

hanns-j neubert **view from the top**

Back to Budapest for lessons on responsible investment for society

They like to call it 'the Davos of science', after the economic summit in the small Swiss town—with its profound agendas, high ideals and a delegate list that suggests that assistant deputies have been left in charge of the world for a few days.

Next week, more than 400 policymakers and researchers, about 30 members of parliament, 17 ministers and four (but still counting) heads of state from around 60 countries are due to gather in Budapest for the third World Science Forum. Last weekend, it emerged that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has sent a video message.

The event, organised by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in partnership with Unesco, the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the Commission, is arranged biennially around Unesco's World Science Day on 10 November.

"What the World Economic Forum is for the world's industry leaders, the World Science Forum is for the world's science leaders," noted Werner Arber, Nobel laureate and emeritus professor of molecular microbiology at the University of Basel.

The theme of the event, Investing in Knowledge: Investing in the Future, is suitably consensual for an international forum that is still struggling to find its feet. Last week, for instance, with around 150 invited journalists preparing to descend on the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and in search of leads, the organisation still lacked effective media communications.

Compared with the World Economic Forum, which started in 1971, the World Science Forum is in its infancy. It developed from the World Conference on Science that was organised by Unesco and ICSU in Budapest in 1999. The first forum, in 2003, focused on Knowledge and Society, while the second, in 2005, was a step more ambitious, taking on Knowledge, Ethics and Responsibility. This year's theme suggests a growing confidence.

Arber, who is also co-chairman of the event's steering committee, which includes Janez Potocnik, the Research Commissioner, acknowledges the immaturity. "But a steady drop will carve the stone," he said.

After opening the forum, László Sólyom, the Hungarian president, will invite a panel of heads of state to address the issue, Responsibility for Future Generations. So far, he has persuaded just four "green" presidents, as he describes them, to sign up for the panel discussion: Heinz Fischer from Austria, Horst Köhler from Germany,

Stjepan Mesic from Croatia and Karolos Papoulias from Greece. Joining them will be Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, president of the Club of Rome.

Thereafter, the WSF runs as two parallel sessions. They take in broad topics, such as Science and Innovation as a Global Enterprise, and Investments in Knowledge in Accelerating Economies, as well as more focused and controversial subjects, such as the dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian scientists and, to mark the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Space Age, the future of space exploration.

Environmental issues receive special emphasis following the UN's decision to declare 2008 to be the International Year of Planet Earth. This initiative, subtitled Earth Science for Society, aims to ensure greater and more effective use by society of the knowledge accumulated by the world's 400,000 Earth scientists. It was co-founded in 2001 by the International Union of Geological Sciences and Unesco.

At the forum, the session on Investment in Knowledge for Sustainability has attracted the attention of many eminent speakers. Among them are Dennis Meadows, co-author of *Limits to Growth*, published in 1972, László Miklós, Slovakia's minister of the environment, and Wolfgang Sachs, senior research fellow at the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy.

Aiming to become the 'network of networks', the WSF will also hear reports from other global forums, including the World Economic Forum. Others include the meetings of the Nobel laureates in Lindau, the OECD's Global Science Forum, Japan's Science and Technology in Society Forum, the European Science Open Forum (ESOF), the World Bank's Knowledge Economy Forum and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). It is certainly an ambitious agenda.

The driving force behind another of the forum's main topics, Investing in Future Generations, is Péter Csermely, professor of biochemistry at Semmelweis University in Budapest. He was a member of the Rocard Group, an expert group of the Commission led by Michel Rocard, MEP and former French prime minister, whose report, *Science*

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Péter Csermely

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Education NOW, highlighted the need for a radical revision of the way that science is taught in schools.

"I will mainly talk on the recommendations of this report, which emphasises new approaches in science education and encourages the Commission and member states to help the formation of science-teacher networks to share their best practice," said Csermely, who won a Descartes Prize for Science Communication from the Commission in 2004.

He will also encourage politicians to increase their support for exploiting talent in schools in general, and in science education in particular, which is currently a hot topic in Hungary.

"This is a much broader project than we may think, since modern talent-definition says, more or less, that everyone is talented and therefore the question is not to judge whether a student is talented or not, but rather which is the area where the student is talented," noted Csermely.

"The WSF is an important melting pot of ideas where new

directions can emerge or be strengthened. By itself, it will not have the power to change anything. But with the goodwill of its participants, the event will change opinions and goals in society in the long run. Personally, I am expecting to learn a lot and develop my own ideas by learning of others' successes and failures."

Other speakers in the session are due to include Gaëll Mainguy, president of the World Academy of Young Scientists, and Yu Wei, vice-president of the China Association for Science and Technology. The forum will also explore some successful examples of the role of science in achieving the eight Millennium Development Goals, set by the World Bank Group in 2000.

Pointing out, once again, the importance and urgency of investing in knowledge for accelerating economies is the task of a panel of leading business scientists, technologists, science council presidents, and politicians from Hungary, China, and Taiwan, chaired by Goverdhan Mehta, the president of the International Council for Science.

"The idea behind the forum is to start dialogs about burning issues of science and society," said Balázs Gulyás, professor of neuroscience at the Karolinska Institute and executive director of the forum's organising committee. "Our goal is to urge politicians to put more emphasis on the scientific production of knowledge for the environment and the quality of life."

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Balázs Gulyás

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