

***CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY***

**UNITED NATIONS**



**NATIONS UNIES**

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

--

**ADDRESS ON ACCEPTING  
THE MAX SCHMIDHEINY FREEDOM PRIZE  
St. Gallen University, 18 November 2006**

Thank you very much, President Gomez, for those kind words. I am deeply moved to be awarded this Freedom Prize. Given the exceptional individuals and organizations who have accepted it before me -- from Mohammed Yunus to the Red Cross -- I am also humbled.

It has taken far too long for me to be able to come here and accept the Prize in person. But I was determined to do so before I leave office as Secretary-General, and I very much appreciate your patience.

All the more so as I am speaking to such a distinguished audience today, bringing together leaders from academia and the private sector, as well as the students, of course -- our leaders of tomorrow. And I am delighted to do so in a setting which marries the promise of the future with the foundations of tradition -- a state-of-the-art seat of learning, set in the beauty of St. Gallen, as eternal as the Alps and lakes that surround it.

What better setting to seek to pursue Max Schmidheiny's vision -- one of encouraging scientific, political and entrepreneurial initiatives that highlight individual freedom and responsibility.

So I will take this opportunity to talk about responsibility and risk, opportunities and challenges, in the world of science today.

Max Schmidheiny was born almost 100 years ago, in the dawn of what would become "the century of physics" -- a century of revolutionary advances and upheavals; a century that gave birth to a debate crucial to the very survival of our species: how to ensure that advances in science are used for the advancement of humankind, without becoming a tool for its destruction.

Today, it is said that ours will be the century of biology. And the debate that began around physics in the 20th century is more than ever relevant to biology in the 21st.

Extraordinary progress in the life sciences -- especially in biotechnology -- has opened up some of the most promising avenues in history towards improving the human condition. They have equipped scientists with new tools in areas ranging from food security to global health. Some of this progress was achieved right here in Switzerland, of course -- from advances in treatment for drug-resistant malaria, to research on drugs against the influenza virus.

Thanks to biotechnology, researchers worldwide are developing new vaccines to combat both long-standing and newly emerging viruses, which currently claim millions of lives a year and take a disproportionate toll on developing countries.

They are using bacterial genetics to overcome resistance to antibiotics, and DNA technologies to produce human insulin to treat diabetes.

They are making advances in the burgeoning field of medical genomics, providing hope of medical solutions to the global burden of cancer and other chronic diseases.

They are helping to protect the environment, by exploring methods of reforestation and ways to reduce pesticide use.

And they are teaming up to develop more effective microbicides against HIV transmission.

The bright side of biotechnology reflects the best of human progress in the service of the deepest human needs.

To ensure that the net outcome remains a positive one, this scientific balance must be nurtured carefully.

Recently, we have seen striking success in reconstructing the entire genome of a virus from scratch. That has been done with the polio virus, and with the otherwise extinct Spanish influenza virus -- the agent that killed tens of millions of people back in 1918

In the right hands, and with the appropriate safety precautions, these are sound scientific endeavours that increase our knowledge of viruses.

But if they fall into the wrong hands, they could be catastrophic.

When used negligently, or misused deliberately, biotechnology could inflict the most profound human suffering -- ranging from the accidental release of disease agents into the environment, to intentional disease outbreaks caused by State or non-State actors.

As biological research expands, and technologies become increasingly accessible, this potential for accidental or intentional harm grows exponentially. Soon, tens of thousands of laboratories worldwide will be operating, in a multi-billion dollar industry. Even novices working in small laboratories will be able to carry out gene manipulation. And the more laboratories there are with inadequate biosafety standards, the greater will be the number of mistakes and accidents waiting to happen.

Currently, we lack an international system of safeguards to manage those risks. Scientists may do their best to follow rules for responsible conduct of research. But efforts to harmonize these rules on a global level are outpaced by the galloping advance of science itself, and by changes in the way it is practised.

That is why, in recent months, I have raised the idea of a global forum for debate. Such a forum could discuss how to ensure that biotechnology's advances are used by all for the public good; how to ensure that the efforts of countries to harness biotechnology are not hampered by unnecessary impediments; and how we can learn to manage the potential risks. The forum would bring together the various stakeholders -- industry, science, public health, Governments, and the public writ large -- to work out a common programme, built from the bottom up.

Already, the idea has been welcomed by many Governments and expert communities. I believe the time is ripe to develop it further.

Today, I would like to explore a potential initiative which would focus in greater depth on two main questions:

First, how to expand the benefits of biotechnology and life science research to build better lives for people around the world. That includes improving human health and food security, and thereby encouraging economic growth and reducing global inequities. It will require making technologies available, encouraging transparency and promoting a cooperative environment.

Second, how to develop a global framework to mitigate potential risks. A number of suggestions have been made for dealing with the many dilemmas that confront the life-science community in the face of these risks. These suggestions range from voluntary measures, such as promoting a culture of awareness on which codes of conduct could be built, to legal ones, such as creating new regulatory bodies to oversee sensitive research.. How to reach workable consensus on appropriate measures is a subject crying out for a focused global debate.

These issues are already being discussed in various fora. The International Committee of the Red Cross has sought to bring the problem to the attention of Governments, industry, and scientific communities. The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology has drafted a code of conduct for scientists working in the biotechnology field. International organizations, such as the World Health Organization and various

national academies of science, have also done work in related areas. To complement these efforts, scientists themselves need to be proactively engaged in this process.

And among Governments, a serious international dialogue has begun through the follow-up process to the Biological Weapons Convention. In two days' time, States Parties to the Convention will meet in Geneva for their sixth review conference. When they do, I will urge them to make every effort to harness and develop their synergies and overlapping capacities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We find ourselves at a point akin to the one in the 1950s, when farsighted citizens, scientists, diplomats, and international civil servants recognized the enormous potential impact of nuclear power. The challenge then was to harness the power of nuclear energy for civilian use, while preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. The result was the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency and, eventually, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The answer to biotechnology's dilemma will look very different. But the approach to it must be equally farsighted. It will require innovative solutions specific to the nature of the science; it may have more in common with measures against cybercrime than with the work to control nuclear proliferation. And it will need to ensure that humanity is not deprived of the enormous positive benefits which biotechnology offers.

The United Nations is well-placed to encourage, coordinate and facilitate an initiative to consider those questions. It has the universal membership, the range of partnerships, and the capacity for outreach that are needed. It has the ability to bring the wide range of relevant participants to the table, and to keep them there.

To succeed, we need inspiration and support from all of you -- academics, civic leaders, business leaders, students. We need the spirit of discovery and learning that drives great institutions such as this one. We need the spirit of individual leadership and responsibility that motivated Max Schmidheiny, and still motivates thousands of people like him today.

Thank you all for listening to me today. Thanks again to the Foundation for the honour it has bestowed on me. And thank you all for your support for the United Nations during the 10 years I have served as Secretary-General.

And now I will try answer your questions.

Thank you very much. *Vielen Dank. Merci beaucoup. Mille grazie. Grazia fitg.*