

World Economic Forum 2007 Weblog



by Mary Robinson
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Flying from the World Social Forum (WSF) in Nairobi to the World Economic Forum in Davos is a long way in every sense. Our flight from Amsterdam to Zurich was diverted to Strasbourg due to the heavy snowfall the Swiss have been praying for. After several frustrating hours we are told the flight is going back to Amsterdam and we can continue by train. This removes any chance I had to attend the afternoon events. Tonight I learn there has been a wide consultation among the mainly business participants asking what they consider the most urgent issues for the World Economic Forum (WEF) to address. It turns out to be the same issue chosen by the Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus of the WSF – Climate Change. It will be interesting to see how much agreement there will be between civil society and business leaders on this critical challenge.

25 January

As a veteran of many Davos meetings, I know how vital it is to get my badge to be able to pass security points along the streets and at every venue. However, as I want to attend a breakfast meeting in a nearby hotel of the C-100, a group I belong to in Davos, I manage to get into the hotel after a lengthy bureaucratic procedure. C-100 was established at the WEF some years ago as a group of religious leaders and others interested in issues on inter-religious, inter-cultural dialogue and peace and security. This breakfast, on *religion and politics*, is addressed by the prime minister of Pakistan and the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Israel. Like many such gatherings it is a private meeting by invitation only, under Chatham House rules.

After registration I am free to go to a range of public plenary meetings, which are also televised live into many hotels in Davos. With the wisdom – or is it fatigue? – of an old timer, I now ignore most of those sessions. There have been many complaints that over the years they are not balanced, even in the narrow context of those fortunate enough to be invited to Davos. The gender profile is terrible: despite the fact that Chancellor Angela Merkel is the opening keynote speaker, many of the panels consist only of men, and any women on panels tend to be media commentators or holders of high office. The subject matter of panels is determined by the business partners of the WEF and often there is little participation from the floor. Although there are a number of regulars like myself from NGO,



academic and trade union backgrounds, our participation is largely confined to side events in hotels which the WEF participants sign up to attend.

So rather than complain every year about this, I have learned to be pragmatic and take the WEF for what it is – essentially a membership group of corporate leaders, who want to benefit from interaction with political figures and to have some wider intellectual stimuli. The value of being there for the rest of us lies in the contacts, the networking, the occasional opportunity to bring a wider perspective to the discussion, and the ability to encourage and participate in some public/private partnership discussions. These, at the very least, are a valuable information sharing exercise.

One example is the workshop on a “*Water Tight Future?*”, addressing a global water crisis which leaves 1.2 billion people without access to safe water and 2.6 billion without access to sanitation. Participants include a stunning mix of academic and organizational expertise, together with CEOs of food and beverage companies. Moderated by Margaret Catley-Carlson, chair of the Global Water Partnership, we are hearing views ranging from Neville Isdell, chairman and CEO of Coca Cola, Barbara Stocking of Oxfam GB and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, former Minister of Finance of Nigeria. Ann Veneman, Executive Director of UNICEF and I have been invited to “set the scene” for the discussion, which draws on the 2006 UNDP Human Development Report. I come away with an enhanced understanding of how critical the water crisis is, and how fragile the possibility of fulfilling the existing commitments to water as a human right. It is clear that framing the climate change issue around water brings out the justice and human rights issues.

Another session I moderate today is on *Women’s Empowerment and World Leaders: Narrowing the Global Gender Gap*. It brings together three women presidents - of Finland, Latvia and Liberia - the prime minister of Pakistan, several ministers of government, a range of businesswomen, and some supportive men. We hear Ricardo Hausmann of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and Laura Tyson, until recently Dean of the London Business School, describe the methodology of the WEF global gender gap report covering some 115 countries. The report ranks those countries on performance in bridging the gender gap, regardless of how rich or poor these countries are, and the results lead to some lively discussion.

Over lunch I participate in a session entitled [*The Big Re-Think: Managing 21st Century Challenges*](#) moderated by Ian Goldin, late of The World Bank, and including a range of other discussion leaders – Joe Stiglitz, Ernesto Zedillo, Kumi Naidoo, and Kishare Mahubari. What I find fascinating is the observation made by a participant that the corporate leaders at Davos think this is the best of times, and the political leaders are full of apprehension that this may be the worst of times!

Yet another significant session today is on adolescent girls - significant because it is hard to get this vital issue on the mainstream Davos agenda. Maria Eitel of the Nike Foundation and I have had several conversations about this, and with much energy she and others put together a session in the Art for Africa tent. It is not on the beaten track of normal venues, but people who find the African tent include Sadako Ogata, Peter Piot, Ann Veneman and Gene Sperling. Moderating is noble exercise between Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times and myself as we have a lively session and report from break out groups. We know we have the answer if only corporate Davos would ask the right question!



Given that I have not described several valuable bilaterals I had today relating to our work in my own organization Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, and the networking at several receptions, it will be evident that Davos is an incredible opportunity to meet, listen, learn, and often feel frustrated at the power of the few to influence agendas, shape language and try to determine the outcome of contemporary events.

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Day 3 follows a similar pattern. It begins with an early breakfast on women's empowerment, and strategizing on how to influence the Davos agenda for 2008. Later I attend a high level discussion on the successes in Jordan and Egypt of a multi-stakeholder partnership in education involving CEOs of IT companies such as John Chambers, Bill Gates and Craig Barrett.

This is followed by a working lunch to consider the establishment of a *global environment platform*. It is a pleasure to see some familiar faces around the table, including Gerd Leipold of GreenPeace, James Leape of WWF and Mark Moody Stuart, Chair of the Global Compact Foundation. As we discuss the issue of climate change I make a link with the WSF, pointing out that the Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus of the WSF was interested in trying to forge some dialogue with the WEF on climate change and justice. I mention that the WSF will not be meeting in 2008, and that some effort might be made to have more voices from the WSF at Davos in 2008. Perhaps, perhaps...

I still have to survive a few more receptions and bilaterals before I leave Davos early tomorrow morning. I hope to get the opportunity to speak more about connecting the WSF and WEF – not because it will be comfortable, but because it will be challenging. Let me borrow a comment I heard at the climate change discussion earlier today. Reference was made to the success of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and the remark was: "*maybe this needs to be followed by another film – "An Inconvenient Solution!"*" Creating more linkage between the WSF and WEF would certainly be *inconvenient* but we might be closer to solutions which would be equitable. Human rights are equally relevant to the WSF and the WEF and have to be a strong presence in both fora. The uncomfortable voice speaking truth to power could help shape some inconvenient solutions.