



«Towards a modern humanism».

A unique approach to scientific and social collaboration takes off at The World Knowledge Dialogue Symposium

Geneva, 18th September 2006 – 270 participants from 34 countries gathered in Crans-Montana (Switzerland) between 14 –16 September for the first World Knowledge Dialogue Symposium. Their ambitious objective : That the natural and human sciences combine forces to expand our global capital of knowledge and understanding. After three days of animated and passionate exchange, the first evaluations of the innovative project's worth are extremely positive. Many active participants have expressed commitment to attend the second edition of the World Knowledge Dialogue Symposium in Autumn 2008, among them laureates of the prestigious Nobel and Balzan prizes. Plans for cooperative projects of an international scale are already being elaborated.

Dialogue is more than the sum of two monologues

Before launching the first round of scientific debates, Jàn Figel, the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism, reminded participants that the success of the initiative was very much dependant on them and that their willingness to translate lessons that emerged from it into daily practice was essential. He stressed the view that society has urgent need of men and women who will put their genius, their knowledge and their wisdom to the tasks of resolving the great problems of our time. He also underlined that this need was for long-term commitment and collective responsibility : Our society has grave problems that no amount of genius can solve in three days. The opinion was echoed by Geoffrey West, President and Distinguished Professor of the Santa Fe Institute, USA, who proposed that the Symposium should become a catalyst to promote focused international cooperation. According to him, the input required in terms of interdisciplinary discussions and collaborations was a question of years rather than days.

Superman exists

The problems that confront our society are so complex that no single scientific discipline can contribute even part of a solution from an "Ivory Tower" perspective. John Schellnhuber, Director of the Potsdam Institute of Climate Impact Research, admitted to his interlocutors that he had never consciously sought the dialogue between the different disciplines that his own work had brought him to. However, he has gradually become convinced that widely accepted mathematical models of the outcomes of current climatic changes, predict the onset of irreversible chain reactions that will take effect within the next few decades with drastic consequences for the very survival of mankind. He now feels compelled to get involved in drawing attention to the fact that recent climate changes are largely caused by human activity and he believes that only a massively coordinated effort, combining the expertise of scientists from many disciplines with world-wide support from political and economic leadership, has a chance to validate and refine climate change models rapidly enough for society to respond by modifying its comportment in time to avert

the ultimate disaster. Ruth Dreifuss, ex-Federal Councillor and ex-President of the Swiss Federal Council underlined the need for real transdisciplinary dialogue about these and many other issues, citing the words of French geneticist and philosopher Albert Jacquard «*Superman exists ; its not you, its not me, its us!* »

Future Prospects – A Santa Fe Institute in Switzerland?

Dame Julia Higgins, “Scientist in Residence” for the first edition of the World Knowledge Dialogue Symposium, brought the conference of Saturday 16th September to a close by summarising the major points of convergence and divergence that were brought to light during three days of exchanging views in a spirit of tolerance and humility. She suggested several practical ways through which to build upon the momentum for change that this dialogue achieved. If the meeting was notable for the number of venerable “wise old men” who expressed the need for radical change in our institutional, educational and political responses to society’s pressing needs, its closure was equally marked by the contributions of Dame Julia Higgins’ team of assistants, 7 young scientists hailing from different parts of the globe. These young men and women used the opportunity to present a distillation of their personal “conference impression” and each made the case for a priority that continued dialogue should pursue, to maximum effect. As Francis Waldvogel, its Executive Council Director remarked afterwards with emotion, the first World Knowledge Dialogue closed most appropriately, with those who carry our hopes and ambitions forward, taking centre stage.

After three days of interactions that were uninhibited by the standard perceptions of boundaries between specialist disciplines, the scientific, academic and political leaders present were unanimous that the continuation of such dialogue is imperative. Internationally respected top scientists and thinkers from traditionally separate disciplines, who would never have encountered each other without this initiative, have been able to discuss together and to learn from each other. All who responded wholeheartedly to the request to leave their “comfort zone”, left Crans-Montana feeling enriched by the experience and eager to repeat it. Their exchanges have generated several proposals for ways to foster new links between the humanities and the natural sciences that further transcend the traditional boundaries. Suggestions ranged from ways to encourage highly specialised academics to become more involved with the community at large, to the creation of a “Crans-Montana Institute”, modelled on the American Santa Fe Institute of inter- and transdisciplinary research.

The discussions also highlighted ongoing initiatives to strengthen ties between science and broader issues within society that exist, in several countries. Although recent European Union efforts have raised the profile of science and society issues, many initiatives remain largely unconnected to each other. As an alternative to the creation of a new institution, it was proposed that better coordination of national efforts via online international exchange platforms would facilitate the dissemination of information.



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A resounding success

“Crans-Montana has been the most extraordinary experience”, rejoiced a delighted Professor Francis Waldvogel just after the Symposium’s closure. “Top scientists and thinkers who would never have had occasion to meet without this initiative, not only talked, but even more importantly, listened to each other here.

270 people participated in the Symposium and the enthusiastic feedback that we have received, together with the ideas that our discussions have generated, indicates we are on the right track. Continued dialogue is a necessity if we, that is, both natural and social scientists are to honour our responsibilities to society. It is just wonderful to see how Professor André Hurst’s vision has been adopted by the participants and taken another step further. Now we must capitalise on the momentum that the process launched this year has gathered. The next World Knowledge Dialogue Symposium, set to take place in Crans-Montana in the Autumn of 2008, will build upon the strong foundations of the lessons we have learned here.”

About the *World Knowledge Dialogue*

The *World Knowledge Dialogue* was founded by the Swiss scientific and academic institutions in June 2006. Its president is Prof. André Hurst, creator of the concept of the *World Knowledge Dialogue* and former rector of the University of Geneva . The rectors of the Universities of Lausanne and Zurich are members of the Board of the *World Knowledge Dialogue* Foundation and the programme is unanimously supported by the governing bodies of the Swiss Universities.

The objective of the *World Knowledge Dialogue* is to create an international scientific interface to bridge the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities, by the means, amongst others, of a biennially organized symposium.

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