

Book review

State of the future V19 and the global futures system – a review

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The 19th Volume of the State of the Future (SoF) report from The Millennium Project is something that those of us who value foresight could well benefit from both reading it and getting involved with this ongoing major initiative. Rather than beginning with a review of what it offers and its methodology, we are going to provide a few comments about the report's impact as evidenced by its endorsers. The study of the impact is important in the foresight literature and should provide an insight to those who read this regarding how valuable this report may be to decision-makers at all levels.

Recommending this report includes senior leaders from the government, non-government/world agencies, business and academe around the world. A few examples include the Director General from the Ministry of Science & Technology in South Africa; Director, Cognitive Opentech Group, IBM; and NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General. The Global Future System (GFIS) website, which forms an important component of the book at <https://themp.org>, includes further endorsements from many world leaders including the President of Mexico (at the time of the endorsement) and a former President of Chile. Perhaps, the most effective endorsement and review was provided by Ban Ki-Moon, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, who wrote that the report provides “invaluable insights into the future for the United Nations, its member states, and civil society.” This opinion is echoed by Eduardo Frei former president of Chile who wrote that the report “should be read by all leaders.”

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Why all this praise for a foresight report? First, it should be recognized for the comprehensiveness of its methodology. Sixty-three project nodes, surveys, scenarios, workshops, interviews, surveys, real-time Delphi's and an online system, which is discussed later in this review, allow for broad participation and comprehensive assessments. The report is like an anthology with a broad coverage of the key foresight topics. V19 covers several foresight projects, 15 global issues, a state of the future index (SOFI) that includes 29 key variables used to provide an overall assessment of these challenges and includes emerging technologies and counter-terrorism strategies and future work/technology 2050 global scenarios and strategies. These are areas of foresight focus that are considered very important for many of the foresight organizations that we have been working with.

The challenges covered in V19 include Sustainable development and climate change, Water and Sanitation, Population and Resources, Democratization, Global Foresight and Decision making, Global Convergence of ICT, Rich-Poor Gap, Health Issues; Education and Learning, Peace and Conflict, Status of Women, Transnational Organized Crime, Energy, Science and Technology, Global Ethics

Each of these challenges is well described, backed up with appropriate statistics and foresight research and accompanied with a series of actions designed to address these challenges. This makes for interesting discussion for leaders in both the public and private sector. With this type of broad coverage, there should something in this report for all who read it.

The overall findings from the methodology, the 15 challenges, scenarios and analysis of the SOFI are as follows:

The world continues to improve in general, although at a slower pace than over the past 27 years. The rate of global improvement in SOFI for the coming decade will be 1.14 per cent, versus 3.14 per cent for the period 1990 to 2017. This is mostly due to the slow recovery after the 2008 financial crises and world recession in 2009. One of the variables that has a large impact on the 2017 SOFI projection is the number of terrorist attacks, which is very uncertain. If terrorism could be contained, the SOFI would appear considerably better. [...] although we are winning more than losing, where we are losing is very serious. “Business as usual” trend projections for water, food, unemployment, terrorism, organized crime, and pollution could create complex future disasters. Humanity has the means to avoid these disasters and build a great future, but too many of the necessary decisions and cultural changes to improve our prospects are not being made.

In terms of where the world is “winning and losing,” a review of the key SOFI tables has much information; conclusions from these tables are given below:

Winning: GNI per capita, poverty, foreign direct investment net inflows, freedom, women in national parliaments, share of high skill employment, secondary school enrollment, adult literacy rate: electricity from renewables (excluding hydro), energy-efficiency, improved water sources, physicians (per 1000 people), health expenditures per capita, prevalence of undernourishment, mortality rate (infants per 1000 live births), life expectancy at birth, population growth, internet users (per 100 people).

Losing or no progress: CO₂ equivalent mixing ratio (ppm), renewable internal freshwater resources, forest area, bio-capacity per capita, R&D expenditures,

social unrest, unemployment, income inequality, terrorism incidents, number of wars and serious arm conflicts, corruption in the public sector.

We mentioned at the beginning of this review that the report cannot be looked at without also considering the online GFIS at: <https://themp.org>. The report itself describes this well:

The challenges in GFIS are updated regularly from news aggregations, scanning items, situation charts, and other resources, which has led to greater detail and depth than in the previous edition. While this report presents the distilled results of recent research by The Millennium Project, GFIS contains the detailed background and data for that research, plus all of The Millennium Project’s research since its founding in 1996. It also contains the largest internationally peer-reviewed set of methods to explore future possibilities ever assembled in one source.

We are going to ensure that our students and clients have the site as a reference as it provides a comprehensive information on the foresight methodologies. The report and the associated website have so much material and information that they have the potential to intimidate new foresight practitioners. The site even allows for user participation/ involvement in the foresight studies lists the 15 global challenges, the research projects and future methodologies. The GFIS is updated regularly and this is the third time that The Millennium Project has used the online GFIS to both update and improve the State of the Future report.

Both GFIS and annual State of the Future reports should be consulted by foresight researchers and decision-makers. They provide valuable insight and information as stated by global leaders and foresight practitioners in their endorsements both in the book and on the GFIS website. Each volume offers new opportunities for

collaborative contribution as evidenced in several of the chapters. Readers should note that the nodal structure of this initiative and the website provides many opportunities to participate in the ongoing study and is a strength of The Millennium Project[1].

Note

1. During the writing of this review, a new edition of the State of the Future (SoF) report became available (SoF 19.1). The main difference between SoF 19.0 and 19.1 is the addition of infographics for all 15 Global Challenges, which help communicate the key messages of the report more directly and strongly, and hence adds another 30 pages of content in the report.

About the authors

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Jack Edward Smith is Chair of the Foresight Synergy Network (FSN) of Canada and President of Technology Foresight Collaborative Insights Canada (TFCI). He was a member of the International Advisory Board for the APEC Center for Technology Foresight in Bangkok and was also a member of the Technical Committee for the European Commission’s Future Technology Assessment Conference. He was formerly Canada’s Chief Foresight Officer. Jack Edward Smith is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: Calof@telfer.uottawa.ca