

ABDALLA S. BUJRA, and Futures Studies in Africa: A Noticer's Environmental Scanning

Introduction

Environmental scanning is looking around to see what there might be in a certain field. It is *purposive gallivanting*, exploration or strollogy, 'taking reflective walks'.¹ It is analogous to an unbiased but anticipative fishing expedition. In this particular case, it is finding out through biographical tracking and literature survey whether Abdalla Bujra (1938–2025) interfaced with the discipline of futures studies, and if so, how and with what effect. 'Futures studies is an art and a science with a strong emphasis on imagination and creativity in creating different possible futures'.²

As part of this exploration, this paper historicises such findings, contextualises and looks at their wider implications in the realm of pedagogy. Our maintained hypothesis is Heraclitus's concept of *panta rei* ('everything flows'),³ that futures studies is a work in progress.⁴ So, as William Shakespeare reminds us, 'all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts'.⁵ One such part played by Abdalla Bujra was to serve at the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) African Futures (AF) regional project, based in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, during its first part

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(1992–1997) of the two-phase duration. His tenure there as expert in sociology and human resources development ran for three years, from the project's beginning to 1995, as part of a regional team to champion long-term strategic thinking and planning in African countries. This project has been described as the embodiment of an unprecedented effort at 'escaping the futures of the past'.⁶

Getting Acquainted

Though I worked as a Junior Research Fellow (JRF) at the University of Nairobi from 1972 to 1973, I do not remember meeting Dr Bujra before he left the university in 1973. I guess I was too busy doing the fieldwork for my PhD. But I got to meet and know him reasonably well in 1995 when he came to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to set up the Development Policy Management Forum (DPMF) hosted by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to deal with the governance and political economy dimensions of Africa's development. By coincidence, I happened to serve as Development Policy

Expert and founding Team Leader of the Policy Analysis Support Unit (PASU) of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, today's AU) from that year. In fact, it was Abdalla Bujra who encouraged me to apply to join the second phase of the AF project as a policy and issues analyst. I ended up relocating to Abidjan in 1998 for a three-year tour of duty.

That is how I came to be acquainted first-hand with the pioneering work of Bujra and his co-team and what they had to deal with: the chores and challenges of starting a new institution, and carrying out its mandate to help African countries overcome the then-prevalent short-termism and crisis management promoted by the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). To achieve this mandate, AF needed to focus on conceptualisation, develop relevant methodologies and devise real-world practical applications and ways and means of implementing them. To do this, working manuals were produced with technical assistance from the United Nations University Millennium project (UNUMP) led by Jerome Glenn.⁷ The manuals covered how to 'construct scenarios ... formulate strategies ... and implement participatory futures studies'.⁸

From the word go, the AF team conceived widely participatory national long-term perspective studies (NLTPS) exercises to promote a sense of liberation, supplant the erstwhile top-down dirigisme impasse, and serve as a guide to activities by various actors. Development management was to involve not just government bureaucracy but also an empowered public, the private sector and civil society, as agents of self-determination – thus promoting development effectiveness.

African Futures Methodology

For the methodology, AF produced a framework⁹ to guide this interactive process, the essence of which was to colonise the future by providing answers to the following questions:

1. What are the long-term aspirations and goals of the society?
2. What are the characteristics of the society and the issues facing it that could affect the ability of the country to create the desired future?
3. What are the alternative future scenarios?
4. Given the scenarios identified above, what should be the vision of the society?
5. What are the strategic issues and challenges that must be confronted if the society is to achieve its vision?
6. What are the appropriate development strategies for the nation and how should they be put in place?

In seeking to answer these questions, the NLTPS process was to proceed in five broad interactive phases:¹⁰

1. Issues identification
2. Basic studies
3. Scenario construction
4. Strategy formulation; and
5. Development planning.

In its ideal form, the NLTPS is a people-centred learning process working towards a shared national vision. It is collective intelligence – thinking together across demographics – on optionality, arrived at by consensus through dialogue, and should prove to be, ipso facto, reasonably implementable. Meaningful stakeholder engagement induces ownership of the resultant programme of action, boosts legitimacy, promotes commitment and develops an accommodating ‘state of mind’.¹¹ These are forms of social capital, stances and attitudes that smoothly turn the probable into actual reification, thus giving sustainability a fighting chance.

Between 1993 and 1998, AF assisted teams in fourteen African countries to undertake NLTPS utilising this framework:

1. Côte d’Ivoire (1993–1995);
2. Swaziland (1993–1997);
3. Mauritius (1994–1996);
4. Guinea-Bissau (1994–1996);
5. Malawi (1996–1998);
6. Zimbabwe (1996–1998); and
7. Madagascar (1997–1998).

Others at various phases of NLTPS were

1. Burkina Faso,
2. Cape Verde,
3. Congo,
4. Gabon,
5. Mali,
6. São Tomé and Príncipe,
7. Seychelles,
8. Tanzania,
9. Uganda, and
10. Zambia.

Some, like Congo, were at the stage of requesting assistance; and a few onboarded ones suffered discontinuity.¹²

By the time Abdalla Bujra left AF in 1995, only two countries had done their NLTPS, namely Côte d’Ivoire and Swaziland (Eswatini). But he was part and parcel of the people who lay the foundation of AF and tested its methodology on the ground. In what could pass as his valedictory testament, he observed that ‘there is no shortage of long term plans, strategies and programmes. African capacity to prepare for the future is available and adequate. What is required is visionary leadership and resolve!’.¹³ Many political scientists would call such hesitancy by leaders to do the needful, ‘lack of political will’.¹⁴

Times are Changing

Locating Abdalla Bujra in the historical context of the development of futures studies reveals an interesting state of play. Our innate human characteristics include wonder and curiosity about what the future holds. To satisfy them, we have applied many tools to make sense of the future. A stylised timeline¹⁵ of such tools could run from oracles, shamanism and mysticism to Nostradamus’s prophecies and Thomas More’s utopia, George Wells’s time machine and Friedrich Hegel’s dialectics, Soviet planning and RAND,¹⁶ the Club of Rome’s limits to growth, and integral futures and anticipatory systems. These tools have moved roughly from being oral to being increasingly written and ‘scientifically’ quantitative, and then cautiously and systematically explorative. Bujra came in during the liminality between the discrediting of (usually linear) trend projection and extrapolation, as if the past were the sole driver of the future, and the debut of the framing of alternative futures scenarios – which occurred roughly between 1990 and 2000.

In a dynamic *mutatis mutandis* world characterised by vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), *ceteris paribus* analysis of past or historic experience cannot serve much as *magistra vitae* (life's teacher). Futures is a plurality, not determinate; not a destiny, but prospective possibilities to be probed, mapped and proactively anticipated; not predictable and, least of all, cannot be foretold or prophesied. Neither value-free nor neutral, the future can be shaped by what is done in the present, though not necessarily an extended present. Abdalla Bujra played his part in the wave of the emergence of new approaches to futures studies, research, foresight and operationalisation.

To popularise and widen the scope of strategic thinking and long-term planning, Abdalla Bujra convened in Addis Ababa a regional conference of senior policymakers and managers, in June 2003, to sensitise them about futures and foresight methodology, and to chart out its applicability in various spheres of engagement.¹⁷ He invited me to contribute a paper¹⁸ for this purpose, after having left AF when I was the focal point on regional Africa's Long Term Perspective Studies (ALTPS). In that paper, I used a 360-degree approach of hindsight, insight and foresight – a scheme of reflection involving retrospection and actionable prospectives in contemplating regional economic blocs. For Abdalla Bujra, once a futurist, always a futurist – and an intentional one at that.

Capacity Development

Much as one is inclined to agree with Bujra's 1995 assertion that Africa has adequate capacity to prepare for the future,¹⁹ this cannot be so definitive. For example, AF itself experienced the phenomenon

of delays and even discontinuity with many NLTPS outfits.²⁰ Again, one must decry inadequate intellectual grounding in futures studies and research. Almost a quarter of a century after Bujra made his statement, it was found that foresight maturity was mostly ad hoc and there was poor awareness of it with little discernible expertise – even in simple forecasting techniques, to say nothing of the more advanced conjecture in causal-layered deep-dive.²¹

To address this futures preparedness deficit and to ensure the necessary capacity for long-term thinking, ongoing, sustained, embedded and institutionalised appropriate educational programmes are required in schools and universities to 'aid in the development of an interpretive community'.²² Unfortunately, futures literacy and formal futures education are rare in African terrain. Only two institutions on the continent offer futures and foresight degrees and short courses, namely Stellenbosch University in South Africa and Mohammed VI Polytechnic University in Morocco. Other programmes are initiatives at Dedan Kimathi University of Technology and the University of Nairobi, both in Kenya.

I have a feeling that Abdalla Bujra would have smiled with approval at this development but, just as Oliver Twist pleaded, suffering from hunger pangs, would say 'I want some more'²³ – of course expecting a positive response, not the backlash meted on Oliver Twist by the powers-that-be. He would second the motion by Mahdi Elmandjra that 'students in African universities should be exposed to the methods of future studies and encouraged to write theses in these fields'.²⁴ After all, UNESCO is emphatic that futures literacy, futures studies and strategic foresight are

overarching skills essential in navigating the complexities of the 21st century;²⁵ and that foresight education is the antidote for the nowism virus,²⁶ an exclusively short-term operational orientation at the neglect of long-term transformative strategies. Indeed, futures studies has to perforce deal with the issue of integrating the different horizons²⁷ of development, since the future is an ambient emergence from the present. That development, being a long-term objective, requires the implementation of a series of immediate, short-term and medium-term action plans.

A Legacy of Bujra's Life

Abdalla Bujra left remarkable steps on the sands of time. This we document through *historia* – 'inquiry, narrative, account'.²⁸ An enduring source puts it well: 'Dr. Bujra's legacy continues to inspire scholars and policymakers across the continent'.²⁹ In death, he rests; but, given another life, chances are that he would choose the same path he lived on earth. Fare thee well.

Conclusion

Abdalla Bujra was deeply involved in the conceptualisation and execution of futures studies as a team member of the AF project. Similarly, DPMF – the outfit he founded – was overseeing development policy implementation with a futurist's eye.

This paper uses environmental scanning method to investigate Abdalla Bujra's footprint in the futures field. In the course of doing so, gaps in skills and quantity of human resources deployed in futures work were identified. Consequently, it is proposed that futures studies and research be mainstreamed in the education system to augment the supply of strategic thinkers and human resource for-

mation in this area and generally promote what I would call futures intelligence quotient (FIQ), a measure of futures consciousness and agency – that is, people’s ability to think and act futuristically. This would be the enabling environment for better-informed strategic long-term development management in all humanity’s domains – be they economic, social, political, environmental, cultural or technological (ESPECT) – and at whatever scale: from the personal to the galactic, and other arenas in-between. Contrary to a popular saying, even the sky is *not* a limit.

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