

The narrative **Tying the Camel in Kuala Lumpur** describes a foresight exercise that took place at International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur in 1996.

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Introduction

Professor Ziaudin Sardar, the futurist who organised the foresight exercise, describes the experience in the following way:

The hardest task in the world, I know from experience, is to get Muslim religious scholars to think about alternative futures possibilities. The future, in any shape and form, just does not figure in their thinking. In contrast, the past is ever present: all the major developments took place in history so history becomes the site for solving all contemporary and emerging problems; the past also serves as nostalgia for real and imagined glories and dreams. I organised a three-day visioning workshop for just such a group of religious scholars at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur in 1996.

The workshop was based on an earlier successful exercise in Penang held in September 1994. Entitled, 'Futures visions for South-east Asia: some early warning signals?' ^[1], the Penang meeting was a joint venture between the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) and Institut Kajian Dasar (IKD), or Institute for Policy Research, an independent organisation committed to investigating social and economic trends and developments in Malaysia. In Kuala Lumpur, the foresight team had followed the same methodology: presentations to set out theoretical framework of futures studies, followed by workshop to develop different scenarios, leading to a visioning session and finally a backcasting exercise to produce practical guidelines and plans to move towards a viable, envisioned future. In Penang, they had a group of mixed participants, which included academics, civil servants, students and a few religious scholars.

But in Kuala Lumpur all the participants were religious scholar, known as ulama. Most of them taught at the International Islamic University, which also provided the financial support for the meeting. Whereas in Penang there was a team of resource experts from WFSF, the Kuala Lumpur exercise was lead by Ziaudin Sardar and Sohail Inayatullah. The goal was ambitious: to persuade the participants to think in a framework of long-term futures, various ways their religion and society could develop, identify potential hurdles and come up with viable alternatives. Maybe they can even come up suggestions how the University itself can develop and adjust to change and become a futures oriented institution.

Foresight Workshop

The meeting began ominously. The participants found it difficult to fathom our language of scenarios, futures, alternatives. The Malay language does not really have plural terms. There is one; but not two. So a brother is Sudara; but two brothers, and indeed many brothers, are Sudara-Sudara. Thus, talking of future in pluralistic terms within Malay patterns of thinking is a knotty paradox. The situation is further complicated by religious considerations. If your belief demands that you must trust in God then the future, where trust plays an all important part, is a domain best left to God. So what Kuala Lumpur may look like twenty years from now is up to God; all we can do is to have full trust in His mercy and beneficent.

Visioning Session

The initial presentations, on the theory and practice of futures studies, went nowhere. The participants found them incomprehensible and brushed them aside. Instead, they ask a few questions of their own. The first question posed by the participants was: why bother with the future? Our answers that it enables you to identify potential opportunities, dangers and threats, and prepares you to meet emerging challenges and thus facilitates better planning and policy work fell on deaf ears. The second question: are you not playing God by trying to fathom what lies ahead? Again, our answer? we are engaging in a human endeavour to develop and explore scenarios that may and may not be realised, but which illuminate certain future possibilities and potentials and that the whole exercise by its very nature is limited - met with a muted response. The third question: since all problems have already been solved in history, and there is nothing really new out there in terms of values or religious tradition, what could scenarios and visioning possibly teach us? Again our responses elicited no reactions from the participants. They sat there as bemused spectators, bewildered but inert, unconcerned and unmotivated.

There was absolute no progress for two days. Sohail Inayatullah later described this as the worse experience of his life, a failure of monumental magnitude that will haunt him for the rest of his remaining days. Ziaudin Sardar too was totally despondent.

The third and final day of the Workshop, they switched tactics. They stopped talking about scenarios, visioning, backcasting, alternative futures. Instead, they talked about the 'will of God'. More specifically, how do we discover and realise the 'will of God' as human beings, how do we know what God wills and what does it mean to know what He wills. And did the Prophet Muhammad not say: 'Trust in God, but tie your camel'? How do we tie our camels in times of rapid change? What would we need to do to actually tie our camels? Can religious traditions survive, in the face of change, without reinventing themselves? The participants erupted. In no time, we were visioning and exploring alternative futures possibilities. Indeed, the participants could not have enough; and were left asking for more when the Workshop finished.

Conclusion

And the moral of the story? The language of foresight and futures can be alien and alienating to non-western cultures. It is not just that different cultures have different perspectives on 'the future?', but they also have different understanding, perceptions and notions of what actually constitutes the future, where it is located, and what it means to explore and interrogate futures possibilities. To make foresight and futures sensible to non-western cultures, we have to talk in their idiom, and use their own metaphors. This is equally true of different cultures within 'the West' as well as different disciplinary and professional cultures.

References

1. 2 Sohail Inayatullah, 'Futures vision for South-east Asia: some early warning signals?', Futures 27 (6) 681-688 1995

See also

Visions in Foresight