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Futures Studies in Egypt

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I. On the nature of and need for futures studies

Futures studies, or long-range perspective studies, are an indispensable source of help for sound planning and decision making in today's chaotic, complex and rapidly changing world. The accelerating pace of change, together with a multitude of accompanying uncertainties, make it all the more important to expand our time perspectives so as to include the future, i.e. **to futurize our thinking**.

Whatever we do today will have an impact on our lives and the lives of our children tomorrow. If we want to take advantage of the fact that we shape our future by whatever we do at present, so as to increase the probability that such future will be agreeable, it becomes critically important to **take the future into account** in the decisions made today. This means that decisions should be made with **adequate foresight** of the probable consequences of current actions and events, of the likely outcomes which may emerge from significant trends and countrends, and of anticipated changes in the technological, ecological, economic and political aspects of our world.

Incorporating the future in current planning and decision making processes is beneficial in many ways. New avenues may be opened for advancing towards our long-term goals, and early warnings may be issued of future problems which may obstruct or slow down such advance. People and leaders are also empowered to rediscover their resources and energies when they take a long-range and holistic view of the world. More importantly, taking the future into account enable people not only to prepare for the future by adapting to what might happen, but also to control their future and to make it better than it would otherwise be had they ignored the future, or just waited passively for it.

It is undoubtedly true that the theoretical apparatus and empirical research tools of futures or long-range perspective studies originated in

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the developed countries, and it is there where such studies are rapidly spreading. This however, does not mean that developing countries do not need long-range prospective studies. In reality, given the development challenges facing these countries, they stand to benefit a good deal from engaging in futures studies. This is so for at least two reasons:

One is **the nature of the development process** itself, namely its essentially long-term dimensions. Development does not take place overnight; it involves time-taking institutional and structural change, and therefore could not be tackled by short-term measures. In fact, the development march suffered greatly from the lack of long-range perspectives for development decisions. Such practice tended to compound problems and intensify development constraints. In contrast, the long view to development, thanks to futures research, tends to ease development constraints and enlarge the range of development possibilities and capabilities.

The second reason stems from the unequal power structure of the world, and **the greater means available to the big powers to influence the directions of change in the weaker developing countries.** The risks of being subjected to this are greater for developing countries which occupy an outstanding political or strategic position in their region or in the world at large. Unless such countries (of which Egypt is a good example) takes the initiative to create its own future, i.e. to shape it according to the interests of their people, external power will carry out this task for them. But the future image of the country will be determined in the latter case by the interests of the external powers in question. As is well known, the big powers compete to re-shape the future of the middle east and north Africa and they are eager to incorporate the Arab countries in Middle-Eastern or Mediterranean "cooperation" or "partnership" schemes. An indigenous futuristic study performed from the standpoint of Arab countries is necessary for envisaging their future image with or without such schemes, and for guiding their decisions as to the development path that best serves their security, economic interests and cultural identity.

One further advantage of futures research should be underlined, namely that **a futures study of a society permits it to know itself better**, enable it to profoundly understand its history and its present and to deduce lessons which may help it to articulate its future in a more meaningful way. Studying the future, which essentially involves studying the past and the present, could contribute to our understanding of the evolution of social systems, and thereby provide a solid knowledge base for theorizing about dynamics of change and development dialectics. Furthermore, a study of a nation's future is a superb intellectual exercise

of enlightenment through which the nation can rediscover its capabilities and potentialities, restore self-confidence, and sharpen its sense of purpose. A thorough futuristic study could also be an excellent tool for mobilizing a nation's efforts and energies for winning the war against underdevelopment.

The mobilization force of futuristic studies will, however, be greater, the broader is the scope allowed for **people's participation** in developing such studies i.e. in imaging and designing the future. Indeed, much of the success of futuristic studies is predicated on its success in engaging intellectuals, scientists, policy makers, the media and the public at large in lively debates about future possibilities, opportunities and risks, and how best to deal with them.

It should be noted that in spite of our emphasis on the normative dimension of futures studies (viz, helping to create a better future and empowering people to control their future), the latter should not be confused with the making of development strategies and the designing of development plans. To be sure, neither strategy making nor planning can dispense with a certain amount of futures research. However, while strategies and plans center around specific objectives and targets which they seek ways and means of how best to achieve them, a futures study is not tied to objectives or targets of this sort.

Rather, the main task of a futures study is to explore alternative possibilities of the future in the present, discover hidden potentialities, anticipate risks and constraints along alternative future paths, and forecast the probable consequences of present actions and events. **The future is therefore studied in terms of alternatives, i.e. alternative paths or scenarios.** This course is necessitated by the fact that the future is far from certain, and is fraught with many uncertainties and risks. In these circumstances, we could not deal with a single future path or scenario, because **we are faced with a variety of futures, i.e. alternative futures - not a single or unique future.** By examining alternative futures (even a limited number of conceivable futures), futures studies help us to demystify the future, provide a knowledge base for making informed choices, and-consequently-increase our control of the future.

II. A brief history of long-range futures studies in Egypt.

Though elements of future studies can be traced back to the late 1950s and the 1960s-mostly in association with planning activities, or sectoral studies-somewhat comprehensive and large scale futures studies date back to the mid 1970s. Three studies of this nature are worth mentioning.

The first study, which was carried out in the 1975-77 period, explored the consequences of alternative development strategies using a multi-sectoral macro-economic simulation model⁽¹⁾. The study paid great attention to modelling the agricultural sector and allowed for economic demographic interactions. The future horizon was, however, rather limited, namely 10-years from 1975 to 1985, and the choice of development alternatives was rather conventional: agriculture-oriented and industry-oriented strategies were discussed, in addition to a business - as usual strategy.

The second study was written by Prof. Ismail Sabri Abdalla in the fall of 1977, within the framework of the OECD's interfutures project. This study articulated three scenario for Egypt, namely undoing the revolution or the Turkish scenario, freezing the revolution or the Mexican scenario, and continuing the revolution or the self-reliance-basic needs-oriented scenario.⁽²⁾

The third study was performed during the 1980-1982 period. It focussed on population and development issues and interactions, and sought to highlight the positive and negative consequences of alternative development policies. It developed a simulation model for testing alternative policies. However, financial difficulties led to the substitution the an already-built model by qualitative analysis supported by partial or subjective quantitative estimates. The scope of the study was very broad, encompassing past and current trends, global and regional changes, education, housing technology, social values, in addition, of course, to economic, labour, and demographic issues. The development alternatives or scenarios discussed were rather broad, namely open-door policy, rationalized or constrained open-door policy, and independent or self-reliant development.⁽³⁾

In addition to these three studies, special reference should be made to the set of activities performed by a group led by the late Professor Ibrahim Helmi Abdel-Rahman, namely the **Egypt 2000 group**. This group consisted of a core group of Egyptian researchers and intellectual who were concerned about Egypt's future. They engaged in debates,

(1) I.H.El-Issawy and A.N. El-Shafei, **SMEE I: A simulation Model of the Egyptian Economy with special Emphasis on Economic-Demographic Interactions**, INP memo. No. 1211 (external), Dec. 1977.

(2) Ismail-Sabri Abdalla, "Development of Egypt - Two Experiences and Three Scenarios", **L'Egypte contemporaine**, nos 435/6, Jan/April 1994.

(3) **See the Project's final report:**
I.H. El-Issawy (Principal Investigator), **Population and Development in Alternative Egyptian Futures**, Population and Family Planning Board, Cairo, Dec., 1982. In addition to this publication, the project issued 14 working papers written by a distinguished group of researchers. The project is well know as: EDCAS 2000 (exploring the demographic consequences of alternative development strategies for Egypt up to the year 2000).

prepared papers and asked others to write papers on issues with a significant bearing on the future and studied futures studies published in the west. They also sought to delineate the critical factors governing Egypt's future and to formulate, intuitively, future images for Egypt. The Egypt 2000 group was active during 1978 and 1979.⁽⁴⁾

To conclude this brief account of futuristic studies, it should also be noted that the future of Egypt was studied within the framework of a number of regional futures research projects and activities in the 1974/75 - 1985/86 period. These include a study of the Arab World in the year 2000⁽⁵⁾, the activities of the Long-Range Planning for the Arab Countries group led by Prof. Ibrahim Helmi Abdel-Rahman in the early 1970s (at the Institute of National Planning, Cairo), and three outstanding large-scale futures studies, namely:

- (a) The Arab Alternative Futures (AAF) study which was sponsored by the United Nations University and carried out by the Third World Forum - Middle East office in Cairo during the 1980 - 1985 period.⁽⁶⁾
- (b) The project: Exploring the Future of the Arab Homeland, carried out by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut during the period 1985 - 1988.⁽⁷⁾
- (c) The Interdependence project sponsored by EINI and OAPEC in the early 1980.⁽⁸⁾

Though the wave of futures studies in both Egypt and the Arab world subsided since the mid or late 1980s, it should be noted that concern over futuristic issues did not disappear. Many scholars, researchers, intellectuals, and journalists contributed important writings, raising critical issues and discussing important challenges and opportunities. Such activities, however, could not substitute for large - scale, comprehensive, and integrated futures studies.

(4) Unfortunately most of the work of the Egypt 2000 group was not materialized in published paper, articles or books. An example of the work of this group could be consulted however, in the paper written by Ali Nassar: **A Debate on Egypt and the challenges of the 21st century**, Issues of planning and development series, no. 10, INP, Cairo, 1980 (in Arabic)

(5) A. Zahlan, **The Arab world in the year 2000**, Beirut 1975.

(6) For a brief review of the AAF project see: Ibrahim Saadeldin Abdallah, "Arab Alternative futures: Main Features, Implicit Assumptions and Basic conclusions, **Arab Economic Journal**, Autumn 1993.

(7) A brief review of this project can be found in:
I.H. El-Issawy, "Exploring the future of the Arab Nation", **Arab Economic Journal**, Autumn, 1992

(8) See the project final report: OAPEC and EINI, **The Interdependence Project - General Report**, Dec. 1985.

III. The Egypt 2020 Futures Research Project⁽⁷⁾

The Third World Forum (TWF) Middle East Office in Cairo has embarked on a futures research project, namely *Egypt 2020*. Officially the project, which is expected to be carried out in three years, started in January 1998. In practice, however, intensive work began informally in September 1997, following several preparatory activities which lasted for nearly two years.

Objectives

Project *Egypt 2020* aims at improving national decision making capabilities and creating an intellectual climate that would be conducive to innovative solutions to Egypt's problems. These aims would be achieved by incorporating a futuristic perspective into the overall decision making process, as well as into people's perceptions of the challenges confronting Egypt in the coming two decades.

The project seeks to enhance decision makers' and people's awareness of future opportunities and risks and to enable them to participate in the making of a better future for Egypt by constructing a number of alternative scenarios. In other words, using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative techniques, alternative images of Egypt's future in the year 2020 will be specified, together with the possible paths which may lead to these future images. Furthermore, the project will estimate the social costs and benefits of each scenario, so that rational comparisons could be made among alternative future options.

The scenario analyses, together with the in-depth investigations of current conditions and the thorough exploration of future trends and potentialities which precede the process of scenario construction, are expected to contribute in a significant way to the formulation of a new approach for managing Egypt's societal affairs, and for planning its future.

As indicated in section 1, future studies have become an essential prerequisite for planning social, economic and technological progress. Although Egypt pioneered such studies in the Arab world in the 1970s, genuine futures research disappeared from Egypt's agenda in the 1980s and most of 1990s. Given the dramatic changes in the regional and global scenes, and the accelerating pace of scientific and technological

(7) See the following project documents:

- a) *Egypt 2020 - A Research Project* (Nov. 1997-in Arabic)
- b) *Egypt 2020 - A Research Project* (in English)
- c) *Egypt 2020 - A Brief Presentation* (in Arabic)
- d) *Egypt 2020 - A Futures Research Project* (May 1998 - in English)
- e) *Egypt 2020 - A Brief Exposition of project studies*, (Jan 1998 - in Arabic)

change during the last 20 years, it is a matter of urgency that Egypt resumes its interest in futures research. The latter will help update and strengthen the knowledge base of Egypt's planning and policy making activities, and clarify the options available for a better tomorrow, on the basis of large-scale mobilization of Egypt's scientific community, and massive involvement of all social forces in the futuring process.

Research Networking

The TWF took the initiative for reviving interest in futures research of Egypt's problems and prospects, and for converting such interest into a well designed and carefully planned research project, namely project *Egypt 2020*. But, given the huge magnitude of the project which was dictated by the desire to be as comprehensive and as multidisciplinary as possible, proper implementation of the project takes place through a research network of institutions, groups of research workers and - exceptionally - individual researchers. Contacts have already been made with 16 research centres without teaching load as well as some university centres. International cooperation is extended mainly through the Internet, together with conventional means of communication.

Methodology

Our study of the alternative Egyptian futures up till the year 2020 starts with an analytical reading of the past and the present to detect the predominant general trends that will probably prevail in the future, as well as the counter trends and their probable paths. Research covers different aspects that will help reveal the trends of development in Egyptian society during the period 1970 - 1995.

Twelve subject-areas were chosen for in-depth studies, with the object of identifying the objective trends of evolution of economic social and political phenomena, highlighting the most important problems, obstacles and hazards, identifying opportunities for rapid development, and determining future options and prospects. The subject - areas selected include:

1. Environment and Population
2. Food and Agriculture
3. Industrialization and Manufactures
4. Housing and Human Settlements
5. Transport and Communications
6. Education and Scientific and Technological Research
7. Financial Sector
8. Foreign Transactions
9. Governance

10. Culture and Media

11. Society

12. Regional Integration and the Global Context.

Among the distinctive characteristics of the methodology of project Egypt 2020, the following are worth emphasizing:

1. Intellectual openness and absence of preconceived ideas or ideological bias. This is guaranteed through enabling the largest number of researchers (who belong to different disciplines and schools of thought) to participate in the project's studies, seminars and other activities, and by refraining from advocating a certain ideology or a particular future image for Egypt. *After 21 months of intensive work, the project has engaged 275 researchers in 38 research sub-projects, and enabled 350 scholars, intellectuals and journalists to participate in 10 seminars.*
2. Establishing links with social action, and avoiding being a closed academic enterprise. The project seeks to interact with elites and ordinary citizens, policy makers and politicians, social and political activists, by registering their perceptions and future visions and inviting their reactions to the scenarios articulated by the project's Central Team. This is achieved by various means, including face to face interviews, field investigations and surveys, workshops and seminars, etc.
3. A holistic approach is adopted which allows for encompassing social, economic, political, technological, environmental and other issues in an integrative systems-analysis framework.
4. Complexity. The project's methodology avoids simplistic abstractions, recognizes the need for considering behavioural details, interactions of non-linear, chaotic and dynamic types, and emphasizes interdisciplinary.
5. Simulation. In recognition of the inadequacy of available economic and social theories, simulation is a practical tool for providing a better representation of social reality, and for theorizing about the behavior of economic and social systems.
6. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative techniques suffer from many shortcomings and are not suited to unmeasurable phenomena. Qualitative, intuitive methods, may be lacking in consistency and precision. A mix of both, with the assistance of a user-interface framework (machine-man interaction), is likely to produce superior results, than otherwise obtained by either quantitative or qualitative methods alone.

Scenairos

Initially, four scenarios were envisaged, including:

- a) a reference/trend/business-as-usual scenario,
- b) a popular/social compromise/middle-of-the road scenario,
- c) an intermediate scenario, i.e. a more consistent version of the popular scenario.
- d) a creative scenario, i.e. involving substantial changes in social structures and values, and drastic re-distribution of political power and wealth, so as to pave the way for innovative development policies.

Following lengthy and in-depth discussions in the project's Central Team, it was decided to relate scenarios to different socio-political forces or ruling elites. This led to the articulation of five scenarios, namely:

- a) a reference / trend / business-as-usual scenario,
- b) a neo-capitalists scenario,
- c) a neo-socialist scenario,
- d) an islamic state scenario,
- e) a popular/social consensus/social solidarity scenario.

The broad features of these scenarios are described in issue no. 2 of the **Egypt 2020 paper** series (*Starting points of alternative Paths to the year 2020 - initial conditions of the principal scenarios of project Egypt 2020* - Dec. 1998). Further consideration of the theoretical and methodological underpinning of the scenarios, as well as discussion of their key features, led to a complementary document, namely issues no. 4 of the **Egypt 2020 papers** series (*The Theoretical and Methodological foundations for Egypt 2020 Scenarios*).

Project objectives will be attained through a variety of activities including preparation of research reports, case-studies, workshops seminars and conferences in which academics, practitioners, policy makers, politicians, social and political thinkers, media people, etc. would participate. The results of these activities will then be published and widely distributed to stimulate as much public discussion as possible about Egypt's future.

Organizational Aspects

The project is led by an *executive committee* composed of:

- (a) Coordinator: **Dr. Ismail-Sabri Abdalla**, Chairman of the Third World Forum, and former Minister of Planning.

- (b) Associate Coordinator: **Dr. Ibrahim Saad El-Din Abdalla**, Director of the Third World Forum - Middle East Office, and former UN Project Director of the Arab Planning Institute.
- (c) Principal Investigator: **Dr. Ibrahim H. El-Issawy**, Professor of Economics, Institute of National Planning, and former Deputy Director of the Arab Planning Institute.

Project activities are planned, organized, and monitored by a *core group* of distinguished scholars, which is headed by the project's principal investigator. The core group (*the Central Team*) consists of **Prof. Ali Nassar** (Planning Techniques Center, Institute of National Planning), **Prof. Abdel Baset Abd El Moati** (Dept. of Sociology - Girls College, Ain Shams University), **Prof. Fayez Mourad Mina** (Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University), **Prof. Mohamed Reda Moharram** (Dept. of Mining and Petroleum - Faculty of Engineering, Al-Azhar University) and **Prof. Mostafa Olwi** (Dept. of Political Science, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University).

Clearly, the core group combines a variety of expertise, and allows for multidisciplinary (economics, planning, future studies, development, education, sociology, engineering, and political science). The continuous discussions among members of the Central Team, and their interaction with the scholars from different disciplines who carry out project studies ensure a good measure of interdisciplinary.

The project has a **Computing and Modelling Unit (CMU)**, which is responsible for constructing a suitable data base, modelling and simulation activities, scenario writing and consistency checks, and designing and maintaining the project site on the web (www.egypt2020.org).

Project policies, work plans and finance are decided by a *Steering Committee*, composed of a number of leading scholars and practitioners, representatives of funding agencies⁽⁸⁾ and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in addition to the project's executive committee. The project is also assisted by a *consultative* Group composed of 12 senior scientific consultants, with high-level expertise in the various subject - areas covered by the project.

(8) So far the project is funded by three parties: the Egyptian government (through the National Investment Bank), UNDP, and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. The project is still seeking extra finance from other donors.

IV. *Medium-and Long-Term Planning*

Medium-term planning has a long history in Egypt. Following partial industrialization programs in the 1950s, Egypt started its first five year plan (FYP) in 1959/60. This was designed as the first part of a 10-year plan for the decade of the 1960s. The second FYP was launched in 1964/65, but it was soon discarded (following the June war with Israel in 1967) and replaced by shorter term plans, and rolling plans. The image of planning was greatly distorted in the 1970s, though the planning machinery continued to produce planning documents which nobody, including the government itself, took seriously. It should be recalled that the 1970s witnessed a drastic transformation of Egypt's economic and social policies towards a more open, capitalist-oriented policies (Sadat's open-door policy).

The need for planning was recognized in the early 1980s under Mubarak's rule, and the tradition of issuing FYPs was resumed as of 1982/83. The practice of producing FYPs continues until present, with the government now implementing its 4th FYP (1997/98 - 2001/2). Planning takes place in circumstances of economic liberalization, privatization, withdrawal of the state from the productive sphere, greater integration in the global economy, etc. Therefore, the scope of planning and its role in coordinating activities and shaping Egypt's development path greatly declined.

As for long-range planning, the government of Egypt released a strategy document in March 1997, which provides guidelines for development directions until the year 2017 (i.e., over the 20-year period 1997/98 - 2016/17, which entails four FYPs.). The distinguishing feature of this strategy is the ambitious target of expanding Egypt's populated area from around 5% to 25% of the country's national space. The backbone of the strategy is a set of land reclamation projects industrial development projects, and free-zone projects, in the South, Sinai, and the Suez Canal regions. In addition to this objective, the strategy involves revolutionizing Egypt's education system, reforming the system of governance, boosting human development, etc.

The long-range strategy was criticized for lack of adequate feasibility and sound futures studies (particularly with regard to the Toshka / South Valley mega project), absence of an integrative framework, inadequacy of resources (even with the target of raising the domestic saving rate to around 20% by the year 2001/2), and inadequacy of tools, given the strategy's heavy reliance on Egypt's private sector, inflows of foreign direct investment, and the market mechanism.

The criticisms directed against Egypt's 20-years strategy underline the dire need for futures studies. For the credibility of long-range strategies and plans depends heavily on how thoroughly the various future possibilities, opportunities, and risks have been investigated. The question of feasibility is critical, and feasibility especially of the so-called mega projects cannot be convincingly established until all alternatives are seriously examined. Futures studies could principal have contributed a great deal to these ends. Moreover, they could be used as a catalyst for generating enthusiasm for the strategy, and for mobilizing people's efforts and energies towards its implementation.

V. Concluding Remarks

Our experience with futures studies in Egypt shows that such studies are not easy to design and carry out. They involve painstaking efforts and require a lot of time, and generous budgets. Successful futures studies need to be **participatory**, in the sense that they should be performed through **team work**, and that sufficient room is allowed for **popular participation** i.e. for engaging intellectuals, social and political activists and ordinary people in their activities. In reality team work is hard to materialize, and the scope for participation is often constrained by financial, political and time factors.

Social demand for futures studies turned out to be very weak. In fact most of the futures studies reviewed in this paper were initiated by foreign or international organizations, e.g. FAO, UNFPA, OECD, etc. The Egypt 2020 project is an exception in that it was indigenously initiated by an NGO - the Cairo branch of the Third World Forum. Indeed the initiative was more personal than institutional, as the project owes its idea and existence to the enthusiasm and dedication of Professor Ismail-Sabri Abdalla, to his willingness to face a variety of challenges, and to his excellent connections with key decision makers in the Egyptian government.

In contrast, government circles and even many researchers and intellectuals tend to view futures studies as a kind of mental luxury which a developing country like Egypt could not afford. This situation call for great efforts to propagate the concept of futures studies, and to explain their purposes and their potential contribution to public debate and the decision making process. Both adults and children need to receive future - oriented education through well - designed and well - targeted programs, including programs to bring futures studies to the classrooms. In short, we should do everything possible to fill the vacuum caused by the absence of a future - oriented culture in our societies, and by the lack of sufficient competencies in the futures field.