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Inquiring the World's Future

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By [Carsten Giersch](#)

Any decision-maker in government or business who is concerned about the

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planet's sustainable future and is looking for serious guidance, might consider studying the "2011 State of the Future" report. Published by [The Millennium Project](#), an international participatory think tank established in 1996, this year's report is the fifteenth of its kind, and it is fair to say that the *futures research* assembled here is unique both with respect to its setup, wealth of information and the innovative methods applied.

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International governance has been turned into a gigantic dockyard, where the damaged tankers of globalization are being overhauled, provided they succeed in reaching the haven before sinking. At the same time, even born optimists start questioning the political engineers' knowledge of how to repair the vessels and empower their engines in face of troubled waters ahead.

The current debt crisis, in particular, was caused by a collective political negligence on an amazing scale. But even more striking is the degree of perplexity and experimental gradualism with which policymakers have been arguing about the appropriate countermeasures. This performance might, however, not be enough to restore trust and confidence in the future, by which we not only mean the future of the financial markets.

Advancing foresight

If we look at the bigger picture, two distinct features of the second international financial crisis to take place within a period of only four years make a strong case for investing more time and effort into futures studies. The first feature is the

international loss of legitimacy of democratic rule, Western style. Huge state deficits and their disastrous consequences for the younger generations, reveal an embarrassing gap between accountable and responsible democratic government. If the belief in the value of democracy is to be stabilized, political decision-making needs to become more educated and farsighted.

Secondly, even though the concept of globalization has become a *topos* of social science, more systematic research into the interconnection of global risks is desirable in the future. (The regular reader of *Global Risk Affairs* may recognized herein a leading principle of this web magazine). There is no easy relationship between social science and futures research since the latter is not regarded as an exact science. This is, however, not the place to discuss the actual topical and temporal reach of scientific exactness. More importantly, research undertaken to guide strategic decision should produce robust results, in particular in relation to the identification of systemic risks. This requires widening the perspective, instead of narrowing the scope of research, and taking into account the interrelations of a broader range of factors affecting future developments on a global, regional and national level.

Methods-based futures research

Given that, a strong commitment to methods-based futures studies is one of the distinct features of the Millennium Project. The handbook on “Futures Research Methodology” comprises 39 chapters and some 1300 pages. The methods presented go far beyond the more common scenario building techniques. The scope of the “State of the Future” report is no less immense. Organized in collaboration with 40 national, individual and topical nodes, 700 participants contributed to this year’s report. The main part which contains an analysis of 15 Global Challenges consists of 1400 pages. Adding the various special studies chapters and a number of appendices, this year’s report offers a volume of 8000 pages of futures intelligence.

The author has used the profound source of global insight and outlook for many years now, both in his academic work and for the purpose of strategic consulting. The quality of the single chapters is generally very good, an achievement for which the editors, Jerome Glenn, Theodore J. Gordon and Elizabeth Florescu, deserve much credit. The Millennium Project is based in Washington D.C. and some of the sponsors are American institutions (mentioned on the homepage). But an international Planning Committee which reflects the collaboration of futurists, scholars, business planners, and policy makers from all over the world, and the multidimensional approach cutting across all topics affecting humanity, make the Millennium Project an independent and truly transnational institution.

The state of the future

A State of the Future Index includes 28 variables which are designed to providing projections rather than simply measuring past conditions. Based on a method called *Trend Impact Analysis*, the report does make statements about those issues “where we are winning” (e.g. water access, life expectancy at birth, GDP per unit of energy, prevalence of HIV), “where we are losing” (e.g. CO₂ emissions, corruption, people killed in terrorist attacks, refugees) and “where there is uncertainty” (e.g. unemployment, non-fossil fuel consumption, freedom, forest area). The overall picture is mixed and ambivalent. While there are global improvements in terms of wealth, health, education, and peace, half the world is potentially unstable. Food prices are rising, fresh water tables falling, climate change continues, and organized crime has developed into a serious threat to national governments, civil society, and international business. Increasing state debt and economic insecurity also entail the risk of losing ground in those areas where trends had already become more positive.

Global assessments such as the State of the Future Index can raise awareness regarding the most pressing issues on the agenda, but they are somewhat limited in terms of regional and operational validity. The Millennium Project does, however, also promote and support the construction of national State of the Future indexes. Moreover, this year’s report contains a scenario analysis for Egypt, the country that has been one of the focal points of this year’s peoples’ revolutions and regime changes. Another chapter is dedicated to the future developments in Latin America, along the socio-political and the techno-economic axes. Furthermore, some studies, apart from analyzing special topics, such as environmental security issues, also discuss various practical issues such as integrating futures research into decision-making.

Global challenges

The part of the State of the Future report containing the dissection of the 15 Global Challenges identified, illustrates the strategic purpose of futures intelligence. Usually two or more issues are linked together in research questions such as “How can sustainable development be achieved for all while addressing global climate change?”, “How can everyone have sufficient clean water without conflict?”, or “How can population growth and resources be brought into balance?” The range of topics and interrelations scrutinized here is impressive, also in view of the regional reflections and political recommendations provided in each section. Democratization, governance capacity, information and communication, energy security, science and technology, health issues, wealth distribution, conflict, corruption and crime, status of women, global ethics – the catalogue is surely comprehensive.

The 2011 State of the Future report allows the reader to understand how decisions in one area will influence developments in other areas; or, how future developments in various topical and regional areas will affect a particular strategic goal. Ideally, this knowledge will assist in improving planning and forecasting. At least, it might help to detect otherwise unforeseen consequences and to avoid counterproductive side-effects of single-sided actions.

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