: past problems of training

Do not underestimate the time required for training

The *African Futures* project has provided support for national long-term perspective studies in three ways: by publishing a methodology guide for these studies, by carrying out studies of the global environment that can be used by each national study, and by allowing project team members to provide direct support to national study team members, particularly by offering them three- to four-day workshops to train them in the recommended methodology.

Some countries have observed that because futures research was an entirely new discipline for most participants in national studies, this training was not enough. For example, this was the lesson that Malawi learned from its NLTPS, while Côte d'Ivoire expressed the wish that more time had been devoted to training the national study team.

In future, it would thus appear important not to underestimate the time needed to provide technical training in futures research methodology, whether the study in question be an NLTPS or a futures study of more limited scope.

Experience has shown, however, that it is generally difficult for a group of experts to find enough free time to take extensive initial training. Another approach would thus be to provide them with a certain amount of initial training in futures research methodology, then follow up with further training on each phase of the study process on an ad hoc basis.

Getting comfortable with the future studies approach

Futures studies attempt to be scientific but, because they deal with the futures of human communities, they can never be as precise as the pure sciences, or even the social sciences whose methods they apply. Yet the usefulness of a futures study does depend on how rigorously it has analyzed the social and environmental realities of the community in question, and how rigorously the results of these analyses have then been incorporated into strategy design. Experience with futures studies worldwide has shown that there is an art to them, as well as a science — the art of combining the necessary precision with the subtle kinds of reasoning that are also necessary in addressing human problems.

As we shall see in the following chapters, the NLTPS teams in various countries have often had some trouble in applying the data from their analyses to construct alternative scenarios and design alternative strategies. Hence, there has often been a lack of rigour in linking one phase of the futures study to the next.

Getting used to a new methodology is not always easy. Researchers may become familiar with the tools of the methodology and how it is used without necessarily having really grasped the spirit of the approach and made it their own.

We can thus learn the following lesson from past NLTPS experience: in programs to train teams for futures studies, **just as much emphasis should be placed on the "philosophy" of futures studies as on technical training.** One good way of communicating the spirit of futures studies to the members of these teams would be to have the initial training sessions include a critical review of futures studies conducted in Africa and elsewhere in the world.