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## ‘AGENCE FUTURE’ Futures Conversations around the Globe

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Authors: Maya Van Leemput  
Sponsors: Vrije Universiteit Brussel - Fons Pascal Decroos  
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Organizers: Independent researchers - Maya Van Leemput and Bram Goets  
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### Exploratory Research into Conceptualisations of the Future

Insight into the variety of everyday as well as specialist conceptualizations of the future is a necessary condition for mature and successful foresight practice. Agence Future or AF is a long-term project for basic exploratory research into the make-up and structure of concepts of the ‘future’, the use of images of the future and the possibilities for cross-cultural communication about futures. The project tests an innovative combination of approaches for futures studies, with the aim of contributing to the theoretical and methodological basis for foresight practice and to improving foresight capabilities.

### Collecting Futures Conversations

Futures are much more multi-dimensional than mere use of the plural can convey. AF tackles the challenge this poses with a multi-faceted methodological approach and an open ended research design to create an analytical overview of the diverse ways people talk about the future.

AF’s main objective is to bring together a **diverse international collection of futures conversations**. It asks how people from different walks of life and degrees of specialization can talk about futures more or less spontaneously and unprepared, with no guide-line other than the clear intention to discuss the future and a semi-structured questionnaire to help the process along.

Images of the future and futures thinking play a role in people’s varying approaches to everyday reality and to their specialisations. How the future is conceptualized in these contexts, underlies the real possibilities for foresight and futures oriented action today. AF examines what people say about the

future and how they say it. It undertakes to chart the characteristics of the logic and content of the futures conversations in its collection. The first stage of the project, presented in this brief, points out the wide range of possibilities for the ways people think and talk about futures. In the current second stage, the data collected is processed for presentation in a series of concept maps of the future.

The study also contains a set of **methodological objectives**. First AF tests interview schedules for futures studies by applying them in different cultural settings. Second, it tests the effects of combining methods from diverging fields of practice in social research design. Working in the fields of futures studies, journalism and visual arts with a single project design, AF offers an opportunity to assess the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach.

While each of AF’s components has its own specific set of objectives, their combination aimed to provide opportunities for popularizations of futures themes and to encourage public discussion on foresight.



## Academic, Media and Artistic Work

In the first stage of AF, field research over a **3 year period** from June 2000 comprising 382 conversations about the future were held in **30 countries in five continents**. A team of two - a scientist and an artist - developed the project independently and established a network of volunteer collaborators as well as corporate and non-profit sponsors. The project was conceived to combine its social research component with a media component and an artistic component. Project development and preparation for the field work took place in the UK, Belgium and Germany over a two year period prior to the start of the field research.

The **academic research** was overseen at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) by the Social Research group (SOCO) in conjunction with the Study Group in Technological, Economic and Social Change and Labour Market Research (TESA), both of the Faculty of Economics, Politics, Sociology and Management School Solvay. Six-monthly reports kept track of progress made during the field research, summarizing the general conditions for the research in different locations, the numbers and types of conversations held, the most notable characteristics of the last series of conversations and the most common subjects of conversation. The **media** component of the project highlights questions about the future for a broader public. AF featured primarily in Belgian and German media. Material produced by the team during the fieldtrip was published in De Morgen, Vacature's Science & Technology and Akademos as well as on sponsors' websites and in their publications. Stories about the project featured in the Flemish national press, as well as national and regional publications in Germany and several locations included in the fieldtrip. Additionally, cycling related publications paid attention to the project and a series of slide-show presentations was held in Germany. The team made radio- and television appearances in Belgium, Germany and Norway. Most media attention was concentrated around three specific periods, the first at the start of the field research, then during a 3-months stay of the team in Belgium after the first two legs of the field trip and finally during the exhibition held in Antwerp 6 months after the first stage of the project was closed. Since then a follow-up project for which 36 interviews were held in Antwerp generated a new wave of media interest. Two thirds of the interviews conducted for AF were filmed and a DVD with interview excerpts was put together for the Futurescales exhibition at which the material collected during the fieldtrip was presented to the public. The interviews held in Antwerp 12 months later were used to produce a video-document that was presented at

MuHKA\_media. During the research journey a website was kept up to date that reported on the team's progress on the road, it had a small but loyal audience. The creative and **artistic** component of AF is based on the experiment and adventure of a journey of exploration into the future during the first years of the new millennium. The research team did not just observe scenarios for the future, they participated in them, tested them out. In the first stage of AF, the team travelled with two recumbent bikes and high-tech equipment. They emerged themselves in their subject, searching for everyday, unexpected or unique perspectives on futures everywhere in the world.

## The Fieldtrip

The following table provides a chronological overview of the first stage of AF, the countries included in the field research and the total number interviews held during each leg.

<b>1998 – 1999</b>	London Brussels	Development and Preparation Publications in De Morgen
<b>Oct 1999</b>	<b>Egypt</b>	Pilot study, test ride and 8 interviews
<b>June 2000</b>	Belgium Netherlands Germany Poland Lithuania Finland Norway Denmark	
		35 conversations and 6 experts
<b>Oct 2000</b>	London Brussels	Publications in De Morgen
<b>Feb 2001</b>	Senegal Mali Burkina Faso Ghana	
<b>Jun 2001</b>	London Brussels	69 conversations and 20 experts 'Visions of the Future on Television'
<b>Oct 2001</b>	Germany Hungary Turkey Syria Lebanon Iran Pakistan	
		52 conversations and 8 experts
<b>Mar 2002</b>	India	41 conversations and 13 experts
<b>Jul 2002</b>	Thailand	Background and Preparation
<b>Aug 2002</b>	Australia	54 conversations and 9 experts
<b>Nov 2002</b>	USA	52 conversations and 16 experts
<b>Feb 2002</b>	Cuba Mexico Belize Guatemala Honduras	
		47 conversations and 9 experts
<b>Jun 2003</b>	Chile	
	<b>Argentina</b>	32 conversations and 5 experts
<b>Oct 2003</b>	Belgium	Analysis and Development

## Interviews and Orientation Conversations

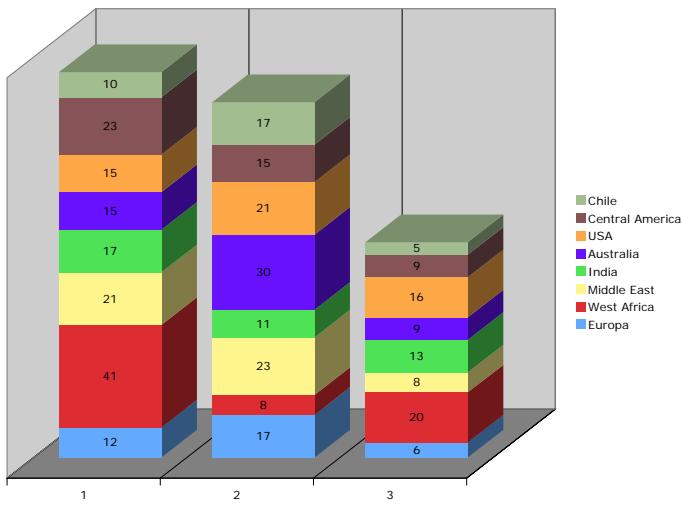
Three different types of conversations were held. The first 'regular' conversation type consists of in-depth interviews following a semi-structured questionnaire. The conversation

partners were individuals from 30 countries who did not consider their practice to have a specific futures orientation. In addition several kinds of orienting conversations were held. Questions from the questionnaire are addressed in the latter discussions, but not necessarily all of them and not in a speci-



fied order, room was made for additional questions. Orientation conversations were held with some of the first contacts made in each country as well as during chance encounters with passer-by and street-interviews. In-depth interviews with experts that apply a specific future orientation in their daily specialists practice make up the third group of conversations.

The interviews were held in 30 countries divided into eight groups. AF brought together a total of 382 conversations about the future. 154 conversations took place with respondents selected to include people with no previously known interest in futures topics. 86 were with experts in fields explicitly or implicitly related to futures. The following figure shows real numbers of interviews in each of the eight legs of the fieldtrip. Columns 1, 2 and 3 show the regular, orientation and expert conversations respectively. The researchers approached respondents directly and talked with them in their own settings. In selecting respondents a degree of stratification as to age, gender, class and ethnicity was applied. This approach benefits the media component of AF but is not representative for any of the population groups featuring in the collection and cannot be attributed analytical power.



## Personal, Local and Global Futures

When people are asked to talk about the future, there is a wealth of possible ways in which they might respond. Respondents can in principle say anything, talk about any aspect of future life, discuss any topic, location or time. This overwhelmingly open research question was tackled by using a

standard semi-structured interview schedule that could be adapted to individual respondents but always uses the same basic approach. The principle is to have people react first to the introduction of the idea of futures with as little input from the researcher as possible. Then respondents are asked to talk about personal, local and global futures. For each of these scales best and worst case possibilities as well as expectations are explored. In the last section of the interview, conversation partners are asked to represent an image of an extremely long term future. To close the interview they are asked to indicate where in their country the future could already be visible today.

The material was gathered so that it would include unique, exceptional and original approaches to the subject matter of the conversations. With such a wide ranging group of respondents, the formulation of questions in the questionnaire could not be the exactly the same in each interview. Respondents needed to be able to make suitably considered statements. Each of them needed to be able to make sense of our questions, and give replies that could be understood by the research team. This is an aspect of strategies and techniques applied in the interviews as well as a more general question of cross cultural communication.

## Time, Geography, Uncertainty and Change

To describe and compare the conceptualizations of the future that appear in the conversations, AF takes into account different characteristics of these conceptualizations. Results from the ongoing analysis are being published in peer-review publications as well as popular media and serve as a basis for the concept maps that are being developed.

In its analysis AF distinguishes between conceptualizations on the future in the realms of the private, professional and public spheres. Conceptualizations of personal, local and global futures are examined and their make up compared. Distinctions between common sense, everyday types of discourse on the future and specialist conceptualizations are apparent in the collection. Conceptualizations in which questions concerning the future are considered relevant and important and those that consider them irrelevant and unimportant are described. Interpretations of progress, change and development apparent in the conversations are examined in detail.

## Atypical Conceptualisations

The analysis of the data gathered is still ongoing. Nevertheless, findings concerning the combination of methods from different fields of practice and the nature of conceptualizations of the future have already been reached over the course of the first stage of AF. The unconventional **combination of meth-**

**ods** in AF has had a definite impact on the execution and results of the project. Different fields of practice offer different perspectives on the object of study as well as different motivations for questioning the object at all. Scientists often work in/for/with the fields of business or governance and such co-operation has more to offer than mere funding. It brings specific questions and points of view to the research design and

implementation. AF demonstrated that combinations with other fields of practice such as journalism, the arts or design can bring up other questions and points of view. The research does not provide **generalisations** on the views and opinions of specific populations or categories of respondents but shows the variety of possible approaches to the subject of futures. In presenting its findings AF highlights the typical as well as exceptional, highly original and unexpected responses to the questions in the interview schedules. It is not within the scope of the research however to make general verifiable statements for instance on optimism and pessimism of certain population groups or on the factors that contribute to this optimism or pessimism. Instead the analysis concentrates on the combinations of characteristics that optimist and pessimist conceptualisations display. Some **themes** such as **labour** and **geo-politics** appeared in all three parts of the conversations held with AF. On the personal scale and the local/regional scale, **education** and the role of national and **international politics** featured prominently. Perhaps surprisingly **science and technology** were emphasized primarily by experts involved in these sectors. Only a minority of other respondents pointed at their role as drivers of change and they have been mentioned only occasionally as objects of change. On the other hand, **material infrastructure**, from ICT to road networks and housing, appeared frequently in the conversations, both as motors and as objects of change. **Religion** did not appear as either an object or motor of change in any of the European conversations but in West-Africa, the Middle East and the US, the theme received a lot of attention. While interpretations of the need for **change** have been varied, optimism about the direction of change was greatest in those cases where uncertainty on the short term was most explicit. Many expert as well as lay conversations in the Southern hemisphere tackled interpretations of **development**. Respondents have talked both about motors of development such as the economy, geo-politics and national politics as well as the desired outcomes. While most respondents equated development with progress, some expressed doubts about the meaningfulness of **progress** in domains such as warfare and medicine, as long as it takes place without reference to progress necessary in domains such as equity and sustainability. The make-up of conceptualisations of change, development and progress is the subject of ongoing analysis of the material gathered with AF. As part of the overview of the

scope of the conversations, the periods of **time** respondents mentioned in the conversation were tabulated. The future could be any time beyond now, but in daily life people think about the immediate future more often than about a time beyond the life time of say our unborn grandchildren. After looking at what period of time people talk about spontaneously, AF concentrated on ways people deal with questions about time ranges beyond those immediate horizons and their own life time. People's conceptualisation of the future most often does not concern a precise 'point in time'. People discuss a certain time span, rather than a precise moment. Usually certain events or processes are central to the discussion and it is the location of these events and processes 'somewhen' in the future that determines the time scope of the discussion. This has been a challenge to code for analysis. Lists of different interpretations of time horizons have been drawn up that indicate that personal or family time does overlap in part with political and scientific time but that it is experienced quite differently.

### Media Coverage, Public Discussion and Concept Map Preparation

AF's outputs that derive primarily from the media component of the project include almost 100 print media articles, more than 20 radio and television discussions on the project, the website, an exhibition and two DVDs, presented in an art-gallery and the Museum of Contemporary art in Antwerp. The outputs of the academic work include several peer-review articles as well as materials for workshops and seminars. The presentation of concept maps is to be prepared by November 2007. AF has succeeded in bringing its subject matter to a broad non-specialist audience in Belgium and Germany and has also received attention in several locations included in the fieldtrip. It has stimulated public discussion on foresight in several contexts in Flanders and elsewhere. Opportunities are sought to present the finalized analysis and concept maps in policy contexts. These are intended to provide insight in the foresight capacities present in individuals and the potential of the combination of different fields of practice to inform the set-up of participatory foresight for policy development.

## Sources

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