

Editorial for Futures WFSF Special Issue (Vol 37 No 5 June 2005)

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Why was the WFSF created?

A look back at the origins of the WFSF show that, in contrast with its larger US cousin, the WFS, the WFSF was created by people who dissented from the emerging status quo in the world and who wished to ‘open up’ the domain to cultural pluralism. In his account of the ‘first fifteen years’ Bart van Steenbergen quotes Robert Jungk on the emergence of new futures techniques. He said that:

these powerful tools should not be restricted to a technocratic elite, for the future belongs to all of us and for that reason it is absolutely essential that future research is internationalised and democratised as soon as possible.¹

Later Steenbergen adds that ‘there was full agreement that it should be a genuine international organisation and not one dominated by the Western world.’² He also writes of the many debates and conflicts that took place but also identifies two other features of the organisation. It ‘played a major role as a breeding ground for future futurists’ and it attempted to maintain a suitable ‘distance from the powers that be.’³

Thus, from the beginning the WFSF aspired to be a true world federation. As time passed it became rich in people, insight, idealism and effort. It has never yet been rich in financial terms. But it could well be in the near future. It has certainly created a tradition of flexibility and openness; a tolerant environment in which many voices can be heard and a variety of progressive agendas pursued. Behind this, and all-but invisible to the membership throughout every stage, a vast amount of unpaid voluntary work has been carried out by small groups of dedicated people. There have been eighteen world conferences, many regional meetings and countless introductory courses in nearly every part of the world. And, while the WFSF archive is still under development, a glance at the publications that have been produced – either by it, or in collaboration with members and others – reveals an impressive sequence of quality scholarship and applied effort. Then there is the Bulletin. It began as a modest collection of items collated in Eleonora Masini’s kitchen and moved though various stages and designs as the Secretariat moved from country to country. Currently it is produced by Chris Jones in the USA and distributed both in ‘hard copy’ and via the internet. The latter, with all its attendant problems of equity, access and misuse, enables members of the WFSF to be in much closer touch with each other than would have been thought possible in the early days. It is sometimes a mixed blessing.

As the 21st century dawned and all the hopes that many had for ‘new thinking’ in this ‘new millennium’ steadily faded, so both the WFS and the WFSF faced new challenges. Measured in terms of raw membership numbers the ‘peak years’ are considered by some to be in the past. As globalisation went from strength to strength; as the abstract imperatives of the almighty market seemed to grow ever stronger and, through the world-wide assault of marketing, ever more invasive, so questions of viable, sustainable futures seemed to slip from the agendas of government and business. Short term thinking, the bottom line, corporate greed and collapse coloured the early years of the 21st Century. So, of course, did the September 11, 2001 tragedy

and, though it is by no means the only disaster to have befallen humans, the world has not been the same since. A new and seemingly endless war on ‘terrorism’ in all its guises was announced. Iraq was invaded and we will all live with the consequences for many years to come.

Given such turmoil and upheaval it is not surprising that many are tempted to metaphorically ‘throw up their hands’ and give up, turn back on themselves, retreat to the comfort of their high-tech cocoons. It goes without saying that these are not the sorts of response being explored in the WFSF. While yet still small, its ranks contain some of the most innovative thinkers, and some of the most effective futures / foresight practitioners the world has yet seen. As an earlier generation departs it is the younger members of the WFSF (and, indeed, the WFS) that are beginning to take the initiative and further build the field for the demanding tasks ahead. Meanwhile, however, humanity faces some highly intractable problems. Part of the task is to ‘clear the fog’ of conventional perception; to see our current world clearly; to know what, in our time needs to be done, and how to begin it. One of many things we can do is to ‘take issue with the way things are.’ That is a theme that circulates beneath many of the contributions included here.

WFSF histories

Just as it is a commonplace amongst futurists that there is no single ‘future’ it has become obvious that there is no singular ‘past’. What has been gathered together here, therefore, bears no resemblance to an ‘official history’. This is, rather, a series of overlapping accounts of the origins and development of the WFSF. Bart van Steenbergen gives a priceless participant’s account of some of the events of the early years. He is followed by Eleonora Masini’s account of her years as Secretary General and President. Indeed, it is often said that she is the ‘mother’ of the Federation. Be that as it may, Prof Masini’s contributions helped to shape the WFSF during its early years and she will remain an enduring influence.

It was no easy task to prise an account of his experience of the Federation from Jim Dator. But the wait was certainly worthwhile. Of all the papers collected here it is Dator’s that most clearly, perhaps, captures what might be called the ‘inner sense’ of WFSF culture. Dator travelled endlessly, communicated widely, and inspired many – this writer included - to join in and work with the Federation. Karoliina Saajos ably covers the next period when the secretariat and presidency were located in Turku, Finland, with Pentti Malaska at the helm. This was another innovative period for the Federation, with a wide range of events, publications and conferences. Finally Sohail Inayatullah takes up the story of the move to Australia and Tony Stevenson’s term as President. He skilfully chronicles the achievements and tensions of that time. Overall, this collection provides what is perhaps the first historical overview of the emergence and development of the WFSF during its first 30 years.

WFSF futures, interviews and narratives

This issue, however, is obviously about more than the past. Over the last couple of years serious efforts have been made to develop a series of forward-looking materials that would help to sketch out where the Federation might go from here and how it could further develop. Far more has been received than could be used in this issue.

Yet the materials will certainly not be lost. Some are part of a developing archive of WFSF work. Others will appear on the web site and future publications. Three papers on WFSF futures are presented here. The first was written by Alexandra Montgomery during an internship at the University of Houston's Clear Lake program. She considers what may be involved in managing what she calls the WFSF's 'sphere of influence'. It is a challenging paper that looks briefly at a number of contrasting scenarios for WFSF's own futures. It is followed by Jose Ramos and Tamas Gaspar's paper on Youth and the WFSF. Here they set out a number of suggestions for engaging with, and encouraging, developments in this crucial area. Next Jenny Gidley and Gary Hampson address one of the most central concerns of the WFSF – that of education. They show how various members have, for many years, worked on, and developed, a variety of approaches to futures in education. The centrality of this work cannot be over-emphasised. It has long been my view that when futures thinking, concepts, methods and tools finally penetrate schools systems and, equally vital, the administrative centres as well, so 'the flood gates will open', as it were, and we will see the beginning of society-wide transformations.⁴

There follow two interviews carried out by Jose Ramos. One is with this writer and Zia Sardar; the other is with Ashis Nandy during a brief visit to Melbourne in 2003. Ramos has worked tirelessly as an AFI intern for the last couple of years and we are all indebted to him for his dedication and commitment. Finally three short 'personal narratives' have been included from Erzsebet Novaky in Hungary, Wendell Bell in the USA and Mika Mannermaa in Finland. These provide further evidence of the vitality of the Federation and its far-flung membership. Over time more of all these resources will certainly be collected and made available.

Role(s) of the WFSF

The World Futures Studies Federation is a relatively small NGO with several hundred members around the world. Numerically you could say that it is insignificant. But in other ways it is not. It supports the development and implementation of futures thinking and policy in many places. It runs futures courses for young people and provides links for courses run in some 50 universities. It provides a context for dissenting views and visions of the future. It encourages the emergence of new voices from many different cultures into the futures conversation. It stands against hegemony – wherever and whenever it is found – and the 'one true way'. Over time these contributions can have catalytic effects. Part of that is the need to promote good work and to stand against sloppy work, conventional thinking and the careless uses of power that Ulrich Beck rightly describes as currently 'legal but illegitimate'.⁵ There's no way around this. One can't be sanguine about the current world order and its distorted modus operandi and, at the same, time expect solutions to emerge from dominant institutions. It won't happen. Lasting solutions will emerge wherever people of integrity are clear about what is going on, when they act out of positive shared values and where they refuse the current sugar-coated version of progress now being marketed throughout the world.

In one of his essays John Berger wrote that:

The first step towards building an alternative world has to be a refusal of the world picture implanted in our minds and all the false promises used

everywhere to justify and idealise the delinquent and insatiable need to sell.⁶

He then added ‘another space is vitally necessary.’ The WFSF is just such a space. But it is also more than that. It is a community, an environment and what Bob 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;
- build the futures domain in both theoretical and applied ways;
- encourage a range of social innovations;
- induct newcomers into the field; and
- explore the grounds of futures beyond dystopia.⁷

The WFSF, finally, exists for the same reason that FS exists. Both were called forth by the history we are living in 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.

References

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3. Ibid p. 3.
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5. U. Beck, *What is Globalization*, Polity Press, London, 2000.
6. J. Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*, 2001.
7. R. Slaughter, 2004 op cit.

Note

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