

The World Economic Forum 'Meeting of the New Champions' in Dalian, China

Young Scientist Participant Report

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The World Economic Forum (WEF) held its annual 'Meeting of the New Champions', also known as the 'summer Davos' from Sept. 10 to 13 in Dalian, China. Fifty-five of the approximately 1500 attendees were young scientists such as myself, nominated by their national academies. The meeting was focussed on relaunching growth, and a central theme was science and technological innovation driving wealth creation. Several very high profile speakers participated in the programme, such as Wen Jiabao, Premier of the People's Republic of China, and Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia.

One of the great advantages of attending such a meeting was the chance to interact with scientists from diverse disciplines and backgrounds. The participation of the young scientists was organized through the InterAcademy Panel on International Issues (IAP), which is a global network of the world's science academies. This ensured an even representation from scientists around the globe, including developing countries in Africa and Asia. We held a number of discussion sessions surrounding the identification of issues affecting the progress of young scientists, with the hopes of making concrete proposals to the IAP. We came up with a number of useful ideas, including the establishment of an international body of young scientists and the creation of a grant scheme similar to the Marie-Curie fellowships but with an international mandate, perhaps supported in part by the WEF. An area which I was active in proposing was the development of a framework for science societies in different countries to share information on creating successful young scientist programmes. An example would be the Australian Royal Society's media/scientist mentorship scheme, or the UK Royal Society's own MP/scientist pairing scheme. It was thought that copying these programmes in other countries would go some way in improving the impact that young scientists make in society at large. All of these ideas will be developed into concrete proposals over the next few weeks, and will be submitted to the IAP board for consideration.

The differences between the WEF meeting and an academic conference were as numerous as they were striking. The emphasis here was on getting hold of the big picture, without delving into technical details at any appreciable level. In a session called 'Future Revolutions in Science' speakers were giving just 20 minutes to outline advances in a particular field, such as stem cell research, and explain how they might impact society and the economy in the future. The conversations that I had with business leaders about scientific advances often hinted at frustration at the pace of development. As a discussion leader in one of the sessions called "Groundbreaking Discoveries in Science", I presented the idea that nanotechnology might be a promising route to develop more efficient solar cells. I suggested a 10 - 20 year time scale to which an investor commented "10 - 20 years!? But we want them NOW! What is taking you guys so long?" My impression is that the enormous amount of time and effort put into scientific research is not universally appreciated within the wider business community.

Equally, as an academic I was exposed to my lack of knowledge on how to commercialize discoveries. The process of moving from a proof-of-principle experiment in the lab to developing a product and attracting investment capital is a complicated one. It was enormously educational to talk to business leaders and investors to learn what it is they look for in developing a technology product. One piece of advice I would offer future attendees is to think carefully about potential ideas for business ventures before attending the meeting. The IAP and WEF were offering five \$10,000 grants to develop projects between a young scientist and a business leader attending the meeting. This could be an attractive route to setting up a business based on an idea you might have.

Of all the sessions I attended I found the 'workspace format' sessions to be the most enjoyable. These were limited to 40 participants, and discussion took place in small groups, with presentations made by group leaders at the end. They were highly interactive and gave young scientists a chance to interact directly with policy makers and business leaders. I attended several and found them very stimulating, particularly one focussed on issues surrounding energy generation, and one on groundbreaking discoveries, where I was a group leader. Summaries for all of the various sessions, as well as video and photos taken at the meeting can be found online at <http://www.weforum.org/en/events/AnnualMeetingoftheNewChampions2009/>

Finally, I was surprised at the number of sessions on the theme of the environment and sustainability. There is often the perception that economic growth and green issues are mutually exclusive objectives, but the international business community seems aware of the need to change its ways. There seems to be a real desire to alter the way in which business operates, using fewer resources in a sustainable manner. It was felt that well thought out design and new technologies would place an important role in meeting these objectives. Whether this desire will result in concrete changes of course remains to be demonstrated.

Overall it was a tremendous opportunity, very educational and inspirational. I would highly recommend it to any scientist interested in policy and development issues.