

Global Problems:  
The Approach of the UN University

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Dr. Lutz, Distinguished Participants.

Let me say first, for myself and on behalf of my colleagues from the United Nations University, how delighted and honoured we are to be here with you for this conference on global problems and global learning. In particular, we are grateful to the Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute for doing such a splendid job in organizing the conference.

You have come here as representatives of Europe's established and rightfully respected universities and research institutions -- a great debt indeed is owed by humankind to the intellectual contributions of the European academic community. We come as representatives of one of the world's newest universities. But while we may differ sharply in our respective ages and modes of operations, I feel sure that we are all bound by the same deeply felt commitment to the advancement of knowledge and human welfare through the instrument of international scholarly collaboration.

We of the UN University very much welcome this opportunity to tell you something of what we are, why we are, and what impulses help to shape our vision of the global society. We hope that this might engender a fruitful dialogue concerned with how the UNU and the interested European universities could co-operate to our mutual benefit. Since we began our operations from our Tokyo planning and co-ordinating centre now nearly eight years ago, we have developed co-operative links with some of the universities and research centres of Europe and we very much wish to expand these linkages.

The nature of the United Nations University has been dictated by the role envisioned for it in its Charter -- as an international community of scholars working collaboratively on pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare, problems that are simply too large and too complex to

be dealt with by the intellectual establishment of any one nation or group of nations.

As its name implies, its constituency embraces the peoples of the Member States of the United Nations, for all practical purposes the whole of humankind. It is not a university that concerns itself with only one region or another of the globe, it has a planetary agenda. Yet global problems have a way of impacting more starkly and more heavily in the poorer nations of the third world. The undeniable fact of growing global interdependence is tainted with the reality that it is a skewed and asymmetrical interdependence. It is for this reason that the UN University gives particular concern to the needs and problems of the developing countries and seeks to enhance their institutional capabilities to bring about a self-reliant development, in collaboration with other universities and research institutions.

When the United Nations General Assembly created the University in 1972, one of the reasons it did so was because it wisely saw the need for a link between the UN system and the academic communities of the world and for the intellectual refreshment that this could offer. As a result, the UNU is located at the intersection of the world's international organizations and the world's scholars -- a unique institution within the UN system and within the international academic community which can provide valuable service to, and draw insight from both.

It is only natural, in the clash of everyday affairs, that the UN and its various intergovernmental bodies should be forced to concentrate to a large extent on relatively immediate issues of high political content. From that perspective, issues very appropriate are often dealt with in the time frame of terms of office -- that is simply the way the world of international and governmental affairs works. The world of the university, on the other hand, strives for the longer and more detached view, but can often be remote from everyday realities.

The contribution that the UN University can make, in my view, is to help these differing approaches to converge to mutual benefit: on the one hand, to recognize the long-term implications of today's decisions and the way in which evolving trends will impact on those decisions; and, on the other hand, to bring political and other realities of this rapidly changing world into the quiet of the scholar's study and laboratory.

From these crossroads, a number of responsibilities would seem to flow quite logically. As far as the UN system is concerned, I think the University might be thought of as a kind

of research "eye" -- helping to define the potential relevance or irrelevance of particular problem areas and in formulating policy options. A particular strength that the University can bring to this task is its Charter guarantee of academic freedom and autonomy; it is unlike any other UN body in this respect. Its governing Council, moreover, consists of persons appointed in their individual capacity as scholars and educators and not as representatives of governments.

Along the academic highway that leads from this particular crossroads, our responsibilities are clearly assigned us by our Charter -- the mobilization of the world scholarly community and the co-ordination of its research programmes with those of the University and the activities of the United Nations and its agencies.

While conventional universities, by their very nature, are committed, as we are, to the pursuit and transfer of knowledge, even the most excellent and prestigious inevitably reflect their own national culture and interests and educational needs of their home countries. The UNU was established to serve all of humankind. Essentially, the University's role is that of a catalyst in mobilizing the intellectual potential and intellectual conscience of the world to focus on the pressing global problems of human survival, development, and welfare.

In its initial years of operation, from 1975 through 1980, the University developed three programmes -- in World Hunger, the Use and Management of Natural Resources and Human and Social Development. All three provided valuable and practical contributions to the world's stock of knowledge. Research in the World Hunger Programme, for example, resulted in new protein/energy standards, drawn up jointly by FAO, WHO and UNU, which recognize in more realistic fashion the diet needs of third world populations. The Natural Resources Programme refined the concept of resource systems and their application in both energy and ecology. The Human and Social Development Programme obtained valuable new insights on social indicators of development success (or failure) through research and systematic dialogue among different schools of thought.

By 1980, the Council of the University felt that the UNU would benefit from a longer-term and broader frame of reference for its programme development. A process of planning and review was set in motion which led to the adoption of a Medium-Term Perspective to guide our work over the period 1982-1987. The widening of the University's approach was essentially a natural evolution of the work of the first five years to ensure that the earlier work remained relevant to a rapidly changing world situation. The purpose of the

perspective was to place the University squarely at the centre of evolving global concerns and to build into its programme structure the flexibility needed to deal with the enormously complex and interwoven problems of the 1980s.

I need not go into those problems in any great detail for they are familiar ones. What is important to recognize, however, is that they have combined in such a manner that the whole international system has been brought to a state of crisis. The many coherences -- political, economic, social and otherwise -- which have held that system together are coming unstuck at a frightening rate and there are no signs of replacement at hand. Worse than this, there is increasing realization that we don't seem fully to understand, and have lost control over, the international or global processes of change now under way. It is in the context of this kind of global crisis that the United Nations University is shaping its work.

In this afternoon's session, you will be hearing in greater detail from my colleagues about specific University activities and aims under each of the five themes that we had adopted to guide our work and choice of project. Let me therefore attempt something by way of synthesis in listing the major priorities which cut across our activities.

The first of these priorities is a concern with peace and conflict resolution. What gives our focus here its freshness is, first, its concern with better understanding of the roots of violence down to the level of local communities. But beyond that, we are actively searching, at these various levels, for mechanisms that, in a time of rapid political and social change and increased competition for resources, will enhance the capacity to resolve or manage conflict in less violent ways.

A second major priority is our continuing concern with poverty. This is, of course, closely linked to our studies of peace -- for overcoming poverty and meeting basic needs are fundamental to the improvement of the quality of life, without which it would be difficult if not impossible to resolve conflicts and maintain peace.

A third priority is our search for more relevant integrated theories of development that would help make structural change possible in a more democratic manner. We are concerned here both with the macro-sociological and historical changes in civilizations as well as with the micro-level, down to the household and its actors -- women, children, the aged. In these studies we are taking into account dynamic factors

which have proven to be of much greater magnitude than expected, such as massive migration and technological change.

A fourth major priority is our attempt to increase learning capacity -- not only of individuals, but of groups, institutions and societies -- and with the sharing of knowledge in both new and conventional forms. Much of the work here comes under the aegis of the Global Learning Division -- and you will be hearing more detail about its work from Mr. Ploman.

Problems of peace, poverty, development or information needs are not, of course, exclusive to the United Nations University. Many organizations, within and without the UN system, have these problems on their agendas and annually expend much more than we can toward their solution. But no single organization can cover the whole ground or do it alone. It is not the topic -- it is the approach, the methodology, the outlook that we have adopted, that I believe gives the University its very specific character.

The unified and integrated University Programme is planned and carried out by three divisions, each with a distinctive function: Development Studies Division, Regional and Global Studies Division, and Global Learning Division. The Vice-Rectors present here and other colleagues will be going into their functions in greater detail this afternoon. But what I wish to stress here is the interactive cycle of operations that is set up by the manner of work of each division. This ensures that problems are examined both horizontally, across disciplines, and vertically, at the local, regional and international level. The horizontal or multidisciplinary notion is a familiar -- though seldom implemented -- concept. The vertical or multidimensional approach is less familiar. We realize that attempting to put the two together is a difficult experiment -- and the UNU may be unique in making this effort.

Yet it must be tried, I believe, if we are to have any real hope of stimulating the capacity for global thinking and enlarging humanity's collective capacity to prepare for the future in a spirit of global solidarity. Take, for example, the problem of poverty that now gives focus to the work in world hunger, energy and natural resources. Poverty makes little sense taken in isolation -- it must be understood in the broader context of development, and thus the focus on alternative, more democratic development. And development, we now recognize, is turning out to be much more complicated than mere economic growth. Thus our studies are considering the development problematique at many levels -- at the level of models and planning, at the macro-sociological level of

civilizational change and the micro-level of the household. Yet another dimension is migration and its economic, social, cultural and political impacts. Migration is one of the forces that breed tension and violence, and thus is an element of our focus on peace and conflict resolution in a time of global transformation. And throughout all our studies run the threat of rapid social change, a reality with which we must learn to live. Change can be a positive force, if we can find ways to harness science and technology to that end. A further common element in these concerns is the need for improved information sharing and innovative social learning.

All of this demonstrates very clearly to me that if we are going to have to learn to think globally, we are going to have to learn to think -- and work -- together, collaborating as scholars and scientists free of the usual political constraints and national boundaries which define our interests and narrow our vision. That is why we have come to this meeting, seeking your co-operation and your interest in our programme of activities.

In seeking to be faithful to our Charter mandate to be an international community of scholars we have been making an extensive effort to reach out to institutions of higher learning the world over. From early on, we have had general agreement of co-operation with the International Association of Universities. We have also signed agreements of co-operation with the Association of African Universities and have worked closely with the Association of Arab Universities and with universities and research institutions in Latin America. We are also developing forms of co-operations with scientific organizations such as the International Council of Scientific Unions, the International Political Science Association, and the International Sociological Association.

We would very much hope that our discussions here at this conference would lead to closer forms of co-operation with a broader range of European universities and research centres. We have become increasingly interested in the concept of what we call "parallel activities." Owing to a combination of demands on our funds and considerations of political geography, we are obviously limited in the number of formal institutional associations we can make in nations that may have a number of centres of academic excellence -- and certainly Europe has a number of just such nations. We are therefore trying to encourage co-operation with the UNU by institutions and individual scholars whose ongoing academic interests are already very similar to certain of ours. There would be no funding from the UNU, but we believe that there could be benefit and intellectual enrichment accruing to participants in

the opportunities afforded to co-operation on specific problems along parallel lines with scholars from many schools of thought and different cultural backgrounds in the networks of the UN University. This is another area which I believe we might fruitfully explore at our meetings here.

We can pursue all of this at greater length and in more detail after we have heard the presentations this afternoon by colleagues from the UNU who direct specific areas of the University's activities. Let me conclude therefore by again thanking the organizers of this conference where I am sure is bound to be some very rich and intellectually stimulating discussion and debate. We hope these two days will serve to broaden the outreach of the United Nations University and enlist the members of this conference in our rapidly widening international community of scholars. In this growing faculty of ours, from universities around the world, one can discern the beginnings of the endeavour to develop a global learning capacity to deal with the pressing global problems that confront humanity today.

In this world of so much uncertainty, one thing is certain: we will all of us have to come to terms with a radically different future. Nowhere, perhaps, is this need so abundantly clear as in our university systems -- in both the developing and in the industrial worlds. At the recent meeting of the International Association of Universities, we heard talk of the crisis of universities and of the quick obsolescence of knowledge being produced. This only underlines the importance for all of us -- North and South, East and West -- to be able to adjust to the world of the 21st century.

Thank you very much.

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