

Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,

on the occasion of World Science Day
for Peace and Development

10 November 2004

World Science Day for Peace and Development provides an opportunity for scientific organizations, scientists, governments and civil society to join together in reaffirming - in the words of the UN Charter - the crucial contribution of science to the promotion of “social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”, including freedom from the scourge of war and conflict.

The accumulation of scientific knowledge and the technological applications that flow from it have transformed human life in modern times, bringing enormous benefits to humankind. However, these benefits have been unequally distributed, reflecting the wide disparities in wealth and opportunity within a socially divided world. Moreover, these benefits have too often been achieved without due regard to the sustainability of the activities that generate them.

At the same time, the uses to which science and technology have been put have raised serious concerns about the exercise of the ethical responsibilities implicit in the increasing influence of science and technology upon all our lives. As underlined by the World Conference on Science and the World Science Forum organized by UNESCO in Budapest in 1999 and 2003 respectively, the scientific world needs to address these issues. This must be done in two main ways: first, by integrating the concerns underlying these issues into the scientific enterprise itself; and, second, by showing decision-makers and the public at large the potential contributions of science to the cause of human betterment, including efforts to remedy the consequences of the past misapplications of scientific knowledge.

World Science Day will achieve one of its essential aims if it helps to focus the attention of young people on science and how its goals are congruent with their own aspirations. Trends in educational and career choices suggest that interest in science may be waning among the young in many parts of the world. Wise governance requires that we reverse this trend and that enhanced efforts are made to motivate the younger generations to take up the challenge of science. In this regard, it is not enough to emphasize the intellectual demands of scientific study and research; in addition, we must ensure that the ethic of solidarity implicit in the scientific enterprise effectively informs its purposes.

UNESCO is committed to supporting initiatives that raise the profile of science among the young. It strongly encourages the creation of associations and networks of young scientists and has decided to support the establishment of the World Academy of Young Scientists (WAYS), which is aimed at enhancing the involvement of young scientists in the science policy-making process. It similarly sponsors the Javed Husain Prize for Young Scientists, which rewards outstanding pure or applied research in the natural or social sciences, and the MAB Young Scientists Awards, which encourage interdisciplinary research on ecosystems, natural resources and biodiversity.

Commending science to the young, which must include making careers in science more financially rewarding, is essential not only to the future of science itself but also to virtually all those goals that the international community has set itself for the new millennium. Indeed, these goals are encapsulated in the title of the World Science Day for Peace and Development.

Koïchiro Matsuura