# Futures Literacy

**Future** is what we will go through later. It is generally assumed that futures are always multiple (for example, something may happen or not – hence, there are at least two options), and this is why professionals usually discuss many future**s**, not 'the future' (as if one future would be certain).

*Futures literacy* is a skill to explore long term futures. For example, 5-30 years ahead or longer. Like skills in any other field, futures literacy can be learnt, trained and improved.



Futurists distinguish *possible*, *probable*, and *preferable* futures. Such distinction reflects some common questions: what futures can (cannot) happen? What futures are more (less) likely to happen? What do we (not) want to happen and how can we improve the probability of desirable futures (or decrease the probability of undesirable ones)?

**What to know**

There would be no need to explore futures if nothing would ever change. The idea that reality is changing all the time is central for futures literacy. Accordingly, it is helpful to know

– How changes can unfold (fast, slow, following some patterns or not, if they stay long, disappear quickly or transform into something else),

– How they are interrelated with each other (e.g. linearly or not, directly or indirectly, separately or via combinations with other factors; smaller changes can lead to bigger ones and vice-versa, quantitative to qualitativ e, changes in the actor to changes in their activities and corresponding fields etc), and



– How they can be anticipated (e.g. by signs, using logical and intuitive methods).
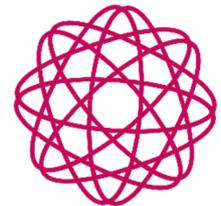
Such knowledge is never limited to one field only, because every object is a part of many systems and broader contexts, it exists in many dimensions, and each and every aspect can play a role in the object's futures.

**What to keep in mind**

There are so many factors that can influence futures that finding and describing general 'laws' of long-term futures seems extremely difficult. Yet there are some proposals, for example, three premises by Ray Amara (1981):



**1) The future cannot be predicted.**

**2) The future is not pre-determined.**

**3) The future can be influenced.**

In my opinion, it follows from the third premise that, for *long-term* futures:

**4) The future is often what we want.**

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If someone wants to arrive from A to B, the probability to reach B *in the short term* may not be very high. If time is increased, the probability to reach B in that time also grows. If time is long enough, the probability of reaching B can near 100% (but never becomes 100%, see the first two premises).

The same applies to other futures of live actors, especially more intelligent actors like humans. If someone (an individual, network, firm, nation…) pursues a goal long enough, they are likely to reach it one day. It is difficult to find a dream that humans have not realized yet or that is not being realized: flying in the air and in space, video conversations, curing dangerous diseases, controlling things remotely…

**What to do**

The fourth premise ("The future is often what we want.") has some practical implications:

To anticipate probable futures, find out ***what people truly want*** and/or what they are likely to want later. (Even if it seems unattainable or unlikely now – remember flying.)

*People* here include *all those whose future it can be*. If it is a future of one person, then only desires of that person matter, but if it is a future of a community, then the desires of all the people belonging to that community.

*This may sound counterintuitive for non-free societies, in which a few decide for all. Yet the role of authoritative leaders, dictators is typically weakening in the long term because it is difficult to maintain coercive pressure all the time. As everything is changing, the amount of the resources available to everyone, including dictators, does change too, and they can no longer continue business as usual. Everyone gets possibilities to alter status quo from time to time, regain freedom and control over their lives, and act again in line with their own desires. For instance, access to knowledge and new technologies has been playing an important role in empowering of individuals and their liberation.*

It needs to be emphasized that *true* desires matter most. Sometimes people say one thing but want (and do) a different thing. Social conventions, fashion, insufficient self-understanding, and other factors may prevent from telling the true aims. To discover them, one may need to observe actions of people and take their context into account.

Desires can change, too, like everything else does. One may use reason to deduce probable future changes in desires. A typical (but not universal) evolution of desires (also called *needs*, *values* etc): *survival – development – self-limitation* (voluntary return to a simpler state).

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**Survival** desires (needs) include, for example, physiological needs and need for safety.

**Developmental** needs are, for example, need for love and belonging, aesthetic pleasure, recognition, self-actualization and self-transcendence.

**Self-limitation** need displays itself through voluntary limitation of one's activities e.g. in order to minimize potential undesirable consequences for oneself and others. When a person has achieved certain power (e.g. control over resources, level of efficiency), they also have more possibilities to cause (unintended) damage, also to themselves.

A good example is a risk of obesity: if people want to stay healthy, it makes sense to limit the intake of food, even if they can afford themselves buying it. By limiting themselves, people voluntarily return to a similar behaviour as if they would not be so powerful. Other contemporary examples: downshifting; minimalist, modest lifestyle; changing a career from more challenging to a simpler, but more satisfying; corporations limiting their pollution; monopolies limiting their prices; disarmament etc.

*One way to influence the long-term futures is to* **influence human desires**. Since the influence must display itself in the long term, such influence must be powerful enough, resistant to 'corrosion', so to speak. Since truth is typically more resistant in the long term than lies, telling the truth (educating, enlightening) seems to be a more reliable way to influence long-term desires: if people feel that something is true, they themselves align their behaviour with it.

**What to be**

These four premises altogether give some reasons to **be active** in shaping one's own futures. A futures-literate person sees their futures as always open, changing, never doomed. Such a person knows (s)he influences their own futures, always. (S)he also knows that myriads other factors influence the futures and, even if (s)he does nothing, the reality is going to change, for better or worse. A futures-literate person also knows that, after a change, another change may follow and alter the value of the first one. It is, therefore, wise to remain broad-minded and open to learning at all times.
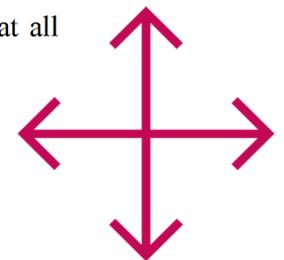
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