

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
Mr Walter Erdelen

Assistant Director-General
for Natural Sciences

at the Opening Session of the World Science Forum

Budapest, 8 November 2003

Mr President of the Republic of Hungary,
Mr President of the Hungarian Academy of Science,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here today for the opening of this World Science Forum. Let me first of all express my gratitude to the Government of Hungary for hosting this very important event, and for the warm hospitality with which we have been welcomed. UNESCO is both honoured and delighted to be a partner in the organization of this Forum, which is an important event in the long-standing ties of cooperation between Hungary and UNESCO in the scientific arena, one high point of which was the World Conference on Science in 1999.

Since this date UNESCO has been busy implementing the World Conference on Science follow-up activities, which have inspired many partners to adopt innovative approaches to fostering science.

The Forum today has special significance in the context of the celebration of the World Science Day for Peace and Development here in Budapest. As you remember, the organization of such a Day is one of the important outcomes of the World Conference on Science held in Budapest in 1999. It was considered as an excellent opportunity to reaffirm each year the commitment to attaining the goals proclaimed in the *Declaration on Science and Use of Scientific Knowledge* and to follow up the recommendations of the *Science Agenda: a Framework for Action*. It is also to be seen as part of our endeavour to bridge the often wide communication gap between the scientific community and the public at large, another of the strong messages delivered by the World Conference.

Indeed, for science to flourish in any culture, its usefulness must be widely understood and appreciated. Progress in science depends on the participation of a global research community, as well as on broad public trust and support. Without the active and conscious involvement of society in science-related questions, peace and development cannot be guaranteed.

This is particularly true today, since science has a more pivotal role than ever in defining the future of humankind. It has become a major factor in the development of technology needed to enable societies to progress. However, in spite of the considerable opportunities opened up by scientific advance, entire populations are living in poor conditions, and the world-wide deterioration of the environment is a serious threat to the very survival of the human race. Although considerable efforts have been made, much more remains to be done in order to find appropriate solutions to problems related to energy, food, housing, or management of the environment, that are still encountered in all societies in different forms and degrees. Most scientific potential is still concentrated in a limited number of countries which, as a result, are holding for themselves the keys to major further developments especially in advanced fields. Profound inequalities continue to divide peoples and the future itself sometimes seems full of contradiction, uncertainty and doubt. Nations are closer to each other than ever before, and humankind has enormous resources with which to improve the living conditions of all, but the prevailing imbalances and inequalities are giving rise to deep unease.

The current revolution in science and technology has led to concern that unbridled scientific progress is not always ethically acceptable. UNESCO's Programme on the Ethics of Science and Technology reflects this concern and aims to place such progress in a context of ethical reflection,

rooted in the cultural, legal, philosophical and religious heritage of the various human communities. In this regard, let me remind you that the Ethics of Science and Technology, including the Bioethics Programme, an area in which we closely work together with the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), is among UNESCO's five principal programme priorities.

Mr President,
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Science is a fundamental creator of knowledge. As such, in its societal role, science is indissociable from education. The provision of modern S&T education is an indispensable prerequisite to combating disparities between developed and developing countries and to paving the way for all countries to build prosperous knowledge-based societies. For this reason, developing scientific, technical and human capacities has been one of the priority components of UNESCO's Science programmes. The International Basic Sciences Programme is a significant new initiative launched by the Organization for the implementation of the follow-up to the World Conference on Science through a concerted, goal-oriented partnership between governmental institutions, national, regional and international scientific organizations.

These approaches are among the priorities each nation needs to set in order to ensure its own development. The World Conference recognized that, to achieve this, there is a need to strengthen the provision of sound policy advice to Governments. UNESCO has been responding to this call ever since. The Science Agenda recommended a comprehensive programme to enhance scientific expertise and to promote innovation in national science and technology policies. At the crossroads of the natural, engineering, environmental and social sciences, UNESCO has reoriented its activity towards the preparation of guidelines for decision-makers and legislators in the conduct of policy review, in addition to enhancing national capacities in science and technology policy formulation and management.

Last but not least, I would like to express my appreciation to the organizers for having included the Young Scientists in the World Science Forum. Without our next generation of research scientists, we would jeopardize our efforts in maintaining, increasing and diffusing knowledge in the future. The International Forum of Young Scientists was one of the successful satellite events of the World Conference in 1999, and its final statement has been source of inspiration for UNESCO's youth-targeted science programmes.

In closing, let me assure you that UNESCO will pay great attention to the result of the World Science Forum. Wishing you a successful and fruitful meeting, I thank you for your attention.