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# Foundations of the Social Futuring Index<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper presents a new, multidisciplinary concept called “Social Futuring” and introduces an index based on this concept, entitled the “Social Futuring Index”. Settled into the intersection of philosophy, psychology, sociology, political theory and geopolitics among many other fields of social sciences social futuring and its application as an index addresses both academia and policymakers.

In the present article the concept is explained and then placed in the broader context of social sciences. We highlight that the most unique characteristic of social futuring is its fixed normative, analytical and discursive framework, the center of which is “a good life in a unity of order”. Finally, we present the key elements of the index that are currently under construction.

*Keywords: social futuring, social entities, Social Futuring Index, good life, normative standards.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is meant by “a good life in a unity of order” and what we expect a nation or country to provide for its citizens in terms of a good life is a question dating back at least to Ancient Greece. The traditional yet more modern approach simply looked at a country’s GDP and assumed that GDP and welfare were closely related so that more GDP implied more human welfare. Today that approach is called into question from a range of intellectual perspectives, each generating its own branch of research around its specific area of critique. New measures have emerged to more completely capture the notion of “better”, “welfare” and a “good life” from happiness indices to measures that incorporate environmental sustainability, all efforts to get a more complete picture.<sup>2</sup>

Each of those critiques brings a specific perspective, however. The happiness literature attempts to measure people’s personal psychological wellbeing. Sustainability measurements focus on environmental wellbeing and long-term viability. Other indices focus on aspects of the political system like rule of law and others still continue to look at traditional economic indicators. But each function in isolation, in silos that are separate from each other, in an effort to better understand a particular aspect of society and social development.

<sup>1</sup> The present study is the updated and advanced version of the working paper entitled “The Concept and Measurement of Social Futuring” (Aczél et al. 2020). The authors express their gratitude to Pál Bóday, Eszter Deli, Judit Sebestény and Péter Szabadhegy for their valuable contribution to the final form of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> See Csák (2018) Introduction for greater detail about the concept of a “good life in a unity of order”.

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Social futuring represents a new, multidisciplinary approach that provides a holistic overview to measuring a social entity's ability to strategically plan for and sustain itself into the future while attempting to maintain the broad goal for its constituent members of achieving a "good life".

Environmental science is probably the furthest along in terms of obtaining widespread acceptance of the need to consider its modern critique on traditional measures of growth and wellbeing (Kocsis 2018). Sustainable economic development, for example, includes the environmental impact of economic development so that the environmental costs are incorporated into any economic cost-benefit analysis. The fundamental question being addressed by this is: how can we grow economically and yet also 'future proof' today's environment so that it is sustained – or even added to – for future generations.<sup>3</sup> From a process point of view, social futuring may be thought of as taking each discipline and asking how it can be made sustainable in the way that one future proofs a building or other physical object or system.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than treating each topic in a silo, however, social futuring attempts to bring their key insights under one roof and asks how this could be done for a society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> To do that, one first needs a common social goal against which to measure the current position and hence allow for a means to measure progress over time. As a first step, social futuring returns to the classical perspective of "a good life in a unity of order" as the broad notion of welfare in a society. It uses this as its normative metric and basis for evaluation and this normative framework is one of the aspects that makes social futuring a unique approach.

<sup>4</sup> For example, there is a great deal of literature on how we might measure happiness in societies (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs 2019). To apply the sustainability challenge here, one would ask something like the following: how can we 'future proof' a society's level of happiness so that its current level or even more happiness is sustainably maintained in order that future generations might too enjoy or improve upon it.

<sup>5</sup> Kocsis (2020) compared the Social Futuring Index with eight other country-level indices, namely with Better Life Index (BLI), Change Readiness Index (CRI), Global Resilience Index (GRI), Human Development Index (HDI), Happy Planet Index (HPI), Inclusive Development Index (IDI), Sustainable Development Goals Index (SDG), World Happiness Index (WHI) from three different aspects, such as Nature, Society, Economy. As a general result of this comparison he has concluded that SFI offers a balanced but fundamentally social composite for decision makers and those interested in the concept of futuring. Thus, both the concept of social futuring itself and the Social Futuring Index (SFI) based on it fill in the gaps in its economic-social-natural interest and complexity. All this may be even more evident if we consider the Aristotelian-Eudaimonic obligation evaluation of the index (Csák 2018) and an earlier version of its possible matrix-like, double grouping of its dimensions (Aczél et al. 2020, 35), which are not discussed here. Among the major composites known today, the SFI stands out primarily for its social (human) emphasis – while also taking into account economic-natural aspects in a proportionate way. This reflects the philosophy behind the indicator: the initial impulse of futureing is social, affecting the system of economic-natural relations. Calculating and tracking it can enrich future-oriented decision-making with new perspectives.

At the same time our complex approach has the special kind of limitation of not being centered around a specific sphere, but considering society as a whole, rooted in nature, while treating economy as embedded in society and culture.

After establishing the appropriate normative objective, social futuring must find its unique place in the approach of social sciences and then determine the means of measuring a social entity's progress toward its stated goal in reality. This is done through the Social Futuring Index (SFI)<sup>6</sup>.

Social futuring is built on each of the key disciplines it incorporates. The Social Futuring Center (SFC) seeks to make field-specific research contributions around the concept of social futuring in the areas of philosophy, sociology, environmental and communication sciences, economics, future studies, geopolitics and political science. There is a need, however, to explain the core concept in a multidisciplinary way.<sup>7</sup>

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we present the key concept of social futuring. Second, we show that it is unique, and yet it incorporates elements of other well-established concepts. Finally, we present the key elements of the Social Futuring Index.

## 2. DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL FUTURING

The SFC defines social futuring as “a measure of a social entity's creative intent and potential to comprehend the ever-evolving world, its ability to get things done, to preserve and reproduce its way of life as well as to control its destiny in general” (Csák 2018, 22). This definition is broad enough to be applied to a wide range of social entities and yet precise enough to allow measurement. The definition starts with a “social entity”, requires “intent” and a forward-looking approach along with an “ability” to make changes, all with a single goal in mind. To operationalize this concept, we next clarify each of these components.

### 2.1. SOCIAL ENTITY

The subject of social futuring is the social entity, “(...) an organism as understood based upon the concept of personhood, which denotes cognition, intentional activity and self-consciousness, as well as an awareness and recognition of the self's state of mind (as distinguished from others)” (Csák 2018, 24). Social futuring focuses on social entities constituted by persons who are given the ability to interpret things, make conscious decisions and take action and who are “embedded” into various groups and social networks. These include, but are not limited to, the following: organizations, settlements, regions, countries, country groups and potentially nations.

<sup>6</sup> The first SFI will be released in 2020 and will first focus on a country-level assessment. Subsequent efforts will then focus on ways to measure social futuring at more disaggregated levels, from cities all the way down to smaller organizations like companies, NGO's and associations.

<sup>7</sup> That is one of the main the purposes of the current paper, which was grounded by previous publications, describing the normative (Csák 2018), analytical (Szántó 2018) and discursive (Aczél 2018) framework of social futuring. While the previous publications considered these frameworks separately, the present one handles them in an integrated manner.

## 2.2. INTENT AND ABILITY

In order to qualify as a social entity capable of engaging social futuring, however, the social entity must meet five *necessary* conditions (NC). They are<sup>8</sup> that it

1. is able to operate functionally (NC1),
2. is able to sustain and reproduce itself over a long period of time (NC2),
3. is self-conscious (NC3),
4. is able to formulate an actionable strategy for itself (NC4), and
5. is able to provide its members with a “good life” (NC5).

The keys here are three: first, the entity must be able to manage itself over time. Second, it must be able to formulate a long-term goal for itself. NC1 and NC2 establish that an entity exists and functions over time. NC3 and NC4 establish that the entity is conscious and can establish its own goals. Finally, NC5 ensures that the entity can provide the “good life”, which is, at a deeper level, the fundamental objective behind the whole notion of social futuring itself.

In many ways, the last condition, NC5, is also the starting point. If the entity is unable to provide its members with a “good life”, either because it lacks resources or the requisite structure to plan and manipulate those resources (or for any other reason), then it will never be able to fully engage in social futuring in the sense we have in mind. The requirement that an entity be able to provide a “good life”, in part or in entirety, restricts the types of entities we consider. For example, a city-planning group to build a bridge that is sustainable and future-proof would not count, but a city’s mayor or planning group to manage the city over the coming years to improve the lives of its citizens would count.<sup>9</sup>

To understand the other conditions, we first turn to NC1 and NC2. A biological organism can meet NC1 and NC2. That organism can react to its environment over time, eat and store energy for the future, procreate etc. And, the broader forces of evolution will, through the entity’s interaction with other entities and its environment, shape the organism today and shape it as a species over time. But we would not say that the organism ever engaged in social futuring because – to the best of our knowledge – it never became self-aware in a personhood and a social sense and it never defined its own long-term goals upon which it then acted. That is, the organism and its species lacked NC3 and NC4. Likewise, if a few people decide to form a club, they may pick a name for the club, define its membership and even establish its goals. These would meet NC3 and NC4, but until the club becomes a viable entity that can actually manipulate resources to maintain itself over time (i.e., meets NC1 and NC2), we cannot say that the club engaged in or can engage in social futuring. So, the entity must be “social” and self-aware. It must also be able to make a strategic plan for itself and be able to carry it out to some extent.

<sup>8</sup> Note that this list is a modified version of the one found in Szántó (2018).

<sup>9</sup> We leave the topic of what exactly the “good life” is for section 2.4. below, since the concept is deeply connected with the normative framework of social futuring.

### 2.3. FORWARD LOOKING

The ability to imagine the future, to progress towards the future and to arrange future possibilities are distinctive features of humans. This ties in both with the definition of social futuring as dealing with the future and with social entities being constituted by people who are distinct biological forms defined historically and philosophically on the basis of the notion of personhood. Furthermore, it is quite logical that if a group of people are to set long-term objectives for themselves, they must be forward looking. This is therefore one of the more obvious and logical necessary requirements for an entity to be able to engage in social futuring, essentially NC2 and NC4 in the above list.

### 2.4. THE NORMATIVE GOAL AND FRAMEWORK

All forms of welfare analysis must assume *a priori* a normative measure against which one can measure improvement or lack thereof. Economists assume people maximize utility, which is an individual-specific ranking of alternative outcomes. If utility is higher, then economists claim welfare has improved. But it has long been recognized and formally shown by Kenneth Arrow (1950), that aggregating utility is notoriously difficult if not entirely impossible in practice. As a result, many in the social sciences seek alternative measures of aggregate or proxies for wellbeing such as happiness, freedom, GDP frequently, equality and so on. In the end, if we want to measure progress, we need to assume the goal toward which progress is made.

The social futuring initiative assumes a broad definition that is grounded in the moral philosophical Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, which considers that “we are in some respects social beings, a genuine aspect of whose *telos* is participation in shared ends” (Haldane 2009, 231-232). The social futuring project is about the study of characteristics that make this *telos* more or less successful and starts with the assumption that the ultimate purpose of social entities is to enable a good life that is worth preserving and reproducing. Therefore, maintaining the “good life in a unity of order” is the starting place and ultimate normative objective for social futuring.

The notion of “the good life” is broad in the way that “utility” is broad for economists. Different societies and social entities may define the good life differently for themselves. As a matter of fact, NC3 and NC4 require that the social entity be able to define the good life for itself. Therefore, there is not a single definition like more happiness or GDP or consumption that the social futuring project or index relies on to measure “good”.<sup>10</sup> The “unity of order” provides the requirement that the persons in the social entity are indeed part of the social entity itself. This returns us to NC3 and NC4 which together argue that the individuals that collectively constitute the social entity are self-conscious as a group and themselves constitute the group. Based on these insights, in order to opera-

<sup>10</sup> This allows the SFI eventually to consider the cases of smaller entities like a company, association or church that might define good and wellbeing for its members very differently from another company, association or church. Likewise, cities might define “good” differently than countries and different countries might define it differently from each other.

tionalize the normative framework, the SFC established the following normative standards:<sup>11</sup>

- *Peace and security*: This is the minimum substance of a „unity of order”. It enables social entities to reproduce, to raise children and to provide for themselves and others in a safe environment, furthermore to make predictions, to set goals and functionally influence their future operation based on strategic assets.
- *Attachment*: This is essential for healthy bodily, psychological, intellectual and spiritual human development. The most basic unit of attachment is the family, which determines the consciousness of what a “relationship, dignity, equity, authority and hierarchy are; what is good and bad, just and unjust; what is love, gift and reciprocity” (Csák 2018, 37), however, patriotism and spirituality are also key dimensions of the standard.
- *Care* (material advancement and freedom): “The maintenance of material goods must entail the accepted practices of production, distribution and acquisition; use and disposition of private or public goods; extendable management skills; and, therefore an image of wealth and the nature of work” (Csák 2018, 37-38). Freedom is the ability of self-determination and self-reliance to actualize one’s potential and capacity to control their fate.
- *Balance*: This is a state of mind, an attitude towards life that reflects the equilibrium between the concern for the self and the care about others – that is, next generations. It is thus a prerequisite of the compound of wellbeing and generativity. Balance is about being free of unproductive societal comparisons and having the balance to give, lead and fulfil human life.

These four normative standards follow each other in a hierarchical order, meaning that without the minimum level of peace and security no attachment, care and balance is possible. Without the minimum level of attachment, no care and balance is possible. And last but not least, without care balance is also impossible.

## 2.5. MUST ALL CONDITIONS BE MET?

### *Sufficient Conditions and Partial Results*

Of course, meeting all necessary conditions, 1-5, defines the ideal and complete Social Futuring entity. In this sense NC1-NC5 are sometimes referred to as conjunctive prerequisites in that all five must be met simultaneously for an entity to be considered fully to engage in social futuring. But there are different levels, degrees or forms of social futuring that we might also consider when entities engage in some degree of ensuring their own future viability.

The disjunctive *sufficient* condition for the future viability of any social entity are that it be able<sup>12</sup>

- to bring about changes, and to prepare for influencing expected changes,
- to prepare to exploit the opportunities and neutralize the limitations of the expected changes and,

<sup>11</sup> See Csák (2018) for greater detail.

<sup>12</sup> See Szántó (2018) for greater detail on these conditions and their implications for social entities.

- to prepare to manage the risks associated with the expected changes.

The implication of these looser, disjunctive conditions is that there can exist various forms or levels of social futuring in which an entity can engage, while still being considered as social futuring and not just planning. The result is that there are three broad categories of social futuring:

- *Proactive* occurs when social entities seek to understand, bring about and influence the changes that are expected in the future. This is the most complete form and closest to complete social futuring.
- *Active* occurs when the possible agents of social entities are prepared to counteract the limitations and/or to take advantage of favorable opportunities of future change.
- *Reactive* occurs when social entities strive to manage the risks that accompany change.

### 3. PLACING THE CONCEPT IN BROADER CONTEXT

#### 3.1. TRADITIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCES

The distinction is most clear by starting with the social science most distant from social futuring. That science is economics. Economics, since at least the time Adam Smith's "invisible hand"<sup>13</sup> was formalized, studies almost the exact opposite of what social futuring aims to study. Social futuring examines the success of self-aware collective groups called social entities that define and strategically move toward their collective goal. Economics studies how self-interested individuals manage to organize limited resources without a central design through a spontaneous ordering subject only to the natural laws of economics. In the words of Friedrich Hayek<sup>14</sup> "...economics has come nearer than any other social science to ... show that ... the spontaneous actions of individuals will, under conditions which we can define, bring about a distribution of resources which can be understood as if it were made according to a single plan, although nobody has planned it, seems to me indeed an answer to the problem which has sometimes been metaphorically described as that of the "social mind" (Hayek 1937, 52). And elsewhere, more succinctly, he states "[t]he economic problem of society is ... a problem of the utilization of knowledge which is not given to anyone in its totality" (Hayek 1945, 520).

<sup>13</sup> Adam Smith ([1776] 1977, 421): "By directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it."

<sup>14</sup> The full quote is "...economics has come nearer than any other social science to an answer to that central question of all social sciences: How can the combination of fragments of knowledge existing in different minds bring about results which, if they were to be brought about deliberately, would require a knowledge on the part of the directing mind which no single person can possess? To show that in this sense the spontaneous actions of individuals will, under conditions which we can define, bring about a distribution of resources which can be understood as if it were made according to a single plan, although nobody has planned it, seems to me indeed an answer to the problem which has sometimes been metaphorically described as that of the "social mind"." (Hayek 1937, 52).

Economics starts by considering a single individual or a collection of individuals, each of whom form their own private and separate plans. They do not have a common plan and the economic question then becomes an exploration how these individuals manage to achieve so much without a common plan. Mancur Olson (1965) goes so far as to argue in his foundational book, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, that studying “collective action” requires understanding that even if self-interested individuals agree on a common interest, the group they form will not represent those interests by acting in some group-interest (Olson 1982, 17). He argues that “large groups, at least if they are composed of rational individuals, will not act in their group interest” (Olson 1982, 18).

Thus, a Hayekian-conceived economic order, or social entity, cannot engage in social futuring any more than the biological organisms mentioned earlier can. Such entities fail on necessary conditions NC1 and NC4 for sure and possibly NC2 as well, depending on how we define it.

The economic approach subsequently influenced political science as well, infusing it with an individualistic, Hayekian foundation. “The importance of Olson’s argument to the history of social science cannot be overestimated. Prior to Olson, social scientists typically assumed that people would instinctively or naturally act on common interests, and that inaction needed to be explained” (Oliver 1993, 273). “After Olson, most social scientists treat collective action as problematic. That is, they assume that collective inaction is natural even in the face of common interests, and that it is collective action that needs to be explained” (Oliver 1993, 273-274).

A range of modern social scientists, even in relatively traditional fields, have however begun to adopt alternative approaches. Easily included in this list could be Harari’s recent contributions to rethinking both human history and human future as in his works *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Harari 2017) and *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (Harari 2018), where he merges a long-term, macro-historical view with insights into human evolution to address the concerns all humans are facing and will face in the future. A similar, forward-looking approach, applied a little less broadly than in Harari’s exceptionally wide brush strokes, would be the work of George Friedman generally focusing on global geopolitical trends, best captured in print in *The Next 100 Years* (Friedman 2009). A final approach, applied to a cross section of human behavior, but not necessarily across time or with an eye toward the future, would be *Bursts* by Albert-László Barabási (2010).

The conclusion here is that – despite some recent innovations from those working in the vein of Barabási, Friedman and Harari – most traditional social sciences follow the economic approach of considering individual rational actors pursuing their own self-interest. The starting point is to consider individuals who have their own, not common plans. Social futuring, by way of contrast, starts by only considering a collection of individuals who have a common plan and then studies how that collective group achieves a broader outcome as defined by their plan.

### **3.2. NEW SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES**

There are other branches of the sciences that have gained prominence as separate fields in recent years. These fields share much more in common with social futuring and reveal that the intellectual location of social futuring is more in line with these newer approaches.



They are the study of resilience, future orientation and future proofing. Comparing them with social futuring helps clarify the areas social futuring shares with, or builds upon them and where it is distinct from them which is also summarized in Figure 1.

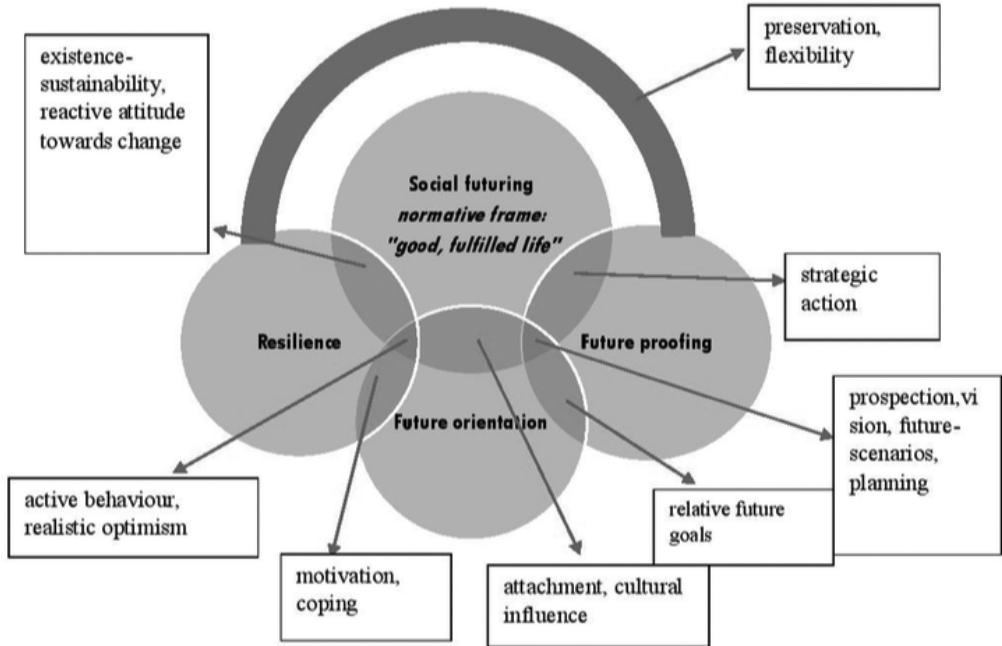


Figure 1: Overlapping and distinct elements of social futuring. From Aczél (2018, 71).

### 3.2.1. Resilience

Disciplines like physics, ecology and psychological discourse use the term resilience to mean flexible, beneficial adaptation to traumas, stress and difficulties, which occasionally involves the process of learning and development.<sup>15</sup> The first and perhaps biggest distinction between the concept (and study) of resilience and that of social futuring is that resilience lacks a normative framework other than the objective of “allowing something to persist”. A secondary distinction is that resilience generally views change as a negative influence to be resisted, while change is an opportunity for social entities engaged in social futuring, since it is necessary for them to achieve their long-term objectives.

To some extent, social futuring also includes the concept of resilience to the extent that it includes as a central issue preserving, protecting and reproducing “the good life”

<sup>15</sup> Aczél (2018, 54) reviewed some “(...) tests and indexes that have been developed to measure personal and age-related resilience (the Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale, the Response to Stressful Experiences Scale, the Dispositional Resilience Scale-15, the Resiliency Scale for Children and Adolescents, RSCA Global Scales and Index) use self-reporting or assessments primarily to find out how people cope with the challenges of reactivity, assertiveness, attachment, control and problems, each of them considered a factor in resilience.”

for its constituent members. In this sense, social futuring entities must identify a core identity that is made resilient while planning long-term for broader changes in an adaptive, evolutionary sense.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.2.2. Future Orientation

Future orientation intends to capture the degree to which an individual thinks in advance as well as capture his/her attitude regarding the future and how it connects to the present and past (Aczél 2018, Monda 2018). Cultures may differ on their perspective of time, whether it is linear or not and the degree to which it may be manipulated. Disciplines also differ in their perspective on time. People in more technologically-oriented disciplines and societies, for example, are more focused on performance, completion and achievement over time so that the future becomes measured in terms of performance generally.<sup>17</sup>

Based on Trommsdorff (1983), the concept of future orientation can be interpreted as an attitude of humans (and culture) referring to the future. It “expresses the mindset through which the conception of the future appears, and lastly it is used to mean such culturally and individually determined complex behaviors which contribute both to culture and to the individual and in which we can suppose a future orientation” (Aczél 2018, 64). Social futuring inherently includes future orientation, since it is primarily about the future itself. While it is certainly necessary for a social entity that engages in social futuring to have a future orientation, social futuring itself is about strategic action extending forward in time while future orientation is simply a matter of whether or not the entity looks forward and, if so, how far into the future<sup>18</sup>.

### 3.2.3. Future Proofing

Future proofing is a concept that has become much more common in technological and architectural industries. The core concept is that an investment into a product, be it a smart phone or a building, only makes sense to the extent that the generated product is sufficiently future proofed to survive long enough to provide a sufficient return on investment. In the case of a technology-based product, the threat comes from competitors developing new technologies that make current products/technologies obsolete. In the case of architecture, there is a technological component, but more importantly, the physical structure needs to withstand environmental forces for a meaningful period of time.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason, Figure 1 shows the intersection of the two concepts as representing the common elements of “existence-sustainability and a reactive attitude towards change”.

<sup>17</sup> Aczél (2018, 65) summarized The Future Orientation Index in the following way: it “explores future orientation using trends in information seeking by looking at Google searches for specific years written in Arabic numbers. The FOI expresses the extent to which internet users worldwide (by country) in a given year are more interested in information available from upcoming than previous years.”

<sup>18</sup> As shown in Figure 1, the two do share the fact that people’s attitudes and understanding of the future are heavily influenced by their culture as well as their attachment to the present and their core beliefs. As in the case of resilience, the biggest difference again is that social futuring starts from the premise of a defined social entity with a set normative framework and objective, whereas future orientation is entity-less and essentially non-normative in nature.

Therefore, we conclude that the essence of “(...) future proofing is that investors should prevent the creation of new technologies that are unfit for improvement and they should rather promote the creation of flexible open-ended systems that adapt to changing needs” (Aczél 2018, 69). The concept of future proofing, then, refers to the logic of informed strategic formulation and development that rest on well-grounded foresight. In the case of organizations, however, future proofing can be considered a given future-oriented way of promoting common thinking. Social futuring is, at one level, most similar to the concept of future proofing (as compared to resilience or future orientation). One can almost think of social futuring as the future proofing of a given social entity’s values and goals for its constituent members. As a result, they have in common that both are concerned with strategic action, have a vision for the future and, combining these two, necessitate some degree of planning.

The two concepts differ radically, however, in their normative basis and on their areas of focus. Firstly, future proofing has no normative basis other than survival of the current state for as long as possible whereas social futuring starts by establishing a normative framework and goal, that of “maintaining the good life in a unity of order for its constituent members”. Secondly, future proofing tends to be an industry-specific concept. That is, it has a very different meaning for each specific technological industry, since their competitors are different, while social futuring aims precisely to develop a common framework of analysis that can be used consistently across individual social entities, including businesses. Moreover, the concept of social futuring can also be much broader by considering very large social entities such as countries<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. THE SOCIAL FUTURING INDEX (SFI)

The study of resilience, future orientation and future proofing contribute new insights into how cultures differ and what parameters affect an individual’s or a group’s ability to engage the world around them over time. Social futuring aims to do the same while providing a normative framework for analysis. But, as a project, it is not merely an intellectual endeavor. The social futuring initiative set the practical goal of developing the SFI, a composite measure of countries comprising a number of dimensions and indicators in four pillars. The indicators of the index are selected from a number of internationally recognized databases which are provided by OECD, World Bank, World Value Survey etc. The focus of the Index is a ‘life in a unity of order’, which can be characterized by the aforementioned four normative standards, namely peace and security, attachment, care (material advancement and freedom) and balance, as it is visualized in Figure 2.

<sup>19</sup> The summary of the comparison and contrast of social futuring versus these other views can be found in both Figure 1 and in Table 1 (in the Appendix). Table 1 presents a more nuanced view of the differences breaking each concept into the components of its views on disruption, risk, process, view on opportunities, whether it is primarily reactive, active or pro-active, whether it is primarily focused on the individual or society, and whether it is motivated to change via incentives or more strategic in nature. Her conclusion is that social futuring includes all the categories of the other concepts except one: disruption. Otherwise, in many regards, social futuring is the larger category or umbrella, building on the other concepts.



*Figure 2:* The conceptual interrelations of the SFI's normative standards, dimensions, and pillars

The scores of the Index will be interpreted from the perspective of the worthwhile life as a standard.

The notion that an approach should be measurable and should provide a benchmark for progress, is not unique within the field of social sciences. Indeed, traditional social sciences have developed growth indices and institutional indices important to growth, freedom and the rule of law.<sup>20</sup> The newer areas of study like that of resilience, future orientation and future proofing also developed indices in their specific fields.<sup>21</sup>

While the ultimate aim is to develop generally applicable indices for social entities of all types and sizes, the social futuring project started by first focusing on developing a country-level index for three practical reasons. First, a country is about the largest social entity that has a defined leader (the government or state) that represents the constituent members, generally through democratic institutions. Second, there are existing data on multiple countries, allowing the first indices to be constructed from current data sources

<sup>20</sup> As examples, see the World Bank Development Indicators (World Bank 2019), or the Heritage Foundation Freedom Index (Heritage 2019), or the CATO Human Freedom Index (Vásquez and Porcnik 2018).

<sup>21</sup> For resilience, either of individuals or larger aggregates of individuals, there are: the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, the Response to Stressful Experiences Scale, the Dispositional Resilience Scale-15, the Resiliency Scale for Children and Adolescents, RSCA Global Scales and Index (Prince-Embury 2008, Prince-Embury and Saklofske 2012). For future orientation there is now The Future Orientation Index (Preis et al. 2012). Since future proofing is an industry specific matter, there are myriad industry specific metrics employed that conform to each industry's regulatory standards or are proprietarily developed to respond to competition.

rather than requiring that the research project solve two problems at once: constructing an index as well as generating new data. Third, in the same way that the concept of social futuring needed to define itself in comparison to other concepts or approaches in the social sciences, so too must an index find its home in contrast to other existing indices. Therefore, starting with countries that are part of other currently existing indices allows the SFI to distinguish itself by highlighting the differences and similarities to other, regularly published indices.<sup>22</sup>

The outlines of the SFI are presented in Figure 3 and summarized here, in order to further conceptualize the SFI and the pillars of the Index implemented by the SFC. According to this logic, the concept for the index is based around the following four pillars:

- Ecological-Geopolitical,
- Technological,
- Socio-Economic, and
- Cultural.

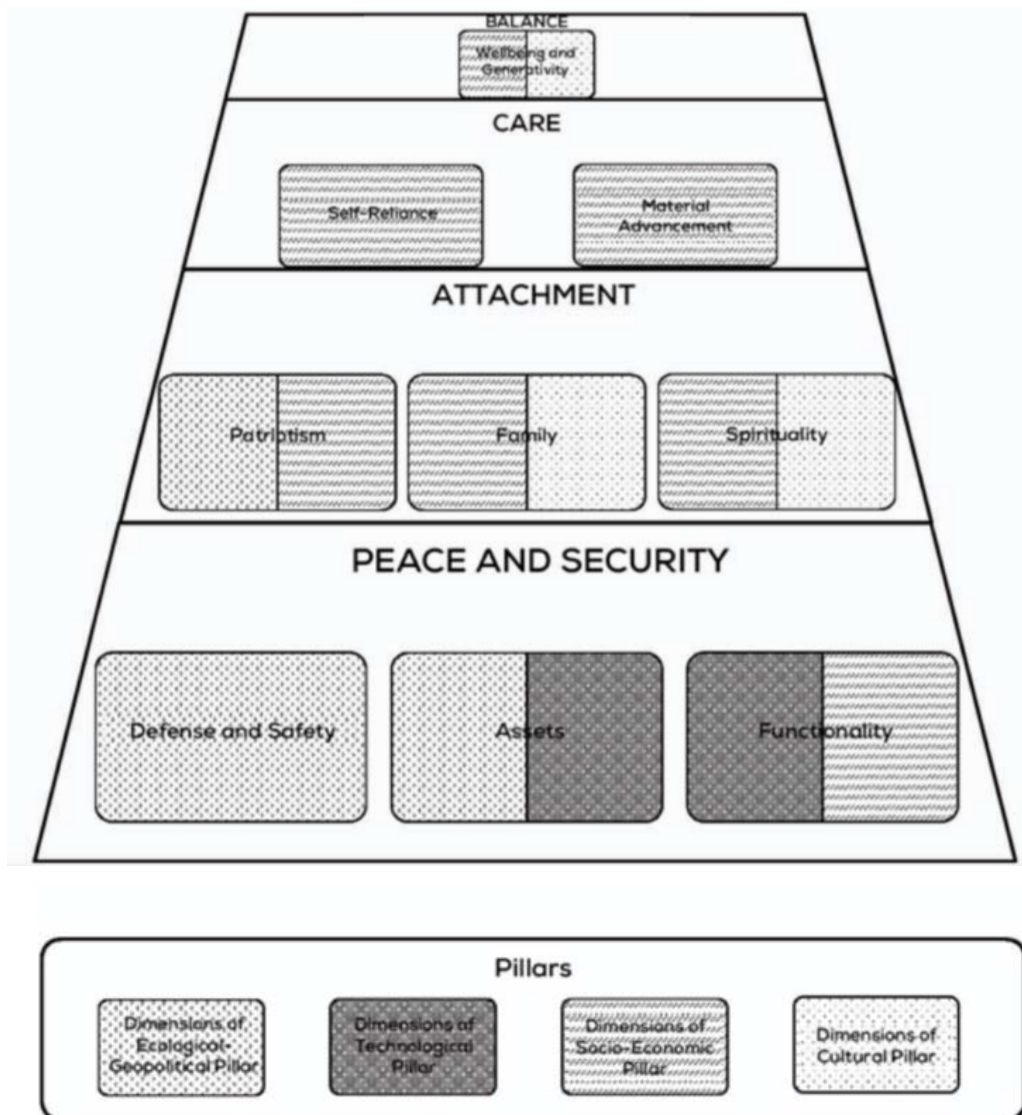
The *Ecological-Geopolitical* pillar captures aspects of a social entity such as its basic assets (energy, water, land etc.) without which it would not have resources to maintain itself. Moreover, it includes dimensions such as measures of patriotism, defense and safety to capture various aspects of belonging to the social entity as well as the assets/resources needed to engage in social futuring. The *Technological* pillar includes aspects such as a social entity's ability to network/connect, innovate and function generally. Basic functioning requires fundamental resources like clean water, while innovation includes a need for a legal framework for patents and intellectual property. Finally, the ability to network and connect can be measured physically, such as roads or digitally, such as internet access, ICT use. The *Socio-Economic* pillar includes classical economic areas like capital, labor and various expenditures as well as indicators of unemployment, schooling and GDP/capita. Socially, the core unit considered for a stable socially cohesive society that engages in social futuring is the family and therefore the SFI includes measures such as fertility, the number of single-parent households, couples with children, work-life balance, ageing and inequality. Finally, the *Cultural* pillar – in many ways the single dimension that makes the SFI unique, since its normative basis is one of the key aspects making the concept of social futuring itself unique – includes measures such as religiosity and following traditions.

As a result the four pillars and four normative standards outline nine dimensions:<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This last reason also allows us to test statistically for the difference between the SFI and other indices, adding an objective element to the claim that the SFI is unique.

<sup>23</sup> See Table 2 (in the Appendix) for the definitions and conceptualization of each dimension.

*Figure 3:* The normative standard based matrix structure of the SFI  
**SOCIAL FUTURING INDEX**  
 Good Life in a Unity of Order



Within each pillar and dimension of each normative level, the SFI includes multiple indicators. Each is weighed/ranked to provide sub-indices and then aggregated to form the overall ranking. This allows one to disaggregate the overall ranking to see where any specific country is relatively stronger or weaker. It provides information and potential guidance for countries wishing to improve their own social futuring efforts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the holistic concept of social futuring and the foundations of the Social Futuring Index. We first explained the basis for the definition of social futuring and argued that it is a conceptually unique approach in social sciences. We then showed where it fits within modern approaches to thinking about societies and the future. The element that was most consistently found to make the concept unique is that it is founded within a specific normative framework. The second most important element, especially separating it from traditional social sciences, was that the starting point of analysis is the social group or entity, which presupposes self-conscious and self-constituting social entities that share a common purpose. Finally, we elaborated on the general framework of the index, based on four normative standards, four pillars, and the nine dimensions they co-create.

According to our intentions, the concept of Social Futuring and the SFI may be of interest for the Academia, especially for those economists and social scientists who are sensitive towards the holistic, multi-disciplinarian and complex approaches of thinking about good life today and tomorrow. However, policy- and decision-makers may also benefit from the findings of the SFI. During the interpretation and dissemination of our country-level results, we will also focus on the practical applicability of our index, providing the distinction of the so called policy-sensitive indicators among the indicators our index takes into account. According to the information stemming from them, our best hope is that the points of intervention could easily be identified in different policy areas as well.

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APPENDIX

*Table 1:*  
Comparison of Social Futuring, Resilience, Future Orientation and Future Proofing.  
From Aczél (2018).

	Conception of change			Attitude to change			Vision as a condition	Entity/agency				Action	
	Disruption, risk	Process	Opportunity	Reactive	Active	Pro-active		Individual	Social	Cultural	Instrumental	Motivated	Strategic
Social futuring		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Resilience	X			X	X			X	X			X	
Future orientation		X			X	X	X	X		X		X	X
Future proofing	X		X		X	X	X				X		X

*Table 2:* The definitions of the dimensions of the SFI

**Defense and Safety**

The ability and the sense of duty to create and maintain the *integrity of a social entity's external and internal order*.  
The aim is to provide for a peaceful and safe environment that allows for prosperity and improvement towards a good life in a unity of order.

**Assets**

The creation and maintenance of *critical resources*.  
The aim is to provide a pro-active basis for a social entity to *prosper and improve* towards a good life in a unity of order.

**Functionality**

The systematic and creative *deployment of natural and artificial infrastructures*.  
The aim is to provide for a *state of the art and competitive* basis for a social entity to pursue a good life in a unity of order.

### Patriotism

The ability to *translate* interpersonal attachments towards belonging to greater communities.

The aim is to work and sacrifice for community goals by understanding that human beings can achieve more together than alone.

### Family

The creation of *baseline attachments* in parents, children and close-kin relationships and their utilization in social networks.

The aim is to *prepare* for an efficient and meaningful management of a social entity's natural and artificial assets, tools and means.

### Spirituality

The devotion of time and resources to *aspirations* beyond material wellbeing and individual existence.

The aim is to provide a *broader perspective* for a social entity to use natural and artificial circumstances and resources.

### Self-Reliance

The continuous improvement of oneself to *comprehend* the complexity of the human condition to be able to choose between alternatives. The capacity and ability for self-determination to actualize one's potential and to establish self-worth.

The aim is to use mental capacity to maximize room to maneuver for the benefit of our own and other loved ones' wellbeing.

### Material Advancement

The provisioning and maintenance of *material existence*.

The aim is to improve material circumstances without jeopardising *next generations' room to maneuver*.

### Wellbeing and Generativity

The management of social, *material and reputational* differences.

The aim is to be content with one's relative social position throughout life, to refrain from using narcotics and opioids.

The ability to *enjoy and contribute* to fellow human beings' advancement.