



Samantha Tonkin, Associate Director, Tel.: +41 79 615 1640 – samantha.tonkin@weforum.org

Rising Greenhouse Gases Pose Greatest Environmental Threat to World, Report Warns

- Rising greenhouse gas emissions pose the most significant, systemic environmental risk over next 10 years
- Other environmental risks include irremediable pollution and a failure to adapt to climate change
- Report analyses top 10 risks in [economic](#), [environmental](#), [geopolitical](#), [societal](#) and [technological](#) categories
- A dystopian world, unsafe safeguards and the dark side of connectivity are this year's major risk cases
- Read *Global Risks 2012* report in full: <http://www.weforum.org/globalrisks2012>

London, United Kingdom, 11 January 2012 – The failure of global institutions to curb rising greenhouse gas emissions is seen as posing the most significant environmental risk to the world over the next 10 years, the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks 2012* report has found. Carbon emissions are perceived as the most systemically important among the environmental risks evaluated because of their impact and influence on the others. These are among the findings of the Risk Response Network's survey of 469 experts and industry leaders, published today.

In the environmental section of the report, 10 long-term risks were evaluated: antibiotic-resistant bacteria, failure to adapt to climate change, irremediable pollution, mismanagement of land and waterways, mismanaged urbanization, persistent extreme weather, rising greenhouse gas emissions, irreversible biodiversity loss, unprecedented geophysical destruction and vulnerability to geomagnetic storms.

In a special chapter on the risk lessons to be gleaned from the [Great East Japan Earthquake](#) last year, the report finds that organizations are more resilient if they have clear lines of communication and if employees across the organization are empowered to take decisions.

In addition to environmental risks, the report includes economic, geopolitical, societal and technological categories of global risks. An analysis across all five categories revealed three constellations of risks that were developed into case studies for this year's report.

Case 1: Seeds of Dystopia

Bulging populations of young people with few prospects, growing numbers of retirees depending on debt-saddled states (stoking fiscal imbalances) and the expanding gap between rich and poor are all fuelling resentment worldwide. Collectively, this constellation of risks could unwind the gains of globalization by driving populism, nationalism and protectionism.

"Individuals are increasingly being asked to bear risks previously assumed by governments and companies to obtain a secure retirement and access to quality healthcare. This report is a wake-up call to both the public and private sectors to come up with constructive ways to realign the expectations of an increasingly anxious global community," said John Drzik, Chief Executive Officer of Oliver Wyman Group (Marsh & McLennan Companies).

Case 2: Unsafe Safeguards

Policies, norms and institutions from the 20th century may no longer protect us in a more complex and interdependent world. The weakness of existing safeguards is exposed by a constellation of risks related to emerging technologies, financial interdependence, resource depletion and climate change, leaving society vulnerable.

"We've seen examples of over-regulation, like the response to the Icelandic volcanic eruptions, or under-regulation, such as the subprime or Eurozone crises. We need to get the balance right with regulations and, to that end, our safeguards must be anticipatory rather than reactive. It's equally important that regulations be made more flexible to effectively respond to change," said David Cole, Chief Risk Officer at Swiss Re.

Case 3: The Dark Side of Connectivity

Our daily lives are almost entirely dependent on connected online systems, making us susceptible to malicious individuals, institutions and nations that increasingly have the ability to unleash devastating cyber attacks remotely and anonymously. There exists a constellation of risks familiar to the digital world that poses a real threat to the physical world.

“The Arab Spring demonstrated the power of interconnected communications services to drive personal freedom, yet the same technology facilitated riots in London. Governments, societies and businesses need to better understand the interconnectivity of risk in today’s technologies if we are truly to reap the benefits they offer,” said Steve Wilson, Chief Risk Officer for General Insurance at Zurich.

The seventh edition of the report describes 50 global risks and groups them into [economic](#), [environmental](#), [geopolitical](#), [societal](#) and [technological](#) categories. Within each category, the most significant systemic risk is singled out. The report also highlights “X Factors” – emerging concerns with still unknown consequences which warrant more research. These include a volcanic winter, cyber neotribalism and epigenetics.

The three risk cases, Japan and X Factors are the focus of special sessions at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2012 in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, taking place on 25-29 January.

Published in cooperation with Marsh & McLennan Companies, Swiss Re, The Wharton Center for Risk Management and Zurich, *Global Risks 2012* is the flagship initiative of the World Economic Forum’s Risk Response Network. The Risk Response Network provides private and public sector leadership with an independent platform to better map, monitor, manage and mitigate global risks.

Notes to Editors

For more information on *Global Risks 2012*, please contact:

Tom Armitage, Media Relations Manager, Swiss Re, Switzerland, at: +41 (0)79 207 3293 or Tom.Armitage@swissre.com

Jason Groves, Global Director Media Relations, Marsh, Marsh & McLennan Companies, United Kingdom, at +44 20 7357 1455 or jason.groves@marsh.com

Riccardo Moretto, Media Relations Manager, Zurich Financial Services Group, Switzerland, at +41 (0)44 625 2100 or riccardo.moretto@zurich.com

Samantha Tonkin, Associate Director, Communications, World Economic Forum, at +41 (0)79 615 1640 or samantha.tonkin@weforum.org

Peter Winicov, Senior Associate Director, Marketing and Communications, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, USA, at +1 215 746 6471 or winicov@wharton.upenn.edu

Read the *Global Risks 2012* report in full at <http://www.weforum.org/globalrisks2012>

Watch the report launch press conference live at 09.30-10.30 GMT on 11 January 2012 or replayed at <http://livestream.com/worldeconomicforum>

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