



Youth and the WFSF: a generational approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of generational change in the emergence and continuity of the WFSF, generational change as situated through macro-historical perspectives, generational value shifts and their implications for the WFSF, and asymmetries and potentialities revealed through youth futures literature. It argues that the development of the WFSF in the longer term will require a generational approach that incorporates greater youth and student participation.

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The Budapest Futures Course was launched in 1999 by Erzsébet Nováky, WFSF Board Member, and the organizing team. Along with the UNESCO strategic plan they started a series entitled 'Youth for a Less Selfish Future.' The international participants discussed the future orientation of youth in 1999 and compared international surveys. Starting from this point, which emphasized how values influence future orientation, the 2001 Budapest Course discussed future societal alternatives along differing values: and highlighted a 'less selfish future'. The 2003 Budapest Course aimed at extending this toward possible actions for the future. The main message was that action means more than just activity, it includes spiritual efforts, dialoguing and channeling changes. Education and networking were the modes of future action, stimulating the present and former Budapest Course participants to enhance future co-operation, one of the ways to further a WFSF youth movement. But not only did the 2003 course offer a good opportunity for us to exchange ideas, it also showed how forces from different parts of the world show convergence. The 35-year tradition of the Budapest Futures Studies Center, and its decades-long research on

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youth futures¹ bases on the one hand our ideas in this paper. Likewise other participants came with their own practical suggestions for bringing youth participation into the WFSF.²

Our inquiry began opened-ended, asking: ‘what is the relation between youth and the WFSF’. This included thinking about why youth participation would be good for the WFSF, and also why and in what way the WFSF would be good for youth. The outcome of this process was a framework for generational change. This framework involved looking at:

1. How generational change is situated in deep time;
2. What generational aspects of change today means to WFSF;
3. How generational development requires youth participation.

We would also like to highlight ‘asymmetry’ between what we see as historic forces as opposed to teleological forces operating at these three temporal levels: deep time, generational and youth. We feel this asymmetry reveals a source of great potential, and is further mediated by information and communication factors. But this essay is an exploration, and does not try to be definitive theoretically or otherwise. Where theory is used, it is used eclectically and more for lending insight. It is a work of conjecture that attempts to situate the WFSF in generational contexts that incorporates youth futures. We hope to stimulate debate and dialogue, and also to catalyze action through ideas and suggestions.

1. Situating the WFSF in deep time

The vantage point of ‘deep time’ offers a number of valuable perspectives, for example macro-history, evolution, civilizational foresight, and future generations. Any one of these perspectives show the WFSF, founded in Paris, France, 26 May 1973, to still be quite young. Understanding the deep time context in which the WFSF was born can help shed light on generational change and youth participation.

Why has it taken thousands of years for humanity to finally mature into rigorous and systematic prospective thinking in the last century? From a macro-historical perspective, the creation of the WFSF is recent and unprecedented. The WFSF was not born squarely after the emergence of an ‘information age,’ so it has lagged a bit in terms of harnessing the power of the new mediums. Yet the WFSF’s global and knowledge intensive orientation lends itself well to working in this information age. The WFSF needs to

¹ See e.g. Nováky E-Hideg É-Kappéter I: Future Orientation in Hungarian Society. *Futures*, 26(7), 1994; Hideg É-Nováky E: A jövőhöz való viszonyunk [Our Attitude to the Future]. *Magyar Tudomány*, 1, 1998; Hideg É-Nováky E: Szakképzés és jövő [Vocational Training and the Future] Aula Kiadó, Budapest, 1998; Hideg É-Nováky E: Factual and Methodological experience probing future orientation in modern and late modern societies, especially the case of Hungary. In Nováky E-Kristóf T (eds) *The Youth for a Less Selfish Future*. Papers of the Ist Budapest Futures Course. Department of Futures Studies, BUESPA, Budapest, 2000.

² See: www.wfsf.org

leverage off youth's capacity in this information intensive revolution. The end of formal Western imperialism after the 1950s is also significant—it is easy to forget that Western imperialism was dominant worldwide over the last 350–450 years, and produced much of what we consider the modern world. Through its pluralistic nature the WFSF is a critique of ethnocentric futures, rejects hegemonic traditions, ambitiously embracing the futures of many cultures world-wide—a platform for civilizational foresight and dialogue. It was also formed in the aftermath the two great wars and a cold war. As Fred Polak revealed in *The Image of the Future* the West was experiencing a 'teleological crisis', dystopian futures a sign of a civilization in decline [4]. The WFSF represents a deep and multi-civilizational processes of teleological reconceptualization, an attempt to, in the words of Richard Slaughter, find and create 'futures beyond dystopia' [7]. The insights of Teilhard de Chardin allows us to see how the emergence the WFSF is an example of reflective, individuated and spiritual community-noogenesis. Arnold Toynbee's macro-history reveals the WFSF to be perhaps one of various creative minorities which is responding to the civilizational challenge facing humanity today—our unresolved nuclear crisis, global environmental decline, the uncertainty of radical new technologies, the ascent of corporate globalization, and find creative responses to other issues of an intractable nature [1]. Future generations thinking might be thought of as the temporal equivalent to the deep past of macro-history or evolutionary theory. While futures generations thinking might be considered only a subset of broader futures studies or foresight, one of the WFSF's explicit missions is to 'encourage responsibility for future generations.'²

While the WFSF was invented in the 20th century, it was invented to deal with the challenge and promise of the 21st century, the 22nd and humanity's long term prospects. From this deep time perspective the WFSF is emerging from its early childhood and into adolescence. Like a youth, it has struggled with the meaning of its own existence and identity. Until recently some argued that futures studies did not even exist, yet a self-referential and self-organizing community had formed. Like a youth, it struggles through the latter half of the 20th century for legitimacy in a world that discounted the future. While economists 'mortgaged' the future, imperialists 'impaled' it, and empiricists refused to even acknowledge that it existed, this group persevered articulating a new Time dimension unprecedented in the history of our species. While the formation of a WFSF was a visionary leap for humankind, it was born ahead of its time, and must wait while the world grows up. Yet, equally, the child must also grow up to be ready for when the world is ready to listen and learn. When the world is ready to learn, will the WFSF be ready to teach and to lead?

2. WFSF as a set of generations

'Generation', in this 'unbounded' context, can be seen to be far more than shallower renditions of the term, such as the generational theory of William Strauss and Neil Howe that simply bracket age groups into 'Silent, Boomer, Thirteenth, Millennial, etc.' in a overly historicist fashion, and which loses traction outside of a US context [8]. (27–40). While age brackets have some usefulness, what might be termed the horizontal aspect of generation, the term 'generation' expresses more than just an age group. 'Generation'

perspective shows how society can integrate youth and elder-generational continuity along multiple if not overlapping value sets.

This requires a deeper understanding of the generational values among members of the WFSF and of emerging generations across the world, how they align, converge or diverge, and would require research. We would need to understand new and changing values and perspectives in the emerging generations of Africa, the Islamic world, Hindu and Confucian Asia, Latin America, Micronesia, and elsewhere. This could help the WFSF better engage emerging generations in a plurality of cultures with sensitivity. For regional-cultural environments very much determine the values, roles and attitudes of youth across different societies. Without going into too much detail, there are characteristically recognizable differences that determine how youth deal with continuing challenges. Many cultures, for instance some in Asia or in Africa, integrate youth and offer them a more or less stable role and future vision; though subordinated to a social hierarchy by age. Life experience and wisdom are therefore taken as closely related. European societies used to be built on similar 'age-archies', though this has changed throughout history. Modern, so-called developed nations, offer a more open and self-made future for youth, even if this was lacking in safety and stability.

The extreme version of the idealization of youth and youth individualism has appeared recently in the US, ironically during the ascendance of the neo-conservative era. While neo-conservatives purportedly hold conservative family values, during the neo-con ascent the ideal became the young, white-collar model of success. The 'yuppie' era represented more than just a social restructuring and a distorted distribution of income. This development model expressed a preference toward constant innovation: economic growth rather than social development; consumption measured in quantity rather than quality; innovation in terms of commercial novelty rather than in terms of progressive and socially sustainable innovation—all aspects of a culture that idealizes instant youth success. Economic and political forces helped create a 'youth-preference' culture, where revealing one's age became taboo rather than the mark of wisdom or experience. In short, the social construction of youth in the neo-liberal age has reached absurd levels, an imbalance that cares little for integrating young and old into a sustainable social model, but which denigrates age by reducing people into economic variables: the successful IT geek is esteemed, the aging become disposable. This pathology reveals itself further when elders try to look and act young, but just end up looking ridiculous.

A generational perspective shows how society integrates youth and organizes itself, showing the need for a healthy social structure that balances age structure and which also reflects on the social construction of age. The WFSF may have a role to play in balancing this processes, as a healthy coupling between old and young, 'elder and apprentice', is not only part of a healthy inter-generational process, it can form the basis of cultural continuity and social development.

Etymological associations with the term 'generation' can also help to deepen our understanding of what the notion of 'generations' may mean for the WFSF. These include 'gene', 'genesis', 'to generate', 're-generate'. Generally speaking, these words refer to an origin, origination, that which creates and re-creates, and that which gives rise to. It is not a passive and 'acted-upon' conception of change. While generations are created, the language invokes the creative and re-creative potential. Generation also invokes strong

organic imagery, the cyclical nature of life. The WFSF needs to engage youth in a generational process because alignment and co-development with emerging horizontal age categories (i.e. youth and students) is part of the development of the vertical generational process, aspects of the cultural continuity and the future creating capacity of the WFSF.

3. WFSF and youth futures

It is our assertion that a WFSF that is to be effective and able to create meaningful change in the 21st century and beyond will need to engage youth in a process of generational change. But what does ‘youth’ mean, and what would this necessitate? In order to engage youth, we need to know a little about youth today. While knowledge of future generations is possibly beyond our grasp, there is an emerging body of literature on ‘youth futures’ based on the youth of today that can help us begin to explore the question.

Emerging forms of youth dissent point to a restlessness and discontent among today’s youth as well as the human capacity for energetic change. The reasons for this differ: in the West it is ‘post-industrial fatigue’, young people long for ‘inner’ meaning and transformation but instead get more technology. Moreover, suicide rates have jumped in the OECD, reflecting cognitive dissonance with the prevailing worldview typified by the excess of the shopping mall and the injustice of *realpolitik*. In developing countries, poverty still consumes the life of many youth, confronted by economic stagnation, dead-end futures and ‘muddling through’. Frustration with life conditions express themselves through going global on the net, rising ‘purist’ paths and fundamentalism, and newly urbanized youth escaping the poverty and communal ‘tyranny’ of the countryside [3].

The future orientation of youth has been widely discussed internationally, offering new global and regional perspectives [3].³ These studies reveal widespread dissonance and epochal changes. Youth futures research conducted in Hungary shows that youth are more optimistic about their individual futures than a common and shared one, a contradiction if its acknowledged a large part of individual futures derives from the social good [3] (123). American youth have envisioned atomic catastrophe. Finnish youth have had difficulty adapting their individual images to global alternatives. English youth were able to articulate their relations to future only through essay writing. Youth rebellion in Japan highlights the rejection of Japan, Inc. and ‘homo-economicus’ [9] (pp. 85–98). Jennifer Gidley has noted a number of challenges and issues facing youth, from globalization, the loss of community and the colonization of the imagination, to the secularization of culture, monoculture, environmental issues, media power and the industrial model of education [2]. We note that the juxtaposition within youth of visions for better futures along side a deteriorating global environment, or optimistic personal futures alongside pessimistic social futures, represents an ‘asymmetrical’ condition which exacerbates youth tension and cognitive dissonance.

³ For more details see Nováky E-Kristóf T (eds) *The Youth for a Less Selfish Future*. Papers of the Ist Budapest Futures Course. Department of Futures Studies, BUESPA, Budapest, 2000.

From a futures studies perspective this asymmetry indicates an urgent need for a breakthrough in rethinking and recreating the factors which determine youth orientation to the future. The factors alluded to include (1) historic structural determinants (trends and traditions) and (2) teleological determinants (visions, expectations and ideals). These two can be simply stated as the push and pull of the future. While historical determinates work by the sheer weight of the past, through collective memory, and institutionally embedded interests, this is locked into a process with teleological visions which ‘pull’ human development from the future. Under stable social conditions both structural/historic and visionary/teleological factors are aligned. Under unstable and relatively open circumstances the teleological and historic factors show an asymmetric relationship.

Thus, this asymmetry is also seen at multiple levels. From a macro-historical/deep time perspective the promise of modernism and endless progress stands in sharp contrast with the real possibility of a ‘sixth extinction’. While a new consciousness around sustainability and worldview that incorporates future generations is growing, this sits within an ongoing teleological crisis of civilizational dimensions. At the institutional level we are simultaneously seeing the ascent of corporate globalization and the emergence of an international third sector. Yet there is increasing opposition to neo-liberalism by those whose vision is global citizenship, ecological responsibility and social equity.

What does this asymmetry, seen in youth, generations and deep time, mean to the WFSF? Youth with a creative and sustainable orientation to the future can only be an expected if those who are able and willing to influence youth—either through education or the media—take responsibly for youth’s future orientation. Youth, soon reaching positions of social influence, need to be emphasized over the long run as a WFSF priority. This is one challenge for the WFSF: to facilitate healthy and creative futures orientation among emerging generations and through youth participation.

4. Generational change: fostering youth and student participation

Clearly, one of the problems the WFSF is facing is that it needs more popular participation to grow. We have heard a recurrent criticism from various members that the WFSF is either too small or too insular. In order to thrive in the 21st century the WFSF will have to be renewed by successive generations. So a key part of this participation can emerge from the interest of students and other ‘youth’. The long term issues facing societies and the world will not go away, and there are some that say the ‘tsunamis’ will only get bigger. The WFSF can be a space where ‘youth’ might be able to talk about and engage in long term thinking and future generations issues. But what do we mean by ‘youth’?

Youth can mean many things in various contexts, so we will try to be specific. First, we mean youth as relative to WFSF members. They may be less knowledgeable about futures than regular WFSF members but capable of making contributions and holding valuable opinions nonetheless. For us the age between 25 and 35 roughly delineates what we mean by youth. In addition, we also feel that university ‘student’ can also mean youth. It is often students who have the most enthusiasm for exploring futures, and where participation in

a WFSF activity could have the greatest influence. By youth we do not mean children. We mean young adults who can be partners, learning from those in the WFSF and capable of making valuable contributions.

The value of having younger ‘student’ members in the WFSF is multifold. Youth often times not only notice the emerging issues before their elders, they are the emerging issue, embodying the values and practices of a changing society. Youth will dissent, re-vision and change what is before them out of sheer energy. While such energies can be destructive if channeled unwisely, they can also be profoundly creative if given proper guidance and focus. In addition, youth often have not so rigidly accepted the status quo, and may be more inclined to challenge existing ways. The act of challenging is also part of a renewal process, and could help the WFSF to mature and grow through their inclusion.

One lingering question remains the correlation between age and the development of foresight. Currently, research is being undertaken on the developmental psychology of foresight at the Australian Foresight Institute, incorporating the work of Wilber, Gebser, Kohlberg, Lovinger and other developmental psychologists.⁴ By connecting the development psychology results to futures studies theory, which has been widely investigated at the Budapest Futures Studies Centre⁵, we might conjecture that while elder people may look into the future with a wider range of consequences, their interest and willingness-ability to act may shrink. So while foresight might emerge with age, older people may also carry more historical baggage and socially derived responsibility that lock them into the future. Older people have foresight based on the ‘weight of history’, while younger people may have a greater visioning power, and the opportunity to make innovative social commitments. While this proposition obviously needs to be researched, the implication would be that instead of the level of foresight, the type and the structure of ‘future orientation and foresight’ would differ by age. This also has implications for how youth and the WFSF might engage: from a hierarchical model of foresight where the aged pay little heed to the young and visa versa, to a complementary and synergistic model where the strengths of age and youth are combined.

But why would youth want to belong to the WFSF in the first place? What is the value for them? As a strategy, the WFSF needs to listen to what succeeding generations are saying, their concerns and issues, and try to address these through an inclusive and participatory framework. Youth, seeing the state of the global predicament around them, may want opportunities to engage with the issues constructively. The WFSF could help youth deal with the asymmetry that exists at the individual level through tackling the asymmetry at the institutional and civilizational. The internet has opened up opportunities for youth to express themselves and perhaps express a revolution in global consciousness that they can usher in. Can the WFSF help facilitate this?

The WFSF may also help youth to articulate their perspectives. Youth often have a strong intuition, and feelings about future directions; however, this is frequently difficult to articulate in a clear and understandable form and difficult to support with theoretical frameworks, as well as difficult for them to put this into wider perspectives. The WFSF can

⁴ This research is being conducted by Peter Hayward, PhD candidate at the Australian Foresight Institute.

⁵ See Nováky (ed.) et al. *Jövőkutatás (Futures Studies)*. Aula, Budapest, 1998.

help youth to better articulate their visions and concerns, without the obstruction of an elder. We can build from a generational approach, which extends the idea that young and old, in a respectful relationship, can co-create new directions.

The networked world of youth today reflects new directions and the opportunity for new innovations. These are the people that will make up the body of the WFSF in the future, more and more, with every passing year. The WFSF has a great opportunity to tap the energy of youth, students and succeeding generations.

5. Youth and WFSF—ideas and suggestions

Having established the need for youth and student participation in a broad context in order to help the WFSF with its own generational development and to help facilitate the generational emergence of futures thinking, we would now like to offer some ideas for practical implementation. While this is not a definitive plan of action, we do have strong ideas about what can be done. We want to open up debate on youth and generational futures in the WFSF which we hope will lead to aligned action from many WFSF members.

- I. We have recently dialogued on the possibility of launching a pilot survey in the near future, beginning with work between Jose Ramos, at the Australian Foresight Institute, Tamas Gaspar and Erzsebet Novaky at the Futures Studies Centre in Budapest and Chris Jones, the WFSF Secretary General. Together we may be able to support the development of a data base which can help us understand the prospects for student participation internationally. This survey research could have various dimensions:
 - (a) The relationship between values and action among emerging generations. Values held by emerging generations may demand different forms of action. We need to examine what forms of action youth prefer, the forms that fit their preferred values.
 - (b) How youth and WFSF have interacted and how they could interact better or differently.
 - (c) Information on the age structure of the Federation would contribute to a better understanding of generational change.
 - (d) Institutionalizing the efforts of younger members may help to create the database of young futurists, including their research fields—likewise, creating a survey on behalf of the WFSF could help create awareness of WFSF youth participation opportunities, and attract people for formal membership and other activities later.
 - (e) A survey project like ‘reinventing the WFSF from the grassroots: students creating the future of the WFSF’ could be undertaken. This might be an initiative to garner broad student participation to re-create the WFSF in new and better ways. The survey project could uncover assumption we have about the WFSF. We could ask students ‘why, how and when would the WFSF be meaningful to me and future generations?’
- II. A Youth Section within the WFSF could be developed. A modest vision, in this first stage, would be a youth section—neither a separate institution, nor a legal entity. Such an entity could co-exist within the current WFSF constitution, and could help begin to articulate youth/student opinions through organized activities, conference

participation, and through a representative within the formal structure of the WFSF. All in all this section would be integral to building in generational capacity into the WFSF. Put it in another way, it could be a kind of ‘regionalism’ within WFSF, for example:

- (a) In order to support the renewal of the WFSF a youth section can channel young people to a wide international forum. Until now younger colleagues joined the Federation mainly through the influence of ‘elder’ teachers, bosses, colleagues. We suggest maintaining this process, but also to enhance it through a mentor system. The Youth Section would be an alternative channel, where young people can find their voice and activity in a smaller company of people with similar age, similar thinking and similar efforts. This may attract more friends who would feel ‘estranged’ by a huge institution for the first time. Youth Section membership might automatically mean a new WFSF member.
- (b) A membership fee reduction for youth section members (students) could help lower the barrier to youth participation, especially in developing countries: youth with few financial sources are often unable to joining an organization which charges in US dollars annually. Moreover, an atmosphere of people getting together compels participation.
- (c) The WFSF could create international ‘internships’, perhaps through a globally networked team that could collaborate on a project. This project would provide practical experience. On a more individual level, the WFSF could use its network of student researchers to help members with needed research activities. This could also be used by students as part of their academic research projects.
- (d) Student status could confer distinct privileges and responsibilities, such as the aforementioned fee reduction or mentoring opportunity. Student membership to be granted in exchange for a project or task done by a student. Students are often money poor but have the time and willingness to volunteer. Such projects or tasks might help the WFSF build human resource capacity. The operation of the WFSF web site, for example, cannot be managed by one person. Such operations should be distributed or decentralized. Including students in this task is one way to do this.
- (e) Youth forums, regionally or on-line, can help youth express their opinions, ideas, methodology, which might also help enliven futures studies. While youth do not often execute major changes, or creates new paradigms, it is often them who give an impetus to new directions.
- (f) This youth section might be represented at the next WFSF world conference.

III. A WFSF Youth web page is being designed, and it is envisioned that this might serve as a platform for information on youth futures in the WFSF.

IV. A WFSF student press could work like the expansive and decentralized Indymedia.org, born out of youth counter-cultures and mainly run by amateur reporters and activists covering globalization issues. This student press corp. could be an international network of futures oriented student journalists who could cover events using foresight concepts and perspectives, and generate publicity for the WFSF and its other activities.

This group of student reporters could also focus on making WFSF publications more socially impact-full and economically viable.

- V. Civilizational dialogue on many issues could be facilitated through international youth participation. In terms of facilitating global awareness, we could use the net to develop shared futures projects, which would also be an opportunity for students to participate across cultures. Students could also be matched up with others (on-line or by phone card) with people of different cultures and nationalities, to discuss and compare respective interpretations of futures, issues and visions. There are various traditions in futures depending on the country and the school, and we have identified 50 places worldwide where futures is being taught at a tertiary level, so a bases already exists [5].⁶

6. Conclusion

We have tried to give a rationale for incorporating youth and student participation into the WFSF as a generational strategy, based on deep time, generational and youth futures perspectives. While institutionalizing new perspectives or movements demands huge effort—time, energy and money—what is at stake: the futures of our world, the futures of the WFSF, and the futures of youth, are all too great to ignore.

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⁶ In 2001, Jose Ramos, on behalf of the Australian Foresight Institute, conducted an international survey of tertiary futures education. See: www.swin.edu/afi