Introduction to the Symposium on the Global Megacrisis

| Jose M. Ramos
| Queensland University of Technology
| Australia

Warnings of emerging global crises seem to be coming more frequently every passing day. Research on the current and potential impacts of climate change make IPCC reports look conservative.[1] We're told that our oceans are under threat from overfishing and acidification (Mitchell, 2008). Human's impact on the planet's ecosystems continues to rise.[2] Meanwhile, a financial crisis looms menacingly. Western nations stare down the barrel of potential economic catastrophe. Trillions of dollars / euros are whisked away from the public purse to recapitalize banks and governments, whose money mysteriously disappeared into hedge funds, and to appease the short term profit motive of investors.

And yet, positive change and innovation in every aspect of life are appearing every day. In Africa, a farmer learns how to turn back the onslaught of desertification.[3] In China, massive investments in renewable energy form a new vanguard for a global renewables industry.[4] In California, a company pioneers closed loop clothing manufacturing.[5] In the UK peer to peer banking emerges as alternative to institutional banking.[6] Spiritual traditions from around the world come together to proclaim the need to protect the Earth and Indigenous Peoples.[7] From Tunisia to Tahrir Square and beyond, the Arab Spring blossoms as citizens across the Arab world show that change is possible. From New York, Occupy Wall Street creates a global network of voices to challenge corporate influence in politics. Does the new meshwork of social networks and media form a technical backbone for an empathic civilization (Rifkin, 2009)?

Whether you believe things are getting better or getting worse, it is hard to deny the magnitude of change in the early 21st century. As Bob Dylan sentiently muttered in 1964, "The Times They are a-Changin'". Yet what is the nature of the change we are undergoing? How serious is our situation? Should we be optimistic? Should we be pessimistic? Or are both options, optimism and pessimism, a trap? Is there another frame? And what are the responses to the challenges that we face, our place in the landscape of change? These are the questions which this symposium confronts us with.

The proverbial elephant in the classroom of humanity is getting much harder to ignore. This symposium is one further iteration in acknowledging, appreciating and attempting to understand what this "elephant" is. There have been many attempts to understand the global "problematique", "great transition", or "macro-shift". For in reality it has not one name, but many names, it has not one aspect but many aspects.[8] The Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant help to extend the metaphor. In the parable each the man is touching one part of the elephant trying to understand

what is. The first feels a leg and says it's like a pillar, the second touches the tail confident it's like a rope, the third feels the trunk and comments it's like a branch, the fourth feels an ear and proclaims it is a fan. The fifth touches the belly and is convinced it is a wall. Finally the last one announces the rest are all fools, for having felt the tusk he now knows it is a pipe!

Halal and Marien, who initiated this symposium, have done a great service in re-iterating a conversation on the enormity of the challenges we face. They provide an opportunity to clarify our understanding of what planetary crises means. Basing their arguments on well-established trends backed up by public data sources, they confront us with the empirical nature of crises. Their scenario axis based on an optimism and pessimism scale, confront us to assess the gravity of the crises, as well as the broader question of optimism and pessimism generally. And by asking for specific criteria in the responses, they have invoked a number of responses which employ different strategies altogether.

What becomes clear is that, while the vast majority of respondents positively agree that the world is facing "crises", how such crises are characterized, diagnosed and understood is fundamentally diverse. Far from being a drawback, this positive diversity and epistemological pluralism is indeed a condition for coming to greater "integrative" coherence in coming to grips with the elephant(s). Thus while the "megacrisis" of an empirical nature is well-established, "the meta-crisis", which refers to our understanding of the perspectives, discourses, cultural standpoints, and interior dimensions of the human psyche (identity, meaning, purpose), is only just beginning.

The Contributions

Jim Dator, for example, rejects the idea that the future can be predicted, and considers both optimism and pessimism to be dis-empowering standpoints. For him, optimism is irresponsible because it is unrealistic give the severity of the indicators. Yet pessimism is irresponsible as there is life after collapse. Preparedness for change is the real antidote to what can otherwise be the paralysis of fatalism. He writes "life during and after social and environmental collapse can be good, peaceful, meaningful, and abundant IF we anticipate the collapse and prepare for it as a form of transformation to a new and potentially better way of life."

Michel Bauwens also argues we must understand the cycles involved in social transformation. Like Dator, there is life after the downturn, through the emergence of peer to peer systems. We are experiencing the end of the current Kondratiev wave (2008), a cycle 70-80 years in length, but there is also the crisis of capitalism itself, a much deeper process of transformation that requires the emergence of a green capitalism and peer to peer economy to emerge as stabalisers, and finally the energy and biospheric crisis at the deepest level.

Vuokko Jarva takes issue with the status Halal and Marien place on trends, writing: "trends are not mythical agents determining future developments." For her, it is the movement of human action and change that is real, whose undercurrent is "identification, belief and motivation". Jarva identifies four streams of human agency: mainstream development, planetization, localization, and glocalization, and each are given

probabilities. Mainstream development gives us the weakest chance of avoiding disaster, while localization and planetization give us 50/50 chances, but it is in the integration of these, *glocalization*, where we greatly improve our odds.

Rakesh Kapoor argues our main challenge is "wisdom ([the] ability to govern and decide wisely)". He is oriented toward strategy and resolution, and situates the megacrisis discourse in both Western and Southern frames: °ßThe South is much less shaken up by the current global crisis than the North. Having lived under colonial subjugation for over two centuries and in poverty for decades, the tide is now turning for India and many other "emerging economies". He believes resolving the crisis will require the West to give up on pretentions of both power and influence, and accept a more collaborative mode of engagement. It will require "Mega-diplomacy is the the art of creating coalitions among multiple stakeholders in a post-modern world of dispersed power, influence and leadership."

Like Dator, Ryota Ono is doubtful whether quantifying negative scenarios can have a positive impact. He wonders, Does assigning a quantitative prediction for a dark future lead us down the path of despair, acquiescence and self-fulfilment? For him then, the quantification of various possible crises is less critical than understanding the underlying nature of crises, which are expressions of human nature. Drawing on the experience of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Ono analyses how human-systems breakdown. It is the very ability to reflect on, and intervene in the system we create and inhabit which becomes our key form of agency in addressing the crises we face.

Anita Kelleher, as well, questions whether trend analysis, which assumes a linear sequence of change, is useful in addressing a complex system, and points toward systems dynamics as a better way of understanding the nature of crises. IT technologies are not a panacea for global cooperation and evolution, but rather what is required is an "evolutionary path of societal advancement [representing] 'cultural' and 'purposive' evolution." Like Dator, Bauwens and others she "elect[s] to view the scenarios as possible stages in global transformation rather than an either/or prospect." In terms of its resolution, new global governance strategies and approaches are needed.

Sesh Velamoor argues we must assess root causes, arguing: "perhaps the most intractable symptom is the fact that all of the symptoms described above are being dealt with and being treated as "problems" or "root causes" in and of themselves, thus masking the need to look deeper to determine the real "root cause". An approach that will do nothing more than ensuring the consummation of the collapse." For Velamoor our big task is to remake the underlying paradigm, beliefs and assumptions that we operate from as a species.[9]

Marcus Barber understands "mega-crisis" as a "Cascading Discontinuity Set", a situation where multiple factors converge to overwhelm a system. Like Marien, Barber is pessimistic, as indicated in the title of his response "Toward 4.9", the imagined world population after the "modern day version of the Black death wherein a third of the world's population could perish". For him, the key problem are system incumbents, those who "put self interest ahead of broader needs" such that a core group of people are able to block global action on key issue. As Kapoor articulates, information technology advances are not enough, what is needed is a transition from

information to knowledge to wisdom. Thus the pathway of hope is an emerging group of wise people, who follow a mindset of "enough-ness". For him this is the fifth scenario the world can follow, which sits outside the discursive boundaries of Optimism-Pessimism. Within enough-ness, one is not faced with a choice between disaster or progress, but a balancing of priorities in which social equity and eco-sufficiency is possible.

For Oliver Markley, while it is largely self-evident that we are facing a crisis of major proportions, we need a more sophisticated analysis of cascading scenarios based on branching points, probabilities that lead toward "Contingent futures instead of gross scenarios... [which are] more relevant for proactive policy development". For Markley, a viable response includes three other elements: 1) conceptual development and mapping of type II wildcards, what he calls "STEEP surprises" (high probabilities coupled with high impacts, credible for experts, but not credible with non-experts), 2) intuitive methods for remote viewing / visioning transformative futures, as rational and analytic methods are not adequate, and 3) a optimistic psychological disposition of creative resilience, critical in engendering healthy responses. In this he echoes Dator and Ono's views - we must avoid getting stuck in paralyzing fatalisms, and instead tap the wealth of healthy human creativity in remaking the world.

For Vahid Motlagh, in Halal and Marien's calculations, the probabilities have already been gamed. Analyzing the data provided by them, the concludes that there exposition of the mega-crisis leads to obvious biases toward pessimism. In contrast, he argues that people's engagement and responses with such issues greatly depends on its presentation. He draws on the *longue durée* of Max Singer, as well as cyclical metaphors in both reframing the mega-crisis as a potential decline of the West, and rise of the Global South and East's middle-classes. Key here is transformation of the individuals inner world, which, drawing on Richard Slaughter's work, and echoing Jarva, includes factors such as identity, values, meaning and purpose. Toward a "vision of a sustainable and conserver society" based on heightened future consciousness and the cultivation of wisdom.

For Richard Slaughter, a global megacrisis cannot be understood or addressed unless one looks at the collective cultural and individual psychological dimensions of the crisis. "Solutions to the GMC will not emerge from new technology and associated infrastructures, no matter how 'green' they may be. They will begin to emerge when people look more honestly and clearly upon their own interior selves and understand that the most potent source of innovation and 'progress' is within agents of knowing themselves." He argues, to make headway in addressing this mega-crisis, we need to address all aspects of social reality dynamically and in combination.

For Kuo-Hua Chen, while the crisis is indeed serious, an emerging generation of engaged global citizens will find solutions to these challenges. He believes "transformational change may require the questioning and modification of deeply held value systems about working, living and learning." He advocates for dynamic balance between "individual and the collective, between discipline and creativity, between left and right brain, between status-quo and paradigms and emerging futures, between respect for the past and responsibility for the future.

Following down the well trodden discourse of liberalism and progress, Ronald Havlock, in sharp contrast to other respondents, feels that the crisis has been overstated by doom and gloom academics. For him what is real is how "science-based technology has been transforming our world for the better for at least three hundred years." Rather than an end to this trend, he sees an acceleration of the trend. He expects our current economic crisis to resolve itself, and expects the resolution of many social problems with the maturation of economics and social sciences in the coming century.

The Megacrisis is the Meta-Crisis

My understanding of mega-crisis is that it is a 'meta-crisis' (as in meta-cognition) – a crisis in knowing about knowing about the 'global' and 'mega' and 'crisis'.[10] The empirical, arising from our direct experiences and then forming a matrix of artefacts of experience (evidence) is surely the basis for our assessments. Empiricism, however, includes both ideation and materialisation as processes. Ideas, discourses, worldviews, interact with and mediate how the empirical arises (Latour, 2005, Bussey, 2011).

In my work researching perspectives on addressing global change, I found that the way different groups of people understand and communicate 'global' and 'crisis' is fundamentally diverse. We are confronted with a wide range of discourses, frameworks, perspectives on what this 'thing' is, which point to different aspects of social reality. Perspectives are partial. Cosmopolitans tend to see the limits of the sovereign state, neo-Marxists critique the emergence of the global factory, re-localists are concerned with peak oil and the re-emergence of community, network globalists look at the emergence of citizen swarms, and alternative development thinkers the legacy of West-centric economic development and the need for development that prioritised the majority world's wellbeing. On and on, how we see 'the global crisis' is mediated by the contours of our discourses (Ramos, 2010).

What is needed, therefore, is a processes of 'cognitive mapping', where we map the discourses and perspective that impinge on our shared predicaments, engage in dialogue though which a shared analysis of mega-crisis is developed, which can lead to shared understanding, commitment and actions (Bergmann, 2006; Smith, 2008).

Halal and Marien use the term 'wicked problem', which has become popular as a way of describing inter-systemic complexity. Yet 'wicked problem' is far more than the visible inter-systemic enmeshment of our challenges, it in equal measure relates to the invisible complexity that lies within our culturally and organizationally given ways of knowing. Rittel and Conklin discuss wicked problems as ones in which:

> *One cannot understand the problem without knowing about its context; one cannot meaningfully search for information without the orientation of a solution concept; one cannot first understand, then solve. Moreover, what "the Problem" is depends on who you ask – different stakeholders have different views about what the problem is and what constitutes an acceptable solution. (Conklin, 2006, 14)*

To unravel the empirical complexity we face in our wicked problems, we must appreciate the epistemic complexity we live in, coming to terms with the different def-

initions, perspectives and understandings of megacrisis. This is the critical pathway to a shared understanding capable of addressing the mega crisis.

Far from an academic exercise, epistemic complexity is at the heart of current failures and challenges.[11] We need to indeed innovate and build platforms for cognitive-affective-spiritual coherence to address global challenges of every type. Recent decades have seen bold innovations in processes for developing shared meaning, understanding, and action.[12] The challenges of the coming decades will require that we continue to innovate platforms and processes for deliberation and action. I believe the development of platforms and processes to facilitate cognitive mapping and collaboration to address wicked problems will be the big business of social change in the 21st century.

But what emerges from the epistemic complexity of this symposium? What are the mental models, discourses, metaphors and ways of knowing for mega-crisis, and what new shared understandings or analysis might be emerging?

Deeper Structures of the Megacrisis

Rigorous futures scholarship requires exploring deeper aspects of reality and change processes (Ramos, 2003). In this symposium we were fortunate to have a number of authors point toward such deeper structures. For Bauwens, a structural analysis of capitalism coupled with an explanation of cyclic change offers a window into addressing and resolving the crisis. For Dator the underlying structure of neo-liberal capitalism is at the core of the crisis and addressing this structure at the heart of re-invention after collapse. For Ono, the deeper structure can be seen in our enmeshment in the systems we design, our rigid and unexamined assumptions about the "key conditions or features of the system," our tendency to cling to existing systems, and the blindness of vested interests preserving dangerous systems.

A number of authors called for an evolution of the interior dimensions of social reality. In this respect, the idea that better technology will save us was dismissed by quite a few. Instead, the idea that we must cultivate wisdom and purposive evolution was shared by at least eight of the thirteen contributors. For Slaughter, we must broaden our work to include both the individual-psychological and collective-cultural aspects of reality - it is in the interiority of the self where change is ultimately enabled. Jarva points to deep structures for the 'inner world' which guide human thought and action: "identification, belief and motivation". Kapoor sees education, communication, leadership, wisdom and collaboration as the key issues. Drawing from Laszlo, he argues we need to foster "intensive' evolution, characterised by connection, communication and consciousness." For Kelleher the question is how to create a new path of 'cultural' and 'purposive' evolution. Barber finds hope in a new cultural orientation he calls 'enough-ness'. As well, Motlagh's "vision of a sustainable and conserver society" would be based on heightened future consciousness and the cultivation of wisdom. Finally, Velamoor focuses our attention on addressing the deepest structure, the paradigm that humans have carried forward in our conquest of the planet: 1) Humans are the apex of creation, divinely ordained to be in charge, 2) Humans and Nature are apart and separate from each other, 3) Nature has been given to humans to subjugate,

exploit and use over the last couple of millennia and more recently, 4) Reinforced with notions of the power of human agency, human infallibility, autonomy and ability to design and create futures at will, and most important the, 5) Divinely ordained "obligation" to do so. For him, our greatest challenge is to re-imagine and re-write this core identity and story, and develop an alternative: "Circumscribed within a supremely critical identity for ourselves. That we are first and foremost Citizens of the Planet and all other identities must take second place and not the other way around."

Putting Optimism and Pessimism in Context

The question of optimism and pessimism has been one that has concerned futures studies for many years. Fred Polak was perhaps the first to take up this question in depth (Polak, 1961). His classic analysis of the image of the future through history, and categories of influence / essence and optimism / pessimism are directly relevant to this discussion.
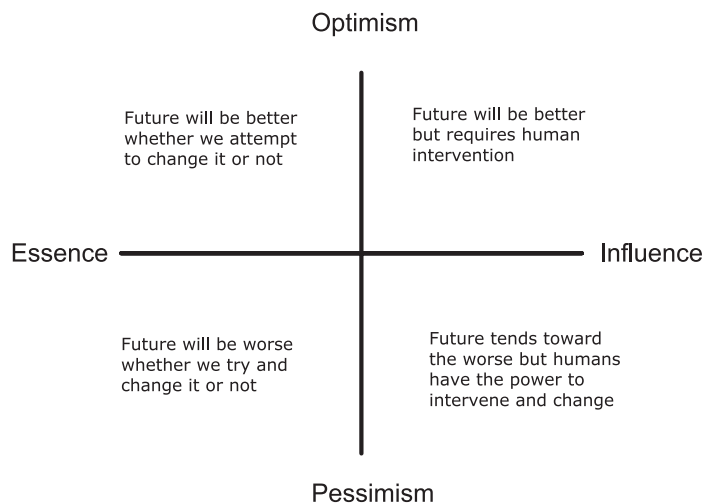
Optimism

Future will be better
whether we attempt
to change it or not

Future will be better
but requires human
intervention

Essence ——————————————————— Influence

Future will be worse
whether we try and
change it or not

Future tends toward
the worse but humans
have the power to
intervene and change

Pessimism

Figure 1. Polak's influence / essence and optimism / pessimism as four possible types

According to Polak, for cultures to thrive, they needed a rational yet transcendent vision of the future, coupled with a sense of agency in creating that future. The 'image of the future', often unconscious or tradition bound, has its own dynamic which 'pulls' a people toward it, generating cohesion and energy toward those preferred visions (Polak, 1961, 15-57). This 'Image of the future' is an active cultural dynamic, and can be understood on an essence to influence axis and optimism to pessimism axis. Essence-pessimism belonged to the age of religious eschatology, where those of this world, and sinners, are damned to suffer eternally. Essence-optimism belonged to the age of positivism, where no-one or no thing can stop the march of progress. With Karl Popper and others assault on historical determinism, we have moved well beyond notions of an 'essence' future and 'end of history' (Goldthorpe, 1971). In this sympo-

101

sium, with the exception of Havlock who is an essence-optimist, the majority of contributors embrace either influence-optimism or influence-pessimism. For Polak, the image of the future was generative and optimism was the ideal stance:

"Positive images of the future, in and through their own history, have fore-shadowed the oulines of the oncoming course of general events; through their imaginative representations of the future they have helped to push events in this very direction, thus acting as co-determinants of the future." (Polak, 1961, p379)

Polak is one of the reasons why I have deliberately focused on uncovering a number of transformative visions and narratives for global change that address our current challenges (Ramos, 2010). Yet we also need to explore the limits of optimism.[13]

Another perspective comes from Richard Slaughter. He argues that it is not pessimism nor optimism that matters, but the quality of the response.[14] For example, if pessimism motivates us to urgently act for change, then the quality of the response is high. If pessimism leads to fatalism, depression, in-action, then the quality of the response is low. Likewise, if optimism leads to over-confidence, denial or complacency, then this is a low response. However if optimism leads to energised, confident action, this is a high quality response. The Marien-Halal opening paper largely deals with the optimism / pessimism axis, but does not extensively engage with the idea of influence, agency and response.

David Hicks offers us a different angle. In his global futures courses he observed students moving through five stages: cognitive, affective, existential, empowered and action (Hicks, 2002). The mental overwhelm of global futures coupled with the emotionally confronting awareness of the challenges we face lead to an existential crisis °V who am I in this situation? He argues that for students to navigate through the existential crisis they need to see new paths of change and empowerment, lest they get trapped in despair. If they can ground themselves in personal empowerment through identifying new pathways, personal action follows.

Drawing on the multiple / integrated selves approach to futures work, my own view is that we need a number of well-integrated 'selves' to successfully address the challenges we face (Inayatullah, 2008). The Realist tells us that the challenges cannot be brushed away, and the transition to a different system-state may be arduous and uncertain. However, we should not let the Terrified self take over - in the grip of panic and fear, there is little room for imagination, creativity and innovation. A confident Optimist (willing to experiment) must be present to give space for bold innovations. The Pragmatists can help makes these innovations viable in the world of today. In addition we need the Visionary, who can inspire through the possibility of a compelling future. We need an optimism grounded in the knowledge that we have the ability to address our biggest challenges, without denying their real dimensions and the urgency required, fully engaged in wise and foresightful action and innovation in the here and now.

For each of us, whether we are authors or readers, my hope is that this symposium can be an opportunity to integrate what we have disowned, to more holistically address the global megacrises we face.

Correspondence

Jose M. Ramos
28 Fontein St.
West Footscray,
Vic. 3012
Email: jose@actionforesight.net

Notes

1. See: http://au.ibtimes.com/articles/235100/20111021/global-warming-s-disastrous-effect-water-levels-to-continue-to-rise-in-the-next-500-years.htm   accessed Oct 25 2011

2. See: http://yubanet.com/world/Humanity-Now-Needs-1-5-Earths-Living-Planet-Report.php#.TqZi95x9e55 accessed oct 25 2011

3. see: http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=105529   accessed oct 25 2011

4. See: http://www.environmental-expert.com/news/renewable-energy-continued-growth-in-2010-despite-recession-249760 accessed oct 25 2011

5. See: http://www.patagonia.com/ accessed oct 25 2011

6. See: https://uk.zopa.com/ZopaWeb/ accessed oct 25 2011

7. See: http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/index.cfm?n=1 accessed Oct 25 2011

8. Michael Marien offered an alternative metaphor which may be even better, '*a shifting herd of elephants*,' to highlight the complexity we are grappling with.

9. Sesh Velamoor's contribution will be available in a subsequent edition of the Journal of Futures Studies, and is based on a recent publication: Velamoor, S. (2011). International Affairs in the New Millennium: A Futures Perspective, *Jindal Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 1, Issue 1. October, p352-361.

10. See: www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/cee/fisher.pdf accessed Oct 25 2011

11. The 2009 UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen was a critical case in point, where the predominance of different perspectives, Chinese, US, European, led to a gridlock and breakdown of negotiations.

12. Examples of cognitive mapping, coherence building and shared analysis include social processes like the World Social Forum Process, smaller processes like Search Conferences and Future Search, and a variety of emerging peer to peer platforms documented on www.p2pfoundation.net

13. See: http://www.kurzweilai.net/brain-imaging-reveals-why-we-remain-optimistic-in-the-face-of-reality?utm_source=KurzweilAI+Daily+Newsletter&utm_campaign=5ea164a0e2-UA-946742-1&utm_medium=email accessed Oct 25 2011

14. See: http://www.foresightinternational.com.au/previous-works/futures-concepts-and-powerful-ideas accessed oct 25 2011

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