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Creating an Unreasonable Future

by *Monika Kosmahl Aring*

One of the things I love about the future is that it is empty. Just plain empty. When you think about it, by definition, the future has nothing in it. However, we seem to live as if we were the victims of demented administrative assistants who take our “*past*” files and put them into the drawer marked “*future*.” So of course, we only end up recreating the past, over and over and over.¹ I’m not talking about forecasting, and extrapolating trends, and all those valuable tools. I’m talking about what I believe may be our fundamental way of avoiding dealing with the possibility that we can create the future intentionally.

What if the future is a blank canvas on which we are creating the future, moment by moment with all our actions, and lack of actions? I find that this way of looking at the future empowering because it allows for possibility of something different than what is possible if we just project the past into the future. In other words, how the future will look could be thought of as a function of what we say will go into it.

When I worked with Fred Jervis, the author of *Future Planning*, and the Key Results logic frame technology², I learned that it is possible to project myself into the future, look from there and declare what I see, despite there being no evidence that what I declare is achievable. Consider, for example, when John F. Kennedy declared “we will put a man on the moon in a decade!” His advisors were reportedly aghast, claiming there was no way to fulfill on that promise. By declaring an (apparently impossible) future event taking place, seven years from 1963, John F. Kennedy called forth a set of actions in the present that would deliver that future. We did put a man on the moon in a decade, against all the odds of reasonable people. George Bernard Shaw once said that all progress depends on the unreasonable man. This article is about being unreasonable, about declaring a certain kind of future, just because we can. And in the process, creating new possibilities that would otherwise never have happened.

So how does one go about declaring a different kind of future and then causing it into being? First of all, by making a promise.³ In fact, if we look at those leaders who did that – Gandhi, Mandela,

¹ I gained this insight at a forum conducted by Landmark Education (www.landmarkeducation.com), arguably the world’s leading training providers on how to transform everything.

² Center for Constructive Change, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH.

³ The technology of promising described in this article is taught at Landmark Education’s Power and Contribution Course (www.landmarkeducation.com).

Mother Teresa, Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. – we see people who have made a big promise and lived their lives in the fulfillment of that promise. This technology of making a big promise and then organizing our lives to fulfill on that promise is available to all of us. And it's fundamentally unreasonable. It always disturbs the status quo, makes people edgy, uncomfortable, and, sometimes, threatened. In his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ron Heifetz of Harvard analyzes the fundamentally upsetting nature of moving into unmarked terrain.⁴

The other thing that is required in declaring a promise and then causing it into being is community. I can promise all I want. Unless I get others to join me in that promise, the promise will die. I think that is what Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist meant, when she asked us never to doubt the power of a handful of highly committed people. Indeed, she said, that is the only thing that has ever changed the world. That tiny handful is the beginning of a community. And, if the promise is one that inspires or calls to the longing of others, they will step into it and enlarge the community until it becomes a movement, then the new way of doing things, and then, just "business as usual."

My promise

As a background for what the rest of this article is about I would like to share something very personal. Many years ago I had a near death experience, and with that the experience of being asked by our Maker to go back. I was told – without words – that there was something it wanted me to do. Since then I've lived my life in the question of what am I supposed to do? That question led me to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, my work in international development, and, among other things, in 1995 to being asked by USAID to go around the world and find out what works and what does not work well in how countries prepare a skilled, competitive workforce (so they can participate in the global economy).

That experience changed my life. In country after country I met dozens, sometimes hundreds of young people who shared their hopes for a better future and their despair at ever being able to grasp it. In Lima, in Honduras, in South Africa, in Ghana, Senegal, Philippines, the poor parts of India, Eastern Europe, Russia. When I returned, I asked my team to look into the numbers. The numbers confirmed what the young people had told me: by 2012 – 2015, there will be approximately 1.184 billion 20 – 29 year olds on the planet. Fewer than ten percent of them will live in countries where there are good jobs for them, jobs that allow them to sustain themselves, their families, their communities (through tax revenues), and their environments. Those young people gave me my promise. I believe it's worth the gift of a second chance with my life.

My promise

My promise is that by 2020, each and every person on our planet sustains themselves, their communities and their environments. This promise means that everyone needs to have a good source of livelihood, that they earn enough to give to their community in the form of taxes (to pay for education and other public goods), and do so while sustaining their environments. I am choosing to live my life out of that promise – the journey is unbelievably exciting! This promise structures my actions, the things I do and the things I don't do. Just in case you are tempted to think I'm a truly "good" person, I'm not. In addition to my spiritual reasons, I have chosen to live inside this promise because it provides a more interesting and productive life. And, by sharing my promise with you, perhaps you too will be inspired to create your own promise and a life that you love. Or join my promise!

⁴ Ronald Heifetz. *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994)

In this article I'll share with you how "my" promise is getting fulfilled, how a handful of people in Washington and in different parts of the world are working together to design a different future from the likely one that will happen if we do nothing. And how my promise has been fostered and grown at my workplace, RTI International, and with leaders such as Stuart Hart at the Johnson School of Business in Cornell and C.K. Prahalad at the University of Michigan, the World Resources Institute, and others.

Background

Youth populations in many developing countries, including the Middle East, exceed 55 percent.⁵ The economies of their countries cannot grow fast enough to absorb that growth. Unless we act quickly, the problems of joblessness and the lack of sustainable livelihoods will continue to have major consequences for world poverty and for international political, social, and economic stability.

This demographic wave is occurring at a time when the world's multinational corporations (MNCs) have begun to saturate their first world markets but lack the knowledge and relationships to grow the economies and capture the buying power and consumer demand that exist at the base of the world's economic pyramid (BOP). Traditional business strategies have had little success in tapping into the estimated \$13 trillion BOP market potential. A select number of MNCs are choosing to learn from these failed attempts and are exploring innovative business partnerships and strategies that might allow them to participate proactively in these markets.

Over the past 50 years, the world's donor institutions (World Bank, bilateral agencies such as USAID, and regional development banks) have spent close to 60 billion to help poor countries improve their condition. While there have been some gains, it has become clear that donor organizations cannot grow jobs, economies, or innovation in poor countries. It is not that they haven't tried. They have, or think they have. However, they are hobbled by the need to be reasonable, to work within the box of known solutions and existing models.

Looking for a breakthrough

Our team realized that to find a breakthrough in the area of job and market creation, we would have to be willing to **Design from the Future**. Most development initiatives refer to the present and past to design future approaches. Our approach creates the future from the future: we stand in the future and create from there. We are asking the question, "If by 2020 everyone had a livelihood that sustained them, their communities, and their environments, what would have had to happen back in the year 2005, 2006 and beyond?" Standing in the future looking backward to the present, our team realized that it was private enterprise that grew economies and jobs and that growing better jobs requires innovation, new technologies and new business models that support sustained productivity changes and improved opportunities for workers in the world's poor countries. How would such growth have been catalyzed? The multinational corporations of the world would have begun to see that the poor represent an exploding market for products and services they need to make their lives better. They would also have seen that, instead of using the poor to produce goods to be sold in rich countries, they could partner with the poor to invent new products and services in ways that build wealth for and with the poor, while building new markets and new business partners for the corporations. That by serving the poor, they would be able to sustain the kind of double digit growth they experienced in the 1990s. This has recently been captured in

⁵ Most of the Middle East, for example, is challenged with very high youth populations and too few jobs to absorb that growth.

a groundbreaking new book by C.K. Prahalad, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid – Enabling Dignity and Choice Through Markets*.⁶

Standing in the future we recognized another important design principle, “partnership.” We saw that people in most multinationals did not know how to work with the poor. Our experience in international development taught us that NGO’s, women’s groups, and local leaders in economic development had that knowledge. We began looking for examples and found these in early trial reports by HP and other companies⁷ described in earlier articles by Stuart Hart⁸ and Prahalad.

What grows economies and jobs? Business. Private enterprise. Businesses, especially MNCs, are key players in growing economies. They know that the future growth of their business depends on the emerging markets of the world – the 4 billion consumers they have not been able to reach. However, they cannot reach these consumers unless, at the same time, they partner with them to build their wealth. How? Through joint venturing with entrepreneurs in poor countries, inventing new products, services and markets that haven’t yet been imagined. This will, if done well, lead to the creation of new jobs, new livelihoods that are sustainable.

While it is not the job of business to help reform countries, their commitment to develop innovative products and services for the BOP can catalyze the development of more enabling environments (transparency, education and skill development, better governance, etc.) that help emerging markets sustain economic growth over time. Using the lens of learning and innovation, my team at RTI is brokering a series of partnerships to connect (1) the world’s leading MNCs seeking to grow new markets at the BOP; (2) local business, government, and economic development leaders in emerging markets; and (3) donor organizations interested in economic and job growth. These learning partnerships will be guided by a new model for growing markets, jobs, and prosperity. Specifically, we’re creating a space for innovation to occur by selecting pilot sites where traditional business models and research and development approaches will not work. As MNC and local business leaders generate ideas for innovative products and services, the Learning States team brings in local stakeholder groups, such as educators, policymakers, and government officials, as well as entrepreneurs and business leaders who are committed to supporting these initiatives and creating new value in emerging markets. Interestingly, that is exactly how RTI and North Carolina’s Research Triangle Park were formed. Industry, government and university leaders banded together to create RTP and RTI to keep the state’s brightest students from leaving North Carolina to look for jobs elsewhere.

Approach

There are many models for effective, local economic development. RTI’s approach is innovative because it integrates BOP best practices across a number of traditionally isolated sectors, such as governance, education, and business, aligning actions to result in the creation of markets and jobs. RTI’s approach is built on learning networks – sharing knowledge and experience with non-competing businesses and countries that have experience addressing similar problems and learning from one another. Learning States takes seriously the need to break out of the economic silos and institutional isolation that too often prevent collaboration toward breakthrough ideas and innovations.

Strategy

⁶ C.K. Prahalad. *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid – Eradicating Poverty Through Profits*. Wharton School Publishing. 2005.

⁷ Debra Dunn and Keith Yamashita. *Microcapitalism and the Megacorporation*. HBR, 2003

⁸ Stuart L. Hart. “Beyond Greening: Strategies for a Sustainable World.” *Harvard Business Review*, 1966

We're developing Global and Local Academies that bring people in multinational corporations together with local stakeholders through a series of learning experiences that will result in mutual benefit. Do we know exactly how this will work and what specific opportunities will emerge? Of course not. RTI is learning as well. RTI is creating a global academy composed of and supported by several sets of approximately 10 non-competing MNCs, each focused on opportunities in specific places, along with input from universities and other institutions, international donor organizations, and world experts on BOP strategies. By participating in project activities, members of the global academy will learn how to create new markets, products, and services for emerging market consumers. RTI will also form local academies in emerging market locations. Local academies will comprise leaders in business, community, economic development, and government who are committed to growing their local economies, jobs, and enterprises. RTI will team global academy members with local academies and facilitate collaborations and learning, both in emerging market sites and on-line.

Learning, Innovation, and Networks

Evidence shows that successful development in poor communities is tied to innovation, and innovation is tied to learning how to turn knowledge, relationships, and local understanding into effective business strategies, products, services, and delivery systems. While some MNCs have begun to forge new economic opportunities in emerging markets, most companies have approached these markets on an individual basis, not as a group of non-competing investors, learning from each other and with their local partners. By collaborating with other global and local academy members, MNCs will learn together how to create new markets, business models, and products and services for emerging market consumers.

The vehicle for face-to-face and virtual interactions in each pilot site is the knowledge hub. The knowledge hub is the heart of the Learning States initiative, and the design and proper functioning of the hub is critical to the success of Learning States. The knowledge hub is the physical and virtual "home" where members of the local academy collaborate with each other, stakeholders in the emerging markets, other international knowledge hubs, and the global academy.

Timeframe

RTI plans to begin with one US and one international pilot site location in 2005, followed by a second international site in 2006. International sites will be selected in partnership with global academy members, who will attend a kickoff meeting at RTI's North Carolina campus in March 2005. International pilot sites will likely be located in countries that serve as platforms for big markets, such as China, Southeast Asia, Arabic-speaking countries, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and others. So far, we have the commitment of eight of the world's leading multinational corporations to join us, creating our first Global Academy. Two other major corporations are waiting to join the second Global Academy, as we will put only ten non-competing corporations into a consortium.

Vision

We are committed to an unreasonable vision. There is a long way to go, but we know that all journeys begin with the first steps, which we are taking now. We invite you to join us!

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Government and has participated in Harvard Business School's Executive Development Program. Ms Aring is a senior analyst of workforce policy at RTI International. There she is leading the economic and workforce development team, developing innovative approaches to job and market creation, economic and workforce development.

In 2001, while at EDC in Boston, she led the technical team to win a \$35 million contract for global workforce development from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Aring now serves as senior consultant to this project. At EDC, she also founded the Center for Workforce Development, raising over \$10 million over 11 years and co-founding a global summit on youth employment, recently held in Egypt. Prior to EDC, she co-directed business development for the American Leadership Forum, working with public and private sector leaders in major US cities to improve local governance. She has worked in over 28 countries on every continent; identifying best practice in private sector led workforce development systems. Her study, "Compass to Workforce Development" is used by world development organizations for training purposes.

Aring has led projects and public forums on workforce development and economic competitiveness for leaders in countries in Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia as well as the US and India. These forums generated a breakthrough level of participation, collaboration, and problem solving, allowing participants to discover where their underlying mental models hinder or enhance their effectiveness as leaders of their country's institutions.

An expert on public private partnerships in economic and workforce development, Aring has led several national skills standards projects in the US. She has led a number of study tours of US policymakers to Europe, where she was also a guest of the German Bundestag. She has been a keynote speaker for global forums, including ASEAN, the Swedish Defense Ministry, the French Government, and many other organizations. In the US she served as an Advisor to the Education Commission of the States, the National Association of Manufacturing, and to various other organizations. Her work has been featured in the International Herald Tribune, National Public Radio, Phi Delta Kappa, and other media. She is listed in Who's Who of American Women and speaks five languages.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *To what extent will this innovative approach impact the Western business model? Will the corporations bring back lessons from the poor countries that they are helping?*
- *Conversely, will the poor countries become more westernized, and if so, what are the implications?*