

Canzler, Weert

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Futures studies and futures shaping: strategies for cooperation between futures studies and politics in the Federal Republic of Germany and other countries

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Suggested Citation: Canzler, Weert (1991) : Futures studies and futures shaping: strategies for cooperation between futures studies and politics in the Federal Republic of Germany and other countries, In: Peter Moll, Klaus Burmeister (Ed.): Recent futures studies in the Federal Republic of Germany: contribution of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Europe 2005 project, headed by the FAST group of the EEC, ISBN 3-928635-00-x, Sekretariat für Zukunftsforschung, Gelsenkirchen, pp. 39-43

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/112547>

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Futures Studies and Futures Shaping - Strategies for cooperation between futures studies and politics in the Federal Republic of Germany and other countries (Zukunftsforschung und Zukunftsgestaltung - Strategien für die Kooperation von Zukunftsforschung und Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und einigen ausgewählten Ländern), unpublished paper edited by Burmeister, Canzler, Dunkelmann and Kreibich, Berlin 1989

Weert Canzler

Abstract

The study "Futures Studies and Futures Shaping - Requirements and state of play - Strategies for cooperation between futures studies and politics in the Federal Republic of Germany and other countries", (Zukunftsforschung und Zukunftsgestaltung - Strategien für die Kooperation von Zukunftsforschung und Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland") with the shorter title of "Futures studies and politics" was carried out by the Institute for Futures Studies and Technological Assessment (Institut für Zukunftsstudien und Technologiebewertung (IZT) on behalf of the Minister for Urban Development, Housing and Transport of North Rhine-Westfalia.

The aim of the study was to take stock of the situation with regard to futures studies in the Federal Republic and to pinpoint possible topics for practice-oriented research in that country. The main finding of the study, which consisted largely in a review of periodicals and other literature, and a survey of experts, is quite clear: the situation as regards futures studies in the Federal Republic of Germany leaves much to be desired, especially when compared with other countries.

The study therefore recommends that action be taken to promote the setting-up of an independent institute for futures studies in the Federal Republic.

Examination of the interviews with experts revealed a whole range of possible topics for futures studies and planning with the emphasis on global issues such as environment, technological development and planning, and issues relating to the social and political control and innovation capacity of complex societies.

In overall terms, Europe and European unity are not priority topics in futures studies. However, Europe will have an important role to play in determining the future shape of North-South relations.

I Introduction and methods

Background and aims

The study was carried out by the Institute for Futures Studies and Technological Assessment (IZT), under the responsibility of Rolf Kreibich, on behalf of the Minister for Urban Development, Housing and Transport of North Rhine-Westfalia.

The aim of the project was to take stock of the situation with regard to futures studies by institutions in the Federal Republic, and to identify topics for policy-oriented research. For the purposes of comparison separate reports were compiled on the situation in Switzerland, Sweden and France.

Finally, it was planned to draw up a systematic list of institutions involved in this field, in the form of a futures studies data base.

The study was carried out between 1 January 1988 and 1 April 1989. It is currently being revised and is due to be published in the autumn 1990.

One of the study's most important findings is its substantiated recommendation that futures studies in the Federal Republic be given institutional backing.

The support provided for the integrated project on futures studies by the North Rhine-Westfalia government, and the consequent establishment of the Secretariat for Futures Studies (SFZ) in Gelsenkirchen in April 1990 saw the creation of an institution specifically devoted to futures studies. It is the declared aim of the North Rhine-Westfalia government to "promote futures studies in North Rhine-Westfalia, contribute to the development of its scientific infrastructure, step up State input by means of scientific consultation, and prepare appropriate and forward-looking proposals for economic and ecological regeneration in the region.

Mandate and composition of the team

The study team consisted of four members of the IZT's scientific staff. At the time the study was carried out, the IZT was the only research institute in the Federal Republic dealing specifically with futures studies.

Methods employed

In addition to the study of periodicals and other publications, 27 experts from various scientific disciplines were asked detailed questions, as part of a structured interview, on the following four topics:

1. Futures studies in the Federal Republic of Germany
2. Topics and methods
3. Futures studies in an international context
4. The outlook for futures studies

II Contents

On the basis of a short history of futures studies in the Federal Republic and an assessment of the current institutional set-up, the situation appears to leave a great deal to be desired. This conclusion, which is the main finding of the study "Futures studies and politics" is confirmed by comparison with other countries and by the 27 interviews with experts. The experts interviewed included: Harmut E. Arras, Meinholf Dierkes, Ossip K. Flechtheim, Rolf Hohmann, Joseph Huber, Martin Jänicke, Robert Jungk, Christian Lutz and Otto Ullrich.

The answers given by the experts concerning establishments and events related to futures studies and forward-looking policy consultation in the Federal Republic produced few names apart from IZT, the institute for Ecological Economic Research (IÖW) and the various futures studies workshops. These included one-off events organized by the Protestant academies, the series of events entitled "Futures Forum" organized by the Nordrhein Westfalen Ministry for Urban Development, Housing and Transport, and the "Futures Congress" organized by the steel workers' trade union, Industriegewerkschaft Metall.

Some of the interviewees pointed to futures studies being carried out by large companies. However, the emphasis in these firms tends to be on research into future market trends. Most of the experts stressed the need in the Federal Republic for policy-oriented futures studies within an institutional framework: "The clear agreement among the experts on the current situation with regards to futures studies was echoed in their assessment of the need for future-oriented knowledge in the political, economic and social spheres." (133)

The experts considered the most important topics for futures studies to be the global issues: "The global issues range from population trends, safeguarding peace and the removal of the North-South divide, to the demise of traditional patterns of behaviour and the resulting, far-reaching, cultural identity crisis." (135)

Most of the experts pointed to environmental issues as the most important topics for research at the present time. Problems such as the threat of climatic disaster, the contamination of man and nature through pollution, and the issues of waste and waste disposal and water pollution, all of which put species in danger, feature on the list of ecological priorities by virtue of their sheer scale. In the context of the ecological threat, some experts felt that the emphasis must be placed on "devising and implementing a worldwide strategy to solve ecological problems, which pose a threat to humanity" (135). This required a "global management" approach.

Second only to a comprehensive assessment of the possible consequences of technologies, the problems surrounding political control and innovation capacity in complex societies, and the social and cultural effects of the changes in the social structure, continue to be identified as central themes in action-oriented futures studies.

The close link between futures studies and planning is also apparent in another area singled out for attention by the experts, namely social innovation and new, experimental living and working models.

All the experts agreed that the topics chosen "can only be treated satisfactorily if various disciplines are involved and the implications in terms of laying down rules are discussed." (136) Interdisciplinary cooperation, then, is one of the most important factors in futures studies.

There are sharp divergences of opinion as regards the methods to be used: "Of the qualitative methods, the scenario technique has the most numerous and most vocal supporters. Several of those interviewed singled this out as the most important research and planning technique, owing to its ability to stimulate creativity and innovation. However, the use of combined methods- in particular a successful mix of qualitative and quantitative methods- was popular with many of those questioned. "There was little agreement, on the other hand, with regard to the use of world models and the form and significance of a participative approach of futures studies. For instance, the GLOBUS world model is praised by some as highly-refined instrument to assist decision-making, while others above all miss the ability of the model based on data to take discontinuous trends into account. There is also a basic conflict as regards the question of a participative approach of futures studies. While some stress the importance of participation as a factor in policy and rule-making, others see it as something which has no place in science.

One of the main conclusions of the study was that action must be taken to promote the development and consolidation of futures studies methods. The very fact that futures studies adopt a general, multi-disciplinary approach is seen as "an opportunity to devise a uniform planning concept." (138)

The shortcomings of futures studies in the Federal Republic are especially apparent when a comparison is made with other countries. A number of international institutions are mentioned several times, such as the Akademie für Zukunftsfragen in Vienna, the Gottlieb-Duttweiler-Institut in Rüslikon, the Association Internationale Futuribles in Paris and the Washington based Office of Technology Assessment. In addition there is considerable activity at State and private level in Switzerland, Finland, Holland and Japan. Some of the experts even see a connection between the status of futures studies in certain countries and their political and economic success: "The Scandinavian countries - in particular Sweden - as well as Japan and Switzerland, are acknowledged to be among the most economically successful and politically innovative countries in the world. Several of the experts stress the position of these countries in the forefront of progress, particularly in the spheres of environment and education.

As regards the outlook for futures studies, experts would like to see more networking between the different disciplines and research institutes. Most of those interviewed came out strongly in favour of the establishment of a futures studies institute in the Federal Republic. "However, the consensus is that greater account must be taken of recent experience, in particular abroad. This has shown that the independence of the futures studies establish-

ment must be guaranteed and its staff must have a practical approach and come from a variety of backgrounds". (139)

III Outlook

Implications for Europe

The prospect of European union and the accompanying economic and social dynamism anticipated by most of the experts are a significant factor in the increasing need for knowledge and scenarios for the future. According to the results of the study, European union is not a priority topic for its own right. This may change, however, as a result of the rapid pace of events in Eastern Europe since 1989, and in particular as a result of German unification. The idea of a common European home is viewed very much as a long-term prospect. It involves a whole range of political, economic and cultural aspects and will lend further impetus to the process of change in Europe.

There is clearly a growing need for greater networking between futures studies institutions and scientists.

However, the international dimension of futures studies is not confined to Europe, but must be seen in a global context. Europe, and in particular a united Europe, will, however, be an important factor in the difficult relationship between the prosperous North and the poor South.