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The World Conference on Science

Federico Mayor

The new commitment pledged in Budapest last month at the World Conference on Science*—by science to society and by society to science—will be pivotal to our ability to answer some of the new century's most pressing problems. Science has solutions to offer on urgent issues such as energy, fresh water, food production, and health, but new approaches are needed to more effectively influence policy-making. Although the Budapest Conference called for new funding mechanisms, the outcome sought by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes the ways of doing science as much as the means. The increasing importance of science in today's world calls for far greater interaction among all stakeholders and for a truly global perspective in research. Strong consensus on this point emerged in Budapest among government officials, natural and social scientists, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, other organizations, and the private sector.

This greater interaction requires improved communication of science to the public and higher levels of scientific literacy in order for people to influence how science and technology affect their lives. Science has to meet the real needs of real people, respecting individual rights and empowering communities, to win public and political support. Scientists must exercise an active ethical and social commitment to earn trust. This is the "new social contract" of science that emerged in Budapest.

Conference participants called for a central role for science in international cooperation, so that capacity-building and the transfer of knowledge enable communities to address their development needs. One framework for increased scientific cooperation is UNESCO's international science programs. All countries that participate in these programs (such as the management of coastal areas) both contribute to and benefit from these multidisciplinary projects. For individual projects related to the Framework for Action adopted at the Conference, UNESCO will act as a clearinghouse to help prioritize aims and circulate examples of worthwhile and effective programs.

By building models for doing science in a more interactive and inclusive way, we can make active partners of all the parties involved and ensure the full participation of women and young scientists. In Budapest, African research ministers announced a follow-up meeting next January, reflecting a readiness to shoulder primary responsibility for developing their science base. The same resolve was expressed by Eastern European countries in transition. Wider participation opens new prospects, affecting how research is done and its focus.

The developing countries are still losing too many of their best scientists to the world's wealthier research centers. Yet the negative aspects of this movement can be in part counteracted by increased mobility and information sharing, current trends that facilitate intensive training courses, the sharing of big science facilities, and networks linking expatriate researchers to their home country institutions—all strategies supported by UNESCO.

In this drive to establish new ways of doing science, the leading industrialized nations clearly have much to offer. The United States, in particular, has the world's strongest science base, a tradition of individual rights, a record of reacting positively to change, and some of the world's largest knowledge-intensive corporations. If the business sector takes note of the potential benefits of a new relationship between science and society, then public and private interests would converge, generating a force for progress powerful enough to meet the challenges of the new century.

Federico Mayor, a biochemist and former education minister of Spain, is the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *The World Conference on Science, organized by UNESCO and ICSU (International Council for Science) took place in Budapest, Hungary, from 25 June to 1 July 1999. The documents adopted at the Conference can be found on UNESCO's Web site at www.unesco.org/science/wcs/index.htm.

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