

The World Economic Forum: Collaboration or Elite Influence?



“Collaboration for a better world, or an exclusive club for the privileged few.”

Every January, the Swiss town of Davos transforms into a global hub for decision-makers as world leaders, policymakers, business titans, and academics gather for the World Economic Forum (WEF). Promoted as a platform for international cooperation, the event aims to address pressing global challenges by fostering partnerships between the public and private sectors. Yet, while the WEF presents itself as a driver of global progress, critics argue it functions more as an exclusive club where elites shape policies to serve their interests.

What is the World Economic Forum?

Founded in 1971 by Professor Klaus Schwab as the European Management Forum, the WEF positions itself as a collaborative platform to improve the state of the world. Beyond the high-profile Davos meeting, the organization promotes dialogue, supports evidence-based decision-making, and drives initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future.

Driving Global Progress—or Consolidating Power?

Over the decades, the WEF has undeniably facilitated landmark moments in international cooperation. The 1988 Davos Declaration, for

instance, helped ease tensions between Greece and Turkey, while also creating a neutral space for Israeli and Palestinian officials to initiate dialogue. Two years later, the forum became a critical stage for German reunification, bringing together East and West German leaders to discuss urgent economic strategies following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The forum has also championed health and human rights. In 2000, it launched Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, to improve vaccine access in lower-income countries. This commitment to humanitarian progress continued in 2016, when the WEF convened a working group to establish principles for public-private collaboration on cash-based humanitarian assistance.

Efforts to tackle social inequality gained traction through initiatives like the Global Gender Gap Report and the Reskilling Revolution, launched in 2006 to promote equal opportunities and workforce adaptation amid rapid technological change. Since 2017, the WEF's Fourth Industrial Revolution Center has spearheaded discussions on AI, blockchain, and automation, advocating for ethical policies that balance innovation with job security and fairness.

Chart 1: Timeline of The World Economic Forum

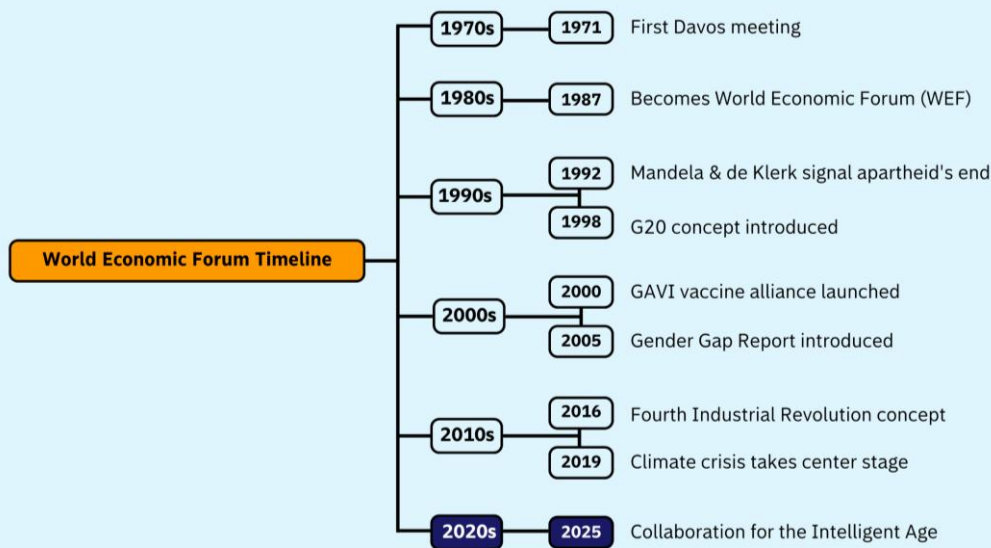
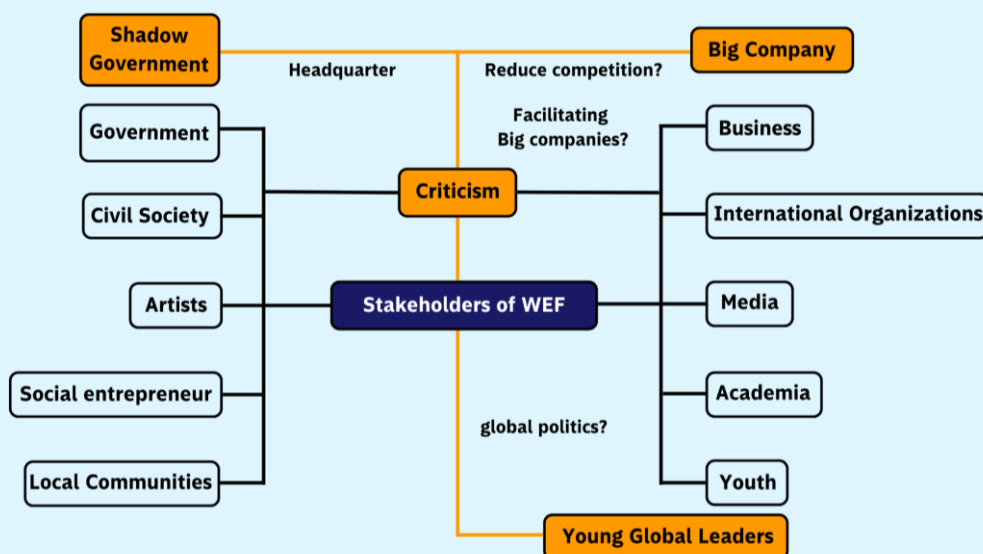


Chart 2: Stakeholders and Rising of Criticism



Source: World Economic Forum

Rising Criticism: Influence or Overreach?

Despite its contributions, the WEF has faced mounting scrutiny. Critics question whether the forum truly drives significant change or simply serves as a lavish networking event for the world's elite.

One point of contention is the WEF's corporate membership model, where top firms pay upwards of \$600,000 annually for access. This structure, skeptics argue, allows big business to shape the global agenda behind closed doors. With its

second headquarters in New York, the WEF has strengthened ties with the UN, Wall Street, and U.S. policymakers—fueling claims that it operates as an unofficial “shadow government.”

The Great Reset, launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, further inflamed debate. While the initiative called for rethinking capitalism and promoting sustainable development, critics viewed it as an extension of the WEF's long-standing agenda rather than a genuinely transformative vision.

The forum's influence extends to political leadership, with prominent figures like Emmanuel Macron and Justin Trudeau emerging from the WEF's Young Global Leaders program. While some see this as a positive effort to cultivate future leaders, others interpret it as a channel for quiet influence over global politics.

Technology initiatives have also raised eyebrows. The WEF's advocacy for digital identity systems and AI-driven governance has sparked concerns about mass surveillance under the guise of efficiency. Similarly, its promotion of stakeholder capitalism—encouraging businesses to prioritize social and environmental goals—has drawn criticism for favoring corporate giants while potentially stifling competition.

Thailand at WEF 2025: Seizing the Moment

Amid this polarized perception, the 2025 World Economic Forum convened under the theme "Collaboration for the Intelligent Age," with climate action and emerging technologies dominating the agenda. Thailand, undeterred by the broader debate, emerged as a key player in global discussions.

The Thai delegation showcased the nation's strengths as a regional logistics hub and leader in sustainable agriculture. At the "Nourishing the Future for All" reception, Thailand highlighted its growing influence in global food security, featuring renowned chefs and emphasizing the health benefits of Thai cuisine.

A significant milestone was the signing of Thailand's first Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with

the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), strengthening economic ties with European nations. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra engaged in high-level dialogues with global leaders, further cementing Thailand's role as a crucial partner in international trade, investment, and innovation.

Conclusion: A Platform of Promise—or Privilege?

As the curtains closed on Davos 2025, the World Economic Forum once again left the world divided. Supporters praised its role in advancing sustainability, social inclusion, and technological innovation, while critics continued to question the true beneficiaries of its initiatives.

For Thailand, however, the forum proved to be more than just a stage for elite discourse. By leveraging the platform to secure trade deals, promote innovation, and highlight its leadership in sustainability, Thailand demonstrated a commitment to shaping the global future on its own terms—aptly reflecting the Thai proverb "น้ำขึ้นให้รีบตัก" (Seize the opportunity when it arises) and the familiar saying "Make hay while the sun shines."

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