Welcome to the Outlook on the Global Agenda 2014

As the year draws to a close, many organisations unveil their predictions for the year ahead. But the publication you’re holding in your hands does something a little different.

We harnessed the insights of our Network of Global Agenda Councils to understand what the next 12 months will bring – but we haven’t simply asked our contributors to gaze into their crystal balls.

Instead, we partnered with the Said Business School at Oxford University to redesign our Survey on the Global Agenda and with Pew Research Center to identify the most pressing issues of the year ahead. Using this tool, we collected insights from more than 1,500 global experts across business, government, academia and civil society. The majority of respondents came from within the Network, but we also wanted to include the perspective of the world’s youth, so for the first time we also asked the Global Shapers and Young Global Leaders – young people who are transforming today’s world – to participate.

Using this data, we selected the most interesting themes and contextualised them with commentary from some of our community’s brightest minds. In this publication, we look at the 10 biggest trends for the year to come; we evaluate how they will play out globally and in different regions; we examine the new developments that are finding a place in the global agenda; and we take a look at how new technological advances will change our world.

We hope you will find the results of our research compelling and thought-provoking. The outlook for 2014 is complex. Our experts overwhelmingly agreed that rising societal tensions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) will be the defining trend of 2014, alongside increasing inequality and unemployment. Respondents also showed their dissatisfaction with the state of global co-operation on major challenges such as climate change, youth unemployment and poverty. But on a brighter note, they were optimistic about the future and about mankind’s ability to address emerging issues in biotechnology, surveillance, energy security and a host of other issues.

The Outlook owes its success to the exceptional calibre and creativity of the Global Agenda Council Members, to whom we would like to extend our most sincere appreciation.

President Drew Gilpin Faust © Stephanie Mitchell, Harvard University

Preface

Drew Gilpin Faust
President, Harvard University

Historians are more accustomed to looking into the past than forecasting the future. But as I read through the challenges facing the world highlighted in the pages that follow, I recognised a pattern that has been a focus of my work in recent years: as president of a research university.

We live in an era when knowledge is of critical importance in addressing the world’s most pressing problems, when technology promises both wondrous possibilities and profound dislocations, when global forces increasingly shape our lives and work. At Harvard and other research universities around the world, academic enterprise has become increasingly collaborative, because the best answers to complex questions often involve the combined perspectives of experts from different but complementary disciplines.

What struck me about the subjects highlighted in this journal was the degree to which many of these challenges are connected in complex ways that may not be apparent at first glance. For example, few would dispute the idea that climate change will be a major concern in 2014, as will the rising socio-political tensions across the Middle East and North Africa. But relatively few may have noted that one of the factors exacerbating the situation in Syria is a drought that resulted from shifting weather patterns in the region. Similarly, the expansion of megacities is influenced by rising sea levels and other climate challenges. And then there’s the issue of energy independence and the impact that tapping natural gas in the US could have on political policy in the Middle East.

The increasingly interconnected nature of the world’s most pressing problems demands new approaches to the development of solutions. Traditional intellectual fields are shifting and converging in order to answer the complex questions facing our globalised society, just as organisations such as the World Economic Forum and its Global Agenda Councils are bringing together thought leaders from across a wide range of disciplines to provide new perspectives on our greatest opportunities.

As we look ahead, we have to be optimistic that this growing spirit of collaboration across disciplines and across borders will enable us to meet the challenges of 2014.