DRAFT: Aspirational Futures, Updated

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Abstract

Futures work must help in better understanding and creating the future. This requires appropriate techniques for understanding changes in the macroenvironment, the operating environment and the organization or community at hand. It also requires a shared vision for the organization or community. The Institute for Alternative Futures has evolved "Aspirational Futures" as a set of techniques to enable this. While it shares similarities with other approaches to futures work, Aspiration Futures emphasizes developing and using scenarios that explore expectable or "most likely", challenging, and visionary paths.

Aspirational Futures: Understanding Threats, Opportunities and Visionary Possibilities

The Institute for Alternative Futures (IAF) has developed "Aspirational Futures" - an approach that combines learning about the future and its uncertainty with vision and creating preferred futures. This article defines aspirational futures and differentiates it from other approaches and then gives examples of its application to scenario use across corporate, government, association and community settings.

Futures is the evolving field that uses a variety of tools to consider the future more consciously and to create the future more effectively. Foresight is the application of futures tools in specific policy making or decision-making settings.

Aspirational Futures involves understanding what might happen (likely and preferred futures) and a clear, shared commitment to creating the community or organization's vision. Both the understanding of the future and an effective commitment to creating it are essential, and they form the basis of the Aspirational Futures approach. This approach has grown out of several sources, including Alvin Toffler's pioneering work in Future Shock (Toffler, 1970), Jim Dator's work on his alternative futures approach (Dator, 1981), my work with Toffler, Dator and others on Anticipatory Democracy (Bezold, 1978) in communities, legislatures and agencies (updated in Bezold, 2006). In our work at IAF (a U.S. tax exempt non-profit organization) and our for-profit subsidiary Alternative Futures Associates we have evolved the processes of Aspirational Futures, through our facilitation, futures research, training and speaking.

Aspirational Futures can be described in terms of its major components, and I'll do that below. There are many similarities with other approaches to futures work. Much futures work, and some strategic planning and effective decision making, will deal with many of these components. Being aware of the "plausible" and the "preferable" is critical. The plausible considers what might happen, the preferable what we want, often with some degree of commitment to making it happen (particularly vision and goals). We acknowledge the power of scenarios to explore plausible future space. We add that the

plausible space that scenarios explore should include paths to visionary outcomes. This is largest difference between Aspirational Futures and some other futures approaches common in the US.

There are three inter-related phases to the process that IAF normally recommends: 1) System Analysis and Environmental Assessment, 2) Scenario Development, 3) Visioning, and 4) Strategic Analysis.

The System Analysis and Environmental Assessment Phase

In the first phase, the organization becomes more consciously of the systems the organization or its field sit in and more aware of what is happening in its environment. An approach to understanding systems is Causal Layered Analysis, pioneered by Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah, 1998). It involves understanding the litany (conventional, official description, surface level analysis), social causes (deeper systemic, sociopolitical and economic drivers), still deeper worldviews, and finally and deep metaphors or myths that inform the entire process (Inayatullah, 2019).

Once the drivers and key forces are identified the environmental assessment of trends in them are mapped.   This often includes a broad range of political, economic, technological, environmental and social forces. Information is gathered from a variety of sources, such as literature reviews, expert interviews, focus groups and surveys, and site visits. This process helps to clarify the mental model that guides the organization's view of its situation. Given the environmental assessment, alternative forecasts are typically developed that project key forces or important elements in the environment into the future. The time frame typically ranges from 10 years to 50 years depending on the organization and the speed of change in the organization's environment, its core work, and its products and services. Using the Aspirational Futures approach, the alternative forecasts for the drivers parallel the key archetypes: expectable, challenging and visionary that also guide scenario development.

Scenario Development Phase

Assessment of trends and key forces can reduce some uncertainties about the future, but it cannot eliminate them, and it often will highlight just how great the uncertainties really are. To deal responsibly with irreducible uncertainties requires a style of thinking based on **SCENARIOS** that embraces and explores uncertainty instead of repressing it. Scenarios serve three purposes:

1. To bound the range of uncertainty and display the broad range of possibilities ahead.

2. To stimulate the exploration of both dangers to be avoided and positive possibilities that can be used in constructing a vision of the preferred future.

3. To test how potential strategies and actions might work in different future circumstances, to test how "robust" strategies are across multiple scenarios.

Developing scenarios using IAF's Aspirational Futures approach leads to using a set of archetypes that explore expectable, challenging and visionary futures. See Figure 1. The expectable, "best estimate" or "best guess" scenario is based on the best available intelligence, informed by the environmental scan and any core assumptions used by the organization. This scenario is sometimes based on the "official future", the assumptions and forecasts used in current strategic plans, policies and

budgets. While this expectable future begins with conventional expectations it must include expectable (or most likely) disruptions. Given the potentially rapid technology transformations as we approach or experience the "Singularity", this expectable scenario is difficult to develop, but must represent the overall assumptions of what is thought to be most likely.   (This is not predicting "the future", it is developing the best estimate of what is likely. Though the subsequent polling of the likelihood and preferability of the scenarios will indicate how likely the developers and users of the scenarios think this expectable scenario is. See below.)

The second scenario asks, "what could go wrong". Organizations often avoid considering these factors or their implications. For this scenario, a list of major challenges relevant to the organization and its environment should be created. In light of the environmental scan, the most likely future, and other inputs a set of challenges is built into the second scenario. These challenges should not go so far as to remove any ability to act. The scenario should not send the organization "over the cliff"; but it should consider challenging, "bad news" prospects that are moderately likely and relevant. (Though I need to note that Jim Dator in his use of a "Collapse" archetype argues that going "over the cliff", or collapsing, is a plausible future for any organization or community and should be considered. (Bezold, 2009))

The third archetype for the scenarios is "visionary". The "visionary" scenario explores a future where a critical mass of stakeholders successfully pursued visionary strategies, the results or outcomes and the path to those visionary outcomes. Having the organization or the principal uses or the scenario define what visionary means for them is essential. This vision is broader than their vision for the organization alone, but rather the vision for their industry, sector or community. Defining visionary futures allows the organization to explore differing spaces and paths to surprisingly successful futures consistent with their vision.

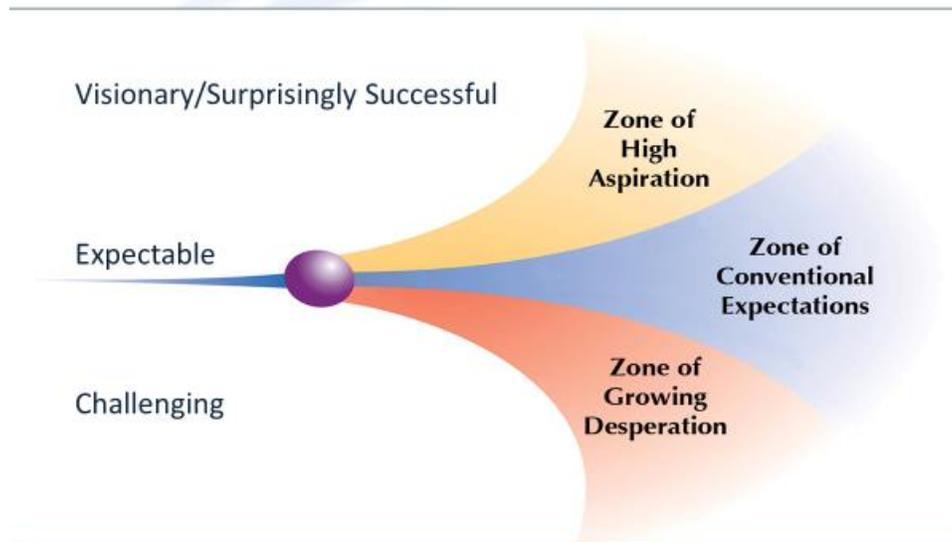Scenario Archetypes in IAF's Aspirational Futures:

Figure 1: Scenario Archetype in IAF's Aspirational Futures

The "visionary" scenario forces organizations to be explicit about what "success" would look like, and the paths to achieve that visionary state. Luke Georghiou and his colleagues at the University of Manchester have developed an approach to "success scenarios" that uses a somewhat similar method for communities to develop images of preferable outcomes for community (Harper & Georghiou, 2005).

Organizations usually don't commit to these visionary scenarios.   They explore visionary space and what is needed to get there. Taking organizations into this visionary space also allows them to consider potential new or revised visions.   The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation case below is an example of using a trip into visionary futures as a stimulus for a new vision.

Four scenarios are usually developed, though three can be effective.   Given the importance of using scenarios to explore visionary futures, typically the fourth scenario considers different visionary outcomes and/or alternative paths or requirements for achieving those visionary outcomes. There are many examples of scenarios developed using this approach, four are given below.

Thus, IAF's Aspirational Futures approach develops plausible scenarios that include visionary or preferable scenarios in the mix. Some scenario approaches call for normative scenarios or images of desired futures. Our visionary scenarios represent an exploration of desired futures that, as noted, ask "what it would look like if visionary outcomes were achieved by a critical mass of stakeholders." And we recommend, as noted, developing two different visionary scenarios that reflect distinct paths to visionary endpoints.

There are other effective approaches to developing scenarios. Some use quantitative models, others simulate the moves of key actors or competitors. In the U.S. the best-known scenario approach, from the Global Business Network (GBN), identifies the most important factor and the most uncertain factor to construct a grid and then uses the grid to position one scenario in each of the four quadrants of the grid. Other key variables are considered in developing each scenario, but the most important and most uncertain variables define and differentiate the scenarios. This is useful and provides a straightforward way to confront uncertainty. Yet reality, both present and future is often not reducible to two main variables. And scenarios should help explore the plausible future space that is likely and preferable. In effect our scenarios differentiate most likely, challenging, and visionary as three "archetypal" pathways.

Aspirational Futures helps to better understand and to better create the future. Effectively creating a better future requires a shared vision and audacious or "stretch" goals, the next phase of Aspirational Futures work.

The Visioning and Audacious Goals Phase

In this phase of work, the organization explores **ASPIRATIONS** and develops a deeply felt **SHARED VISION** of the preferred future. It then sets specific goals associated with that vision.

While trends and scenarios are "futures for the head" that help us think systematically about future possibilities, visions are "futures for the heart." Visions inspire by stating what we are striving to become, why we do what we do, and what higher contribution flows from our efforts. They touch us and move us to action. A living vision–as opposed to merely words on paper–is something that people share, feel deeply about, believe is possible, and commit themselves to achieving. Vision deals with the

ultimate questions facing every individual, group and organization–questions about purpose, meaning, direction, and reasons for existence.

When people are really committed to a vision, they will stretch themselves and their organizations to make it happen. Within organizations, shared vision allows management to decentralize. People can be given more freedom to act independently and creatively when they have a clear sense of direction and know the importance of their 'piece' in the realization of the vision. A shared vision can serve as a focus for collaboration and alignment of efforts by outside organizations.

To be a real force in people's hearts, and not just words on paper, a vision must meet several conditions. A vision must:

- ***Be legitimate*** – A vision can never be imposed on an individual or group. To have emotional power, a vision must be inwardly accepted as fully legitimate.

- ***Be shared*** – A vision only works when it is shared. Vision works by posing a collective challenge, aligning people, and generating a group spirit in which people move toward the vision.

- ***Express people's highest aspirations for what they want to create in the world*** – Self-centered visions that talk about things like 'being successful' or 'making a profit' inevitably lack emotional power. Goals of this type are perfectly valid, but vision needs to go further and engage people at the level of their highest aspirations for 'making a difference.'

- ***Stretch beyond the limits of current realities*** – Visions are not about current reality. They create a tension between current reality and the vision. Visions that command attention always push against the limits of what people have assumed to be possible and challenge them. Challenges that are easy to meet never elicit the best efforts of a group. Our organization uses the vision to create AUDACIOUS OR STRETCH GOALS that are bold enough to make people ask themselves "Is this really possible?" Once the inner answer is "Yes," the vision and stretch goals' very boldness becomes a major source of its power. Because they articulate a daring adventure with important outcomes, stretch goals give people the sense they can make important contributions and surpass what they thought were their personal limits.

- ***Conceivably be achievable within a specific time frame*** – Even though a powerful vision must push at the boundaries of change, the people who share it must in fact believe that they can eventually make it happen. They must be convinced of its 'ultimate possibility, no matter how difficult it may be to achieve.

There is much analysis of the power of vision. Collin and Porras, in their book, Built to Last, gave numerous examples of the power of vision in the corporate sector. They point out that companies with a powerful, shared vision that was felt and owned by their workforce, outperformed the general stock market by a factor of 12 between 1925 and the 1990s (Collins and Porras, 1994).

And it turns out that a powerful shared vision is can be a major factor in successful change management by enabling people throughout the organization to feel they are part of making a larger contribution and being more willing to change. IAF learned this in a roundabout way.

Among our corporate clients, there were several where we worked with them to do scenarios and new or revised visions, and they then proceeded to vision-driven change management. The Gartner

Group did a global survey of multinational companies on what groups did effective change management consulting for multinational companies. Based on this survey, they identified a few large consulting firms and a dozen "boutique firms" globally doing effective change management—and IAF was on that list! We were honored, even though we don't sell "change management" services. We earned a spot on that list for facilitating the development of powerful shared visions that gave people throughout the organization a higher shared purpose and, thus, enabled the organization and its corporate leaders to make the changes needed to achieve the shared vision (Bezold, 2018).

The Strategic Analysis Phase

Once a vision and stretch goals have been articulated, the more "traditional" aspects of a strategic plan, particularly strategies and action plans, are needed to focus efforts on achieving the vision. Vision and strategic analysis are equally important for shaping the future. Without vision, strategy is merely reactive. Without realistic strategies to achieve them, visions are only lofty ideals. Each of the proposed strategies must undergo a detailed analysis to consider internal and external requirements for success, robustness (i.e., useful, robustness in differing scenarios), risk, outcomes and audacity. The organization, in light of its preferred future and the nature of its operations, selects the specific outcomes and evaluation criteria for each strategy.

The Advantages of Aspirational Futures

The Aspirational Futures approach lends itself to the development of strategy. Organizations develop good strategies by using vision and stretch goals to stretch the commitment and capacities of an organization. Good strategies also reflect the assets and capacities of the organization. Aspirational Futures provides a number of advantages to an organization beyond traditional strategic planning.

- Aspirational Futures emphasizes planning "from the future." We essentially ask the organization what world it wishes to create and then systematically develop a plan to create that future.

- Aspirational Futures focuses the organization on its long-term preferred future. Many strategic and organizational plans are for short periods of time, but they often lose their audacious quality, narrowly restrict their options and set too-easily achieved goals.

- Aspirational Futures facilitates an explicit discussion of the organization's vision, values and mission. Most strategic planning processes move quickly to evaluating specific strategies in light of existing mission or organizational imperatives. Aspirational Futures invites participants to explore an organization's "heart" first. This is done to re-introduce participants to the organization's essential characteristics before moving into decision making.

- Aspirational Futures assures that specific goals are driven by the organization's vision, values and guiding principles. Textbook strategic planning typically proposes that goals and measures be established once the final strategies are selected. Aspirational Futures asks the participants to identify audacious goals consistent with their vision, values and principles and then to select specific strategies that will achieve these goals in a manner aligned with the organization's vision, values and principles.

- Aspirational Futures emphasizes that strategic decision-makers should examine a range of

alternative futures before making strategic decisions. Scenarios stretch the strategist's imagination, offer insights into how the organization's environment may evolve and foster unique creative dialogues that can generate new ideas for consideration. All too often, strategic planning processes consider only one future - a future that assumes that tomorrow will be relatively similar to today. This is broadened by multiple scenarios, but some scenarios approaches, such as the GBN approach, fail to explicitly call for consideration of visionary paths.

- Aspirational Futures takes advantage of the dynamics between the external environment and the internal capacities. Most planners ask what an organization can do with its resources and pay relatively little attention to trends that may create new resources. We ask leaders to examine what resources will the future make available. By exploring trends and developing scenarios the planning process helps organizations recognize opportunities and threats that are invisible to traditional planning.

- Aspirational Futures emphasizes stakeholder participation and empowerment. The process should be highly participatory, involving stakeholders including staff, volunteer leaders and experts in a structured dialogue and decision-making process.

Figure 2 describes the relationship between the scanning/scenario work and the vision/preferred future work in Aspirational Futures.
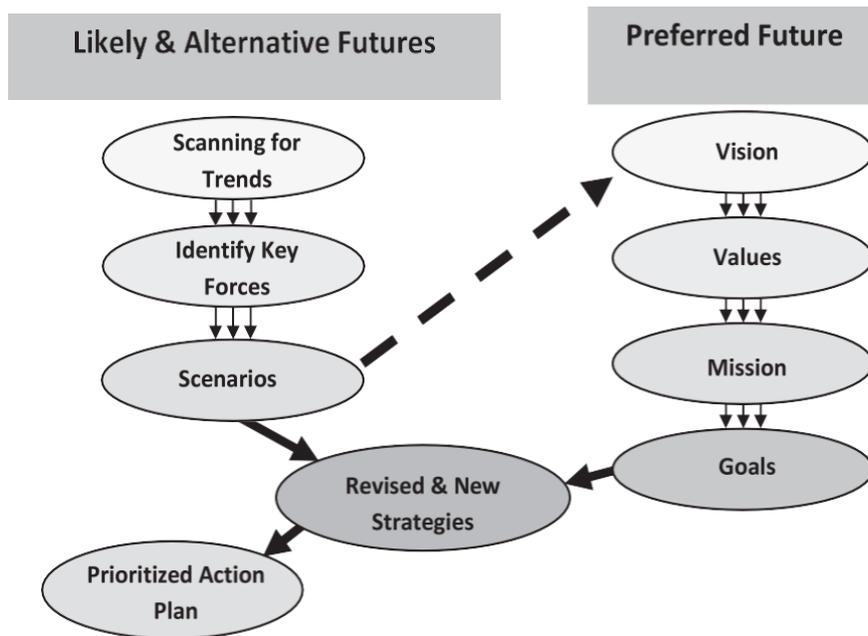

Figure 2 Aspirational Futures process

Examples of Aspirational Futures

The multiple phases of Aspirational Futures have been reviewed above. In some settings that full cycle is deployed. In other settings parts of the process are used, e.g. an environmental scan, or scenarios. In terms of Aspirational Futures, the core question is whether the range of factors in the environmental scan or scenarios includes likely, challenging and visionary developments. Aspirational Futures can be applied to an organization or community, or used to guide specific decisions or policies. Here are some examples:

- **The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC):** ESRC is the UK research funding agency for social science and economics. Faced with the task of setting up centers to study genomics and providing those centers with ten years' worth of funding, the ESRC had scenarios commissioned to consider what the issues, research questions and priorities might be for this emerging genomics area. IAF and the Institute for Innovation Research at the University of Manchester identified a series of 10 drivers that would be important for genomics, its uses, and its societal impacts. Research was done on trends in these factor and forecasts were developed considering likely (alpha), challenging (beta), and visionary (delta) forecasts for each of the 10 key forces. These were built into scenarios (Justman, Bezold & Rowley, 1999) which an expert panel used to explore the future and the genomics and identify issues for ESRC and suggest priorities for funding (Bezold & Miles, 1999b). ESRC at the time felt that the process had uncovered questions of importance they had not considered, and ESRC used the results in formulating their priorities and funding. The forecasts, scenarios and results were published as a special issue of the futures journal, foresight (Bezold & Miles, 1999a).

- **American Cancer Society:** The American Cancer Society (ACS) is the largest health voluntary organization in the US. It is a charity which raises money for cancer prevention, research, treatment and patient support. IAF worked closely with American Cancer Society's (ACS) senior leadership for more than a decade. The first project was a futures effort to consider what ACS should promise as the target for their 100th anniversary (2013). IAF worked with 25 experts who developed forecast papers on the macro-environment, primary and secondary prevention, cancer treatment, and health voluntary organizations. We simultaneously worked with a team of ACS staff and volunteer leaders to develop scenarios using the Aspirational Futures process. The forecasts and scenarios were used at a national ACS meeting to develop audacious goals to achieve their vision for cancer prevention and control. The results were published in an ACS Book, *Horizons 2013: Longer, Better Life Without Cancer* (Brown, Seffrin & Bezold, 1996), and used to develop the ACS 2015 Goals which became the focus for ACS programming for an extended period of time. It also led ACS to start the National Dialogue on Cancer, later named C-Change, to unite the cancer community to pursue a shared agenda.

- **Military Health System 2020:** The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) asked IAF to assist in a major research project designed to help military and civilian health care experts to envision the future of health and health care delivery. We assisted in developing scenarios that explore the future of war and global society and the nature of both warzone medicine and day-to-day health care for active duty personnel, dependents and retirees. We facilitated and coached the interactions within and between 20 online working groups with approximately 200 expert participants as they analyzed trends and forecast potential developments in their defined specialties and disciplines

within the health care system. A set of scenarios was developed, then the group developed a vision and audacious goals. One of these goals – to extend the "golden hour" (the average time a soldier wounded in combat needs to get treatment before dying) to six hours. This goal was largely accomplished in the ensuring years.

- **AARP:** AARP is a 40 million member organization that provides services to and advocacy for those over 50 in the U.S. It is the largest membership organization in the U.S. IAF has worked with AARP on numerous occasions to help them better understand and shape the future including developing 50 year scenarios for aging, and provided scenario training for AARP executives. In 2007, IAF provided a futurist's view of the next decade in relation to AARP's Livable Communities strategy and related research and assumptions. This provided the sense of key forces and future directions and our critique of AARP's strategy in the context of those trends and forecasts and the AARP vision. This led to the realization that their strategies had to consider a longer length of time and to be broader than their original objectives (this effort is described Fiddler 2011). In 2008, IAF developed scenarios of health care in the US using the Aspirational Futures process. The project included working with AARP executives to understand their sense of the future, using IAF's forecasts for health care, and interviewing key thought leaders in the U.S. AARP is a leader in the US in encouraging universal access to health care and lobbying for a range of related health care policies. AARP came away from the exercise better aware of a broader range of economic recovery end points for the US economy (2 to 10 years), and the need to advocate for considering "health in all policies" as transportation, housing and other policies. This includes the realization, identified in some of the scenarios, the U.S. might be ready, faster than expected before, to support progressive policies in health.

- **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation:** The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is the largest health philanthropy in the U.S., providing about $500 million annually in grants to promote health and increase health care quality and access. RWJF funded several IAF projects, including explorations of how emerging health technology could promote health equity; Vulnerability 2030 (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2011), scenarios on social and economic security; and Public Health 2030 (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2014). In 2012, as part of their 40th Anniversary celebrations RWJF asked IAF to hold a scenario symposium. The event was well received and provided the Foundation with the direction for their vision that was being revised at the time. Typical of our Aspirational Futures approach to developing scenarios, the first scenario was expectable or "most likely", the second explored a range of challenges, while the third and fourth explored paths to visionary outcomes. The fourth scenario "A Culture of Health", envisioned communities creating environments to support and improve all domains of health, including the social, economic, and environmental determinants of health. At the September 2012 Symposium participants explored the scenarios, considered implications and developed broad recommendations (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2012). RWJF reflected on the process, on the "visionary space" explored in the fourth scenario, and the recommendations. In 2014, they announced a vision of working with others to build a "culture of health" that gives everyone in America an equal opportunity to live the healthiest life they can. That commitment led them to define the social components of a culture of health; to develop metrics for measuring a culture of health; and focus their programs and grants more directly on community and leadership development.

Conclusion

Aspirational Futures calls for a richer consideration of the future – aware of our mental model of key forces and of their likely trajectories; and scenarios that include the expectable, challenging and visionary pathways. These enable being smarter about the future. The development of shared vision growing out of the values of the organization or community, linked to audacious goals and strategies enables wiser and more effective creation of the future. Not all the steps in Aspirational Futures need to be taken, as long as the aspirations are made clear and the future considered in relation to them.

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