Used Futures as Stumbling Blocks to Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The images of development in the developed world spur images of similar developments in the developing world, without consideration of local contexts. This purchase of used futures leads to a disincentive for local experimentation and importing of ideas/thought processes that have been successful elsewhere. The result is a plethora of examples of failed interventions and costly experiments in the developing world which have failed to achieve their targets and only installed xeroxed functionalities and organizations without the capabilities of the originals. This article attempts to initiate a dialogue on the types of used futures and how to move away from the colonization of thought processes and policies.

Three types of used futures are identified and discussed. The bedazzled future represents the blatant emulation of someone else with worldly superiority. In symbolic futures, the emphasis is on copying symbols, icons and structures. The Avatar future represents mimicry of thought processes and sensibilties of another culture and context. In terms of moving ahead, it needs to be stressed that while emulation is important for innovation; context and corresponding to local situations is important.

Keywords: colonization of thought, story telling, used futures, sustainable development, bedazzled future

Reference: https://www.juniordr.com/images/image_categories/technology/copy-paste.jpg

Introduction

A Used Future, (term coined by Sohail Inayatullah [1]), highlights the way a community/organization's sense of the possible, probable, and preferable is occupied unthinkingly, inappropriately, and in all likelihood damagingly, by concepts developed in another context (and pursuing other interests) altogether [2]. The concerning aspect of this decolonizing of the future is the disempowering of thought, by accepting the futures of others as our own. The desire and the struggle to create leap-frogging pathways for sustainable development have ended up in the imitative reproduction of used strategies inspired by clichéd images and stories of success in the developed world. In the developing world context, this has usually been emulating the Western world and in the last decade copying ideas from South Korea and the other South Asian tiger economies. This xeroxed application of alien and already-used choices in other temporal and spatial contexts without regard to the specificity of the particular situation at hand have resulted in the establishment of used futures - aspirations and images of future that are a unmodified loan from other times and places.

This is especially troubling in a post-COVID-19 world, as economies quickly move towards economic resurgence and a semblance of control. In these troubled times, it is more tempting to copy "ready-to-use" ideas, in-vogue policies and projects from success stories elsewhere. Blatant copy-paste of policies or projects irrespective of their local contexts and without regard to the contexts in which they are being pasted, is an assured recipe for failure and hopelessness.

Mental images inform imagination

Images often provide us with what we think we know about the world. For example, our notions about the problems of the poorest countries are saturated with images of starving children, cold-blooded multinationals and crooked politicians. Uprising and disruptive change is often synonymous with the image of Che Guevara, ever-present as a poster on student t-shirts and revolutionary walls. The problem arises when the image does our thinking for us and we are held prisoner by these images.

Take the example of Asian cities, which have tended to follow the same pattern of urban development that western cities did generations ago [6]. The image of the future, of unbridled growth without concern for nature or livability has led to the concrete jungle model of Asian cities. By unconsciously following this pattern, these cities are now facing a crisis of overpopulation, equity, fresh water depletion, climate change and loss of human dignity. In the process they have also disowned their own traditions where living with nature was important and community was central. It really is a pity given, urban civilization originally emerged in Asia and that the emergence of the modern western city itself owes a considerable debt to the mathematics, architecture and urban design principles of Asia.
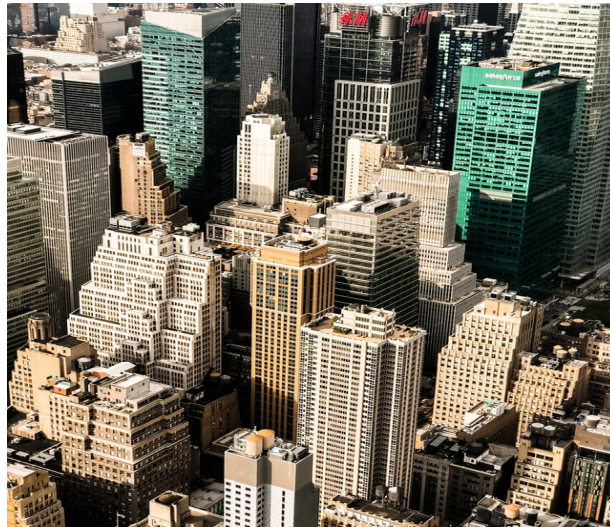
Concrete Jungle (image by Felipe Souza on Unsplash)

Throughout history societies and organizations have forged ahead by learning through emulation. However it should be reminded that the method of best practice lesson-drawing (emulation) must be examined and/or balanced with context-specific and history-sensitive analysis and prescriptions. Otherwise history is replete with examples of failed interventions and costly experiments. This paper is an attempt to draw a line between the various types of purchased images, so that wiser-preferred futures can be chosen.

The Bedazzled Future

There is a special reason for naming this genre of used futures as such. The Islamic equivalent for Anti-Christ is Dajjal (derived from the Arabic word dajl), which means bedazzled. As the story goes, Dajjal will carry with him a city of fire and a garden city, both of which are a deception and belie what is underneath. Bedazzled people, blinded by superficiality, will follow Dajjal, without taking into account what is beneficial or hazardous to their long-term existence.

In the same vein of superficiality, a bedazzled future represents a future which has been emulated simply because someone else with worldly superiority has done it and the emulator feels helpless to think for his own self. The images of the future are colonized by others' who have thought through the type of world they want, often through the use of instrumental rationality – reason for personal gain [7] and have succeeded. This success serves as a barrier towards organic thinking and solutions. In terms of inner story, the myth here is "he is better because he is red-faced, so let me thrash my face so that I can be red as well". Such an endeavor usually starts with a minister or CEO visiting a developed country and picking up ideas which are then uncritically copy-pasted back home.

There is another dimension to this story as well. When the inner story is that "efficiency will not earn you brownie points but failure will get you into trouble". This automatically puts brakes on any indigenous innovation and the emphasis is on xeroxing ideas which have succeeded elsewhere.

The history of the developing world is littered with examples of such blatant emulation practices. I was involved with an e-health scenario planning event in Bangladesh a few years ago. A used futures phenomena which emerged from the foresight exercise was the E–health paradox, a term coined by Liaw and Humphreys [8]. Populations that may have the most to gain from ICT in health are those who are thwarted in their use due to barriers of untrained personnel, poor infrastructure, and lack of resources. E-health is a great innovation but for the developing world there have been decades of well-meaning but non-sustainable ICT projects which have left a legacy of uncertainty in their wake. This chasm that has left behind low-income, technologically disadvantaged, rural and marginalized communities, which most desperately need access to health services. has been brutally exposed during the COIVID pandemic.

The Symbolic Future

As the name implies, the emphasis here is on symbols, icons and structures. The icons are copied but no thought is given into how these symbols might bring desired change or to avoid unpleasant throwbacks. This category goes one step further than the bedazzled futures that while some emphasis is on litany, there is failure to comprehend the systemic and inherent workings behind the symbols. In terms of inner story, the story here is

"A rural dweller visits the city and sees a water tap for the first time. Impressed by the ability to summon water at will, he buys a water tap and installs it in a wall of his home. No water comes out when he tries to turn on the tap."

The best example of this genus of copy-paste can be given of the tallest building syndrome in developing countries. The tallest building is supposed to be an icon; a symbol of economic prosperity irrespective of the state of other socio- economic indicators and the world-view. For many developing countries it has turned out to be a tombstone of ruined ideas; ideas which were purchased from the developed world, where high-rise buildings are rarely constructed by choice. Instead, they are planned to overcome constraints of space. The Petronas twin towers in Kuala Lumpur were completed just in time for the Asian Financial crisis in 1998. The World Trade Centre in New York opened just before the 1973-4 Wall Street crash. London's Canary Wharf tower opened in 1990 just at the start of a major recession in the UK. One of the more awkward and complicated moments in the history of symbolism, occurred at the ribbon-cutting of Burj Khalifa, (Burj Dubai prior to its inauguration), in 2010. Coinciding with the Global economic crisis, Dubai had to deal with a massive real estate collapse that sent shock waves through financial markets around the world and forced the ambitious city-state, in a significant blow to its pride, to seek repeated billion-dollar bailouts from neighboring Abu Dhabi. But the lesson seems to be lost on developing countries, especially in Asia, where a plethora of high rises are planned in the immediate future.

The Avatar Future

For every success story there is also a plethora of missed opportunities, which future generations rue. Of the three future categories, the avatar future is the trickiest, as it represents the sensibility and trends of the time. Because, it has a following in the developed world and is in vogue, it is hard to even raise voice against it. The sci-fi movie *Avatar*, best

personifies this mode of thinking. It has been hailed for its pro-environment, pro-indigenous community position and depiction of the triumph of the David against Goliath. But looking at the hubris, you realize that an opportunity of addressing the sensitive balance between environmentalists and capitalists has been ruined; just because it appeals to the current trend of "green" and tree-hugging.

This is ironic in another sense as well. Many people associate the word *Avatar* with the Western movie, but it is originally a very important Sanskrit word which refers to the "incarnation", "embodiment", or "manifestation" of a deity or idea. In that sense, an Avatar future has a very different meaning than one which simply reflects the 'sensibility and trends of the time'.

Case in point is the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, which represented an ideal opportunity to bring change in the global finance sector, in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. But it will go down in the annals of history as a missed opportunity for change. While there are many reasons for failure which find the spotlight, at a more deeper level, the iconic flower power image which defined the OWS inner story, is to blame as well. The image of a girl putting a flower in a gun barrel, from the Vietnam War protest, became an integral symbol in the counter-culture movement. But it represents a used future as the proponents of this image have failed to realize that governments, militaries and multinationals have learnt and evolved. They have located themselves for change; the proponents of OWS could not evolve. Perhaps they could have taken a leaf out of the Arab Spring Movement, on which OWS was prototyped. Coupled with Twitter and Facebook, the underlying image was that of the "Warrior Bedouin"; an image which had been the subject of criticism by futurists and analysts in a post 9-11 world. OWS disowned the flesh, blood and perspiration behind the Arab Spring Movement. Here a word of caution needs to be added. The future is a moving frontier and it is equally important to shift images with shifting times. This is very similar to SWOT analysis, where if you sit on your strengths for long, it starts becoming a weakness. The image of the Warrior Bedouin, which initially served the Arab Spring well, later tore apart the initial gains of the movement. The image failed to shift to more wiser and be-calming icons (like Mullah Naseer-ud-din or Juha), and the Arab Autumn soon gave way to the Arab Winter.

Future directions

Emulation and best-practices are a human phenomena; the expansion of knowledge and civilization is built on previous knowledge and history. In the complexity literature, best practice is generally viewed as a useful pattern of behavior in human systems where the variables are ordered and predictable. But raw "copy and paste" is rarely good recommendation. It is rarely successful in highly complex or chaotic contexts – where emergent or novel practice is required. The method of best practice lesson-drawing needs to be examined and/or balanced with context-specific and history-sensitive policy analysis and better appreciation and understanding of history and world experience. This involves asking the right questions about what matters in history and what the rest of the world has done well and how they have achieved these outcomes. Insights into these questions then need to be used to build perspective between local/indigenous consciousness and external experience. The inner story/metaphor for such a future could be defined by the fisherman-at-ease:

"A fisherman was lying on a beautiful beach, with his fishing pole propped up in the sand and his solitary line cast out into the sparkling blue surf. A businessman walking down the beach, decides to find out why this fisherman was fishing instead of working harder to make a living for himself and his family.
Businessman: "You should be working rather than lying on the beach!"
Fisherman: "And what will my reward be?"
Businessman: "Well, you can get bigger nets and catch more fish!"
Fisherman: "And then what will my reward be?"
Businessman: "You will make money and you'll be able to buy a boat, which will then result in larger catches of fish!" "
Fisherman: And then what will my reward be?"
Businessman: "You can buy a bigger boat, and hire some people to work for you!"
Fisherman: "And then what will my reward be?"
Businessman: "Don't you understand? You can build up a fleet of fishing boats, sail all over the world, and let all your employees catch fish for you! You can spend all the rest of your days sitting on this beach, looking at the sunset. You won't have a care in the world!"
The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and said, "And what do you think I'm doing right now?"

"Copy and paste" is rarely good advice for those planning the transfer of innovative ideas from one place to another. However emulation has been a part of the human psyche since time memorial. The trick is to envision what we want at the end of the day and balance it with a better appreciation and understanding of history and world experience. Self-judgment is not just against the achievements, real or imagined, of others, but in the light of own norms and ideals. Equally important is to resist the temptation of the 'salesmen of used futures', as they sell their wares through indicators, nationalism and bedazzlement.

There is a lesson here for the salesmen of used futures as well. As global sellers of perceived wisdom and prosperity, they need to move from mere marketing of superficiality, to more wiser and indigenous solutions. The trick is to move from the treatment of symptoms to diagnosis and cure of underlying disease and cause. The inner story/metaphor can be taken of the wise hakeem (traditional doctor),

"A man with intense stomach pain visits a hakeem. When inquired he tells him that he had burnt bread for supper, the previous night. At this the hakeem gives him eye medication as it was incorrect choice of meal that lead to the ailment."

Case in point is the general economic policies of China and India which remained the exact opposite to the Washington Consensus' (the supposed Magna Carta of economic wisdom) main recommendations. Both countries employed high levels of protectionism, virtually no privatization, extensive industrial policies planning, and lax fiscal and financial policies through the 1990s. Instead of being dismal failures, their successes have presented strong evidence against the recommended Washington Consensus policies.

The purpose of this paper was to inititate a dialogue on used futures and its typology. Emulation has been a part of the human psyche since time memorial. The trick is to envision

a preferred future that we want at the end of the day and balance it with a better appreciation and understanding of history and world experience. Self-judgement is not just against the achievements, real or imagined, of others, but in the light of own norms and ideals. Equally important is to resist the temptation of the 'salesmen of used futures', as they sell their wares through indicators, nationalism and bedazzlement.

I would like to conclude on excerpts from a speech by Ramachandra Guha, which perfectly embodies not running after used futures. The topic is on why India should not even attempt to become a superpower [9].

"In my view, international relations cannot be made analogous to a competitive examination. The question is not who comes first or second or third, whether judged in terms of Gross National Product, number of billionaires in the Forbes or Fortune lists, number of Olympic gold medals won, size of largest aircraft carrier operated, or power of most deadly nuclear weapons owned...We should judge ourselves not against the achievements, real or imagined, of other countries, but in the light of our own norms and ideals... We are a unique nation, unique for refusing to reduce Indian-ness to a single language, religion, or ideology, unique in affirming and celebrating the staggering diversity found within our borders (and beyond them)."

Endnote

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Citations

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