

## Chapter 5

# How Can We Achieve a Satisfactory Future?

How can we dramatically improve the probabilities that were estimated in the previous chapter? Individually and globally, how can we learn and change so rapidly, so appropriately, and so deeply that humanity's well-being will not deteriorate?

Even better, recalling the dedication at the front of this book, how can we strongly enhance our prospects for achieving “a world that is cooperative and flourishing, thoughtful about the future, and safe from war”? How can we change the course of human history toward a very positive future?

### Fundamental Priorities

An extraordinary range of issues, problems, dangers and opportunities clamor for our attention. Countless organizations proclaim that their favorite issue is the most important of all. In order to achieve a satisfactory future, humankind must make certain that the top priorities—a few *fundamental* priorities—are not neglected amidst the clamor of competing items for the human agenda. We need a dramatic shift of public attention, discussion, commitment, effort and resources to these fundamental priorities—and away from any luxuries, habits, beliefs, old structures, and narrow interests that seriously interfere with them. Our society probably cannot accomplish all the worthy and significant improvements that we desire, but it is almost certain that we can accomplish a small number of crucial changes if we focus our attention and efforts on them.

Deep, far-reaching changes are required. Will we make them soon enough? If we do not, then deep, far-reaching deterioration and losses will occur, far larger in magnitude and costs than the original changes would have been. From the long-term perspective, then, we will be very foolish (and unfair to people alive in the future) if we fail to make the required changes very soon. How would we react to a bus owner who knew the brakes would give out soon but did not bother getting them fixed promptly?

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

How would we react to a science fiction story about a civilization that had fairly good knowledge about the steps needed to avoid catastrophe and to achieve a reasonably positive future but who nonetheless failed to take those steps promptly?

How can we get from here to a satisfactory long-term future? One crucial step is to survey the total range of possible goals for the next few decades and beyond. Literature on our current problems, global issues, deep-rooted causes, potential futures, and policy options can help with this step. A second crucial step is to select the goals, or clusters of goals, that are probably most important of all for our long-term future. These two steps are remarkably neglected whereas detailed strategies, specific solutions, and concrete actions are extensively discussed in many books and by various organizations and governments.

Over the past nine years I have spend a great deal of time at these two steps. By writing papers on the results and by presenting them to various groups, I have received useful suggestions for modifying and refining them. Then, in 1988, I produced a survey instrument that listed 26 possible goals for human civilization for the next 100 years. Sixty people (in two countries) who were immersed in studying the future then rated the importance of these goals on a five-point scale. The results (Tough, 1990b) were very useful in writing this chapter and the next. Among people who were looking seriously at the future, there is general agreement on the top priorities, rather than widespread disagreement. Virtually every priority in this chapter and the next was rated by at least 80% of the respondents at the top two scale points, which were labelled “so fundamentally and supremely important for the next 100 years that we should devote extraordinary efforts and resources to achieving it” and “almost as important for the next 100 years.”

Our chances of a satisfactory future will improve greatly if more and more people discuss and clarify their fundamental priorities for humanity's future, use them as a foundation for their choices and actions, lift their vision beyond their daily activities, and take into account the long-term future of human civilization. Public and government concern, widespread study and discussion, various physical and human resources, and the acceptance of disruption and sacrifices are all needed. Discussion of fundamental priorities is oddly lacking in much of the planning, policy, and futures literature.

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

If we can soon shift toward emphasizing these key priorities, humanity will benefit enormously over the next several decades. The payoffs for human well-being will be several times greater than the costs of making the shift. Our current path seems bizarre, foolish, and insane when one considers the extraordinary benefits that could occur if citizens and governments around the world took seriously the future of human civilization, researched the various possibilities thoroughly, set key priorities, and helped everyone learn about all this.

National governments, international agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and businesses could benefit from thoughtful statements spelling out their fundamental priorities for the long-term future. This process could avoid foolish errors, for example, and could highlight several crucial goals that are easy to neglect if we do not look beyond a decade or two. Certain groups that now find themselves polarized on political issues, security, or social issues could possibly discover some common ground if they discussed their most basic priorities of all. If the general public becomes committed to long-term priorities, they will be much more willing to support the necessary strategies, changes, and costs.

Individuals may find their own set of fundamental human priorities useful when deciding how to contribute to the world, reassessing their current projects and priorities, choosing a job, taking a stand in any decision-making group, assessing government and corporate behavior, and weighing various world problems and competing situations. Each individual has a choice of many useful avenues for contributing, as we will see in the last chapter.

Five fundamental priorities for achieving a satisfactory future are discussed in this chapter. For each of these priorities, much has been written about the particular steps and solutions that could be especially useful. Many inspiring success stories have already occurred in real life. There is no lack of specific and constructive things for us to do once we take a fundamental priority seriously. In fact, a wide array of potentially useful directions, strategies, organizations, solutions, and possibilities remains open to all of us, individually and together.

There may be an illuminating parallel between intentional changes at the individual level and the societal level. Much of my earlier work focused on highly intentional changes that individuals make in themselves and their lives (Tough, 1979, 1980, 1982). One of the fascinating insights that emerged from interviews with a wide range of people is this: once an intentional change is chosen (once the person decides definitely to go ahead

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

with this particular change, chosen from all the other potential changes), accomplishing it is relatively easy. Something similar may be true on the societal level. If a sufficient number of people choose each of the societal goals in this chapter and the next, accomplishing them may be easier than we anticipate. What is needed most is public support. Political will. Widespread commitment to doing whatever is necessary to achieve a safe, sustainable, flourishing future for our civilization.

Humanity has the potential to live for many more centuries with robust health and happiness. In order for us to achieve that potential, though, we must take seriously the most important priorities of all.

### The Five Top Priorities

How can we achieve a satisfactory future? My response in this chapter spells out five priorities that we must pursue vigorously in order to achieve a reasonably positive future for human civilization. Because all five priorities are of crucial importance, they are arranged in a logical sequence in this chapter rather than in order of priority. Here is a preview.

1. Increase humanity's knowledge of world problems and social change much faster than the problems themselves increase. A threefold increase in future-relevant research, inquiry, disciplined thinking, knowledge, synthesis, and wisdom would probably be a highly beneficial expenditure, not a waste of money.
2. Disseminate this knowledge to political leaders, other key decision-makers, and the general public of all ages through education, books, mass media, and fresh approaches. Also help individuals around the world become more cooperative, more caring about other people and about the healthy flourishing of human civilization, and more committed to the well-being of future generations.
3. Improve governance, including planning, policies, governmental structure, and public administration. Our chances of a satisfactory future are slim if governments and laws do not shift toward emphasizing equality of opportunity for future generations. We need to sharply reduce the influence of unduly narrow and short-term pressures on all aspects of governance.

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

4. Avoid the worst catastrophes of all. In particular, avoid World War III and any other war more severe than World War II. Equally important, halt population growth, the deterioration of our planet, and the resulting poverty and misery. These potential catastrophes are so important that chapter 6 is devoted to them.
5. Foster positive directions and improvements. In addition to avoiding the worst catastrophes, we need to devote plenty of effort toward improving various aspects of our civilization. If the successful positive directions outweigh the negative trends, humanity's well-being will gradually become better and better. If the negative changes are roughly equal to the positive changes, we will at least hold our own and achieve a future that is no worse than today's world.

### Future-Relevant Knowledge

For achieving a satisfactory future, one fundamental priority is the rapid development of relevant knowledge, ideas, images, understanding, and insights.

We need to know far more about potential futures, policy development, and effective governance. We need to study the causes and possible consequences of various world problems, including problems that have so far been ignored even though they could have severe consequences in the future. We need much more thoughtful understanding of any traditional or false beliefs that threaten our future, why so much human behavior undermines a flourishing future for human civilization, and the most urgent and appropriate actions that we need to take. To work on almost any global problem, as Richardson (1987) has pointed out, we need to understand individual values and goals, social and political will, why people are what they are and make the decisions they make, and especially how such things can be changed.

What fosters appropriate and sufficiently rapid social change-and what blocks it? What role is played by powerful ideas, images, world views, and cultural beliefs? How can we profoundly influence the extent to which people care about the future and gain meaning and purpose from their actions for future generations? We need to study why people, even when

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

informed and convinced about the dangers, act in ways that produce not only short-term benefits but also undue long-term risks or costs.

We need vigorous thinking and research about the arrangements and institutions that are most likely to produce individual and group behavior in the long-term interests of human civilization (Firey, 1967; Hardin, 1981; Sorokin, 1954; Stern, 1978). We need greater sophistication concerning the likely outcomes of the various paths and strategies: successfully fostering good outcomes and reducing negative outcomes can be an incredibly difficult and subtle process. We need strong creative efforts to understand how to offset the natural tendency for things to go from bad to worse (K. Boulding, 1985). The study of human history, too, can illuminate the future even though no cycles or theories of the historical past can be guaranteed to apply to our future.

How can we increase the extent to which the actual decisions and behavior of citizens, organizations, and governments enhance our chances for a satisfactory future? In other words, how can we get human society to take its own future sufficiently seriously and to act accordingly?

A variety of methods, approaches, and activities could add to our future-relevant knowledge base. Our civilization could benefit greatly in the future if our generation would increase at least threefold the creative thinking, disciplined inquiry, research, theory-building, journals, profound books, thoughtful seminars, and doctoral theses devoted to the future.

In addition to applied knowledge, it is important to develop sophisticated conceptual frameworks and a scientific knowledge base about the future. ("Scientific" here means using the best social science approaches, most of which do not resemble the approaches in the physical sciences.) Lengyel (1987) has pointed out that all the social sciences, especially at the international level and within international organizations and meetings, are doing too much application and not enough theory-building. To put it bluntly, let's do plenty of social *science* instead of jumping too readily or totally into application. There also is a great need for deep thoughtfulness, for wrestling with the most important question of all, for seeing the big picture, and for wisdom and a broad perspective.

It is also important to support and attract people with especially lively and penetrating minds to contribute ideas and knowledge about the future. One excellent use of \$1,000,000 would be to scour the world to find the ten best thinkers about the future and then offer each of them one-tenth of this

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

amount if they would take time to write a thoughtful, comprehensive book relevant to the future. These thinkers would be somewhat similar to MacArthur Fellows except that they would focus specifically on the future. The field also needs frequent seminars for the brightest futurists to discuss their leading-edge ideas with one another. The number of fresh profound ideas presented at most futures conferences is surprisingly and ironically low. My impression is that many other fields of knowledge do much better at providing face-to-face forums for the presentation of cutting-edge ideas, theories, research projects, and data.

The amount of human effort going into the creation of profound significant knowledge about the future is much less than it should be. Multiplying our efforts threefold would produce long-term benefits to human civilization that would far outweigh the costs. Even a tenfold increase in creative thought, disciplined inquiry, and social science research relevant to the future might not be extravagant compared to the payoff. We are not sure of the optimum level of resources to spend on developing knowledge relevant to achieving a satisfactory future, but we are sure that the gap between the optimum amount and today's actual effort is enormous, foolish, bizarre, and poignant.

World problems are outstripping our knowledge of how to deal with them. We are going to have to run much faster than now simply to catch up to all the major problems and negative aspects. Then we will probably find that the negative forces are running faster and faster, becoming more and more challenging. To develop the knowledge, understanding, insight, wisdom, and techniques to outrun all these strong tendencies for civilization to deteriorate, we will need to increase our efforts even further. We certainly have the potential to win the race, but not by coasting along at our present level of commitment to creating new knowledge, insight, and understanding.

### Individual Learning and Change

Virtually every futurist agrees that we will not achieve a satisfactory future without far-reaching learning and changes by individuals around the world. These individuals include all of us, not just political leaders, government officials, policy experts, or business leaders. We will successfully navigate through the next few decades only if a very large proportion of the world's population understands global problems and potential futures, values humanity's long-term future, wants to provide

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

equal opportunities to future generations, accepts the need for certain interim risks and sacrifices, and takes a cooperative and constructive approach to dealing with today's hard choices. Once enough people care about the future of human civilization, choosing and implementing the necessary priorities and policies will be easier than at present.

Back in 1951, H.G. Wells pointed out the need for individual learning and change: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." A recent review of the results from various global computer models concluded that "the most important message is that changes in human values, modes of thinking and visions of the future are needed for us to live more sustainably and harmoniously—indeed to survive—in an interdependent world" (Richardson, 1987, p. 19). Coates and Jarratt (1989, p. 283) put it bluntly: "Never in history have so many people known so little about those matters most important to their occupational, social, personal, and political future. This ignorance is a powder keg."

Adult educators, college and university instructors, teachers, writers, artists, composers, public speakers, book publishers, and the mass media will all play a crucial role in fostering the necessary learning and changes in the people of every nation. Organizations that focus on particular aspects of the future (environment, population, peace, women, human rights, and so on) will also play a crucial role. Lively but profound television series on the long-term perspective could be important, as could thoughtful new books by the best thinkers about the future. Intensive workshops can have a particularly powerful impact: among the pioneers in developing future-oriented workshops of one type or another are Elise Boulding, Robert Jungk, Joanna Macy, and Warren Ziegler. All in all, over the next 10 or 20 years, the most powerful force toward a positive future may well be the large number of citizens who are sufficiently informed about contemporary issues, who have a sense of various possible futures, and who care deeply about the never-ending flourishing of human civilization.

The implications for the educational curriculum and for adult education programs are stunning. Educators and librarians ought to provide a wide array of methods and opportunities for people to learn about various prospects for the future. In addition to a variety of group programs and courses, individual self-planned learning projects could be fostered and facilitated (Tough, 1979, 1982). In every community, people should be able to study and discuss the likelihood and consequences of nuclear warfare, the effects of consumption and population growth on the local environment, various social issues, and possible and preferred futures.



## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

Curriculum and programs should also help people deal with the emotions that often arise when learners face these realities, help them gain greater meaning and purpose from being part of the ongoing flow of human civilization, and help them see their own most appropriate ways of contributing to a better future for their families and society. (These themes are enlarged in chapters 8 and 9.) They need to sort out their answer to the question, “What part can I play in achieving a positive future for humanity?” Each educator and each institution should think creatively about how to provide additional learning opportunities in these areas. Nothing in the curriculum could be more important!

In addition, as I have discussed elsewhere in more detail (Tough, 1978), educators can take three other useful steps. Educators can train and support instructors and workshop leaders who help people learn in a variety of settings about global issues and humanity's future. Second, they can conduct research on the gaps between what our curricula should teach and what they do teach. We also need research on the methods, problems, and needs of the many people who are already learning about world problems on their own. Third, educators can view themselves as learners and become familiar with the various ideas in the literature on futures, policy, planning, and key issues. Our future will certainly benefit from formal and informal educators with a strong commitment to making a significant difference as the unfolding human drama moves through its next exciting scenes.

Why not have a “Center for a Positive Human Future” on every university and college campus? Why not courses and discussion groups on “Humanity's Fundamental Choices” in every town and city? Why not a multi-media room called “The Hall of Supreme Priorities” in every public library? Why not an advocacy organization for all people who will be alive 100 years from now?

From elementary school through to adult education, the instructors who are interested in teaching about the future are eager for help and support. They want to explore how to incorporate world problems or an orientation to the future in the various subjects and courses that they already teach: in this way the future can pervade the curriculum. Some of them also want to develop courses specifically on the future. They want information about similar courses elsewhere, including their content, methods, and reading lists. Many instructors also want to attend seminars in which they can share ideas, problems, and solutions with other instructors. Even in their early stages, a newsletter and a world association for futures educators can foster

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

networking and a sense of being part of a highly significant worldwide enterprise.

Like many other instructors around the world, I am highly enthusiastic about the courses that I teach on global issues, potential futures, and the personal and professional implications for each person in the class. The intellectually challenging content is one reason for my enthusiasm: the subject matter is complex, difficult, fascinating, demanding. Another reason is the significance of the course: at the first session I say that no other course on the University of Toronto campus deals with more important subject matter. In addition, the emotional dimensions of the subject matter and the significant individual implications for each student make it a high-involvement, high-energy, and high-impact course for most students.

The messages of futurists are clear and important. For example, (a) today's decisions and actions will greatly affect the future of human civilization and our planet; (b) if we act vigorously, effectively, and soon, we have a good chance of achieving a reasonably positive future for ourselves and the next few generations; (c) if we continue instead on our present path, then the future will probably be tragic. If these messages are deeply absorbed by citizens, politicians, and international officials, humanity's behavior may change fast enough to avoid the worst possible futures and to achieve the best.

What can futurists, educators, and others do to convey these messages successfully? Clearly we need research and development projects on this question in order to improve our chances of success. Here, to get our thinking started, are a few ideas. (1) Make our messages as clear, precise, and convincing as possible. Neither underplay nor overstate the risks. (2) Try to reach wide segments of the general public as well as the key decision-makers and opinion leaders. Use a variety of media including newspapers, television, simple booklets, sophisticated books, radio, discussion groups, films, and courses. (3) Try to get some of the basic long-term issues high on the agenda of political and campaign issues. (4) Try not to overwhelm, discourage, or paralyze people with our message. Instead, adopt a tone of hope and cautious optimism, cite recent inspiring success stories, and suggest manageable actions that are not completely unrealistic. Study (with empathy and sympathy) the major psychological factors and motivations that block people from implementing the necessary changes and actions.

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

A widespread desire to cooperate and contribute is one particularly important challenge that all of our educational efforts could promote. Widespread altruism, kindness, goodwill, and compassion. A loving, connected, nurturing, caring attitude toward other people and the environment. Much more hopefulness than cynicism in the world. Fewer people tempted to intentionally take far more from the world than they contribute. More people eager to contribute to humanity's future. A large reduction in irresponsible and deliberate harm to others, in hatred and hostility, and in destructiveness and revenge. Instead, a pervasive attitude of cooperating and contributing.

A widespread desire to cooperate and contribute will not be easy to achieve, although we may already be making good progress toward it (Axelrod, 1987; E. Boulding, 1988). We could explore and assess a great variety of strategies: newspaper stories of good deeds, convincing magazine articles, powerful television programs, workshops and support groups on effective paths for contributing, self-help books, cooperative ventures, and religious and citizens' groups interested in useful charitable projects. Virtually everyone behaves cooperatively and helpfully in certain circumstances; we could benefit enormously from a full-scale effort to encourage and support such behavior in much wider circumstances. A widespread cooperative attitude could help us achieve rapid changes toward appropriate choices and behavior by individuals, organizations, governments, and international agencies.

A Club of Rome report to Unesco points out that “individual dignity and self-respect go hand in hand with recognition of the dignity of others and respect for them. The human race is distinguished by great diversity and heterogeneity which we must accept rather than seek to suppress or render uniform.” One major educational challenge is “to help individuals to avoid the trap of their personal impulses and desires and make room for their obligations towards other people, towards society and towards humanity” (Schneider, 1987, p. 37).

## Policy-Making and Governance

In addition to developing future-relevant knowledge and fostering widespread understanding among citizens, a third priority is necessary for achieving a satisfactory future. This third strategy consists of far-reaching improvement in policy-making, governance, and public administration. In

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

order to be successful, these processes need to be well-intentioned, well-informed, responsive to the most important needs of the citizens, and focussed on the overall well-being of the total population. They should build on the future-relevant knowledge and widespread learning that we have just finished discussing. They also need to emphasize fundamental priorities, a global perspective, the long-continuing future of human civilization, and equality of opportunity for future generations.

A large body of literature discusses possibilities for improving policy-making and governance, including deep-seated structural changes, in order to deal with the complex, overwhelming, rapidly changing global and regional problems of today. Instead of devoting an entire chapter to this topic, let me simply select five aspects that I consider especially important.

First, it is important that a *long-term perspective* be built into the planning, policy-making, and governance processes. As Richardson (1987, p. 12) has pointed out, “owing to the momentum inherent in the world's physical and social processes, policy changes made soon are likely to have more impact with less effort than the same set of changes made later. By the time a problem is obvious to everyone, it is often too far advanced to be solved.” Although a 30-year or 100-year perspective would be adequate for most problems, some potential long-term environmental problems may require looking 500 years into the future (Tonn, 1986).

Forrester (1973, p. 208) noted that there is usually a fundamental conflict between the short-term and long-term consequences of a policy: “A policy which produces improvements in the short run within five to ten years, is usually one which degrades the system in the long run, beyond ten years. Likewise, those policies and programs which produce long-run improvement may initially depress the behavior of the system. This is especially treacherous. The short run is more visible and more compelling. It speaks loudly for immediate attention. But a series of actions all aimed at short-run improvement can eventually burden a system with long-run depressants so severe that even heroic short-run measures no longer suffice.”

Scorer (1988) proposed a Council for Posterity as advocates for the multitude of generations ahead of us. “It must consist of people who can devote their deepest thoughts to the theme and muster all the arguments to call the present generation away from its myopic trends” (p. 2). He pointed out that the Council would help to rectify a gap in governance by acting as an advocate for the interests of future generations, who cannot lobby or

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

vote even though our decisions will affect them greatly. Yule (1988) expanded on the same proposal: “There could be a Council of Posterity within every political party, government department, local council, company, union, journal and newspaper, TV and radio station, religious organization and congregation, every club, consumers' organization, the teachers in every school, every class in a school, university or college” (p. 3). In the United Kingdom, a Council for Posterity has now in fact been established by the Institute for Social Inventions.

Tony Macelli (1989) established a Network on Responsibilities to Future Generations and Their Environment to stimulate the world community to set up structures and processes to protect the interests of future generations; e.g., a charter of rights for future generations, a special commission at the United Nations, education, and mass media. Edith Brown Weiss (1989, p. 124) has noted that “perhaps the most promising approach for ensuring that the interests of future generations are considered today is to designate ombudsmen or commissioners for future generations, who would be responsible for ensuring that the planetary obligations and rights, as detailed in positive law, were observed, for responding to complaints, and for alerting communities to threats to the conservation of our planetary heritage.”

Second, at the international level, instead of dealing with each problem separately, a better approach might be to *develop a comprehensive package of changes and quotas and contributions*. Some of these, such as number of children per adult or a net increase in the number of living trees, could be universal across all nations. Other contributions to humanity's future could vary from one nation to another: some would drastically reduce their output of CFCs or carbon dioxide, for instance, or fund research on futures studies or birth control methodologies while others would agree to implement vigorous family planning programs or to avoid developing or possessing nuclear weapons. Each nation, in concert with other nations, would agree to the overall package (despite its inevitable costs and disruptions) because in the long run it would benefit. A comprehensive plan, adopted by all nations, could be a win-win approach: every nation would be better off 20-40 years later by implementing the agreement than by refusing. If everyone realizes that everyone else in the world is doing their share toward a satisfactory human future, then the necessary changes might actually occur. People might realize that the consequences of not cooperating with the required changes would be far worse than simply going ahead and implementing the changes.

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

Third, it is particularly important that governments *avoid major follies*. The governments of the world sometimes seem intent on continuing “the march of folly” described by Barbara Tuchman (1984). That is, they sometimes follow a course of action that is contrary to their self-interest. “Self-interest is whatever conduces to the welfare or advantage of the body being governed; folly is a policy that in these terms is counter-productive” (p. 5). Despite the multitude of warning voices, despite feasible alternatives, the governments of the world make insufficient effort to alter their present risky course. The behavior of governments today certainly underscores Tuchman's observation that humankind “makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity. In this sphere, wisdom, which may be defined as the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests?” (p. 4).

Fourth, a dramatic shift from misery to human flourishing and progress would occur if all *politicians and rulers put the needs and rights of the people ahead of their own desires*. Over the past 20 or 30 centuries, some governments and rulers have abused their power for their own ends with little concern for the basic needs and rights of the people. Some governments today are still behaving in the same way, though perhaps more subtly or with new techniques. Some governments seem more interested in power, control, secrecy, repression of dissent, and personal gain than in civil and political liberties for their citizens and residents; the positive aspects of human civilization are sadly marred by the widespread fear of government-condoned torture, murder, disappearances, harassment, and suppression (Amnesty International, 1986; Gastil, 1978; Humana, 1986). Even in the nations in which flagrant abuses are rare, the general bulk of government spending, programs, policies, and laws is often out of line with the most important goals and needs of the people. What a leap in human well-being would occur if all governments and rulers made the basic needs and rights of all people (present and future) their top priority!

Finally, governments should seriously consider *reducing the level of their spending and bureaucracies*, including the military. In many countries, taxes have risen dramatically in recent years as a percentage of average individual income and of gross national product. Government and military spending has often increased even faster! In many countries, as a result, the annual budget deficit has accumulated to an astronomical

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

perpetual debt. Constitutional and other limits to government spending and taxes could usefully be explored.

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

### Prevent the Worst Catastrophes

“A highly negative future” was one of the three outcomes discussed in the preceding chapter. Such a future would (by definition) be so much worse than today that the majority of historians and social analysts would agree on this assessment. Avoiding such a future should obviously be a fundamental priority for humanity.

Preventing the worst catastrophes is such a large and important topic that it requires an entire chapter. Consequently, chapter 6 is devoted to preventing World War III, avoiding major irreversible deterioration of our planet, and halting population growth before the consequences become even more severe than they are already.

### Foster Positive Directions

The fundamental priorities discussed so far provide a foundation for a positive future but are not by themselves sufficient to produce such a future. Eliminating large-scale warfare and improving the relationships between humanity and the planet will avoid the worst of the potential catastrophes. Greater efforts to understand and teach about potential futures and policies, along with better long-term planning and governing, will also provide a solid foundation for achieving a reasonably positive future. In addition, though, we need direct efforts to move toward a highly positive future (or at least a future state of human civilization that is better than today's). This, too, is a fundamental priority.

On the one hand, it is very important for human society to devote sufficient attention, effort, and resources to avoiding a highly negative future. We need to become safe from any catastrophe that would be a great setback for human civilization. Otherwise there is a grave danger that some civilization-wide deterioration or disaster will make all of our positive goals seem irrelevant or misguided.

On the other hand, not all of humanity's efforts should be devoted to avoiding the worst. It is also beneficial to devote some of our efforts to nourishing and improving particularly significant aspects of human civilization, thus enhancing our prospects for a highly positive future and for realizing our evolutionary potential. Kenneth Boulding (1978, p. 359)



## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

stated that good, positive directions are delicate plants that have to be actively cultivated. He found that view much more realistic than the view that “all we have to do is remove oppression and all will be well” or “if we could only get rid of evil, the good will simply flower of itself.” Humanity's potential is far greater than merely avoiding catastrophes. Most of us want human civilization to flourish for many centuries and to reach the heights of which we are capable.

It is important to maximize our gains as well as minimize the losses and deterioration. Nurturing various positive directions is necessary in order to counterbalance the aspects of human civilization that will become worse. There is little doubt that several aspects will deteriorate over the next decade or two. If we simultaneously manage to foster significant positive directions, then overall we may successfully hold our own and achieve our goal of equal opportunities for future generations.

Some writers present a specific vision of a positive future, but others point out that highly specific visions may be inappropriate. This second approach is probably more realistic. When one thinks of catastrophes to be avoided, one can be highly specific: one can foresee the negative future consequences of certain paths and can figure out a safer route. By avoiding the worst dangers and simultaneously freeing up human creativity and ingenuity, we can enhance our prospects for a highly positive future. The particular details of that future will emerge as we go along, though, and cannot readily be chosen and foreseen today.

A plea for 500-year planning put it this way: “We should try (through means that restrict individual human freedoms as little as possible) to keep things from happening that, by cutting off any of various evolutionary options open to the human race, might severely restrict the freedom of humankind to choose its own destiny. Instead of trying to order the human race into a future we think is best, we should simply envision the kinds of catastrophes that would cut off evolutionary options and work toward making sure they do not occur” (Tonn, 1986, p. 186). After studying the ideas of 17 futurists, Coates and Jarratt (1989, p. xi) pointed to “the intellectual difficulty in identifying and describing plausible *positive futures* in contrast to the relative ease with which *negative, hostile, and destructive futures* may be generated.”

A similar situation occurs with one's children. We all do our best to keep our youngsters away from hot stoves, poisons, busy roads, and other dangers. If an illness develops, we take remedial action. In short, we try to

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

help them grow up with good mental and physical health, plenty of knowledge, good relationships with others, and so on. At the more particular level, however, we let children emerge, develop, and flourish in their own chosen directions (though we may offer suggestions and guidance). We want them to have the capacity for choosing and developing a happy adult life and for making a useful contribution to others. Usually, at least in the North American culture in which I have lived, we do not try to foresee or choose the highly specific components of that adult life. We do not choose their occupation, employer, marriage partner, home, furniture, number of children, clothing style, hair style, or personality traits. We assume that the healthy foundation produced by successful child-raising will enable the young adult to choose and build an appropriate life-style, career, and so on. My children do a much better job of choosing for themselves than I could have done. My daughter worked for L'Arche and is now studying to become a Protestant minister; I lacked the knowledge to arrange these things for her. My son works in New York for a top-flight magazine: I could not have arranged this for him.

Similar principles apply to the development of human civilization. How can one of us, with our limited knowledge, plan a total, detailed, positive path for all of humanity? We *can* do two things, though. As a foundation, we can work toward a civilization that is healthy, flexible, successfully avoiding the worst risks, and coping effectively with the most significant problems. Also, we can foresee or choose *some* of the areas that will most likely be part of a highly positive future, and we can foster those areas and support their development. Indeed, much progress is already being made in improving many aspects of human life and culture.

Everyone has their own choices of particularly hopeful and significant directions for positive change. Countless organizations, groups, and movements in the world are devoted to countless causes, improvements, changes, paths, directions, and strategies. Here are my top ten choices for significant, positive, long-term goals for human civilization. I make no claim that they are more worthy of support than someone else's choices. For me, though, these are the ten highest priority goals for moving toward a positive future-listed here in fairly random order.

1. A dramatic increase in the proportion of people who can have adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, health, and freedom from backbreaking work and extreme poverty.

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

2. While growing up, most children in the world will receive adequate love, attention, and opportunity to learn. They will not suffer from violence, sexual abuse, unduly heavy or degrading work, grinding poverty, malnutrition, nor anything else likely to inhibit their developing into reasonably effective, healthy, happy, cooperative adults.
3. Breakthroughs and major advances in humanity's total body of knowledge about the universe, life throughout the universe, evolution, human history, our place in the universe, and potential futures. Better ways of figuring out whether a supernatural God, major spirits, Satan, major psychic phenomena, life after death, and reincarnation actually exist in reality “out there” or are simply inner human experiences and wishful fantasies.
4. Most people will have adequate motivation, encouragement, opportunities, and competence for learning a wide variety of knowledge, insights, and skills. Learning and wisdom will be widely treasured and fostered. Students and the general public will have access to humanity's accumulated knowledge and to various experiential techniques and other methods of learning and change. Most people will be able to think clearly, flexibly, creatively, and skeptically about social issues, ethical controversies, and the various beliefs promoted by others.
5. Widespread freedom of speech, assembly, inquiry, and political opinion. Most individuals, groups, and subcultures will have the maximum amount of liberty, choice, self-determination, creativity, and opportunities (and the minimum amount of external restriction, control, and repression) that is possible without unduly threatening social stability, law and order, the rights of others, the environment, or the future flourishing of human culture. The powers and interventions of governments and political leaders will be clearly and effectively limited. No organization or religion will interfere in the lives of non-members or involuntary members. A diversity of life-styles and subcultures will result, along with a diversity of powerful visions of a very positive future.
6. No second-class citizens. Virtually no prejudice or discrimination on the basis of gender, age, sexual behavior between consenting adults, disabilities, appearance, ethnic background, etc. Everyone is free to contribute and to be a full-fledged member of society.

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

7. A significant improvement in individual happiness and well-being. This could include self-esteem, good mental health, personal growth, enlightened values, thoughtful behavior, opportunities for nourishing and caring relationships, competence at goal-setting and life-planning, inner serenity, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Foster the finest human values, purposes, symbolism, capacities, awe, wonder, curiosity, arts, music, joys, inspiration, and creativity.
8. Develop ethical and moral principles (and norms and laws) based on what is most beneficial for the continued flourishing of human civilization over the next few decades and beyond. Take these principles very seriously in any debates or decisions on public controversies, such as nuclear weapons, terrorism, limiting family size, birth control information and methods, thoughtful suicide, euthanasia, and research to prolong the human life span.
9. Maximize civilization's gains from the major new technologies that emerge; avoid or minimize any major negative side effects. These new technologies may include genetic engineering and biotechnology, intelligent robots, artificial intelligence, space exploration, and space settlement. Jim Dator (1987) has suggested that the new technologies might even include “electronic and post-electronic cybernetic systems..., new intelligence, new life forms, and eventually post-homosapiens.”
10. Achieve successful contact with intelligent life and advanced civilizations in other parts of our galaxy. Because a richly detailed encyclopedic radio message or face-to-face contact would have such an extraordinary impact on our civilization, chapter 7 is devoted to this possibility.

Moving ahead with these ten goals would certainly contribute greatly to humanity's well-being and happiness. Progress is already being made toward many of these goals. Surveying the total panorama of human activity, one can spot inspiring and successful examples of development projects, child-raising approaches, new knowledge and insights, learning, sudden increases in freedoms and rights, reduction of discrimination, constructive movements, effective organizations, futures awareness, cooperation, altruism, and caring. Our task now is not only to avoid losing

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

what the previous hundred generations intentionally or unintentionally built up for us, but also to build an even better future on that foundation.

### Other Lists of Priorities

The general importance of looking ahead at least 50 years when setting priorities has been emphasized by several futurists in their writing. Particularly notable examples include Walter Truett Anderson (1987), Kenneth Boulding (1985), Lester Brown and others (1990), Nigel Calder (1978), Garrett Hardin (1972), and Jonathan Schell (1982).

A few writers have gone even further and have listed particular goals and priorities. Ervin Laszlo (1978) provided a comprehensive survey of humanity's goals. Harold Linstone (1984) listed five long-term priorities ("the most vital challenges we face"). These are to (1) avoid a nuclear holocaust, (2) avoid an environmental catastrophe, (3) avoid internal decay in our society, (4) enhance opportunities for creativity, and (5) support the self-development of the Third World. Bertell (1985, p. 294) listed 16 "world issues ranked in order of seriousness by the Global Futurist Network." I suggested three broad clusters of fundamental priorities in a *Futures* essay (Tough, 1986a). Priorities were discussed by several contributors to a print symposium on the twenty-first century, particularly Mario Bunge, Joe Chuman, Herbert Hauptman, and E. O. Wilson (Kurtz and others, 1988). A survey of Nobel laureates found that their top three priorities were population, war, and the environment (Didsbury, 1990, p. 8).

A public opinion survey of Canadians asked them to evaluate a list of specific international problems by ranking their importance as threats to Canada's security (Munton, 1989). Global pollution and international crime were rated highest, followed by the spread of diseases, financial and monetary instability, terrorism, trade conflicts, a major war, and human rights abuses. Poverty and hunger received the lowest rating.

A survey of 1346 opinion leaders in the U.S. asked, "What programs or plans should be undertaken to improve world society during the next twenty years?" The items rated highest were population control, disarmament and arms control, improved universal education, economic development and cooperation, and peace. Asked what steps individuals should take to prepare themselves for the future, these opinion leaders

## CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

placed education first, followed by “learn about world issues” (Gallup, 1984, pp. 163-164).

From 22 interviews, Kidder (1987, p. 195) developed a list of six vital issues “to which humanity must devote its full attention and its unstinting resources.” These are the threat of nuclear annihilation, the danger of overpopulation, the degradation of the global environment, the gap between the developing and industrial worlds, the need for fundamental restructuring of educational systems, and the breakdown in public and private morality. The *Christian Science Monitor* then convened a group of 35 people from 12 nations to select four key priorities, along with particular goals and strategies for each (Kidder, 1989); their four priorities were the North-South gap (including population), East-West relations, environmental degradation, and ethics.

Michael Marien (1990, pp. 108-183) summarized 36 lists of priorities, largely American. He organized these agendas into four categories: globalist/environmentalist, conservative/libertarian, progressive/left, and liberal/moderate. Based on his extensive coverage of the previous year's literature, Marien also provides an annual list of his top ten hopes and fears. He hopes that this activity will “stimulate and inform other listings of hopes and fears as a way of prioritizing problems and possibilities, and helping people to pay attention to what is most important” (Marien, 1989, p. vi).

One of the most insightful and thoughtful papers on humanity's priorities was written more than 20 years ago. John Platt (1969) classified world problems and issues by magnitude, seriousness, and potential impact. His “grade 1” priority was to avoid total annihilation from nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare. His grade 2 priority was to avoid great destruction or change (physical, biological, or political) through failing to deal adequately with the combination of poverty, hunger, ecological balance, and population growth. Grades 3-5 were decreasing levels of seriousness (number of people affected multiplied by degree of effect), grade 6 problems were important but adequately researched, grade 7 consisted of exaggerated dangers and hopes, and grade 8 listed overstudied noncrisis problems. Although it is easy today to criticize several of Platt's choices and omissions, I cannot recall ever seeing such a precise and comprehensive effort to rate humanity's priorities.

We began this chapter with a crucially important question: How can we achieve a satisfactory future? We have seen that many others have wrestled with this question. Most of them have emphasized the priorities

## HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE A SATISFACTORY FUTURE?

outlined in this chapter: (1) rapidly expand our knowledge and ideas about world problems, comprehensive solutions, and the future; (2) help individuals around the world to care about the future and to make the necessary changes; (3) improve planning and governance, and adopt a sufficiently long-term perspective; (4) avoid the worst catastrophes of all (the next chapter discusses nuclear weapons, environmental degradation, and population growth); (5) foster positive directions and improvements.