Strategic Planning for the Planet

Foresight Journal review of 2012 State of the Future (Foresight, Vol. 15 Iss: 1, pp.74 – 75)
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Doing this review is a special treat because one does not often see future studies that have succeeded as brilliantly as The Millennium Project. Their most recent report, *2012 State of the Future*, is a veritable encyclopedia of sound foresight. With the help of working groups (nodes) in 45 nations, this 10,000 page-study, available in print and electronic formats, easily comprises one of the most complete and authoritative analysis of where the world is heading and guides to reaching a better place. Endorsements by Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the UN, Enrique Peña Nieto, President of Mexico, and other international figures offer high testimony to its worth.

Having participated in The Millennium Project since its founding, I attribute this great success to the huge need they have filled so well by what I think of as "strategic planning for the planet". Just as the internet exploded into life two decades ago to fill the empty niche for a global communication system, The Millennium Project fills the large and growing need to guide the turmoil of our time into useful directions.

That is exactly what the *2012 State of the Future* accomplishes. Starting with through analysis of the 15 Global Challenges facing the world, the report then provides a summary of progress using their innovative State of the Future Index (SOFI), followed by scenarios for different regions and the entire world. The next ten chapters go into detail on specific topics, ranging from Governance to the Arts. As in any serious scholarly work, a final chapter suggests avenues for improving futures research, and appendices provide supporting data.

One can always argue about the choice of perspective, but the quality of the analysis is remarkably articulate and prescient. Rather than the boilerplate often found in large studies of this type, the *2012 State of the Future* is incisive in unraveling tough issues. In assessing the contradictory signs of progress in the face of mounting threats, for instance, the report's opening lines provide a penetrating insight into the complex nature of our times and the need for grounding information – "The world is improving better than most pessimists know, but future dangers are worse than most optimists indicate".

The Millennium Project is now working on its next innovation – a "collective intelligence system for the world". In addition to the wealth of knowledge in its annual State of the Future report, the collective intelligence system (CIS) includes a Summary, Situation Chart, News, Scanning Results, Computer Models, Resources, Discussion, and a Dashboard on each of the 15 Global Challenges to provide decision-makers insights and strategies for the trying times ahead. The CIS is to be updated constantly through collective work and is searchable. For more, see www.millennium-project.org

The enormity of this ambitious effort boggles the mind, and it poses big challenges in maintaining such a huge knowledge base. The online version of this report runs 345 Megabits. As the founder of a similar but not quite as ambitious system (www.TechCast.org), I can easily appreciate the difficulty and hard work required to inspire hundreds and thousands of people across the globe to take the time for participating and to post good information. And users have to be able to find their way through this labyrinthine complex. Hopefully, intelligent search systems are likely to be a big help soon, like a smart robot or tutor who knows what you want and can find it for you in a conversational manner. Robots may also help scanning and drafting rough analyses, but I do not think they will replace good editorial judgment. The need for editors to review this work for accuracy and acceptability alone is awesome.

This hardly diminishes the value of the *State of the Future* reports, but rather it helps us to appreciate the extraordinary contribution they have made. The principals behind The Millennium Project – Jerome C. Glenn, Theodore J. Gordon, and Elizabeth Florescu – deserve the world's gratitude and admiration.