

# The Futures Triangle: Origins and Iterations

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## Abstract

This article presents a genealogy of the Futures Triangle. The method's evolution is explained. Problems, iteration and benefits are presented. The Futures Triangle is a simple method to map three competing factors: the pull of the future, the push of the present, and the weight of history. It can be used as a stand-alone futures method or in conjunction with other methods such as Emerging Issues Analysis, Causal Layered Analysis, or Scenarios.

## Keywords

futures triangle, genealogy, futures method, emerging issues analysis, causal layered analysis, scenarios, macrohistory, Six Pillars

## Origins

The litany origin was in January 1997 at a workshop for senior academics at Southern Cross University, Lismore. Paul Wildman, Bill Ellis and myself had initiated an online futures course titled Futures Studies: Methods, Emerging Issues, and Civilizational Visions (Inayatullah and Wildman, 1998). This was one of many steps to futurize the university. At this particular meeting, I was searching for ways to have the academics - professors, researchers, doctoral candidates - question the nature of the university so as to create alternative educational futures. The Head of School had asked for assistance in opening up possibilities for crafting a new research agenda.

At earlier meetings on the futures of the university, we had tried what-if questions (for example, what will students look like in 2020? Will they be human or AI? How might teaching change in a virtual world?) but the seriousness of the Academy made futures challenging (Inayatullah 2004). “Nothing really changes for

the University. It was history, not future, that was on the side of the Academy,” was the conventional perspective. Arguing otherwise, I had an uphill battle in front of me. Luckily, Southern Cross University was a small institution with a large imagination. They were led by a Vice-chancellor who was a music composer and thus saw the world with different lenses. There was thus an opening for innovation.

In our quest to develop a long term vision and futures research agenda for the University, I needed to find a way to link the emerging vision of the future (more virtual, more student choice, global and multicultural) with the trends impacting the university (the beginning

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of the internet, the internationalization of students, an ageing society, and life-long learning) and the reality that the weight of the university felt like an elephant to change agents. Heavy. Difficult to move. The bureaucracy was there not to support innovation, but to audit risk.

It was far from clear to me how I could explain these various forces - the vision, trends, and weights - in an elegant way. From this confusion, emerged the Futures Triangle.

## Context

Most understood that we were slowly but surely being impacted by mega-trends, drivers of change. [Naisbett and Aburdene \(1982\)](#) and [Toffler \(1980\)](#) had made this type of work popular in the 1980s. And thus in the mid-1990s, drivers and trends had become part of the organizational change literature. However, how these were associated or impacted visions and historical barriers was far from evident. The general response was for the university and other organizations was “this is interesting” but not relevant to my industry. Furthermore, we were unable to link futures thinking adequately with strategy.

Along with mega-trends, I was informed by macrohistorians such as P.R. Sarkar, Ibn Khaldun, Arnold Toynbee, Fred Polak, Pitirim Sorokin, Auguste Comte and others ([Galtung and Inayatullah 1997](#); [Inayatullah 2002](#)). Working with Johan Galtung, the mathematician turned sociologist, we contextualized futures research not by trends but by longer term deeper patterns. This research led to two publications on macrohistory with Praeger and then with Brill. Our conclusion was that there were clearly grand patterns which made change difficult and there were patterns which enhanced agency. History seemed to be a pendulum between agency and structure.

However, equally important was the work of [Polak \(1973\)](#) and his hypothesis that the vision of the future was central in reducing the power of structure and creating desired futures. The preferred vision of future was

crucial for nations, institutions and organizations in not just adapting to the changing future, but in creating radical possibilities. Polak argued that civilizations that had a clear vision of the future and a belief or evidence of agency were far more successful than those that did not. It was within this context that I worked and curated foresight workshops. I needed to find ways to challenge existing views of reality - that the university would not change - and once worldviews were destabilized to anchor reality, not in the past, but in a newly formed desired future. Thus, merely stating that the university is dead, or that the market is encroaching on the Academy did not suffice. We had to find ways to create.

And we needed to create wisely. I had clarity from the work of Ibn Khaldun and Sarkar that vision was not the only relevant factor. For Khaldun and Sarkar, history was cyclical, power based, and thus deeper epistemes, the power of elites, the role of the tradition were all mitigating factors to vision ([Galtung and Inayatullah 1997](#)). For Khaldun, every victory eventually led to decline and then a restructuring as new “bedouins” would vie for power. Sarkar asserted that the cycle of history was evolutionary and that exceptions could transform this cycle, making it into a progressive spiral. It would take individuals on the leading edge of thought to do this. They needed to understand the past and have a clear vision of the future with an alternative narrative of history.

Academics lived the weight of the past. While they had agency in their own classrooms, they well understood their limited broader agency given the role of the market, the power of the dean, university administrators, and the role of the Federal/Commonwealth. These were authentic barriers to change. Paradigm shift was for the external world: not for the Academy itself.

In contrast, conventional futures messaging was that agency was supreme - that if we only changed our paradigm, our way thinking, then we could achieve our vision. To make my case for vision and drivers in the context of history, I

need to find a way to show all three at once: visions, drivers/trends and weights.

I was reminded of Galtung's suggestion that every theory, every methodology needed to be represented by visual shape to be of use. This was the argument of elegance. Strong theory needed to be elegant. This was not just for communication to policymakers, but as part of the robustness of the theory itself.

And what shape could best hold the space of three different forces? At that meeting in Lismore, I put the forces together as the Futures Triangle.

It has worked well as it was simple, elegant, and useful. The Futures Triangle managed to evoke not just the modern episteme but the ancient too. In the ancient texts, as, for example, in Tantric epistemology (Inayatullah 2002a), there are three core forces that emerge from pure consciousness, that bind consciousness, as it were. There is the *sattvic*, the pure, the vision. There the *rajasic*, or mutative, change based. And then there is the *tamasic*, or crude restricted base. These three forces explained reality for the ancients.

## Problems and Iterations

As with all methods, the Futures Triangle has its problems.

### Complexity

First, as one brings in more complexity, aspects of the triangle become problematic. For example, globalization is certainly a push of the present. We can clearly measure this trend in terms of global trade, travel, and the growth of international organizations. Globalization is also, for many, a weight of the past, allowing movement for corporations but not for individuals. For nationalists, it is to be avoided. And globalization is certainly a vision for the future for many, a preferred future of a utopian world system where individuals, capital, and ideas can move freely, without friction (Inayatullah 2002b).

### Distinguishing the Vertices

To help distinguish these variables, I added some useful details (Inayatullah 2002c). The push of the present I defined as quantitative. One needed to show a quantitative increase, for example, in the case of globalization, in trade flows, or in tourism. For the pull of the future, I suggest that workshop participants or researchers focus on the visual image of the preferred future. One needs to see the possible or preferred future. For the third vertex, the weight of history, I suggest qualitative measures. These are perceptions by participants of the relative weight of history. In recent workshops, participants, especially those that are business minded have changed some of the language, seeing the push of the present as the enabler and the weight of history as the barrier of change.

Of course, these are just recommendations. Many, as this example below on the futures of the smart home, prefer to use images for the three vertices (Figure 1).

### From One to Many Triangles

Many ask which image of the future should we use? The dominant? The recessive? The outlier? The methodology thus can be used from mapping the preferred or the plausible future, to mapping out the competing images of the future - the different globalizations, for example. Globalization as one world market versus globalization as a cultural ecumene versus globalization as the planetary brain. Thus, to map out different pulls of the future, the discussion shifted from the Futures Triangle to futures triangleS. After the Lismore meeting, in the early 2000s, I experimented with using the Futures Triangle with Brisbane City Council and other municipalities in South East Queensland. The Futures Triangle became a way to map out different desired and not so desired futures; for example, the green - carless city versus the global-smart city versus the traditional white-picket fence city versus the industrial polluted city. Each image of the future had different pushes of the present (climate



**Figure 1.** Mahathir Nor bin Ismail, Salina Juhari, Sit Sarah Johana, and Woon Wei Kian. Presentation at Melbourne business school. September 9, 2016.

change and the rise of the environmental movement for the green city and new information and communication technologies for the global-smart city, for example) and different weights of history (the construction and mining interests groups for the green city and historical car-road worldviews for the global-smart city). Thus, each triangle mapped out different futures and possibilities in different ways.

### From Mapping to Disruption

While the push of the present, addresses trends, what of emerging issues and weak signals? Clearly the Futures Triangle does not deal with emerging issues/weak signals. And thus, it is placed as the first pillar of Futures Studies in the Six Pillars approach (Inayatullah, 2008). It is a mapping technique to gain insight into the system as it is. For example, the pull of the future is based on today's images of the future, not on tomorrow's images. These are best

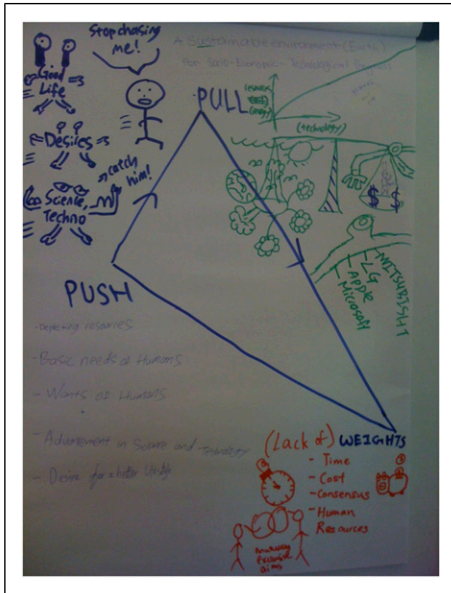
accomplished through the scenario process. It is the second pillar - Anticipating - that addresses disruptions through emerging issues analysis.

This is not to say that the futures triangle cannot be used as a stand alone methodology. It certainly can, however, it has its limits, as with all methods.

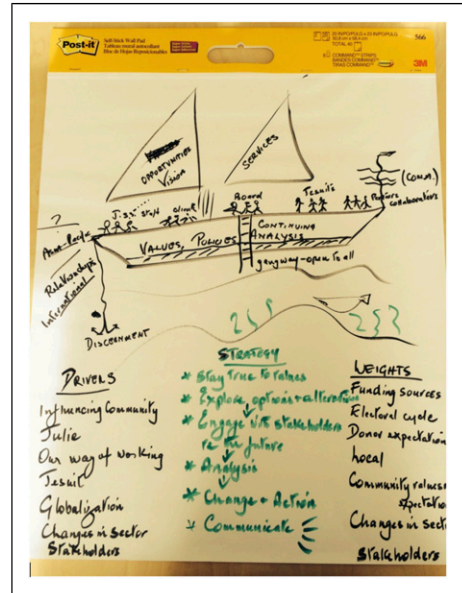
### From Equilateral to Obtuse

While I certainly imagined the model to be based on an equilateral triangle, students at a course in 2009 at Raffles College in Singapore challenged this. They argued the shape of the triangle needed to accurately represent plausibility. For them, given the weight of history, it was unlikely that a sustainable environment could be created for the Earth. We were running out of time. And continue to do so.

Here is their Futures Triangle that expresses the challenges of climate change (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Photograph by Inayatullah of work by students at Raffles College. November 20, 2009.



**Figure 3.** The data from the futures triangle for Jesuit Social Services is used to construct the CLA table. The old narrative is the “paddle steamer on a river” and the new narrative is “a yacht in the ocean exploring the seas”.

**From Mapping to Strategy**

The other iteration that emerged was linking the workshop process with strategy. This was to answer the question on the mind of every CEO or decision-making, “so what.” This is where methodology meets policy-making and strategy. In the past 20 years of running executive education courses with Robert Burke (2006) at the University of Melbourne we have focused on not just the mapping function but using the map to create a more robust strategy. For example, if one wishes for a green city, this means challenging the weights of history, the political interest of the fossil fuel industry. This can be done through lobbying or through reinforcing the image of the future, telling a better story, a powerful vision of the future. Or it could mean increases the number of voters who are environmentally conscious. This can be a short term process or a long term process of environmental literacy. Thus, mapping can then lead to more effective strategy.

This can be done individually or more powerfully with a group. Participants, in a workshop setting, can discuss and debate the three forces as well as evaluate possible resultant strategies.

So the Futures Triangle helps map the future and can be used to develop strategy. In a group process, I always ask once you have mapped the future, articulate your preferred strategy (ies)

In the example below, done by Jesuit Social Services on January 28 in Melbourne, participants used the Futures Triangle to first map the emerging future and then articulate their strategy (Figure 3).

From here, they further refined their strategy through Causal Layered Analysis. Thus, the Futures Triangle informed the CLA.

		Using analysis and advocacy for prevention
Litany	Standing up for the marginalized	
System	Government funding with multiple services in an uncertain environment	Access to multiple sources of funding to enable innovative solutions for the most marginalized

(continued)

(continued)

	Standing up for the marginalized	Using analysis and advocacy for prevention
Litany		
Worldview	Respected and has influence in the public space largely in Victoria and the Northern Territories	Maintain and expand the perception and delivery of services nationally and internationally
Metaphor	Paddle steamer on a river	A yacht in the ocean exploring the seas

In this Futures Triangle done at BRAC University, Bangladesh, June 25, professors understood that their best strategy was clearly articulating the vision. They needed to imagine the future student, first. A clear vision would then lead to funding. And they were successful (Inayatullah 2015) (Figure 4).

In this next example on the futures of energy, their conclusion after doing the Futures Triangle was to shift their global strategy from

“We know what is best for the customer” to “I decide” that is, the customer decides the energy mix she or he needs (Figure 5).

## Affective Futures

In a workshop process, once participants have developed their Futures Triangle, I have found it useful for them to embody it. This means a short role playing exercise. I ask participants to live out the different forces. One person may be the pull of the future, another the push and a third the weight. Or, depending on the nature of the triangle, more than one can role play each vortex. Movement is also of use - that is if they can show the push and pull of reality. In drama, the visual representation of the forces moves to an extra dimension. Afterwards, a short reflection on their experiences in not just using the Futures Triangle, but discussing what seemed more real, believable can be of use. Sometimes it is the push, other times the weight can be the most powerful, and other times it is the vision that become defining.

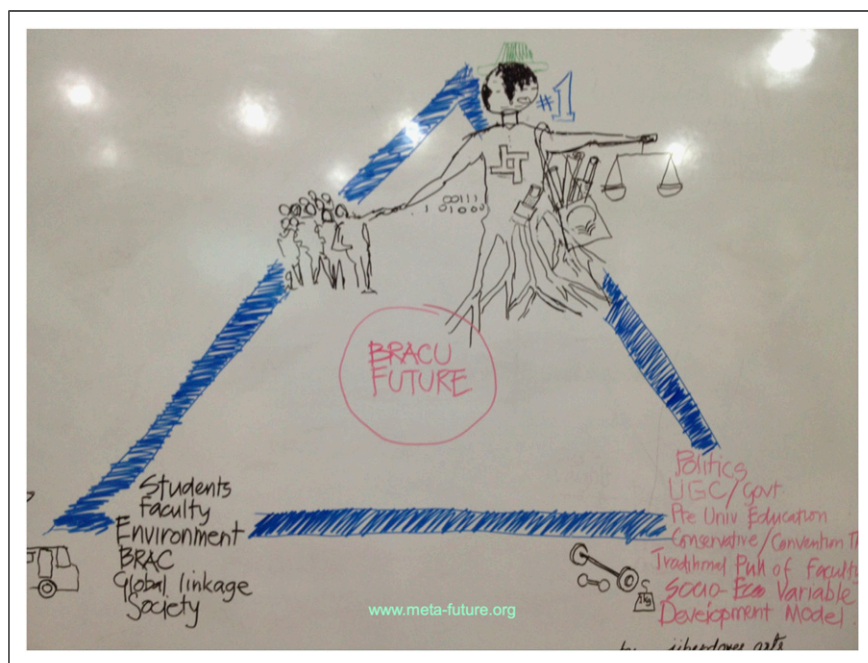


Figure 4. Photography by Inayatullah of work done by Workshop participants.

Below is an example of the Futures Triangle in motion (Figure 6).

**Outer to Inner**

The Futures Triangle can also be used for inner work. The pull of the future is where one wishes to be, the desired personal life one

imagines for oneself. The weight of the past can be blocks - inner or outer - preventing one from achieving the vision. The pushes of the present can be enablers or externals pushes one needs to navigate. In my work, while the Futures Triangle is useful here, it is the CLA of the self that focuses on inner transformation. Here is an example of a Futures Triangle applied to the

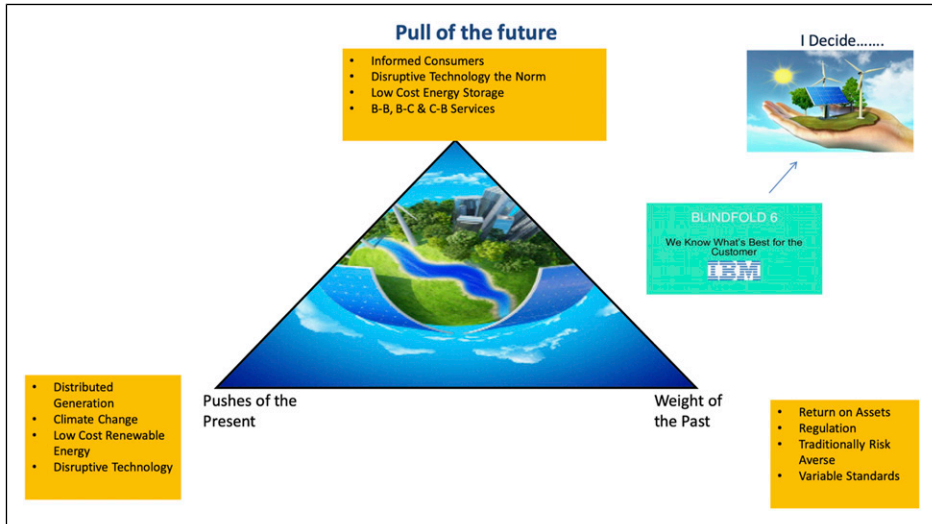


Figure 5. Image on power distribution futures, September 14, 2016. Author unknown.



Figure 6. Image from Sandra Coulibaly Leroy, FAO project on food safety futures.

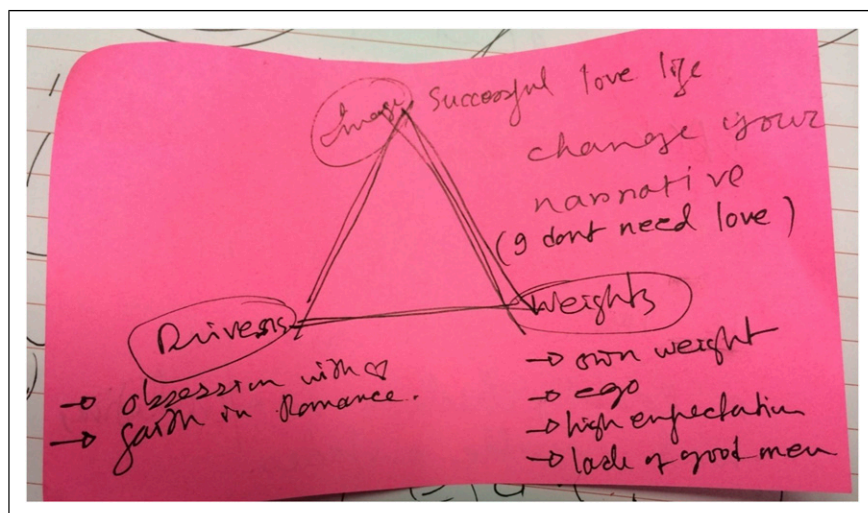


Figure 7. Image by workshop participant. Unknown.

self. She engages in the mapping exercise and then develops a strategy. The image shows the the Futures Triangle applied to a personal issue (Figure 7).

## Other Methods

The Futures Triangle can be used as a stand alone method, but also with other methods. Most of all, I have used it with scenarios.

With one large museum, we developed a very clear vision of the future. This was to be the connected museum. Exhibits were to be co-curated with stakeholders, even crowd-sourced. This was to be a world's first for established museums. As we went through the pushes of the present, it was clear there was a demand. However, most telling was the weights of the past. These weights were not just external but internal. What would happen to the current experts, the curators? We addressed this in the scenario process. The Connected Museum was the preferred. The disowned scenario was the traditional expert curated museum. The integrated scenario was the Mixed Museum. Some exhibits would be curated/ designed as they had been: others would be crowdsourced. The scenario integrated innovation and tradition. The outlier

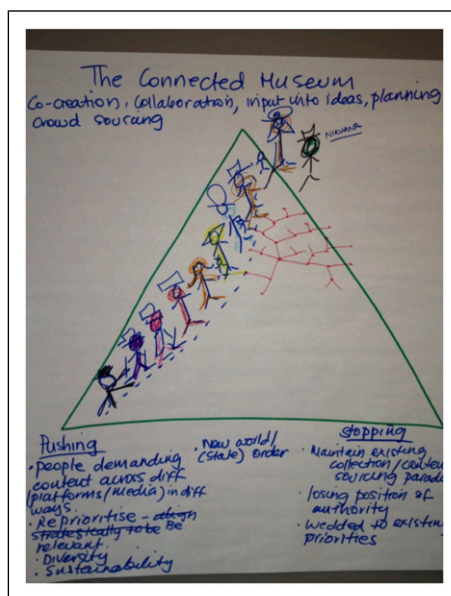


Figure 8. Photograph by author based on a workshop in Melbourne, August 20, 2012.

scenario was where the museum in itself disappeared. The Futures Triangle was useful in that the weight of the past identified the resistance to change - strategy was not to eliminate tradition and expertise but to integrate it (Figure 8).



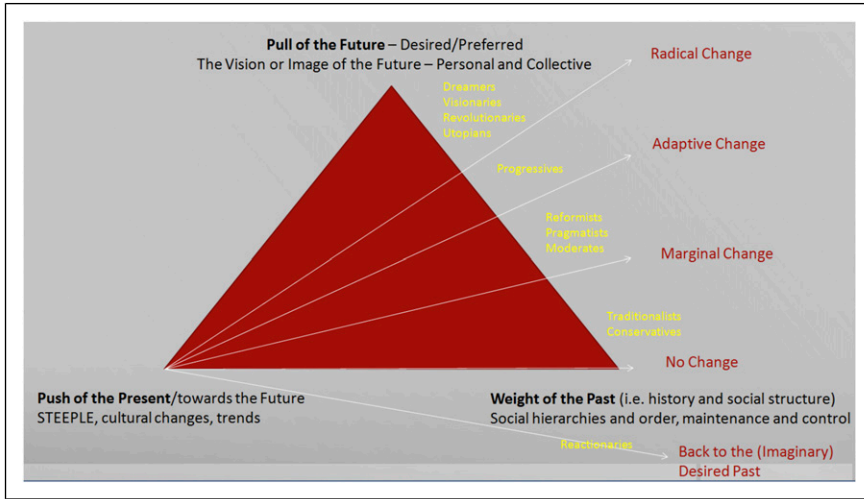


Figure 9. Milojevic, Ivana.

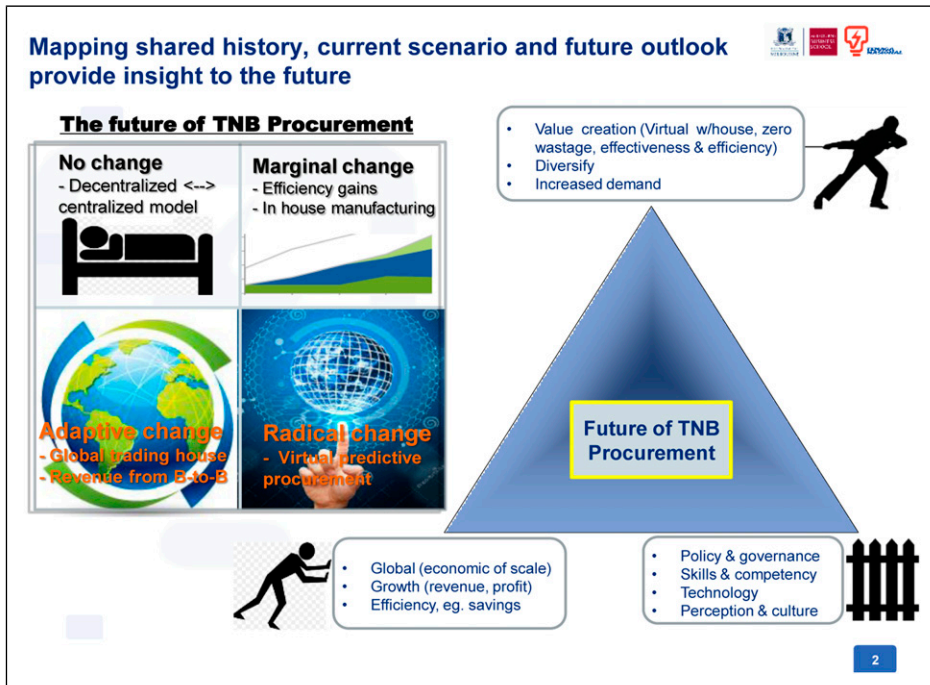


Figure 10. Image by Ahmad Sazree Abd Aziz and colleagues. September 9,2016.

In the past decade, with Ivana Milojevic (2006), we have used the Futures Triangle to create the Change Progression Scenario method.

Closest to the weight of the past is the no change scenario. The past wins, as it were. As we move up the right side of the triangle, we

articulate the marginal change scenario. Then the Adaptive change. Finally the apex of the triangle is the Radical change, where the truly desired vision is realized.

The figure below shows how scenarios can be developed from the Futures Triangle. Their

differentiation is based on whether they are closer to the pull of the future or the weight of the past (Figure 9).

This following image uses the Futures Triangle and specifically links it to four different futures. It was done by executives from TNB Malaysia September 9, 2016. (Figure 10).

## Benefits

There are numerous

First, it is an easy way to map the future.

Second, and this is one of the great benefits of the method, it has a low entry point. In contrast to CLA, which requires a basic understanding of critical theory and a willingness to explore one's own narrative, the Futures Triangle can be used for children or world leaders.

Second, complexity can be added on. It can be used to articulate one preferred future and the salient pushes and weights. Or it can be used to compare and contrast different images of the future - preferred and worst case.

Third, It can be used to develop strategy and policy-making. That is, once the future is mapped, participants or researcher can develop strategies to, for example, clarify the vision, or lighten the weights, or navigate the waves of change.

Fourth, It can be used as a stand alone method or with other methods such scenarios, or Causal Layered Analysis.

Fifth, it is of use for the quantitatively minded participant, the visionary, and the cynic. Each has a place in the triangle.

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