

Workshop on Generating Youth Sustainable Futures 22-24 February 2023

Sponsored by GCI/FEFA/WSG

Introduction

The University of the Witwatersrand's Global Change Institute, in collaboration with Taya Risha Digital Governance, Future Africa, Future Ecosystems for Africa, and Youth@SAIIA held a three-day futures literacy lab at the Wits Club from 22nd to 24th February, 2023.

The main aim of the workshop was to provide space for deploying collective intelligence to the exploration of the reasons and methods humans use to imagine the future. Specifically, this Lab explored the sources and implications of imagining extinction for intergenerational relationships (including an emphasis on youth agency) towards the realization of sustainability. These aims are arguably central in considerations of sustainable biodiversity in Africa.

Objectives

The main objectives of the Futures Literacy Lab were to:

- Share information about youth-engaged efforts in futuring, particularly with reference to global change;
- Begin contributing towards a 'youth, next-generations sustainable futures plan';
- Explore opportunities for collaboration; and
- Build the futures literacy of the teams to encourage more intentional and sustainable 'use' of the future

Wits Involvement

Wits Staff

Distinguished Professor Coleen Vogel and Geci Karuri-Sebina, Associate Professor (Digital Governance, Coordinator | Civic Tech Innovation Network | Wits School of Governance and Coordinator | Tayarisha African Centre of Excellence in Digital Governance) facilitated the hosting of the workshop, with Professor Sally Archibald and Associate Professor Laura Pereira (in absentia).

Professor Archibald and Associate Professor Pereira are Co-Principle Investigators for the Future Ecosystems for Africa project at the Global Change Institute (GCI) funded by the Oppenheimer Generations Research and Conservation, which co-funded the Futures Literacy Lab. Ms Heidi Robertson provided administrative support. Dr. Memory Reid, a post-doc and researcher in the GCI working on the nexus between food, water and energy was also in attendance.

Wits Students

Two PhD students from the GCI, Joyce Ojino and Mulako Kabisa were part of the co-design team for the Futures Literacy Lab together with other members of the GCI.

The workshop was led by Dr Riel Miller (pictured below). Dr Miller is the former Head of Futures Literacy at UNESCO where he established the Global Futures Literacy Network and its 30+ UNESCO Chairs in Futures Studies/Futures Literacy.



Dr Miller is a globally experienced, leading expert in the field of futures studies. He has assisted organizations around the world, including the OECD, governments, scientific organizations, and industry, to “use the future” more effectively. Dr Miller is an accomplished keynote speaker and facilitator. He currently holds Senior Scholar positions at the universities of: Corsica; Ecole des Ponts Business School; New Brunswick; Nordic institute for studies of innovation, research and education (NIFU); and Stavanger where he is actively involved in advancing the theory and practice of futures literacy. He is also an Associate of the Wits School of Governance’s Tayarisha African Centre of Excellence in Digital Governance, within its Anticipatory Governance programmatic focus.

The outcomes of the workshop are shared below:

Day 1: The first day of the Lab was a brainstorming session with the co-design team working in preparation for the main workshop, to explore topics for the futuring exercise. Working in a co-designed way, and after collective deliberations amongst partners, it was decided the theme of the activities would be “The future of intergenerational value inheritance”. The focus of the exercise for the days lab work would center on what the role ‘value’ plays in present day efforts for sustainability and futures sustainability? What factors configure value?, and finally, How are and may these values be passed on in preferable envisioned futures?

From the meeting preparations it was also decided that more youth were needed ‘in the room’. Deciding who and what the ‘youth’ are and who should represent the youth are key themes in many youth and sustainability deliberations (Vogel et al., 2021a and b). Several youth were drawn into the workshop with GCI and SAIIA partners.

The co-design session was followed by a public lecture presented by Dr. Riel Miller on “Future Literacy – what possible roles and visions for Africa’s youth”. A question and answer session followed in which questions on how to value things and people in a changing world; how

scenarios play a role in a world targeted towards imagination and if there is anything wrong with having utopian visions of the future were asked. The lecture concluded with two key thoughts: the two legs of scenarios and imagination need to be equally used to make the current brittle systems more agile to unknowable futures; and that one way to avoid killing innovation for alternative futures, when it challenges existing power structures, is if the dominant systems became benign otherwise more transgressive efforts may be required.

Day 2: The second day was the beginning of the actual public living lab. It began with an ice-breaker session using the Polak Game to initiate conversations about how Lab participants viewed the future (positive or negative) and how much agency they felt they had on the future. This was followed by exercises on probable futures and preferable futures. Causal Layered Analysis was used to unpack the unquestioned understanding, actors, systems, and myths/metaphors of the envisioned futures. These exercises were followed by presentations from the four groups present during the Living Lab.



Ice-breaker session



Group exercises: Probable and preferable futures

A session on *reframing* was used to open up the imaginations of the participants. A prompt was given in which participants were asked to envision a future in which there were no familial linkages and influences to then imagine how the inheritance of values may appear. This reframing utilised Causal Layered Analysis for the envisioned futures (Miller, 2018). The question posed was: "What object from 2050 would you bring back to 2023 to explain what is happening in the future?". The object was determined using card prompts with three themes – Object, Mood, and Terrain. All groups used arts-based methods to explain their envisioned futures using an object from that future in the present.



Skit: Children visiting the baobab tree to understand their connection with a past where people still had biological parents

After the presentations, the participants were put in pairs and advised to take a 30-minute walk to discuss what they had learned from the visioning exercise. The day then ended with sharing of thoughts from the participants on what they had learned from opening up their imaginations using the tools from the Living Lab. In preparation for the next day's activity, the participants were tasked to think about how futures thinking could be infused into their ongoing work.

Day 3: The final day of the workshop involved a discussion of the work Lab where participants were engaged in, sharing their own research, projects and activities and considering how futures literacy methods could be directly used in each of their projects. There was a large variety of work shared and presented that included food systems, climate modeling, urban planning, design, biodiversity, and sustainability activities in secondary schools.



Reflections on the possible uses of futures methods



Showcase of student videos exploring the future

The final discussion for the day was to find ways for next steps and to find ways of how potential futures literacy labs could be used in global change research (including FEFA research) and see how these could be prepared. Two proposals were made for possible future activities: The future of creative sustainable communities and the use of futures methods in ongoing secondary school sustainability activities.



Participants on the last day

The lab and activities opened up critical considerations of the 'future' and what and how our values and visions of the future (particularly) youth change agents play in shaping future landscapes of change (e.g. environmental, cultural and socio-economic) in Africa and southern Africa. The support and funding from the organisers and sponsors is gratefully acknowledged.

The organisers thank all the funders and look forward to 'future' research for a sustainable and thriving generations moving forward:





in partnership with



For further information kindly contact Mulako Kabisa and Coleen Vogel, GCI.

References:

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