

PRESENTATION BEFORE
BioVision Alexandria 2004

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by

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Let me begin by thanking the officials of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina – and especially my good friend and colleague Dr. Ismail Serageldin – for the opportunity to address such a distinguished group.

I have heard a great deal about the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, but this is my first visit here. It is indeed a magnificent structure in its own right. But this Library is more than bricks and mortar, granite and glass. It is also the embodiment of a lofty 'ideal' built on an enduring principle: knowledge is the common heritage of all humankind.

Now, with the new information technologies at hand, it is within our grasp to turn this ideal into reality. I would like to pay tribute to Dr. Serageldin for all he has done to make

this facility a showcase for international exchange and collaboration.

The 'cyber-library,' so staunchly supported by Dr. Ismail Serageldin, promises to turn millions of books, speeches, video clips and three-dimensional images of archaeological artifacts into an electronic archive that will be accessible on computer screens via the internet, not only in Egypt but throughout the world. Dr. Serageldin's cyber-library project is a noble initiative – one that is well worth our support and attention.

The Third World Academy of Sciences (TWAS), where I serve as executive director, shares Bibliotheca Alexandrina's spirit to enlarge the circle of influence of our responsibilities.

Just as the Library is striving to be more than a repository of books, the Academy is striving to be more than an institution that functions solely for the benefit of its members.

And, like the Library, we too wish to serve as a positive agent for social change.

TWAS has moved in this direction in several ways:

- We have established regional offices, including one here at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina for the Arab region under the leadership of Dr. Ismail Serageldin, that are designed to bring the Academy into closer contact with regional issues.
- We have elected renowned economists and social and political scientists as TWAS members to enable the Academy to better address critical science-related issues of importance to society.
- We have published reports on fundamental problems in the developing world that include action-oriented strategic solutions to these problems. TWAS's first report on access to safe drinking water was completed in 2002. The Academy's second report – on scientific capacity building in the South – will be ready for distribution later this year.
- We have established a series of institutional networks focusing on fundamental environmental and social problems in the South. Over the past five years, in cooperation with a host of other international

organizations that includes UNDP, UNEP, the Global Environmental Facility, UNESCO, and WMO, we have launched a series of networks devoted, for example, to indigenous, food and medicinal plants, dryland biodiversity, safe drinking water, and renewable energy.

All of these initiatives are intended to do for the Academy exactly what is being done here at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina: To make our organization more relevant to society and to put the Academy in a position to help address issues that are of critical importance to the people of the developing world.

The Academy's efforts extend to the major topics that will be discussed at this four-day conference on 'the new life sciences.'

- TWAS, in partnership with the African Academy of Sciences, is currently finalizing a statement focusing on issues related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the developing world. The purpose of this statement is to provide a strong Southern voice in the current wide-ranging policy debates on HIV/AIDS that are taking place across the globe. The statement calls for the full

participation of developing world scientists in all international HIV/AIDS research and public health projects. I have brought the draft statement with me and would be happy to provide copies to those who are interested.

- The InterAcademy Panel on International Issues (IAP), a global network of 90 merit-based science academies that is managed by TWAS, issued a statement last autumn voicing support for the cloning of human stem cells for therapeutic purposes, but calling for a ban on human reproductive cloning. The statement, to which TWAS and more than 60 science academies lent their signatures, was designed to influence the debate – and vote – on the subject at the UN in New York.
- Just last week, the executive committee of the InterAcademy Medical Panel (IAMP), a global network of 45 medical academies, decided to move the Panel's secretariat to Trieste under the administration of TWAS. IAMP's mission is to build the capacities of its membership in order to help them examine the full range of scientific, social and ethical issues related to the medical and life sciences. We anxiously await

IAMP's arrival, which should take place over the next few months.

- This past autumn, TWAS cosponsored a workshop at its secretariat in Trieste designed to examine strategies for "promoting the life sciences in developing countries." Joining TWAS in the organization of the workshop were the Human Frontier Science Programme (HFSP), the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) and the United Kingdom's Wellcome Trust.
- Frontier research in the basic sciences is now largely dominated by the biological sciences. As a reflection of this trend, TWAS now awards 60 percent of its research grants – some 50 grants each year – to researchers working in the biological or medical sciences. This programme, which provides support to young scientists in the least developed countries on the basis of merit, makes TWAS a significant force in the development of the 'life science' capacity in the South.

All of the Academy's efforts that I have outlined here indicate that TWAS stands ready to explore with others –

both individual scientists and scientific institutions – the broad-based issues on 'ethics, patents and the poor' that will be at the centre of discussions here in Alexandria. With our experience and wide-ranging network of contacts, we think that TWAS could make useful contributions to the debates and initiatives that unfold during the course of this conference and beyond.

When a student recently asked Nobel Laureate Sydney Brenner, one of the world's foremost life scientists, what ethical standards should be adopted by his colleagues, he had this answer: "Tell the truth and stand up for humanity."

This simple set of principles should guide all of our efforts as we seek to explore – and embrace – the new life sciences: the most compelling science of our times and a science that holds great promise for addressing some of the most difficult issues that we face in public health, food production and environmental protection.

But, at the same time, the pursuit of this science raises compelling social and ethical issues that should not – indeed cannot – be ignored.

If, as Brenner suggests, truth and compassion guide our discussions, I am sure that we can devise strategies for putting new scientific and technological findings in the life sciences to work in ways that benefit all people.

Thank you.