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Forward Perspectives

The Political Dynamics of Foresight

By Eric Meade, IAF Vice President

Futurists have long advocated the use of foresight methods among governments and leaders. The argument for foresight is generally that those who have thought about the future, identified emerging challenges and opportunities, and considered a range of plausible scenarios will likely perform better no matter what the future brings. However, what this argument fails to mention is that the results of any foresight activity are likely to have winners and losers.

This is the insight found in Robert C. Lieberman's recent article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled "[Why the Rich Are Getting Richer](#)." Lieberman describes the work of Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, who argue that growing inequality in the U.S. is the result of policy choices (and non-choices) over the past 40 years. Hacker and Pierson present the concept of policy "drift," by which outdated policies are left in place even as they fail to achieve – or even subvert – their original purpose. They provide numerous examples in financial regulation, labor law, and other areas where Congress' failure to update existing policies – often under intense pressure from special interests – has greatly contributed to the wealth, income, and health disparities we see in the U.S. today.

As IAF solicits public comment on the Vulnerability 2030 scenarios it has developed for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (see announcement below), it is important to consider the political dynamics that surround the application of foresight methods. Hacker and Pierson argue that policymakers, starting in the 1970's, have intentionally neglected and left outdated policies in place that direct the benefits of economic transformation toward a small elite class. Thus, these elite have benefited significantly from the unwillingness of leaders to consider the future consequences of existing policies.

Interestingly, foresight was on the rise at the highest levels of government just as "policy drift" became the norm. For example, the House foresight provision adopted in the mid-1970's requires congressional committees to conduct futures research on topics under their jurisdiction. It seems that at the same time there was both a nascent foresight movement in Congress *and* a growing desire to leave things just as they were. And the latter was victorious. Evidence for this can be found not only in the work of Hacker and Pierson, but also in the demise of foresight efforts on Capitol Hill. The House

foresight provision is rarely enforced, and the Congressional Clearinghouse for the Future – also created in the mid-1970's – was dissolved in 1994.

History shows that some people benefit, at least over the short term, when foresight is neglected. These beneficiaries are often those who are powerful in the present rather than those whose ideas and innovations will be most critical to success in the future. Thus, a free people should demand foresight on the part of their leaders not just so they can find emerging opportunities but also so that policy decisions are not distorted by those interests seeking to cling to a level of power, benefit, or privilege that they may no longer warrant or deserve.

But that is not the whole story. Foresight activities can also engage stakeholders in the formulation of a vision that they would *all* be willing to create. It is from this perspective that the RWJF Vulnerability 2030 scenarios can best be viewed. In this project, IAF captured many of the key drivers that have increased vulnerability over the past few decades. Clearly, Hacker and Pierson would have ideas on this as well. But the project also outlined two visionary scenarios for us all to consider. As our political discourse increasingly harnesses the mythology of the past to support the policies of the past, forward-thinking policy-makers must create a new vision of the future to guide policy into the future. This process can help the powerful of today recognize the opportunities that exist – even for themselves – in a future where the U.S. economic and political systems work for all. They will likely see that these opportunities far outweigh the short-term benefits that accrue to some when we stagnate or "drift."

News & Events

Bezold on Lessons from IAF's Scenario Work in *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*

"Lessons from Using Scenarios for Strategic Foresight" is an article by IAF Chairman Clem Bezold that has recently been published in a special issue on strategic foresight by the journal of *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* (Volume 77, Issue 9, Pages 1423-1610). Clem is one of seven seasoned authors selected by guest editors Joseph Coates, Philippe Durance, and Michel Godet to discuss real-life adaptations and applications of scenario planning tools, models, and techniques. In his article, Clem discusses IAF's Aspirational Futures methodology, challenges to effective foresight, and lessons from IAF's 34 years of foresight work with a wide range of organizations. The abstract of the article is as follows:

Strategic foresight requires a longer and broader view of the environment and, as we at the Institute for Alternative Futures (IAF) would argue, a conscious attention to the organization's vision and visionary scenarios in the environment. Having promoted foresight on six continents for a wide range of governments, corporations, and non-profit organizations, we have developed lessons on the design and set-up of foresight efforts, their use and follow-through. The lessons include: Scenarios using 'aspirational futures' should include expectable, challenging, and visionary alternatives; beware of and understand 'allergic reactions' to foresight given some individuals', particularly leaders', psychological preferences; foresight is most effectively done by and for top leadership but foresight for units or regions of the organization can also be successful; to get the most value, it is important to err on the side of boldness and vision in developing scenarios; foresight efforts create a 'safe space' for exploring challenging situations; associations, as collections of companies or professionals, have unique foresight needs including elected leadership that may rotate every year, and the need to communicate the results of foresight efforts to their members effectively; government and corporations have more similarities than differences in foresight, but companies have more resources and can usually move more quickly to develop and use the foresight.

IAF Releases Draft Vulnerability Scenarios for Public Comment

Alexandria, VA – January 11, 2011

The Institute for Alternative Futures (IAF) has developed scenarios for social and economic vulnerability in the U.S. and is seeking comments before these scenarios are finalized. The scenarios provide alternative futures for the year 2030, and were developed with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Vulnerable Populations Portfolio.

The scenarios incorporate IAF's research on key factors shaping vulnerability, including the state of the economy, employment and unemployment, education, food and diet, technology, and criminality and corrections. They include an "expectable" future where the government is constrained by debt and the ranks of the vulnerable grow; a challenging future with a double-dip recession and expanding disparities in health, wealth, and income; a more equitable future where government efforts help ensure all Americans have access to a baseline of resources; and a community-focused future where local efforts enable nearly everyone to achieve his or her full potential.

IAF is now soliciting public comment on these scenarios from January 11, 2011 through January 24, 2011. The final scenarios will be released in March 2011. The scenarios can be found on the project website at www.altfutures.org/vulnerability2030 and comments can be sent via e-mail to yarikan@altfutures.org. Once the scenarios have been finalized, IAF will release a "toolkit" for use by organizations in their own long-term planning. The toolkit will include instructions, exercises and worksheets, and a series of videos to put participants in the "mental space" associated with each of the scenarios. This toolkit will be released in March 2011 and will be available to the public on the project website.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 35 years, the Foundation has brought experience, commitment and a rigorous balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org.

The Institute for Alternative Futures is a nonprofit research and educational organization that helps communities and organizations more wisely understand and create the futures they prefer. IAF has been a pioneer in the use of futures methods, such as forecasts, scenarios, and vision, in health and health care, energy, transportation, education, and business. For more information see www.altfutures.org. Through its health equity promoting project, the DRA Project, it has identified "disparity reducing advances" and worked to accelerate them. For more information see www.altfutures.org/draproject.

Sheppard Facilitates Workshop for Mexican Municipal Government Leaders

On January 13, 2011, IAF Senior Associate Ben Sheppard ran a workshop to assist the Puebla municipal government in Mexico identify how they can increase the attractiveness of the region to foreign direct investment. In conjunction with Alexandria, VA-based Idea Sciences, Sheppard employed risk analysis tools and ran an exercise to help the municipal leaders map the dynamics affecting the public "narrative" about the attractiveness of the region. This initiative built upon Sheppard's work in Ecuador, where he was invited to teach a three-day course in Political Risk Analysis at the Catholic University in Guayaquil. The course was based on the graduate degree program he teaches at the Elliott School for International Relations at The George Washington University. The class was comprised mainly of older students with diverse employment backgrounds. Course topics included expropriation, governance, and the use of future tools in political risk analysis.

IAF Welcomes Patricia Reid

IAF welcomes Patricia Reid who has recently joined us as Project Coordinator and Executive Assistant to IAF Founder and Chairman of the Board Clement Bezold. Patricia has years of administrative experience with non-profits both nationally and internationally in various roles including Program Assistant and Logistical Coordinator. Prior to her move to Virginia in 2009, she worked with Levi Strauss & Co. in Dallas supporting labor relations and community affairs. She has a Bachelor's degree in Emergency Administration and Planning from the University of North Texas where she graduated magna cum laude. Patricia has also worked with humanitarian relief projects in Sudan, Mexico, and India, and has worked several years as a volunteer with the American Red Cross supporting emergency shelters and hurricane disaster relief.

Upcoming Events

[New Directions for the Social Determinants of Health: Charting an Alternative Future for Vulnerable Populations](#), Session at 2011 GIH Annual Meeting on Health Philanthropy. Clem Bezold, Jane Lowe (RWJF), Gail Christopher (W.K. Kellogg Foundation), Matthew Barnes (Houston Endowment Inc.). 11:15 A.M. - 12:45 P.M. on March 4, 2011 in Los Angeles, CA.

"Psychology and Technology for Police Futures," workshop for California's Police Officer Standards & Training (POST) Command College. IAF Vice President Eric Meade. March 14, 2011, in Folsom, CA.

"[Wiser Futures: Using Futures Tools to Better Understand and Create the Future](#)," pre-conference workshop at WorldFuture 2011: Moving from Vision to Action. Clem Bezold and Eric Meade. July 8, 2011 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

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 at www.altfutures.org/newsletter.

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