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ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

*Dear President of the Montenegrin Academy of Sciences and Arts,
Excellencies,
honoured guests,
ladies and gentlemen,*

It is my honour and privilege, as member of the Board of the Union Académique Internationale (International Union of Academies), to greet this respectable assembly of representatives of prominent international academic bodies. Let me first convey sincere salute on behalf of Prof. Øivind Andersen, President of the IUA, who is presently involved in other duties.

The Union Académique Internationale, founded in 1919, is an organization of more than a hundred national academies from more than 60 countries and several international academies.

Born from a great desire for intellectual brotherhood after the trauma of the First World War, the IUA is an old lady who will celebrate her century in a couple of years and who can pride herself on a prolific posterity resulting from collaborative work by generations of scholars from around the world. The IUA has always been a place for long-term projects and fundamental research. The dozens of enterprises which it patronizes provide fundamental resources for the humanities and the social sciences; at present, the IUA is working to expand beyond the boundaries of Europe, to undertake world-wide themes, and at the same time to promote interdisciplinary research, embracing both themes which combine the humanities and the social sciences, and those who combine the human and natural sciences.

The theme of our conference “Transition to a New Society” results of the more and more generally acknowledged premise of the grave consequences the global environmental changes could potentially inflict to the well-being and security of people all over the world. Many already recognize the urgency of environmental changes as they interact with and exacerbate other social, economic and political crises.

Environmental problems cannot be separated from the other risks and crises that comprise current global realities. They are not disconnected challenges; they do not occur in discrete, autonomous systems rooted in the environment on the one hand, or in society on the other. Instead, they are part of a single complex system. Social science research helps us to comprehend the complex dynamics of “social-ecological” or “coupled human-natural” systems, and can help explain how these systems unfold and interconnect across space, from the local to the global, and in time, from past and present into the future.

Given these features of today’s global realities, the case for greater engagement by, and attention to, the social sciences is clear. Their knowledge is indispensable in the search for a clearer understanding of the causes and consequences of global environmental change, and for informing more effective, equitable and durable solutions to today’s sustainability challenges. For the past few decades, the physical and natural sciences have led the way in detecting, diagnosing and framing the challenges and solutions for every type of global environmental change. They have provided a particular lens through which to view and understand the problem, and have shaped the ways in which policy makers and society at large think about its causes, consequences and solutions. Yet these frames obscure the social, economic, political, cultural and ethical nature of the issues at hand, and the role of people, behaviours, practices and institutions. An important step for the social sciences is to claim the space of the problem framers. The problems raised by global environmental change cannot fully be grasped without understanding the human drivers of change. Nor can the importance of such problems be judged without understanding what they mean for people and in what contexts they unfold. Likewise, the resilience or collapse of systems cannot be understood by measuring temperature increases, predicting earthquakes or tracking tropical storms alone. The social scientists, claiming the right to frame these issues through a social lens, will apply transdisciplinary approaches that engage stakeholders, decision makers and other scientists. Calls for the social sciences to help meet the challenges of global environmental change and social transformation do not actually ask only for the production of new knowledge. They also raise the challenge of bringing existing social science knowledge into the decision-making process. Communications issues and limitations of human capital and institutional resources all need to be addressed to bridge this gap.

Let’s turn back to the IUA. As I have stressed before, the pursuit of long-term projects is the essential mission of the IUA. It is our belief that, in this respect, the goal of the IUA is more modern than ever. Nevertheless, it is sure that the IUA has to change if it still wants to remain a major reference body for the human sciences as well as to become a real pertinent representative body for large disciplines covered by the social sciences. That should be our pretention for the future IUA; of course, it is not an easy bet. When introducing changes in a respectable organization like ours, it must be proceeded with caution, care and dedication, so that we do not loose the richness of the past, but also with determination and tenacity so that we do not loose the reality of the present.

Let me close my speech with an open invitation, especially addressed to the IUA member academies, the Montenegrin Academy of Sciences and Arts included, to play a more active role in shaping the future IUA with respect to the new mission it has to fulfill.

I wish to all of you, dear delegates and guests, a fruitful, inspirational and instigative outcome of the opened conference.

