

'Science summit' sets ambitious agenda

[PARIS] Momentum gathering behind plans for a global 'science summit' next June appears to be fulfilling the organizers' hopes that it could be the most important international meeting on the relationship between science and politics for 20 years.

The World Conference on Science for the 21st Century is to be held in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. It is being organized jointly by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) and the International Council for Science, until recently known as the International Council for Scientific Unions. (The council is keeping its old acronym, ICSU.)

Continued debate over the effectiveness of Unesco, which the United States still declines to rejoin after withdrawing in the mid-1980s, gave rise to considerable scepticism about plans for the conference when it was proposed last year by the agency's director-general, Federico Mayor.

Concerns remain over a tight planning schedule, a shortage of funds and an ambitious agenda. The latter includes a comprehensive overview of the achievements of modern science, and what one Unesco official describes as a desire to establish "new international guidelines for science policy".

Set against these, however, is a growing awareness that the ending of the Cold War, whose dynamics determined much of the past 50 years' political thinking about international cooperation in science, makes the timing of such a meeting appropriate.

Several of those who plan to attend say privately that, although unconvinced that the meeting will produce a substantive outcome, it could be a valuable opportunity to advance negotiations already under way, and perhaps to float new ideas.

High level delegations of scientists and government officials are expected from more than 120 countries. Those leading delegations or due to give keynote speeches include Bruce Alberts, the president of the US National Academy of Sciences, Israel Vargas, science minister of Brazil and president of the Third World Academy of Sciences, and the British government's chief scientific adviser, Sir Robert May.

It seems likely that the US delegation will be led by Neal Lane, recently appointed as the president's science adviser in Washington, and include Rita Colwell, the new director of the National Science Foundation. If confirmed, their presence would be a particularly significant move in the light of the continued hostility to Unesco in the United States.

"The scepticism has not gone away; but the momentum is certainly building," says one official at the US academy. "The United States, for example, is planning to send a strong delegation of seven scientists and



Flying the flag: the headquarters of Unesco, which is seeking a 'new social contract' for science.

three or four government representatives, and is taking the conference very seriously."

The partnership between Unesco and ICSU, both based in Paris, as organizers of the conference is based on ICSU's role as an informal science advisory body to the UN organization. Three-quarters of Unesco's International Science Advisory Board, where much of the planning for the conference is taking place, are ICSU members.

The scientific community's central role in the planning process stands in sharp contrast to the last such meeting, the United Nations Conference for Science and Technology in Development (UNCSTD) which took place in Vienna in 1979. That was dominated by governments and aid agencies, and Unesco's marginalization still rankles.

"We felt it was important this time that scientists should have a central voice in the planning of the conference," says Istvan Lang, a former foreign secretary at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences who is chairman of the local organizing committee. Hungary is matching the US\$500,000 that Unesco has committed to the meeting with a similar sum to cover the extra costs of holding the meeting in Budapest rather than Paris.

The conference will run from 26 June to 1

July. At the end of the meeting, delegates are expected to endorse two declarations embodying guidelines for follow-up activities, both of which it is hoped will eventually be endorsed by the United Nations.

One, known as the 'Declaration on science', will emphasize the need for a political commitment to science and the resolution of tensions between science and society. The other, 'Science agenda — framework for action' will set out ways to encourage greater scientific cooperation in addressing national and global needs and problems.

The two organizing bodies admit to slightly different goals. ICSU sees the conference as a way of getting the value of science across to politicians. "We would like to try to increase the understanding of science on the part of policy-makers," says Jean-François Stuyck-Taillandier, ICSU executive director.

Unesco also wants to cast science in a positive light, but stresses the need to use science effectively and to challenge the cultural and political barriers to achieving this. "We need to develop a new social contract for science," says Maurizio Iaccarino, Unesco's assistant director-general for science.

Iaccarino is keen to see a rewriting of the informal contract, expressed in its best known form by President Harry Truman's science adviser Vannevar Bush, under which scientists were left largely to set their own research agendas. "Bush's ideas have been used by many natural scientists, but are no longer appropriate," says Iaccarino. "We need now a new commitment of politicians to science, and of scientists to society. Our idea is to put scientists and politicians together to discuss these issues."

Iaccarino says he hopes practical ideas will emerge from the conference. One could be enhanced international commitment to postgraduate training in specific fields, particularly for researchers from developing nations. This might be provided in the form of short research training courses in the industrialized nations.

David Dickson

Indian anger at promotion 'caste system'

[NEW DELHI] A decision announced last week by the Indian government to limit the opportunities for promotion for scientists working outside the 'strategic' departments of space, atomic energy and defence has provoked an angry reaction among affected researchers.

Researchers working in these three areas will continue to enjoy a fast-track promotional system, but those in the eight 'non-strategic' government departments, such as biotechnology, industrial research, and oceanography, will have to wait between

three and five years before being assessed for promotion to the next grade.

The announcement was made by the Department of Personnel after the rejection of a suggestion from a national pay commission that scientists in all government agencies should enjoy a uniform pay structure and promotional opportunities. The Joint Action Forum, which represents researchers in the eight non-strategic scientific departments, says the government is legitimizing a caste system in Indian science.

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