

# Responsibility for the Future\*

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## Abstract

*Responsibility for the future can be closely linked to innovation and responsibility of entrepreneurship, nevertheless we are all responsible for our future. Since futurists have a special role in catalysing social changes and channelling actions for better futures, the present study analyses how the responsibility of futurists is seen in our times, characterised by great and far-reaching changes, and how this activity is enriched by elements of foresight. The responsibility of futurists lies in mapping out, communicating and implementing future alternatives. Futurists also have considerable responsibility to convince people that essential changes have to be accepted by the public.*

**Keywords:** responsibility, futurist, future alternatives, change

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## About Responsibility

"You have become responsible once and for all for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose..." says the Fox in the novel "The Little Prince" (Saint-Exupéry, 1970, p.83). How true and noble-minded this idea is. Nevertheless, reflecting on it we come to realise that we are responsible not just for what we have already tamed but also for what we haven't yet tamed and intend to do so, but which is not in our power yet. We are also responsible for the future.

Responsibility is an obligation that demonstrates our readiness to bear the consequences of our actions. On the one hand directly, when the induced circumstances afflict the perpetrator and on the other hand indirectly, when others are afflicted directly. In the latter case we also have to be ready to be called to account for our actions, to take responsibility. Consequences of our activities generally come to light in the future, sometimes in the distant future. A responsible person endeavours to give an appropriate response to questions that arise and this is reflected in all his reactions. In order to meet this challenge talent and ability is required along with responsible behaviour.

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A person who fails to consider the future can be regarded as less and less responsible. There were and still are many people who think that the future cannot be considered with scientific thoroughness, it exceeds the ability of mankind. Many are convinced that only a few people have the possibility to shape the future. We are of a different opinion. Everyday people take part in the responsible shaping of the future just like the futurist who works to catalyse social changes and to channel ideas, hopes and plans of the population. The activity of futurists connects with future ideas of laymen, but also with the activity of innovators, entrepreneurs and social politicians. A futurist can only do a responsible work if he does it in the spirit of participativity (Nováky, 2004).

### **Connection between Futures Studies and Responsibility**

Futures studies and responsibility are closely connected in all ages. This is particularly true in a world of fundamental changes. Scientists dealing with futures studies have a great responsibility in recognising the repetitions and regularities in ongoing processes and changes induced by forces shaping the future that can lead to turning points. Are they capable of drawing conclusions about the future and capable of seeing the possibility of futures substantially different from present circumstances? It is also a responsible task for a futurist to decide when and how to communicate his knowledge to decision-makers and to those who shall live in future conditions based on the forecasts and deliberations of futurists.

The examination of changes is therefore in the focus of futures studies. Typifying of changes taking place in space and time (e.g. quantitative/qualitative, positive/negative, cyclical/non-cyclical, stability enhancing/decreasing, dependant on natural/human interference, having lasting/short-term effect, reversible/irreversible etc.) can lead us closer to understanding the change and its essence: adjustment to changed conditions or dissatisfaction with it. We not only follow "in the steps" of the future but are walking to meet it as well. We cannot live in so-called "constant" future (lacking any changes), or in a "decadent" future (where the past declines. We cannot live well in a continuous future (with hardly any changes taking place) but we can expect to live well in a created future (with significant changes taking place). Futures studies have a considerable role in preparing for these changes.

### **Responsibility of Futurists**

The professional criteria set for social scientists are also applicable to futurists, namely: objective analysis and examination of available facts and theories, formulation of scientifically evident conclusions. Futurists are also responsible for raising awareness and responsibility of individuals and social groups for the future, making them conscious about future alternatives and exploring possible courses of related activity. Collaboration (and participativity) is the new task of futurists, which significantly increases their responsibility.

The objective and subjective responsibility of futurists is not rigidly fixed but is open to constantly changing conditions, i.e. it can be extended as well. Different meth-

ods are available, primarily: the elaboration of scientifically founded theory and applicable methodology that respond to challenges of our age. If the futurist is capable of regularly renewing future oriented scientific theory (Kristóf, 2005) then he is able to recognise and help to solve problems that threaten future societies. The application of newer and newer scientific methodology can also promote early recognition of pending changes.

The taking responsibility by futurists extends to four areas: mapping out future alternatives, its communication and implementation/achievement and having the changes accepted by the public (Nováky, 2006a).

**Responsibility of futurists in mapping out future alternatives**

The following personal skills enable the futurist to map out future alternatives:

- He is able to deduce the future from information about the past and present, recognises permanence and changeability in the processes.
- He is capable to objectively analyse ongoing processes and events and to draw conclusions regarding the future.
- He is intuitive, i.e. he is capable of thinking unconventionally, a person of vision to future alternatives, which could be fundamentally different from existing ones and can give a glimpse into the future.
- He is able to explicitly formulate his value preferences, he openly claims that there is a possibility for drawing up various future alternatives even under conditions of varying sets of values.
- He recognises early signs of the future, even in the "budding" stage.
- He regards necessary to interpret the desirable and acceptable futures as well, thus avoiding the formulation of Cassandra prophecies.

Drafting future alternatives is not an easy task these days. The main reason is that futurists have to find and develop a methodology applicable under unstable conditions (Nováky, 2003).

Under unstable conditions (when very few signs of change are apparent), interest is focused on seeking significant changes, renewals. In such a situation a point of reference can be a future-oriented attitude, revaluation of the past and present. The focus is on exploring turning-points. We see a decrease of determined processes and the role of teleologicistic (goal assuming) elements increases. The future is determined by past and present to a lesser extent and the future becomes increasingly "mouldable" via human actions. This future, mouldable through our own actions, can be referred to as not only "created" but also as creative future. It is regarded to be the most important future domain in our days. In this situation the statistical balance between past, present and future breaks up, the applicability of traditional mathematics-statistics procedures decreases. This requires the application of professional methods that employ intuitive paths of cognition, like participatory procedures, scenario building, computer-simulation.

Under unstable conditions the role of accidental events increases, while the significance of statistical probability decreases. We are less capable of deducing the future from development tendencies of past and present, based on probability. In this case we cannot present a future alternative based on probability value (i.e. we cannot prepare

a prediction), instead we can come forward with future alternatives with more-or-less similar probability. Unexpected changes (with little probability) play an important role in this process, including expectations concerning the future that also comprise many accidental elements.

If we take into consideration the fine structure of time and its relative character the dynamism and self-organising character of systems may be revealed to us. This is useful to interpret, particularly under unstable conditions. When defining the fine-structure of time we have to see that past, present and future exist not only in chronology but also concurrently. The present comprises the future, the evolution process, which led us to this present and the future, which is in harmony with evolution choices ahead of us. If we examine the future of the present we can see a multitude of future processes and structures. If on the other hand we wish to study the effect of the future on the present, then we anticipate the future we re-create it in the present (in desires, goals, hopes and fears). Evolutionary processes and methods, including future-orientation studies come into the limelight.

Under unstable conditions we have to examine many elements and components of the system, because a new situation can evolve even in the event of little changes in some elements. The future of a multi-dimensional, complex system can be outlined by way of a vertical (mixed) approach. This method can help the researcher in determining the critical sub-systems, processes and connections of the forecast. Varying approaches are applicable in case of complex system processes like continuous, discontinuous, short and long-term, reversible and irreversible, or systems like linear, exponential and logistic development. In order to successfully analyse and forecast these we require dynamics examinations (non-equilibrium and evolutionary model examinations and simulations) the cross-impact method, expert- and non-expert methods, including "futures workshop" techniques. We apply the above in connection with scenario-writing.

Under unstable conditions visions and goals are characterised by a marked alternativity. The possibility of alternativity is enhanced through social participation. Individuals and social groups wish to shape not only their own future but also their vision of the future. In contrast to former times, now there is increased need to compare and consider various opportunities available and to decide over the acceptance of one, after careful deliberation. Creating an alternative under unstable conditions can be assisted by methods that have gained a new role in recent years (e.g. scenario writing) or others gaining popularity these days (e.g. story telling method and workshop techniques).

In mapping out future alternatives we are confronted by a new concept: participativity, which is closely connected to foresight. Its definition includes several entities (futurists, professionals, future oriented non-professionals, stakeholders, NGO and TNC members) whose participation is expected to result in elaboration and achievement of future alternatives. The futurist may end up working "for the shelf" if he fails to acquaint himself with the opinion about the present and expectations regarding the future. In addition he may also fail in his profession to set a favourable course for the future of the society and social groups. Futurists therefore co-operate with various groups of society. Futurists have to be open in this process as regards to questions

raised by non-professionals and their visions of the future. Their expectations about the future have to be considered when preparing the forecast. Non-professionals have to be aware that futurists are listening to them and utilise their creative ideas. They have to be confident that their future alternatives shall be well-founded as a result of the co-operation.

**Responsibility of the futurist in communicating future alternatives**

Questions that arise in this regard are the following: "what", "when" and "how" should futurists communicate.

It is the task and obligation of the futurist is to publish future alternatives including both positive and negative scenarios. The publication of positive future alternatives can increase the readiness of society in their implementation, the purpose of publishing negative scenarios is to raise public awareness about the sustainability of some present processes. It is the responsibility of the futurist to speak sincerely about potentialities present in the world, in a given region or a nation. Limiting the communication merely to positive changes, only emphasizing the chances of improvement, cannot be regarded as ethical. Nor is it appropriate to stress negative situations, e.g. the possibility of disasters. The latter situation often has a paralysing effect and does not urge people to take initiative.

The issue of "when" to communicate can cause a dilemma to the futurist, whether to publish forecasts only when they have won full scientific support, or even before these are available. It is important for the futurist to publish forecasts in which his knowledge is only partial, even when his statements and conclusions are not fully proven, but they can be justified at the given state of knowledge. This is particularly important when there are strong signs that the forecast may have a significant effect on society. In this case the futurist has to admit that his forecasts carry significant uncertainty. Regarding issues like (for example: social consequences of global climate change) the futurist can initiate a dialogue between scientists and society, and society has to deliberate on necessary steps to be taken and the extent of the danger.

A futurist is often confronted by signs and signals, which may be interpreted as forerunners of significant changes and perhaps signal the formulation of new futures. These so-called "weak signals" are considered weak because events have not unfolded yet, and not because they are yet to be proven. The first report by the Club of Rome, calling attention to the dangers of environment pollution, can be regarded as such a weak signal. It is precisely the task of futurists to recognise the seeds of changes, based on this knowledge, methodical experience and intuition (Hideg, Nováky & Vág , 2007). The futurist has to perceive even weak signals and "seeds" of the future, which are just formulating or may take shape if the present processes remain unchanged. The futurist can help decision-makers reach good decisions not by declaring the absence of change, but by pointing to the possibility of changes, he can forecast its direction well before it takes place. He will call attention to the fact that certain processes cannot be continued even while sensing signals of the future. Such weak signals can emerge in objective processes as well as in subjective factors. It is not only the instability of processes or sensitivity to changes that can produce the seeds of change, but these can appear in forces that shape the future. The more future-sensitive

and creative a society is, the more chances are that the seeds of change are carried by future-shaping forces.

As regards the issue of "how" futurists should communicate, I have to stress that I regard education to be the most important form of communication among the various available methods (e.g. scientific thesis, presentation of results at scientific conferences, education and reporting in the media). This is the process when futures studies knowledge is passed on and widely discussed it also provides an opportunity for bringing to surface ideas, suggestions prompted not by the futurist himself but by non-professionals. Participatory futures studies takes advantage of these opportunities.

### **Responsibility of futurists in implementing/achieving future alternatives**

The implementation of future alternatives is not a one-man task. The futurist cannot expect society to embrace and implement future alternatives (be it most favourable) elaborated by him. In the course of their implementation, future alternatives are moulded, transformed or may turn wide off the mark. The reason is that human activity is often not outlined, and often does not take shape in line with a given strategy or action plan. The complexity and incalculability of human thought and momentary activity does not make possible the exact carrying out of previous ideas.

The participation of the whole society is important in bringing about the future. During this time the futurist conquers "the loneliness of the distance runner" (in himself) and involves a wide strata of society in the implementation process, leading to joint action, participative forming the future. Social campaigns (futures movements) have to be organised not only to prevent the possibility of disasters, but people have to be mobilised also in order to achieve positive futures (Nováky, 2006b).

This requires improving future-orientation of social groups, recognition of new values and adopting a new ethical approach to lead us into the future.

The future orientation of society, its openness to new developments and development of its responsibility all play an important role in forming the actions. Empirical surveys carried out among Hungarian population revealed that future orientation of Hungarians has changed significantly in the past ten-fifteen years. While the years of 1992-1993 were characterised by hope and shock, fear of the future (Nováky, Hideg & Kappéter, 1994), the mid 1990-ies showed uncertainty and contradictions (Hideg & Nováky, 1998; Hideg & Nováky, 2002). After the turn of the century Hungarians became more optimistic and were preparing to adopt new values for the future. The latter was apparent particularly among university students. It was proven by surveys that future orientation can be linked to education and culture. The more educated a person, the more open he is to active future orientation, i.e. activity to improve mental and spiritual well-being for future periods, and efficient formulation and shaping of the future.

It is the responsibility of the futurist to clearly define the set of values he is driven by, in his thinking and activity. "Thinking about the future you have to think about the values", this sentence was formulated by Eleonora Barbieri Masini, during the post-graduate course of the World Federation of Futurists in 1994 (Masini, 2004). In a period of stirring values, when old and new social and individual values are both present, this is proving to be a special task. New values are surfacing in society, like informa-

tion, recognition of growth factor, love and respect for our environment and long-term commitment. These values however are not accepted everywhere. The joy of accomplished work is better than material welfare the most important values are knowledge and a safe, harmonious life. These are the most important values that the majority of people have not realised yet. All this requires intelligence, trustworthy, responsible, brave, resolute people. With his choice of values the futurist can set an example to decision-makers, innovators and entrepreneurs and also to non-professionals, through the application of participative futures research.

The responsibility of the futurist is increased by the fact that a change can be observed from the side of ethics as well: we can note the emergence of opportunity-ethics besides obligation-ethics unequivocal obligations ("do what you have to do"). This raises the question whether we are "capable of NOT doing what we could do, because it is not desirable to do it according to new values" (e.g. we do not interfere in nature), or "are we capable of doing something out of the ordinary, something completely new" (noting the sensitiveness of society and individuals about everything new). This is not only social responsibility but correlates to issues of social renewal.

### **The responsibility of futurists in having changes accepted**

Futurists are sensing the need for changes they are preparing the best possible alternatives to no avail, if the population fails to prepare for them or does not accept them in good time. The responsibility of the futurist is present also in this area.

It is the responsibility of the futurist to call attention to the fact that objective possibility of changes (self-organisation of processes) and subjective conscious and non-conscious relation to changes (activity and expectations of individuals and social groups) together determine which future alternative can be best implemented. The futurist is able to promote this process if he becomes familiar as to how the population relates to changes. In possession of this knowledge he develops skills that strengthen the acceptance of changes. I stress that it is a complex social process that cannot be achieved by futurists alone, but rather as a member of a team and part of a larger innovation movement.

In the course of empirical surveys conducted at the Futures Studies Department of Budapest Corvinus University we have tried to examine the attitude of university students to changes (Nováky & Kappéter, 2005). Based on the survey conducted with nearly 300 university students we can conclude that students:

- Have a positive attitude to changes, they accept their existence and are not frightened by them.
- They are of the mind that they adapt flexibly to changes but they are not aware of imminent great changes and dangers.
- They attach great importance to stability within the family.
- They hope that this will provide for them motivation and strength to endure unfavourable outer changes.

Albeit (based on the example) young people generally accept changes and relate positively to them, nevertheless it emerges that they would prefer if changes would not affect their own small community, where they prefer stability. From the above we can conclude that futurists have yet a lot to do, to bring about changes in the present

short-term economy-focused approach and also to set new ways and courses to be followed in Hungary and worldwide. Futurists may carry on this task only with responsibility for the future and commitment.

## Conclusion

The responsibility for the future is a complex, multi-fold way of thinking and line of social actions. Futurists can fulfil their tasks only if they collaborate with everybody who is ready and willing to do something for the future, i.e. with innovators, entrepreneurs, decision-makers, social politicians and with everyday people. In transforming responsible thinking into actions educators and instructors have a significant role together with futurists.

Thus futurists ought to aspire to increase future orientation of the society (especially teachers) and motivate them to practice responsibility for the future in their individual choices and social activities. In the frame of life-long learning self-development should be supported and students should be prepared to articulate and estimate their common ideas about the future. Particularly we should address the most real dangers and surprising but not unrealistic opportunities that can benefit our society.

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