

**Risk, resilience, and alternative futures:  
Scenario-building at the World Economic Forum**

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**Abstract**

The implications of globalization and geopolitical shifts are central concerns in think tanks and other organizations geared to producing knowledge about the contemporary world. The World Economic Forum, a nonprofit international organization headquartered in Geneva, concentrates a large part of its work around the production of The Global Risks Report. The paper discusses the The Global Risks Report and the models of alternative futures outlined in the report, as examples of organizational scenario-building. The report draws on expertise available within the different communities and knowledge networks created by the WEF and builds on research, projects, debates and initiatives piloted by the organization. It is suggested that the risk scenarios articulate a particular form of ‘anticipatory knowledge’, geared to contribute to the shaping of political priorities and agendas. The scenarios aim to shape perceptions of what constitute ‘global problems’, and how they might best be addressed and governed and confer a degree of agency onto the organization and its partner organizations, i.e. the world’s largest transnational corporations. Hence, they contribute to anticipatory governance, i.e. governance geared to integrate imaginaries of the future into regulatory processes.

## **Introduction: Anticipatory knowledge and the clout of agency**

Grappling with the present global situation and anticipating future scenarios is a considerable challenge for contemporary political systems, organizations and citizens across the world. Current developments are globally interconnected and difficult to untangle. Reports show that the world is improving better than most pessimists know and that future dangers are worse than most optimists indicate. On the one hand, people around the world are becoming healthier, wealthier, better educated, more peaceful, increasingly connected, and living longer. On the other hand, glaciers are melting and coral reefs are dying, income gaps are increasingly indecent and youth unemployment has reached alarming proportions, intrastate conflicts and refugees are increasing, and half the world is potentially unstable. These facts of the ‘global predicament’ point in different directions and to interdependent assemblages of global problems. They call for comprehensive knowledge seeking and concerted political action.

Present-day global challenges constitute the baseline from which organizations such as the World Economic Forum, the Institute for the Future and The Millenium Project work. Organizations like these have multiplied in the last decade. Their foresight reports and future scenarios have climbed the agendas of international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Commission, made their way into global summits, such as the UN Climate Summit Meeting and the World Economic Forum Annual meeting, and entered into both national and transnational policy-making. And they have made headway into global news reporting and animated public debates. We ask: how are such scenarios made, and what can they tell us about possible futures?

Global future foresight is essentially about ‘what is, what ought to be, and how to achieve it’. It concerns our ways of understanding the world, postulating visions for the future, and crafting scenarios about how to get there. It is a crucial feature of organizations to attempt to look into the future – to foresee risk, challenges and opportunities, and ultimately try to shape the future. Anticipating the future speaks to the core of organizations’ aspirations to manage, shape and control the social, economic and political activities they are engaged in, now and onwards. Organizations employ a wide variety of sophisticated tools, relying on both qualitative and quantitative methods (metrics, indexes, forecasting and scenario models), in their efforts to imagine possibilities, estimate probabilities, sketch trajectories, and frame

choices. States, business corporations, and civil society organizations find knowledge about the future to be indispensable for a number of purposes. It is used to mobilize support for policy proposals, to ground decision-making in reasonable levels of facticity and predictability, and to project the appearance of professional credibility and legitimacy in an environment of contingencies (Nelson et al 2008: 546). And although such ‘anticipatory knowledge’ is often seen as informed speculation, qualified guesswork, or science fiction, its prevalence in organizational operations speaks for itself. Anticipatory knowledge has come to appear as an important prerequisite for organizations striving to position themselves as accountable for their actions, past, present and future.

The need for evermore exact and robust knowledge with which to tackle urgent global problems has thus ushered the demand for knowledge of a particular kind – knowledge that is anticipatory (Gusterson 2008), that looks towards the future (Guyer 2007), and that may assist in the creation of geo-cultural scenarios for the future (Hannerz 2009). This paper departs from an interest in how future foresight organizations attempt to anticipate the future, how scenario models are produced, and what they tell us about proposed solutions for tackling urgent global challenges. More specifically, it aims to look more closely at the work undertaken at the World Economic Forum (hereafter called the WEF or the Forum) on the topic of identifying global risk scenarios that can lay the ground for proposing future policy directions. The risk scenarios crafted at the WEF articulate a particular form of ‘anticipatory knowledge’, geared to contribute to the shaping of political priorities and agendas. The scenarios aim to shape perceptions of what constitute ‘global problems’, and how they might best be addressed and governed. They also confer a degree of agency onto the organization and its partner organizations, the world’s largest transnational corporations, by opening up horizons and by closing others off, hence creating a mandate for themselves to act. Thus, they contribute to anticipatory governance, i.e. governance geared to integrate imaginaries of the future into regulatory processes.

### **The World Economic Forum: ‘A response to a need’**

The WEF was first founded in 1971 by Professor Klaus Schwab as the European Management Forum, a non-profit foundation based in Geneva, Switzerland. As Schwab himself expresses it, ‘The World Economic Forum is a response to a need. We were not mandated by anybody.

We created... a response to a clear need in the international governance system' (interview March 2013). The organization was thus created as an attempt to contribute to 'improve the world' and to offer a platform for leaders of government, business and civil society to join forces in making the world a better place. Each January, the organization drew business, political and civil society leaders from Europe and beyond to the Swiss Alpine village of Davos for an Annual Meeting. What is described as the collaborative and collegial 'Spirit of Davos' has grown out of four decades of meetings of carefully selected leaders and aspirants.

The World Economic Forum has to date approximately 550 employees. Its headquarters in Geneva has been expanded to house the growing number of staff and to cater to the heightened security demands. As one approaches the entrance to the building, armed guards will check your identity, your WEF contact and purpose of the meeting. Passed the gate, one enters the building via a security screening portal, which checks your body and bags for potentially dangerous objects. Inside the building, a receptionist will again take your name, the name of your WEF contact, and you are asked to sign in to get your visitors badge. In the waiting lounge, floor to ceiling windows allow for a breath-taking view of the Geneva Lake, and multiple WEF publications are provided at leisure.

Regional offices, however, meagerly staffed, have been established in Beijing and New York. The highest governing body of the WEF is the Foundation Board, consisting of a smaller number of highly influential members. The activities of the WEF are funded by its 1,000 member companies, some of the largest and most highly ranked companies in their fields of business. This gives business a strong voice in the deliberations undertaken within the network communities of the WEF.

The WEF describes itself as politically neutral, in the sense that it is not tied to any national, political or partisan interests. Formally recognized as an international institution, it operates as a think tank, networking among and influencing corporate leaders as well as top politicians, NGO representatives and academics. Whilst it is most known for its annual meeting in Davos, it regularly hosts a large number of more informal and private meetings attended by world leaders around the world. Apart from the Annual Meeting, the WEF also sponsors several regional meetings, the Annual Meeting of the New Champions (targeting emerging economies), the Young Global Leaders Meeting (focusing on promising young leaders), meetings on the topic of social entrepreneurship, and scenario planning. It also works via

Strategic Insight Teams, who produce reports of relevance in the fields of economic competitiveness, global risk and scenario thinking. Moreover, the WEF strives to be and already functions as a private organizer for diplomatic efforts in a range of topics. North and South Korea held their first ministerial-level meetings in Davos, Hans Modrow and Helmut Kohl met in Davos to discuss the reunification of Germany, and the first joint appearance of F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela outside South Africa took place in Davos (WEF 2009). Reports, ratings and indexes are some of the specific outcomes from these activities, but most importantly the Forum works as the provider of the arena itself and its agenda. In the words of Geoffrey Pigman (2007: 2), ‘the Forum is fundamentally a knowledge institution; it affects the field of operations by causing the thinking of its members and interlocutors on problems and solutions to change and develop. The Forum’s story is a story of the power of words, ideas, and discourse’.

The WEF has since its inception built a worldwide network of people and organizations representing many parts of society, such as corporations, non-governmental organizations, churches, as well as national and international institutions. It has emerged as one the world’s most notable multi-stakeholder organizations and positioned itself as a catalyst of numerous public–private partnerships and international initiatives. In tandem with these networking and agenda setting attempts the WEF strives to be, and already essentially functions, as a private organizer for diplomatic efforts on a range of topics. It has evolved into a hybrid structure of a novel sort: ‘corporate funding, non-profit status, current and former government officials on board, and summits accorded the status of official diplomatic events’ (Khanna 2011:47). One of its central missions is the crafting of future scenarios. WEF meetings and the increasingly numerous initiatives that the WEF sponsors are vehicles for world leaders to figure out what they want and what they can do together and then find ways to transform the world. Executives, ministers, and NGO leaders leave WEF meetings with stacks of business cards and a division of labour to get the job done. In a sense then, the WEF gives all these leaders ‘homework’ (Khanna 2011:48), and extends its agency by way of mobilizing around joint stocks of knowledge and perceptions of desirable routes forward.

### **Anticipating risks: WEF staff as futurologists**

The World Economic Forum has positioned itself as a projector of futures in the format of forecasts and prognoses. The annual Risk Report is the Forum’s forecasting flagship, and ‘one

of the fundamental activities that the industries and communities will have to take on', as declared by then managing director Rita Lesley, with whom we met at the Geneva headquarters. The intention is to frame the Forum's own future activities, but also to 'raise the flag' early on for 'creeping risks', in the hope and anticipation of getting ahead of risks, before they turn into chocks:

'So, the Global Risk Report with its ten year output, instead of actually experiencing physically the shocks, is meant to sort of enlighten people that this is something that you might need to think about, because it will have implications on your own society; and if it does, how would you actually better manage it?' (Rita Lesley, interview 20120921)

As Rita Lesley continues, the report is intended to function as a 'diagnostics' tool, with the purpose of finding the solution space, asking questions like: 'what kind of action can we take', 'what kind of tangible interjections can we make' and 'How can we make sure that the risk management process is beneficial and not counter-productive?'

As the future cannot be observed, future scenarios such as the Risk Report are an interesting hybrid of fiction and facts, or at least something that could be treated as facts (Hannerz 2015). Identifying risk is a way of expressing the link between the perceived contemporary and an imagined future, and have in later years come to be a key feature within the industry of futurology. As an academic field and political practice, futurology was from the early 1960ies dominated by the forecasts and prognoses carried out by industrial think tanks and military interests, such as the Hudson Institute and RAND Corporation, and later on in Europe the Club of Rome (Andersson 2006). Fundamental to the rise of future studies was the belief that prediction was not a product of fantasy but a field of reason (Andersson 2006: 280). After the fall of the Berlin wall a new wave of scenario planning gained momentum. In the new situation questions were raised, with relief or anxiety, about what the future would bring. A small but lively intellectual industry rose to the challenge, creating scenarios for a born-again world. As the world turned, after for example 9/11, there would be more of them (Hannerz 2015). Think tanks have continued to be a significant constructor of scenarios. The WEF, with contemporary commenting and analysis of the future as core organizational activities, is one of them. The Risk Report, launched in 2005, is the cornerstone of organizational narratives.

## **Crafting the Risk Report**

Apart from texts the common future scenario builds on the most manifest level, on statistics, pictures, graphs and texts (Inayatullah, 1998). The WEF risk report is no exception from this trend. The reports come out as impressively laid out products, with texts and graphs intertwined in the narration of future risk. What is somewhat different from the common scenario is that this one is drawing upon evaluations from business, academia, media and so forth, not merely the WEF itself. Basically it is built on a survey undertaken each year by the Forum, through which experts from WEF communities can communicate what they believe to be risks in the coming ten years. It is mainly the experts drawn from the so-called Global Agenda Councils (EXPLAIN) that are the respondents of the survey, meaning that there will be people from the WEF member corporations, and other types of experts identified by the Forum, for instance scientists, politicians, thought leaders and civil society leaders. But in later years the more or less 13,000 CEOs taking part in the annual Global Competitiveness Report, also issued by the WEF, were asked to indicate the main five future risks, seen from their perspectives.

Rita Lesley describes the complexities of the report in the following way:

‘So we’ve got fifty global risks that we look at as a set, and then we conduct a perception survey over summer to fall every year, and then coming out from that we sort of identify the key emerging themes in peoples’ minds about the potential high-impact, high-likelihood risks for the coming ten years, and then we extract it into three different cases. It’s almost like telling a story around these risks.’

In the process, Rita Lesley and her team are first working on the set of risks that will form the basis of the survey. This year these risks were 50, but the number changes over time. When we met Mrs. Lesley they had just been changed from 37, in order to balance the risks internally. She explains that this was done since ‘some were much more macro, like climate change, and others were more like micro, like flooding, but we try to keep it on the same order as much as possible so there is comparability’. Later on the number of risks will change again. In 2015 the number of risks were downsized into 28 (WEF 2015). The risks as they appear in the report are constructed internally in Lesley’s team, but with the help of the communities of WEF, as well as connections to these communities. For the GAC-members it

is mandatory to participate in the survey, but apparently not all of them do. In the 2012 survey 449 persons had taken part as respondents, but all in all the GACs comprise around 1,500 people. In addition to this, other groups are also called upon to participate, both as respondents and commentators to the survey:

‘We position it as sort of an expert perception survey, so it passes the mark of what the Forum think passes for an expert. We do turn to the Global Agenda Councils – it’s mandatory for council members to respond to it – to the industry experts who are also part of the community, and the same for the regional teams, meaning sort of the governments and international organizations. So the primary pool of sample is definitely forum-affiliated. The secondary one is not a huge pool, but it’s the one that hasn’t necessarily officially worked with the Forum, but in terms of risk work, we’ve identified quite a lot of people who are very interesting, and which we are then trying to bring into the Forum. You know, we’ve got quite different processes to bring them on, so they’re not quite there but their opinions and perspectives are very valuable so we do engage with them too.’

The criteria for becoming a risk in the WEF survey, the report and later on something that the Risk Response Network will attend to, Lesley explains, are that it has global implications in the sense that it effects more than one region and more than one industry, and it has implications for people around the world, and it is something that cannot be solved by one stakeholder. In turn these risks can be of two sorts. The first is in the form of a shock. Lesley gives the example of the financial crisis in 2008. The second are the underlying factors, amplifying the shock. In the case of the financial crisis that would be the ‘sort of structural issues around the financing incentives, or there might be structural issues around how the financial market is organized’, as explained by Lesley. Neither of these two forms are static, in the sense that they can never be put of the list. If the creeping risk of ineffective antibiotics would be mitigated, than it would be taken of the list for that reason.

The Forum group working on the report is small. When we met with managing director Lesley, they were only seven, but as explained by her the group is in practice aided by a large number of people around the world. The role of the team, and the network it draws on, is to find the angle, figure out how to slice the report, and to make sure that the information is valuable. As Mrs. Lesley says ‘We can’t really be repackaging old news, but at the same time



w can't be too far out, because otherwise it becomes science fiction'. In this sense the construction of the risks is balancing act between at least two risks affecting their work. The first is to miss setting the light on something that turns out to be an important risk, affecting many peoples' lives, simply because it is not mentioned in the channels that Lesley and the team have set up. The second is to bring in something that is not a global risk in the eyes of many, but more something that some actor wants to bring into the discussion. There is of course a strong concern for many actors to get their specific interest into the analysis, being rated as a risk by the WEF. An important part of the team's work is therefore to validate and evaluate the importance of risks brought up by their many contacts. Rita Lesley explains:

All the experts that we talk to have one agenda or another. So for us, like, you know, it's also the agreement of the Forum to make sure that we're balanced and not inclined towards one risk or another, so we do try to make sure that we're looking at it more from a neutral background. We consult a series of experts to make sure that we're not actually listening to one set of people, with one set of idea that really gets pushed through. So we do really try to maintain that neutrality as we actually select them as well.

Keeping the risks that end up in the report neutral and non-political is thus of great importance for the team, since the WEF intends not to take sides. This rendering neutral (cf. Engle Merry & Coutin 2013) is a central concern for the WEF, not only around the Risk Report, but pertaining more generally to its many reports and statements. In the interest of 'improving the state of the world', as their slogan has it, they want the report to be brought in and used by other organizations. What these organizations do with the results is not a major concern to the Forum, only that they are drawn upon. They see themselves as raising awareness; it is for others to act. Their mission is thus to mobilize around key concerns, to incite operating agency onto others. When asked about what happens when the report is out, and what the Forum strives for, Rita Lesley describes business in various branches as those primarily picking up the results from the report. 'The value', Mrs. Lesley says 'especially for the partners that we're working with, is in the area where they get sort of a global scan of what the issues are and you know, allow them to do a temperature check or an assessment of what your health status is against this risk.' But the Forum also wants to raise awareness on the political side. One example is shaping a 'risk culture' in the region of Latin America. As Lesley says, this is all about explaining risks in the regional geo-political context:

‘First of all, it’s also about explaining the risks in the regional context. So we need to make it relevant at that Latin America context, and for people within Latin America there are different country contexts. So we need to translate the global risks into the regional, and also the country level. Then by doing that, we also need to get the key decision makers drawn into the fact that this something that they need to deal with, and that the country really needs to start working on it. We’re working on sort of a series of dialogues for the Latin Americas, to really test what methodology is going to be the most applicable, and most effective. So this is pretty much the work in the pipeline right now that we’re doing with them.’

The Forum thus intends providing a product as neutral as possible. However, constructing risks is not an undertaking that is void of underlying values, otherwise the collection would appear haphazard. Furthermore, as is clear for instance by way of the increasing and decreasing numbers of risks over the years, risks have to be constructed. This construction takes place in a value-based context. Moreover, the product relies on the identification of social forces, in order to map and explain what the risks are about. It is not possible to identify and communicate a risk without explaining some of its fundamental characteristics, and how the risk is to be understood in context. Those who read the report need some more help, guidance, in interpreting what is presented. This is all the more the case since the Forum has, in its own words, gone from ‘risk identification to thinking through risk interconnections and the potentially cascading effects that result’ (Risk Report 2015:8). These interconnections are not possible to establish without a narrative of what brought individual risks about. Underlying them is an ontological understanding of risks and how they are related to each other.

### **Underlying values: the equation**

Futurists come in many fashions, offering utopias and dystopias. The latter is more common, as the scenarios are intended to instigate action. The futurist then appears as a ‘fearmonger’, that warns for the end of times (Inayatullah 1998). But the futurist may also be a positive broker of ideas, solutions and projects. Within the WEF we find a mixture of fear and hope in relation to the future. Projections of the future are typically nicely presented in an appealing

layout, and there is a sense of glossing of facts. The key message sent out is that of problems that can be solved, not of troublesome futures. The future is here ripe with opportunities. Issues are presented, but tightly aligned is the promise of ways to handle them. In the following quote, taken from the annual report from 2012-2013, the sense of urgency, with existing systems, structures and formal institutions no longer sufficing, is immediately coupled with promises of opportunities.

‘We live in a fast-moving, highly interconnected world, yet our existing systems, structures and formal institutions no longer suffice. Pressing global problems can arise quickly and without warning. At the same time, new and unprecedented opportunities for global growth and positive change are emerging, ready to be harnessed for the future of humanity.’ (WEF, Annual Report 2012-2013).

The meta-frame in the Forum’s narrative of global risks and the future to come is ‘interconnectedness’. This is a term that underlies the narrative of the report and most central texts from later years. Risks exist in and by themselves but because the world is increasingly interconnected risks get multiplied in unprecedented and daunting ways. As explained in the preface to the 2015 report by Klaus Schwab: ‘Across every sector of society, decision-makers are struggling to cope with heightened complexity and uncertainty resulting from the world’s highly interconnected nature and the increasing speed of change’ (WEF 2015:6). In addition, the term ‘hyper connectivity’ is repeatedly drawn upon, indicating that ‘over the past years, the speed of transmission and the strength of interconnections have been increased’ to the state where communication has become a problem (WEF 2015:16). Risks, such as climate change, geopolitical uncertainty, rising inequalities, increasing national sentiment and the lack of regulatory mechanisms, are thus sharply intensified because of their inter-connectedness.

The main identified cause for problems related to hyper connectivity, and the un-ability to build more resilient societies, is the lack of a shared view on behalf of governments, business, INGOs, NGOs and so forth. Since the inception of the report, in 2005, the intent has been to foster such a shared view on the most pressing issues. Klaus Schwab, the Chariman of the WEF and its creator, writes that ‘the shared understanding of challenges is needed as a base for multi-stakeholder collaboration, which has seen increasing recognition as the most effective way to address global risks and build resilience against them’ (Schwab 2015, Risk Report, Preface). The concerns of the future can, thus, be mitigated by way of the WEF

getting all the important actors to share the WEF view of contemporary issues.

The interest of fostering a shared view is related to the fundamental idea within the Forum that it is possible to construct one picture of the future and of risks that ‘leaders’ from all walks of life could get to know, agree and act upon. Essentially the Forum believes that there are solutions that will benefit all in a ‘win-win’ way. In the beliefs of the Forum there are no winners, no losers and no power relations. Moreover, conflict among these various actors is a forgotten or forbidden idea in the WEF lingo. Divergent interests between groups, not to say classes, in how risks are to be mitigated, are not part of the value model of the Forum. It is a model devoid of power and conflict, built on assumptions of trust, mutual understanding and consent, in other words, dimensions of essentially harmonious or consensual relationships are to be aligned. In other words, it is an instance of what Nader calls ‘harmony ideology’ (Nader 1990).

The alignment of economic and social values has been a part of the WEF from the time of the first meeting in 1971 (see Garsten & Sörbom 2015). It has since been worked on and argued for in different versions. In the 2000s, the WEF launched something called the Davos Equation, in order to show the bond between the economic and social worlds:

‘We live in a world that is uncertain and fragile. At the Annual Meeting in Davos, global leaders from all walks of life will confront one basic fact: We will not have strong sustained economic growth across the world unless we have security, but we will not have security in unstable parts of the world without the prospect of prosperity. To have both security and prosperity, we must have peace. This is the Davos Equation: security plus prosperity equals peace.’ (Klaus Schwab, Davos 2004)

The Equation aimed to capture the idea of a balanced and neutral solution to global problems of all kinds: peace, health, education and so forth. The very notion of ‘equation’ implied symmetry, or balance, between radically diverging tendencies and interests that may be reconciled and brought into balance and harmony with each other. Thus, in this view parties that may not entirely agree on responsibilities or priorities, can reach a partial consensus about global issues and development problems. Underlying the equation was the understanding that economic growth can work in tandem with a responsibility for the social and natural environment. The equations came out of fashion a few years later, but the non-

conflict perspective did not. The essential idea is still, according to WEF discourse, that in the long run economic and social development is not possible without the other. With the goal of building and sustaining economic development in mind, the WEF wants to promote ways to mitigate global social risks, promote health for all, improve social welfare and to foster environmental sustainability. In this vision, economic growth and social and environmental sustainability are brought into alignment.

The idea of economic and social values as intricately related to each other, and as unattainable without each other, is something worked on in all the settings of the Forum. As phrased in the mission of the organization, the WEF is ‘the International Organization for Public-Private Cooperation’ the Forum wants to play a role in the alignment of different and sometimes divergent interests and values by the bringing together of groups and people from different spheres of society. In the 2000s, the concept of ‘global citizenship’ was added as a way of describing the relationship between the various groups (WEF 2011). As an extension of the stakeholder concept, it seeks to express the interdependence of all the groups.

### **Metaphors and myths: Alignment**

Within the Forum the Davos Equation is commonly understood as intrinsically linked to the multi-stakeholder approach, meaning that you need to bring together different types of major stakeholders from across the world to discuss global issues and to come up with ways of solving problems. The approach was established already in 1971 when the first forum was arranged, at that time called the European Management Forum. The approach had been laid out the same year in a book by WEF founder Klaus Schwab, *Moderne Unternehmensführung im Maschinenbau* (‘Modern Enterprise Management in Mechanical Engineering’). Schwab argued that the management of a modern enterprise must serve all stakeholders (*die Interessenten*), ‘acting as their trustee charged with achieving the long-term sustained growth and prosperity of the company’ (WEF 2010:7). The stakeholders here include the enterprise’s owners and shareholders, customers, suppliers and collaborators of any kind, as well as the government and society, including the communities in which the company operates or which may in any way be affected by it. In 1973, the participants of the forum codified the approach into a code of ethics, termed ‘The Davos Manifesto’. The first point in the manifesto states that:

‘The purpose of professional management is to serve clients, shareholders, workers and employees, as well as societies, and to harmonize the different interests of the stakeholders.’ (Code of Ethics – The Davos Manifesto)

The enterprise shall thus serve not only the shareholders and clients, but also employees and society at large. This is to be ensured by securing long-term profit for the enterprise, stated in the manifesto’s last point:

‘The management can achieve the above objectives through the economic enterprise for which it is responsible. For this reason, it is important to ensure the long-term existence of the enterprise. The long-term existence cannot be ensured without sufficient profitability. Thus, profitability is the necessary means to enable the management to serve its clients, shareholders, employees and society.’ (Code of Ethics – The Davos Manifesto)

As such, the multi-stakeholder model builds on visions of aligning key priorities and values from different actors. In the words of Klaus Schwab, corporations must align their economic activities with ethical principles:

‘Companies and their decision-makers do not operate in an open space. They cannot command as they please. Business leaders must meet economic, ecological and social demands. They are liable not only to one but to various stakeholders. If enterprises want to succeed at long term they need the trust of all the relevant interest groups. This can only be achieved if they are willing to align their actions with ethic principles. Those who believe that they can do without it must sooner or later reckon with the negative consequences.’ (WEF 2009:192)

So, how is the future constructed by the WEF? At the level of litany, how are we to perceive the trends and problems presented in the form of statistics and diffused through the WEF communication channels? What are the social causes proposed in order to interpret the fears and hopes put forth by the WEF? What are the deeper assumptions about the future that the WEF is broadcasting? How are issues framed in discourse practices? What are the guiding metaphors and myths in their discourse?

## **Concluding notes: Organizing the future**

Futurists are concerned about the nature of ‘the good society’, and a major goal for futurists is human betterment (Bell 2008:1). However, not knowing what human betterment is, or how it could be pursued, is a predicament of human life. People and organizations will need to choose to their path in order to find what will develop their lives, individually or collectively. For the WEF, as for most think tanks and other policy-oriented organizations, the future is often not as open. As a fundamentally political organization it attempts to mobilize others to make these choices, and may even be seen as tools for making these choices. But the WEF are more than merely tools; it organizes the future. It takes action for defining alternatives futurities, for articulating a preferred version of the future, and judging by its finances, the media attention and the credibility given to the organization by the presence of top-level politicians, business and governmental bureaucrats, it does so with a measure of success. Measuring media attention and hype does give the full picture, but a part of it. It is probable that some of the organizing efforts will have effect. They will, most likely, have consequences for what is possible to think and suggest in terms of policy making. That is it will be consequential on the level of discourse and agenda setting, in a broad sense. In addition, as we have shown in earlier chapters, down the line Forum activities influence actual policy decisions.

The WEF articulates and opens up a specific ‘horizon’, to speak with Koselleck (2004), here used as a figurative and analytical device used to negotiate the relations between experience, everyday life and historical and future time. The sense of future time at the WEF is generated through the tensions between experience and expectation, identified risks and possible solutions. The increasing divergence between experience and expectation and between identified risks and potential solutions opens up a horizon, towards which agency may be projected and the authority and influence of the WEF may be leveraged.

De-constructing future-oriented activities as part of and fundamentally related to contemporary activities shows that, at the level of myth and metaphor, we find what can be conceived of as a case of ‘harmony ideology’, in Laura Nader’s sense (Nader 1990). As we have shown, the fundamental postulates of the Forum is that not only are the values of economic growth and social development reciprocally related, but that it would be dysfunctional and unproductive to encourage one without the other. The Forum therefore

argues that all types of actors are needed at the table. This reflects an expansionist idea, in that potential adversaries and conflictual or divergent views are included in the discursive community and allowed articulation within the WEF space. This resonates well with Nader's analysis of harmony ideology, which centres on the Western belief that the existence of conflict is by definition a bad thing, and that healthy societies are those where conflicts and confrontation are minimized and there is harmony between people. Harmony ideology, Nader argues, has been an important ingredient in recent forms of conflict resolution in the US, forms that emphasize harmony, compromise, and the language of therapy over talk of injustice. In addition, harmony ideology depends upon an ontology claiming that there is one solution that will fit all. All the various actors invited to sit down at the same table, so to speak, are to find *the* solution for all. In turn, this one-fits-all-solution rests upon the one-world perspective aptly described by John Law (2015), by way of the self-contained myth of 'Northern' beliefs. Epistemologically this entails that no account is required of what makes the understandings, analysis and descriptions possible (Hinchliffe 2015: 30). In the one-world telling, accounts are seen as natural and realist, with deviations from the main narrative reduced to ideology or poor knowledge. As pointed as by Law, there is no clear single North and South. Forum ideas are, however, fundamentally of Northern origin. The post-colonial understanding that people, in order to avoid the colonization of others, need to craft ways of proceeding that acknowledges differences and the multiplicities of ontologies that cannot be included in 'our own' (Law 2015: 128) is absent in WEF's conceptualizations of present and future. Staff, members and invitees may individually express such a post-colonial ontology, but it is not the official understanding of the organization. Furthermore, the *raison-d'être* of the Forum as it presents itself, is the possibility of finding the *one* solution. The multi-stakeholder concept epitomizes this perspective, as do the ideas of aligned interests in social and economic development as expressed in the Davos equation.

As organizers of the future the WEF acts based on its present values. At the heart, the risk scenarios and the future visions are ingredients in the aspirations of shaping the world in a particular direction. They articulate a particular form of 'anticipatory knowledge', geared to contribute to the shaping of political priorities and agendas, reflecting the central WEF values and priorities. The risk scenarios aim to shape perceptions of what constitute 'global problems', and how they might best be addressed and governed. Hence, they contribute to the anticipatory governance potential of the WEF, i.e. governance geared to integrate imaginaries of the future into regulatory processes. The scenarios for possible futures developed in this



context inform new ways of building resilience to risks and threats of various kinds through close collaboration with its membership-base, i.e. the largest transnational corporations in the world. From this perspective, the Risk Report begs central questions about whose futures are aired and articulated and perceived to be resilient, and whose futures remain merely potentials?

**References**

To be added...