

**SEÁN CLEARY**

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Seán Cleary is Chair of Strategic Concepts (Pty) Ltd, Vice Chair of FutureWorld Foundation, and a Director of Companies. He studied social sciences and law at the Universities of Cape Town and South Africa, and has an MBA from Henley.

He is on the Faculty of the Parmenides Foundation and lectures on corporate strategy, conflict resolution, international law, development and national security. He chairs the Advisory Board of the Global Economic Symposium; is a Board member of the Salzburg Global Seminar; a Trustee of the South African Foundation for Conciliation; and a Strategic Adviser to the World Economic Forum.

He served in the South African Navy before a diplomatic career in Iran, the USA and Namibia, where he initiated negotiations between Namibia's political parties, the release of political prisoners and adoption of a Bill of Rights. He served on committees preparing the South African Peace Accord and chaired the Working Group on the Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Organizations; was a Member of the Business Steering Group of the New Programme for Africa's Development, Chair of the Advisory Board of Operation Hope, a Board Member of LEAD International; the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the Rocky Mountain Institute and Carbon War Room; and served on national Advisory Committees in Namibia, and as Senior Adviser to the Arab Business Council.

He has received academic and public service awards; been published in South African, European and U.S. journals; co-authored, with Thierry Malleret, *Resilience to Risk* (2006), and *Global Risks* (2007), and contributed chapters to several others, including *Learning from Catastrophes* (2009).

## Governance at risk

The thesis of the conference is that human society faces serious, even catastrophic risks if the balance of the planetary, biological and social-political systems that enable its survival, are disrupted. Such disruptions may be caused by systemic risks, triggered by exogenous stochastic events, and by endogenous systemic weakness due to the integrated nature of global society.

The past three decades have seen the proliferation of significantly more complex, interdependent and integrated global networks. Rising demographic growth, urbanisation and technological connectivity have led to exponential increases in the number of nodes, paths and potential patterns by which risk may be transmitted across the same networks that convey data and information, capital, materials and people. Increasingly connected networks facilitate robustness through risk dispersion; and fragility beyond systemic inflection points. While scale-free networks, with many peripheral nodes and few hubs are robust, moreover, hubs are vulnerable to targeted attacks, as proliferating threats to cybersecurity illustrate.

Addressing global systemic risks characterised by complexity and interdependency across geopolitical boundaries, requires cooperative interstate behaviour on a scale beyond that presently available. This governance gap is exacerbated by the increasing role of non-state actors – institutional agents of labour, finance, production and trade; groups advocating policy change on particular issues; and entities seeking disruption of the established order – whose increasing role has challenged state sovereignty and Westphalian governance.

It seems likely that our ambition has exceeded our grasp, and that we are unable to manage the degree of systemic complexity and the diversity of interests and values that constitute the environment we have engineered. This suggests that we should recognise our limitations, and tailor systems of governance to scales at which we can agree on normative principles to accommodate different measures of the diversity of interests, and the relative ordering of values, among actors whose cooperation is required to mitigate catastrophic outcomes, and promote beneficial circumstances.