Scores rapportserie 2014:3

Think tanks as policy brokers in partially organized fields: The case of World Economic Forum

Christina Garsten & Adrienne Sörbom

SCORE

STOCKHOLM CENTRE FOR
ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Think tanks as policy brokers in partially organized fields: The case of World Economic Forum

Christina Garsten & Adrienne Sörbom

christina.garsten@score.su.se
adrienne.sorbom@score.su.se

Scores rapportserier 2014:3
ISBN 978-91-89658-83-7

Stockholms centrum för forskning om offentlig sektor
106 91 Stockholm
www.score.su.se

Stockholm University

Stockholm School of Economics

Think tanks as policy brokers in partially organized fields: The case of World Economic Forum

Christina Garsten & Adrienne Sörbom

Abstract

As has been noted in research on think tanks it is difficult to describe what a think tank is, and to pinpoint what it is in think tank activities that generates powerful relationships towards other actors. This is even more the case when talking of transnational think tanks. In this report we give a theoretical account of how relationships organized by transnational think tanks may be analyzed.

In the report we are drawing on empirical findings from the World Economic Forum (WEF), seen as a transnational think tank addressing a non-national audience. We are suggesting that think-tank experts are engaged in the brokerage of ideas and knowledge, implying an intermediary activity, wherein ideas are translated, shaped and formatted. Operating at the interfaces of various actors, think-tank experts formulate and negotiate ideas with and among actors, encouraging them to adopt and use those ideas.

The main argument in the report is that this brokerage can be seen to generate 'partially organized fields'. The think tank organizes other actors not by constructing a complete organization, but by establishing and maintaining a decided network, drawing upon such organizational elements as membership, monitoring and sanctions. This allows think tanks to maintain a degree of flexibility, whilst gaining control of valuable resources.

In the case of the WEF the report show that the combination of a small core of complete organization with a larger environment of only partial organizing essentially allows the WEF to be bigger than they actually are. The decided networks, i.e. the partnerships, the working groups, and the communities, significantly extends the reach of the WEF, allowing it to reach across organizational boundaries.

We suggest that this form of organizing is the prime way for transnational think tanks to organize outside themselves, thereby exerting political influence. The potential influence it may exert resides in its influence over the shaping of agendas in other organizations, the formulation of pressing political issues, and by mobilizing actors in their decided networks to carry the issues further, on other organizational platforms and with other organizational mandates.

Contents

Introduction

As has been noted in research on think tanks it is difficult to describe what a think tank is, and to pinpoint what it is in think tank activities that generates powerful relationships towards other actors (Rich, 2004). This is even more the case when talking of transnational think tanks. In this report we give a theoretical account of how the relationships organized by transnational think tanks may be understood and analyzed.

We suggest that both national and transnational think tanks experts are engaged in the brokerage of ideas and knowledge, implying an intermediary activity, wherein ideas are translated, shaped and formatted (c.f. Smith, 1991; Ingold and Varone, 2012). Operating at the interfaces of various actors, think-tank experts formulate and negotiate ideas with and among actors, encouraging them to adopt and use those ideas (cf. Mosse, 1985; Wedel, 2009). Transnational think tanks either address a non-national audience, or have offices in several countries. In both cases it is relations to other actors that are organized through brokering. But in the latter case this is done in a national context. How is it possible that this brokerage, and these types of interfacial activities, may be used for shaping the actions of actors outside them-selves? Moreover, how is this possible in a non-national context?

In this report we are drawing on empirical findings from the World Economic Forum (WEF), seen as a think tank addressing an international audience, in order to answer this question. In comparison to other transnational think tanks the WEF has unique qualities, primarily due to its grandeur and recognition factor. At the same time, the WEF as an organization bears many resemblances with other transnational thin tanks attempting to organize the world around them.

The main argument in the report is that think tank brokerage can be seen to generate 'partially organized fields' (cf. Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011). It organizes other actors not by constructing a complete organization, but by establishing and maintaining a decided network and drawing upon such organizational elements as membership, monitoring and sanctions. This allows think tanks to maintain a degree of flexibility, whilst gaining control of valuable resources.

The report is organized in three parts. We start with some introductory remarks on think tanks as policy brokers and the case of the WEF (also called the Forum). Thereafter we introduce the notion of partial organization and briefly analyze WEF activities in terms of partial organizing and decided networks. In this part we focus especially on the WEF. In the final part we conclude by relating the findings to transnational think tanks at large, and invoke some broader questions pertaining to the implications of such forms of organizing for global political agenda-setting and for democracy and political action in the broader sense.

Think tanks as policy brokers

Our curiosity about think tanks stems from an interest in the operations of power in contemporary society. We take inspiration from Rose and Miller's viewpoint (1992, p. 175) – that 'political power today is exercised through a profusion of shifting alliances between diverse authorities, to govern a multitude of facets of economic activity and social life'. To analyze these aspects of contemporary power, we need to relocate the state and the market and the concepts of politics and non-politics. This perspective serves as a launching pad for

investigations into the operations of power across and among organizational spheres: the public, private and civil spheres – nationally and transnationally.

Think tanks are often established as non-profit organizations, and hence part of civil society. But because they are often funded by corporations and private foundations, they operate across organizations, as 'boundary-spanning organizations' (cf. Medvetz, 2012) and, as noted by Rose and Miller (1992), manifest the expansion and diffusion of power and politics. In this cross-boundary environment, ideas are disseminated to other actors: governments, authorities, the media and the public. As stated by way of introduction we suggest that think-tank experts are engaged in the brokerage of ideas and knowledge, implying an intermediary activity, wherein ideas are translated, shaped and formatted (c.f. Smith, 1991; Ingold and Varone, 2012). Operating at the interfaces of various actors, think-tank experts formulate and negotiate ideas with and among actors, encouraging them to adopt and use them. They therefore contribute to the establishment of 'epistemic communities' for policy coordination (see e.g. Haas, 1992; Stone, 2005).

This brokerage can be seen to generate 'partially organized fields' (cf. Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011). It organizes other actors not by constructing a complete organization, but by establishing and maintaining a network that is partially organized, drawing upon such organizational elements as membership, monitoring and sanctions. In these fields a think tank may be part of organized networks, in which it obtains authority vis-à-vis other actors only if it is recognized as a legitimate actor (cf. Emerson, 1962). Authority is seen here as legitimate power, and legitimacy is thus the acceptance of authority (cf. Weber, 1978), endowing the actor with agency. Since think tanks generally do not have states nor citizens as founders or funders the authority of think tanks is fragile, in the sense that they have no clear political mandate given to them by an outside actor. They must continually construct and maintain both authority and legitimacy. The authority of the think tank is based, therefore, upon its capability to construct legitimacy in relation to other actors.

As an analytical point of departure, we assume that the theoretical ideas regarding the achievement of authority among think tanks, as outlined here, will also be useful for understanding transnational think tanks. Yet we recognize that there are distinctions to be made. The principal distinction is that the 'transnational domain' (Ruggie, 2004) is still under construction – where the governance of such issues as climate change and international trade policy is to be handled and where these think tanks are active. 'Transnational' here refers to the extension of the scope and modalities of operations across national boundaries (Ruggie, 2004). Compared to multilateral political organizations (e.g. UN and IMF) there is no mandate for think tanks such as RAND Corporation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace or the World Economic Forum to act and to make decisions with transnational impact. Yet this is what they aspire to do (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Richardson et al 2011; Garsten and Sörbom, 2013). Because there is no mandate for them, they must construct it and find a way to become legitimate. This is not a clear-cut endeavor. Being nationally located, intertwined with and partly dependent upon the political, cultural and legal opportunity structures of a national political landscape, think tanks must actively carve out, construct and expand their position and their mandate. As has been obvious in later decades some think tanks have been successful in becoming legitimate, and are now able to speak with authority in transnational matters. As a consequence the system of multilateral governance is paralleled and transgressed in by an increasing number of organizations that do not adhere to nation-state borders.

World Economic Forum – in between politics and markets

The WEF is a not-for profit organization, based in Geneva Switzerland, founded in 1971 by Professor Klaus Schwab. Today the organization has approximately 500 employees, financed by the organization's 1000 members, who are some of the largest corporations in the world (www.weforum.org). WEF is most known for its annual meeting in Davos, but it hosts a vast number of private meetings around the world, and has built a world-wide network of people and organizations coming from many parts of society, such as corporations, churches, NGOs as well as national and international authorities.

The activities are funded by the WEF's 1000 member companies, which are ranked by the Forum and other ranking institutes amongst the top companies in their fields of business (www.weforum.org). Of these companies, those who contribute the most in financial terms and are seen as the most influential generally have a stronger voice in the decision-making within the Forum; they can participate somewhat more in the communities that are close to the Forum's internal decision taking. The highest governing body is the Foundation Board, consisting of a smaller number of highly influential members.

The WEF describes itself as politically neutral, in the sense that it is not tied to any national, political or partisan interests (www.weforum.org). Moreover, WEF is not a decision-making body in the international political arena. It rather operates as a think tank at the global level, networking and influencing among corporate leaders as well as top politicians, NGO representatives and academics. One major interest is to function as a private organizer for diplomatic efforts on a range of topics. As is proudly presented in the WEF account of their 40 first years 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 2010). 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 of its agenda. In the words of Geoffrey Pigman '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' (Pigman, 2007 p. 2),

But the WEF is not merely a political intermediary, it also plays a significant role in relation to markets. In spite of neither selling nor buying products, and in spite of not being a formal regulator of market actors, it functions as a market intermediary through its involvement as a third party at the level of discourse. In this role, the Forum promotes ideas and practices that relate to the organizing or reorganizing of markets in various ways. These promotion activities can be categorized into three general types: networking (bringing the right people together to meet and discuss the right subject), construction of organizational techniques (such as ranking and indexing), and diffusion of solutions (official and non-official in the form of reports, media contacts, projects, etc.). In all of these activities, the WEF as a full organization is the hub where topics, solutions and people are chosen and decided upon. The participants, members or guests, are invited to a table that is set by the Forum. What they do at the table, and to what degree the Forum is able or interested in steering what happens at the table, is an empirical question. It varies from setting to setting. What is of importance here is the organizing role of the Forum.

Not all of these activities relate directly to the functioning of markets, but we can see two basic ways through which they do relate. First, the WEF is a platform for market activities. A

major interest, at the Annual Meeting in Davos, for example, is for business to do business (Garsten and Sörbom, 2013). The lion share of meeting attendees is made up of representatives from many of the major corporations around the globe. They are there not only to contribute to solving the problems of the world, but also – and oftentimes primarily – to sell, buy, and talk business. A large share of the Davos frenzy is thus about markets in action – selling and buying, but also embedding (trans)actions in social relations. Sometimes this is done with an interest in shaping the market in a specific way. One of our informants from a regional meeting participated in order to find new customers and partners for his hedge fund investment service, described on the company's website as 'alternative' and 'research-driven', and with 'thoughtful' risk management. In cases like this, the WEF functions as a market fair, but with an organizing interest.

At the same time, the WEF is an intermediary actor in activities aimed at shaping regulations for business. The fundamental role that the Forum attempts to create for itself is to provide a bridge and an arena between global corporations and nation-states. It provides spaces and defines topics around where involved parties from business and politics meet and discuss the pros and cons of market rules. That is to say, they clearly engage in global politics. This is the second and increasingly important market-related aspect of the WEF; they partake in setting the stage for the regulation (and deregulation) of markets. This function relates to the interest on behalf of both nation-states and private firms to control and stabilize markets. As was shown by Charles Lindblom in his influential analysis of the relationship between private enterprise and democracy in relation to the Western nation-state framework as it has evolved over the last centuries, business needs government just as government needs business (Lindblom, 1977). Within this type of nation-state there is therefore a general tendency to hand over a large array of major social demands to business, both large and small. These demands are in this sense taken off the public agenda, and decisions on pivotal matters such as jobs, prices, economic security and so forth are left to the discretion of private business. Governments must therefore take into account the needs and concerns of business; they cannot afford not to. This need is of course as strong in a globalized market situation.

At the same time business needs governments, in order to set the framework for their practices (Polanyi, 1989; Fliegstein, 1996). As corporate actors, businesses are rarely in favor of harsh taxes and regulation. Still, they cannot operate without regulations, because markets need stability and predictability. The same dual relationship applies for global business, i.e. multi-national corporations operating in a number of countries. The difference, though, is that at the global level there exist no governments. Organizations such as the WTO, the UN and the IMF do not exert the same institutional power as national governments. Global businesses operate, at least partly, in a regulatory void, in which soft law, standards, and codes of conduct play an increasingly influential role (cf. Braithwaite and Drahos, 2000).

The Forum recognizes this regulatory gap and the opportunity it provides. It works to facilitate solutions for contemporary societal and global dilemmas, dilemmas that involve market actors (buyers, sellers, regulators) as well as products sold in global markets. As one managing director noted, the WEF is filling a regulatory gap by trying to be 'a vehicle for gathering stakeholders for political action' (Interview, Geneva, 8 April 2004[1]). Hence, the WEF does not aspire to be an organization that provides global regulatory frameworks. Transnational rules for markets are not set by the WEF (neither in Davos, nor at any of their other activities or events), but it can certainly play a role in articulating them. For example, in

[1] Interview by Adrienne Sörbom in cooperation with Hans Abrahamson, see also Abrahamson, 2006.

the many informal meetings between stakeholders, in the reports issued from their working groups, and in the ratings of countries and businesses, the Forum articulates its preferred alternatives for how to regulate specific business sectors and issues. Attempting to measure how successful they are in these efforts would be futile, but that ideas formulated within the WEF are communicated to and used by high-level officials, politicians, business leaders and representatives from interstate organizations, is indisputable.

One example of this kind of political activity is the background deliberations leading up to the decisions taken at the Cancun summit on climate change. This is how it was explained to us by one informant working at the WEF headquarters in Geneva:

> You remember Cop15 in Copenhagen? How everybody saw that as a failure? Well, one week later, all the key protagonists, apart from Obama, met in Davos. Without the political pressure. They met without any particular agenda. It was decompression. And our role? We, as organizers, pursue no particular agenda, but we provide space. And, after that meeting, Calderon suggested to get a move on with what later became the Cancun Agreement. At the top level, there is an increasing demand for this kind of space. It works as decompression. Here, it is possible to say things that can't be said at top meetings. (Interview, Geneva, 8 September 2011)

What happened at the actual meeting in Davos, we do not know. The informant might overstate the importance of the meeting, and we have not asked Prime Minister Calderon about where he got the ideas for the so-called Cancun Protocol. But the words of the respondent tell us how the Forum sees its own role. It is an intermediary in global politics, creating an arena for decision-makers to meet and deliberate.

In this sense, the WEF is an political intermediary actor for global markets. It does not directly allocate values, as does the traditional political organization (Sartori, 1974), but it organizes an arena where this allocation is discussed and where solutions may be suggested. Oftentimes, these discussions and recommendations relate to the operation of markets, how actors may or should behave, and what is to be sold and under what conditions.

The word 'intermediary' does not imply that the WEF functions as a neutral tool for those attending the meeting. As stated in the quote above, the WEF describes itself as a neutral and independent arena, without attempting to voice any particular interest, and an important part of how it frames itself as an organization is that it 'is not a global board of commerce seeking to impose its view and order onto the rest of the world' (Interview, 8 April 2004). However, from a social science perspective, it is evident that notions of value are part and parcel of political discussions of how markets should be regulated, or not regulated, as well as how priorities should be balanced in doing actual business. In fact, it is hardly conceivable to think of, let alone discuss, markets without introducing notions of values. Markets are embedded in contested, and therefore organized, values (Alexius and Tamm-Hallström, 2014). The WEF embraces the basic tenets of market liberalism, but positions itself as favoring a social market economy, with responsible market actors. This is for example expressed in the WEF's mission, to 'improve the state of the world,' (www.weforum.org) which builds, as stated in the Davos Equation, on the conviction that the values of economic growth and social development are interlinked and interdependent (Garsten and Sörbom, 2014).

We now turn our interest how this organizing may be understood in analytical terms, in order to explain how intermediation of this kind can in fact lead to authority in the regulatory gap where they are operating.

Organizing the unknown – partially

Organization regards the future. People organize in order to better handle the contemporary and trying to tease out what might happen in the future. We may have a sense that we know what will happen tomorrow, and basically that feeling comes from our organization of today. By for example building material structures, organizations and institutions future activities are somewhat framed. Organization in practice means having a structure to fall back onto when changes, however minor, appear. Moreover, these structures frame future choices, making the situation tenable (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972). Too many choices would infinitely burden our daily lives. Obviously, these frames are contingent and open to all kinds of changes, but theoretically they can be described as *decided attempts* to create some order (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011). The prime characteristic of organization defined this way is the moment of decision. Organization depends on somebody consciously wanting something, taking decisions about how to organize.

This ordering is sometime undertaken by the creation of a full organization. In these instances five elements will be drawn upon; there will be members, a hierarchy telling who can make decisions for and talk in the name of them, rules for members to follow, monitoring possibilities in order to see if members are applying rules, and sanctions to be used if rules are not followed (Ahrne, 1994). However, for establishing and maintaining social order it is not always necessary to build a complete organization. Even achieving only a partial organization, using one or a few of these elements, can be used to establish order in the contemporary and the future (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011, p. 87). Göran Ahrne and Nils Brunson argue, 'Those who wish to organize do not always have the opportunity to or the interest in building a complete organization. Instead they use merely one or a few of the organizational elements, thereby creating a partial organization among individuals and organizations' (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011, p. 87). By for example rendering membership to customers service firms are trying to organize loyalty of customers, making them prone to come back also in the future. Rules can also be imposed on people or organizations, even though they are not formal members. A standard, for example, is a way of directing activities. When explicitly adopting the standard it will be difficult to not comply with it. For the standard setter this means that compliers are organized in line with the intentions of the standard. Compliers follow the rules of the standard setters, in spite of not formally being part of the standard setting body.

Seen this way partial organization is a decided attempt to create connections between an organization and its environment in order to increase the likelihood that the future will bear some of the organization's decided traits. Applied to the case of WEF and think tanks in general, we can say that they may use any one of the organizational elements, one by one or in combination with each other, in order to partially organize their environment. By so doing they will attempt to mold the environment in line with their ideological direction. Primarily, as in politics in general, these attempts will regard the future (c.f Kingdon, 1984/2011, p. 122; Ricci, 1993). The results are uncertain, but the attempts still make up a partially organized field where actors are being related to each other. These relations do sometimes have the form of natural networks, that is, informal structures of relationships that link persons or organizations (Powell, 1990); they build on the social character of human life. Often though,

the activities are not informal in the sense that they are undecided and non-organized. Rather, they are part of strategic activities aiming at binding actors to each other so that the ideas generated in the relationship, down the line, can be put to use.

This method of setting up decided networks, not a complete organization, employed by the World Economic Forum and other think tanks is plagued with uncertainty in terms of results in the form of concrete action. In fact it is very difficult to assess their successes and failures in specific cases. But conceptualizing the activities of think tanks as attempts to order the future redirects the attention from the specific gains and losses to the basic interest of a think tank. Their main aim is to partially organize, to shape the field of relations by being part of it, by talking to others. Essentially, it is talking, communicating, in partly organized forms that think tankers are involving themselves in. This is the process they are aiming for. By being part of and by shaping communication processes they are also partially organizing their environment, hoping to set the agenda for the actors they are enrolling.

Organizing for the making of contacts – a source of authority

As most other think tanks World Economic Forum is an organization that foremost produces talk (c.f. Brunsson, 2006 p. 2). With the exception of books they seldom produce action in terms of goods and services that others can buy. Their coordinated action is not supposed to yield products in that sense. As former USA President Ronald Reagan once said at a meeting at the Heritage foundation, "Ideas do have consequences, rhetoric is policy, and words are action" (Smith, 1991 p. 20). Following the idea expressed by Reagan – who was referring to Richard Weaver that in 1948 published the conservative classic *Ideas Have Consequences* – one may assume that in the world of World Economic Forum, ideas are not simply talk. Ideas can get or be given feet, and make their way into the minds or decision centers of others. If that happens, then they might have a chance of gaining some importance and to become part of the agenda. In order to enhance that possibility, organizing is essential.

In line with the assertion that organizations are constituted in and through communication (Corren et al., 2011) we assume that the communication of think tanks is the organizing they are undertaking. Communication is the means by which they establish, compose, design and sustain their organization; internally as well as externally. Ideas cannot spread by themselves (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón, 2005). They need a vessel and to be communicated by someone, and they need to be worked upon, interpreted, translated, and articulated in friction with other ideas. Establishing and maintaining contacts with individuals and other organizations is the most essential element of the process through which think tanks participates in organizing the agenda. These contacts can have consequences – ideas in themselves cannot. What they are organizing are thus communication, and contacts through communication. The more communication, especially with and between the right people, the stronger the possibility that the ideas will have the consequences wished for, that they will be used by policy makers and other actors.

WEF-employees and think tankers around the world refer to this as "networking". The emic term captures part of what our analytical perspective suggests. A "network" is based on communication and contacts, and without this think tankers could not do their job. Without communicating with others, hooking up with them, making them part of their networks it would be difficult to set the agenda. But what is important here is that when networking is undertaken in the framework of WEF and other think tanks it is to a large extent an organized activity. It is the partial organization being staged as decided networks, and not a network that

simply takes shape without being decided upon (c.f. Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011 p. 8).[2] Partial organizing, by way of the setting up of decided networks, is a significant component in attempting to set coordinate, structure and shape political agendas. The WEF, like other think tanks, makes strategic use of the full range of the continuum of social forms of networking available – ranging from spontaneous and informal to decided and formal.

These decided networks significantly extend the range of the organization. A think tank with for example a large blog community will be able to make more contacts than the think tank without this kind of communicative infrastructure. Likewise, the think tank with a large staff will have better opportunities for monitoring other actors, and communicate this to outsiders. It is, though, not only density in the patterns of contacts established that accounts for the importance of a think tank. A partnership with other well-connected actors or with the exact right person will also contribute to the possibility of reaching out, in spite of this partnership only including a few people (and the organizations they are related to). Each contact shall in this respect be seen as one of the many feet of a think tank, but some have the possibility of reaching out to many others and/or the person in charge. The maintenance of contacts does not consider formal or legal organizational boundaries, but cuts across them. Nor are all the contacts that are developed necessarily public. A large part of the decided networks that think tanks organize are more private than public, without necessarily being unlawful (c.f. Wedel, 2009). It can simply be a merit for the contacting actors to not be open about their activities.

A decided network is not the same as a complete organization. Apart from their own staff think tanks in general have only a smaller core of formal members for whom they can set rules, monitor and sanction. But they rely to a great extent on a wider community of members, who are more loosely connected and more difficult to control. Our hypothesis is that for the purpose of making ideas matter, the choice of combining partial organization with complete organization is a strategic act, compared to sticking only to the complete organization. Partial organization serves think tanks well in their strivings to set the agenda. In this pursuit a formal chain of command will not make do, because political ideas are delicate. An elected politician cannot be told by someone outside his own organization what to do. Ideas for politics therefore must find other ways to reach the ears of politicians. Using the networks is one such way. As Walter Powell has argued, networks are "lighter on their feet", compared to organizations (Powell, 1990 p. 303). Moreover:

> Networks are particularly apt for circumstances in which there is a need for efficient, reliable information. The most useful information is rarely that which flows down the formal chain of command in organization, or that which can be inferred from shifting price signals. Rather, it is that which is obtained from someone whom you have dealt with in the past and found to be reliable. You trust best information that comes from someone you know well. […] Networks, then, are especially useful for the exchange of commodities whose values are not easily measured. (Powell, 1990:304).

Through these decided networks ideas might move between actors, at times being picked up by a policy maker, without the ramifications that a full-fledged organization would have. Formal membership, for example, is a mixed blessing (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011:94). Members can be useful, but members also demand influence and transparency, making the organization more prone to be troubled by inertia. Using some organizational elements, but

[2] Decisions are of course part of natural networks too. But these decisions are not taken in order to set up a network.

avoiding the formal organization can be a solution to this difficulty. Even though partial organization in the form of decided networks is something different than informal, social networks it can still bear the same trait of lightness. In the WEF case we may say that it is performing a balancing act which involves being strong by using more organizational elements – and being light as a millipede having thousands of feet.

The authority that WEF can execute resides in the attempts to set the agenda that the organization undertakes (cf. Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips, 2006). The partial organizational form enhances their possibilities to achieve authority. Their authority does not primarily rest on obtaining different sorts of resources, but by using them in the organization of the future they aspire to. The authority of WEF is, in this sense, based on two pillars. In the first instance, they *set the scene* for contact making, they choose how to make contact and how to communicate. These choices will have consequences for the actors they are trying to communicate with. The restricted membership influences what is communicated to the outside. In the second instance, think tanks *choose what to communicate*. The topics and solutions analyzed, advocated and communicated are imbued with choices related to political ideologies and discourses. The agenda they are trying to set will reflect these choices, and the things that for different reasons were not communicated will be absent.

In these activities the people employed at, affiliated with or in other ways publicly related to WEF in their roles as communicators, experts, analysts and so forth are of great significance. They become the specific carriers of the ideas, whose mediating activities are crucial to the flow and development of ideas (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002:10). It is partly through their activities that WEF has the possibility to gain and uphold the authority to influence an agenda outside their won organization. Apart from networking techniques at the organizational level, in the form of for example partnerships or donations, it is the "think tankers" themselves that do a majority of the networking (Garsten, 2013). Consequently, in the framework of WEF they organize their own base of authority.

Partial organization – empirical examples

As we have argued, one characteristic feature of WEF and their outward relations is that they avoid setting up full organizations, outside of their own core organization. They may have global ambitions but the globalness of their organization is achieved primarily by developing their contacts around the globe, not by letting their organization travel, so to speak (by setting up many new offices), or by allowing the number of formal members to increase (thus expanding towards the full organization). Obviously, this does not mean that they avoid organizing all together. To the contrary, the agenda-setting of WEF is all about organizing. Above all they use membership as the organizational element with respect to the decided network. As one of the managing directors at the headquarters in Geneva explains to us, the Forum is all about building community:

> So there is a lot of talk about building community. I believe that that is what the Forum fundamentally does and… why we are able to engage. The projects, the insights, even the events, those are all secondary. I mean events, actually events are crucial for building community, but I always said to my team, don't ever think that a company becomes a partner or engages because of a project. (Interview, 19 September, 2012)

The communities talked about within the Forum are the empirical expression of the decided

network. Apart from the 1000 corporations that fund the WEF there are many other examples of how WEF offers possibilities to be included as member in the community building, the organized network. There are for example the experts that are invited to Dubai every year in November for what within the WEF is called the "brain trust meeting", where the agenda of the coming year annual general meeting is to be set. Many of these experts come back from one year to another, and aspire to do so. Participants from this event have whispered in our ears that people will be afraid to tell us what they really think about the event and the Forum, since they want to come back. And as our informants in the Geneva office claim participants want to be able to write in their CV:s that they are part of the network. For their part, participants at the events that we have talked to underscore that seen from their professional perspective they become part of a rewarding network that they otherwise would not.

Journalists may also be loosely affiliated to the network. We participated at the "media dinner" in Davos, a dinner that is given every year by the WEF to accredited media professionals. As was said in the welcome speech the WEF holds this dinner as a way of 'thanking attending media for the job that had been put into reporting the event'. During dinner it was clear that the Forum had long relationships to some of the reporters. One journalist that we talked to told us that he had 'inherited her right to come and report from the annual meeting' from somebody at her media company, and she confessed that she wanted to come back. Therefore this reporter swiftly told us that he did not want her critical views of the WEF to be known, as it was important for his job that he could come back. During dinner an employee from the WEF came by and asked what our informant had reported from the event. Afterwards the journalist told us that he saw this as a way of checking that he had not written the wrong things, something that he had no intention of doing. This reluctance of reporting criticism was not only due to an interest in not being troublesome for the Forum, but to him thinking that from a more general perspective this was not such an important issue. Not writing was thus a consequence of balancing his own interest with a more universal one.

Another format for organizing membership is through the construction of partnership. Any initiative launched on behalf of the Forum will commonly consist of a group of different "stakeholders" that commit to undertake a project. Often enough the projects aims to acquire new knowledge on a specific topic, and most commonly to publish some form of report, thus making the content known to the relevant actors. These stakeholders are then seen as having formed a partnership. This is quite informally done, though. Legal papers are not written on the relationships between partners. There are no codified rules for the group and the hierarchy regarding for example who makes decisions and talks in the name of partners is developed within the group. Yet there exists an order within the group as well in its relations to the Forum. This order basically relies on monitoring and sanctioning. Partners monitor each other, as does the Forum. Sanctions vary somewhat, but companies that have paid a substantial sum for being related to the organization and are big important actors in their fields, do not run the same kind of risks of being excluded as do those whose membership rest solely on the invitation by the Forum.

These examples illustrate ongoing organizing by using membership in various formats, thus opening and closing of doors into the decided network. You can be invited, and be a recognized "member of the community", although in these instances there is no membership fee to be paid. As in complete organizations these memberships will be monitored and approbated. If the contribution of the individual participant is proper, well performed and valued as productive by the WEF staff, the participant may become part of the network and return for subsequent meetings as well as at other events. Among our informants it is common

to be part of several parallel working groups, initiatives, partnerships and so forth.

In this sense the Forum organizes individuals that work on behalf of other organizations, which they will both monitor and sanction. Employees at the Geneva headquarters working with events, initiatives, projects and so forth, keep the participants that they can invite under close supervision.[3] They are seen as "belonging to" a particular member of staff, a relationship that can be a valuable asset internally. When moving from one position to another within the Forum employees also bring their contacts. Employee X cannot invite employee Y's contact, without asking permission. The manifest reason for this is that some persons would otherwise get overused. At the same time, the more latent reason is that in the interest of organizing contacts and communication the actual persons become the assets. As one informant from the Forum told us, 'getting the exactly right moderator for a panel is pivotal to the success of the event'. Other informants from Geneva headquarters have told us that some invites have become great disappointments, since the moderator and other participants did not meet the standards. In practice this has meant that the original plan for the event – for example constructing a new community or partnership – could not be completed. It is therefore of great importance for both parts – the Forum employee and the invited persons – that the latter perform well at meetings.

Crucial to coming back is to be seen as constructive and "thinking outside the box", without being too radical. Criticizing the Forum is fully possible for the average participant if he or she expresses some kind of trust in the organization. Expressing more fundamental criticism is difficult, but not impossible for example for a person that is either very famous (as Bono), or very young (that is for example the role of the community called "young global shapers"). In general though, not complying with the basic ideas of the Forum means that the person and his/her organization is left out from the network. What these ideas are and how to behave at the activities are, for example, transferred from WEF employees to participants when planning panels, seminars etc.

Key to WEF:s efforts to organize outside themselves is thus using membership as a way of reaching out and attempting to control those who accept to be part of WEF communities. This way the WEF can also use rules as an organizational element, albeit these rules are rarely codified, and they do not necessarily monitor and sanction those persons/organizations that fail to meet the agreed upon or taken for granted rules of conduct. However, WEF also use for example rules and sanctioning as organizational elements in them selves, not only in relation to membership. This happens for example in the many instances when WEF launches as standard to which other organizations comply, or issuing an index. In the latter case the index will function as a rule in so far as other organizations use and relate to the index. One of the most used and cited indexes that WEF puts together is the "competitiveness index" in which countries are ranked on the basis of how competitive companies in each country are measured to be. The idea of the index is to show for each country/nation state how well they are doing seen from this particular aspect, in order for the states to change their policies and climb the ranking. The underlying idea here is that it is through market competitiveness a country may develop in welfare. The index does formulate a rule – which countries may or may not adhere to – about development. It is a soft rule, different from for example a law. Nevertheless, when applied it has the consequence that WEF as a think tank has a soft agency even outside their own full organization.

[3] Deciding whom to invite to for example the annual meeting in Davos is a time consuming process. Quotas are set for how many participants there can be from different stakeholder groups, such as business, politics and academia.

Concluding note: Think tanks organizing for global political action

Think tanks present the organizational scholar with an interesting range of social formations. By way of its position in the political landscape, it works as an intermediary involved in attempts to organize, i.e. to coordinate, structure and shape politics. In the WEF case this intermediary position also concerns the shaping of markets, in a trans-national setting. In this report we have discussed how that is possible, given the fact that WEF and think tanks are intermediary organizations with limited possibilities to shape other actors. What is it about it their activities that make up some form of order, impinging the actions of other organizations?

The WEF and think tanks in general is, on the one hand, tightly organized and articulates all the organizational elements needed to form a complete organization, in the sense of Ahrne and Brunsson (2011). In this sense, it is an organization with a high degree of coherence that maintains its boundaries towards the outside. On the other hand, this relatively small core of organization extends towards other organizations and actors by way of a range of contacts and networks. This outside landscape is only partially organized, with looser forms of membership and limited rules, hierarchy and sanctions. By way of "decided networks", webs of relationships with a decided intent are formed. The brokering activities thus generate partially organized fields (cf. Ahrne and Brunsson 2011). The WEF and many other think tanks organizes other actors not by constructing a complete organization, but by establishing and maintaining a decided network and by drawing upon the organizational elements of membership, monitoring and sanctions.

The combination of a small core of complete organization with a larger environment of partial organization allows the WEF and other similar think tanks to maintain a degree of flexibility, whilst gaining control of valuable resources. Essentially, it allows them to be bigger than they actually are. The decided networks, i.e. the partnerships, the working groups, and the communities, significantly extends the reach of the WEF, and allows it to reach across organizational boundaries. Hence, it is an essential way by which the WEF may influence agendas and decisions in other organizations.

Whilst the scope of partial organization is an important feature in itself, it is also the only way through which a think tank, a civil society organization such as the WEF, may exert political influence. The WEF does not have the mandate to make decisions with implications for either domestic or the international politics. The potential influence it may exert resides in its influence over the shaping of agendas, the formulation of pressing political issues, and by mobilizing actors in their decided networks to carry the issues further, on other organizational platforms and with other organizational mandates. For example, as was the case with the Cancun protocol an issue related to climate risks may be "adopted" by a participant at a meeting set up by the WEF, who then may pursue the issue within the relevant UN body. Or as we witnessed at one WEF meeting, a small group of invited people may come up with an idea of how to increase the accountability of CEO:s in transnational organizations, such as the WTO and IMF. This idea will later be highlighted and carried further by these persons through their "home organizations". Other organizational actors may thus act as "ambassadors" for issues articulated at WEF meetings. Metaphorically speaking they act as bees coming into the bee hive with nectar, that later on will be turned into honey.

Yet another important implication is that the extensive use of partial organization allows for a strong centralization of leadership. Whilst partial organization comes with weakened power in

the form of oversight and sanctions, it may allow for a concentration of resources at the center. The periphery has little sanctioned insight into the core of the organization, and a weak voice in influencing the operations of the organization. Actors in the partially organized environment thus have to rely on the goodwill of the leadership. For an organization with global reach, such as the WEF and an increasing number of think tanks, a centralized leadership may also be the only way by which the activities of the organization can be carried forward.

A further implication of partial organizing is that demands for increased transparency and accountability may be handled more flexibly. Complete organizing means that the organization is expected to, and has the means to, make operations more transparent and to be accountable (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011). More loosely organized networks tend to be more opaque and accountability tends to be fuzzier.

Whether or not, and how, something is organized is thus crucial for understanding how it how it functions and changes. By paying close attention to the kind of organizing that goes on, we can avoid the risk of missing important aspects of the phenomena of interest. The broader question to be raised concerns the implication of these trends for politics and for democracy as we know it. Decided networks are becoming an increasingly popular way to ”do politics”, as exemplified in for example ”governance networks”. As argued by Sørensen and Torfing (2005), governance networks have become a necessary ingredient in the production of efficient public governance in a complex, fragmented and multi-layered world. The question of how they contribute to democratic decision-making remains unresolved. They may be regarded as a threat to democracy on the grounds that they challenge established democratic procedures and the position of elected politicians. On the other hand, governance networks may be a way to broaden political participation and to include new actors and new ways of exerting influence. We may be witnessing the conjunction of new forms of organizing with new ways of doing politics.

References

Abrahamsson, Hans (2006). *En delad värld. Göteborgshändelserna i backspegeln*. Stockholm: Leopard.

Ahrne, Göran (1994). *Social Organizations. Interaction, Inside, Outside and Between Organizations*. London: Sage.

Ahrne, Göran and Nils Brunsson (2011). 'Organization outside organizations: The significance of partial organization', *Organization* **18**(1): 83–104.

Braithwaite, James and Peter Drahos (2000). *Global Business Regulation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brunsson, Nils (2006). *Mechanisms of Hope. Maintaining the Dream of the Rational Organization.* Malmö: Copenhagen Business School Press.

Clegg, Stewart R., David Courpasson and Nelson X. Phillips (2006). *Power and Organizations*. London: Sage.

Cohen, Michael D., James G. March and Johan P. Olsen (1972). 'A garbage can model of organizational choice', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **17**(1): 1-25.

Coore, Francois. et al. (2011). 'Communication, Organizing and Organization: An Overview and Introduction to the Special Issue', *Organization Studies* **32**(9)1149-1170.

Czarniawska-Joerges, Barbara and Guje Sevón (2005). *Global ideas: how ideas, objects and practices travel in a global economy*, Malmö, Sweden: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

Emerson, Richard M. (1962). 'Power dependence relations', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 27, No.1 Feb. 1962.

Fliegstein, Niel (1996). 'Markets as politics: A political-cultural approach to market institutions', *American Sociological Review* **61**(4): 656-673.

Garsten, Christina (2013). All about ties: Think tanks and the economy of connections. In Garsten, Christina and Anette Nyqvist, eds, *Organisational Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.

Garsten, Christina and Adrienne (2014). 'Values aligned: The organization of conflicting values within the World Economic Forum', in Alexius, Susanna and Kristina Tamm

Hallström, eds, *Re-configuring Value Conflicts in Markets*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Haas, Peter M. (1992). Epistemic communities and international policy coordination. *International Organization*, **46** (1): 1–35.

Ingold, Karin and Frédérick Varone (2012). 'Treating policy brokers seriously: Evidence from the climate policy', In *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* **22** (2): 319–346.

Kingdon, John W. (1984/2011). *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*. Longman Publishing.

Lindblom, Charles (1977). *Politics and Markets*: *The World's Political Economic Systems*. New York, NY: *Basic Books*.

Medvetz, Thomas (2012). *Think Tanks in America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Mirowski, Philip and Dieter Plehwe 2009. *The Road from Mont Pellerin.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Mosse, David and David Lewis (2006). Theoretical approaches to brokerage and translation in development. In Lewis, David and David Mosse eds, *Development Brokers and Translators.* Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, pp. 1-26.

Pigman, Geoffrey A. (2007). *The World Economic Forum: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Global Governance*. London: Routledge.

Polanyi, Karl (1989). *The Great Transformation*: *The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Powell, Walter (1990). 'Neither markets nor hierarchy: Network forms of organization', *Research in Organizational Behaviour* 12: 295–336.

Rich, Andrew (2004). *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ricci, David M. (1993). *The Transformation of American Politics, The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks*. Yale: New Haven University Press.

Richardson, Ian, Andrew Kakabadse and Nada Kakabadse (2011). *Bilderberg People. Elite, Power and Consensus in World Affairs*. New York: Routledge.

Rose, Nikolas and Peter Miller (1992). 'Political power beyond the state: Problematics of government', *The British Journal of Sociology*, **43**(2): 173–205.

Ruggie, John Gerard (2004). 'Reconstituting the global public domain: Issues, actors and practices', *European Journal of International Relations* **10** (4):499–531.

Sahlin-Andersson, Kerstin and Lars Engwall, eds (2002). *The Expansion of Management Knowledge. Carriers, Flows and Sources.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Sartori, Giovanni (1974). 'Philosophy, theory and science of politics', *Political Theory*, **2**(2): 133-162.

Smith, James A. (1991). *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks And The Rise Of The New Policy Elite*, New York, NY: The Free Press.

Sørensen, Eva and Jacob Torfing (2005). 'Network governance and post-liberal democracy', *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, **27**(2): 197 – 237.

Stone, Diane (2005). Global knowledge networks and international development: Bridges across boundaries, in D. Stone and S. Maxwell, eds, *Global Knowledge Networks and International Development: Bridges Across Boundaries*. London: Routledge.

Weber, Max (1978). *Economy and Society*. Vol. 1. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Wedel, Janine (2009). *Shadow Elite*. New York: Basic Books.

WEF (2010). *A Partner in Shaping History: The First 40 Years. Cologny*: WEF.