



A Monthly e-Newsletter From:

Institute for Alternative Futures

August 2010

In This Issue

[Congress, Don't Ask an Economist to Do a Futurist's Job](#)

[Thank You for Attending IAF's Wiser Futures Workshop](#)

[UTMB and IAF Partner to Develop Hurricane and Healthy Neighborhood Scenarios](#)

Forward Perspectives

Congress, Don't Ask an Economist to Do a Futurist's Job

By Eric Meade, IAF Vice President



Keynes wrote that “the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else.” So it seems. Economic analysis is at the center of most policy debates, and a new legislative initiative can live or die based on the output of an economic model run by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) or the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Thus, policy makers and others have responded to the financial crisis and the ensuing Great Recession in large part by criticizing the economists who seemingly got us into this situation in the first place.

The latest episode of this phenomenon is a July 20 hearing of the House Committee on Science and Technology, Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight entitled, “Building a Science of Economics for the Real World.” After noting the widespread use of economic models in all aspects of domestic policy, the hearing charter states, “If the generally accepted economic models inclined the Nation’s policy makers to dismiss the notion that a crisis was possible, and then led them toward measures that may have been less than optimal in addressing it, it seems appropriate to ask why the economics profession cannot provide better policy guidance.”

Here are some thoughts why this is the case. Economists excel – and contribute much to humanity – by analyzing data from the past and then providing an objective analysis of what is happening in the economic system. Insights and models drawn from that dataset are then extrapolated to predict future changes in the economic system. This is very effective when future events resemble those of the past. The traits necessary for someone who chooses this line of work include the ability to think analytically, a capacity for objectivity, and facility with large amounts of data.

However, these are not necessarily the traits that would help a person anticipate future events that deviate from patterns established in the past. To do this, one must have a capacity for identifying emerging trends, issues, and “weak signals” of changes in the external environment; the ability to consider alternative possibilities; and an appreciation of subjective factors as well as the objective factors typically captured by economic datasets. This is a completely different skill set from those required to be an economist. Thus, to the extent that we rely solely on economists to advise our policies, we will repeatedly be vulnerable to surprise by events our models failed to anticipate.

Fortunately, several decades ago the U.S. House of Representatives adopted a provision in the House rules that requires each committee to “review and study on a continuing basis...future research and forecasting on subjects within its jurisdiction” (House Rule X, Sect. 2(b)(1)). Unfortunately, House committees have largely ignored this rule for the 15 Congresses since it was adopted. While “the generally accepted economic model” is “used to inform virtually every aspect of domestic policy” (July

20 hearing charter), the requirement to consider potential futures that may fall outside that model is consistently ignored.

On July 30, IAF futurists Clem Bezold and Jonathan Peck attended a meeting of the Project on National Security Reform (PNSR), where Clem presented on "Foresight Opportunities: Implementing the House Foresight Provision." He provided specific recommendations regarding how each House committee could meet the provision's requirement. These included developing an oversight and foresight agenda at the beginning of each Congress to identify emerging issues that would change the nature of the problem being addressed by legislation, develop scenarios of the future of the policy area, and determine the topics where "early warning" information must be developed by or for the committee. These steps would fill the gap that exists when you plan for the future based on a model that was built on data from the past.

Economics is good at what it does, but it cannot do everything. While economics has an important role to play in the formulation of policy, policy makers do economists and our country a disservice when they assume that the tools of economics are the only tools they need. Economists live in a world of data from the past and can give us the underlying logic behind the data. Futurists live in a world of trends and "weak signals" and can tell us about important scenarios that lie beyond the constraints and assumptions of the prevailing model. If Congress wants to anticipate the plausible changes that might warrant new policy or legislation, one way to do that would be to conduct the future research and forecasting that is required by their own rules.

News & Events



Thank You for Attending IAF's Wiser Futures Workshop

Thank you to all who attended our Wiser Futures Workshop at the World Future 2010 conference in Boston last month! We had participants from a variety of countries and sectors, including Government, Military, Police, Insurance, Media and Entertainment, Academia, Consulting, Non-Profit, Foundations, Finance, and Medicine. Kind remarks by workshop attendees include:

- "Excellent, exactly what I'd hoped for. Thank you!"
- "I hope to use this in [my institution] as either an aid to our existing planning education or by adding an elective."
- "Great introductory level course that will help me better enable change and adaptation to the future."
- "World class presentation and materials."

We hold the Wiser Futures Workshop every year in conjunction with the World Future Society Annual Conference. IAF also offers the workshop to clients across a range of organizations and is an approved offering through GSA Advantage for government agencies. If you would like to learn more about the Wiser Futures Workshop, please [contact us](#).

Again, thanks for signing up and we hope you found it helpful!

UTMB and IAF Partner to Develop Hurricane and Healthy Neighborhood Scenarios

Under the Galveston Health in All Policies Project initiative, the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) and IAF founder Clem Bezold have partnered to create a set of hurricane scenarios for the county of Galveston, TX, and to develop a tool-kit that communities can use to develop local hurricane scenarios and to prompt better preparation, more coherent understanding of current conditions, more accurate threat assessment, and better response and recovery options with a focus on health equity.

Using the scenarios in a workshop with members of the Gulf Coast Transdisciplinary Research Recovery Center for Community Health, Clem and his colleagues at UTMB explored what Galveston could look like if it were hit by a Category 3 hurricane named Tina with 115 mph winds and a 16-foot storm surge. The group found that despite lessons learned after Ike, Galveston remains vulnerable to major hurricanes; if no further changes are made — such as emphasizing mixed-income, mixed-use developments and improving access to healthy food — Galveston after Hurricane Tina would be more depressed, less functional, and less able to recover and re-establish healthy neighborhoods.

The scenarios and tool-kit are part of a larger project to map health and resiliency in Galveston County and to develop recommendations to prompt policymakers to more consistently include health considerations in local recovery planning. News coverage of the report can be found [here](#).

Upcoming Events

"CHC's Leveraging the Social Determinants of Health", panel discussion at the [National Summit of Clinicians for Healthcare Justice](#). IAF Founder and Chairman Clem Bezold. September 24, 2010, 1:30–3:00 p.m., in Washington, DC.

"Future of Healthcare," facilitating a group of 50-75 in the Health Professions. IAF President, Jonathan Peck. October 8, 2010, at the University of Michigan.

"Vision and Leadership," facilitating a workshop for South Central Public Health Leadership Institute. Jonathan Peck. October 13, 2010, in New Orleans, LA.

"Psychology and Technology for Police Futures," workshop for California's Police Officer Standards & Training (POST) Command College. Jonathan Peck. October 19, 2010, in Folsom, CA.

"Preserving the Planet: A Human Challenge," panelist at [MEXICO ENCOUNTER 2010: Building the Future](#). Clem Bezold. October 20, 2010, at 11:30 a.m. in Mexico City.

The Institute for Alternative Futures is a 501(c)3 non-profit research and education organization based in Alexandria, VA. IAF was founded in 1977 by Clem Bezold, Alvin Toffler, and James Dator. IAF has a long track record of using forecasts, scenarios, visioning, and other futures tools to help leading organizations understand the likely, challenging, and visionary developments that may take place in their environments, and to develop robust and visionary strategies that account for the inherent uncertainty of the future. IAF's past clients include the World Health Organization, AARP, American Cancer Society, and Rockefeller Foundation, as well as a wide range of multinational corporations through its for-profit subsidiary, Alternative Futures Associates. To learn more about what we can do for your organization, call us at (703) 684-5880 or write to futurist@altfutures.org.

We'd like to know what you think. Please send us your comments, questions, and things you would like to see included in future issues to futurist@altfutures.org.

To view past newsletters, please visit our [archives](#).

[back to top](#) | [about IAF](#) | [about AFA](#) | [IAF futurists](#) | [news & events](#)

Institute for Alternative Futures, 100 North Pitt Street, Suite 235, Alexandria, Virginia 22314
T: 703.684.5880 F: 703.684.0640 [Map to IAF](#)
© Copyright 1998-2010 Institute for Alternative Futures

This email was sent to yarikan@altfutures.org. To ensure that you continue receiving our emails, please add us to your address book or safe list.

[manage](#) your preferences | [opt out](#) using TrueRemove®.

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

powered by 