

Cliche, consensus and change: the wisdom of the WEF crowd

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It was inevitable that the summary statements of two days deliberations by 800 diverse people at the WEF in Dubai would be cliché-ridden and consensual. I didn't hear many surprising, challenging or critical ideas in the plenary presentations.



Talk to individuals, however, and they are full of knowledge and innovation. Take the Stanford professor of longevity who told me about pharmacological solutions of cognitive deterioration in the world's booming elderly population and the psychological aspects of ageing.

But overall the rhetoric of the summaries was either over-generalised or ideologically complacent. The clear message was that market systems should be reformed but not regulated. "The market system is fundamentally sound".

This is not to say that people did not realise that we are a point of transition, a moment where the world is pausing for thought and demanding a consideration, at least, of new directions.

For example, there was a convincing call for a fundamental reboot of policy to put a deeper and wider sense of sustainability at the heart of decision-making (see how catching the jargon is?). This was combined with a demand to identify 'transformational transactions'.

But if we have already decided that our market systems are sound how are we going to think radically about possible improvements to economic and social processes?

One problem, as one delegate said, is that the people at the WEF 'is the elite that caused the problem' in the first place. As Josette Sheenan from the World Food Programme said, the world needs a much more inclusive governance process that embraces critical and fringe thinking as well as the well-polished minds of the academies and consultancies.

One shouldn't be too surprised at the outcome of this conference. It is a gathering of an intelligent but business-based elite (LSE included). As one person said, even the NGOs live largely off the largesse of corporations and the proceeds of capitalist growth.

And the point of WEF is not to set out policy. It brings people together and then sends them back to their jobs with new ideas and potential new partners. It is a uniquely powerful network for lubricating the wheels of power and getting the powerful to think afresh.

But if the big annual WEF meeting in Davos is to be taken seriously then the WEF needs to do more than make grand statements. The carefully crafted clichés born out of all this debate need to feed into real policy and projects.

Oh, and by the way, the one implementable [idea](#) that emerged from my [little group](#) on media future survived to the final presentation. It emerged blinking into the jargon-fest as a 'kind of non-profit CNN'. Sounds like Aljazeera English to me...

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