



**Brief report¹
of the
Scientific Conference held on 4 July 2006
to mark the
75th ANNIVERSARY OF ICSU (1931 - 2006)
International Council for Science**

Main meeting room
French Academy of Sciences
23 Quai de Conti, 75006 Paris

The Conference opened with addresses by **Edouard Brézin**, President of the French Academy of Sciences, **Goverdhan Mehta**, President of ICSU, and **François Goulard**, France's Deputy Minister for Higher Education and Research.

After the customary salutations, the two French representatives said that both the French Academy of Sciences and France were honoured to be celebrating the 75th anniversary of ICSU, and Professor Mehta reciprocated by thanking both the Academy and France for their hospitality. Warm congratulations were extended to Professor Catherine Bréchnignac for her election as future President of the Council in 2008.

Edouard Brézin thanked François Gros, Honorary Permanent Secretary of the French Academy of Sciences, for his role in representing France at ICSU and entrusted him with the task of retracing, in his own closing address, the history of the relationship between the Academy and ICSU.

The President of the Academy then developed his view of ICSU and its role. The extension of scientific issues to the planetary scale (climate, environment, health, safety, *etc.*), the unavoidable depletion of the goods essential to life on Earth (water, air, fossil fuels, *etc.*), continuing concerns about worldwide demographic growth – achieving better control of these issues and being able to explain them to our fellow citizens are the objectives that the international scientific community needs to meet. The way of achieving this is to join forces and to speak with a single voice. ICSU, with its role, for example, as a scientific motor in the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has already taken the first steps towards this. However, “joining forces and speaking with a single voice” supposed being able to do so freely, and for that it was necessary to define and impose a common deontology for scientific practices – ICSU had been doing this ever since it was founded, and would continue to do so in the future.

¹ This report is an English language translation of an original report in French

In conclusion, Edouard Brézin emphasised the role played by the French international scientific unions committee (COFUSI) and thanked Marie-Lise Chanin, who headed the Committee, for her efficiency. This aspect was also developed by François Gros in his closing address.

Goverdhan Mehta, in his capacity as President of ICSU, gave a brief presentation of ICSU – what it does, its main achievements in the past, and its plans for the future. He presented the vision that ICSU has of a world in which science is appreciated and used for the well-being of all, a world in which scientific knowledge effectively underpins political action. It is a universal vision for all the regions of the world, and the universality of science is at the heart of ICSU's concerns. The Council recently concluded a comprehensive international consultation to finalise its strategy for 2006-2011. The resulting Strategic Plan sets out future priorities in terms of planning and coordinating research worldwide. These include environmental change, polar research, natural disasters, energy, sustainable development, and health. In each of these fields, all of which are important for society, ICSU undertakes to make science useful to politicians. The Council also renews its commitment to building a diverse and equitable international scientific community. This requires the free exchange of scientists and scientific information among all the countries of the world and the nurturing of scientific skills, particularly in the most disadvantaged developing countries. In this context, ICSU's recent opening of new regional offices in Africa, Asia and Latin America, to be followed shortly by the Arab Region, constitutes an important step.

Professor Mehta highlighted the special relationship between ICSU and its host country, France, and expressed the hope that this relationship would continue throughout and beyond the period of implementation of this new Strategic Plan. He expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the Academy and to the French Government for their generous support.

Before handing over to François Goulard, Goverdhan Mehta presented a small gift to all those who had played a key role in hosting this conference.

François Goulard, Deputy Minister for Higher Education and Research, began by requesting permission to broach a number of material issues, confirming the transfer of ICSU's Secretariat to a new building in a better location in central Paris, where refitting work was already in hand. The Minister also confirmed that France was prepared to provide permanent annual assistance, evaluated in accordance with the requests expressed by ICSU, at 500 000 euros, to enable ICSU not only to develop its activities but above all to be able to continue to do so from Paris. This was a point of honour for France.

Then, while taking up a number of the themes used by the previous speakers, he stressed more particularly the absolute necessity for science to be able to express itself and to be able to do so with the support of political players. It would then be in a position to respond to the concern and scepticism that was increasingly being manifested by society with regard to some areas of scientific progress. Science should be able to communicate its own values of honesty, truth and respect for the citizen and combat those who deny these values and would reject or abuse scientific knowledge for their own ends. The answers to many important questions will come only from science and the sharing of knowledge. It is for the politicians in each country to pass the message on to their fellow citizens, to combat the current lack of interest on the part of young

people in a science by introducing new methods of science education, to train leaders in scientific realities (*cf.* the recent creation in France of an Institute of Higher Studies for Science and Technology). For François Goulard, this served to emphasise the importance of the work of the Academies at the national level and institutions such as ICSU at the international level, and he wished them every success.

The actual Scientific Conference then took place; it consisted of the following presentations:

Biodiversity –challenges for science and society

Michel Loreau, Professor at the Paris Ecology Laboratory of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and Professor at McGill University in Canada, Chairman of DIVERSITAS

Sustainable development and marine fisheries

Jane Lubchenco, Professor of marine biology at the Oregon State University (United States), and Past-President of ICSU

International research and Africa

Khotso Mokhele, President of the National Foundation for Research in South Africa, Vice-President for Scientific Planning and Review of ICSU

Languages and communication

Dominique Wolton, CNRS research director, director of the “Information, Communication and Scientific Issues” laboratory

François Gros, Honorary Permanent Secretary of the French Academy of Sciences, representing France at ICSU, and **Gilles de Robien**, Minister for Education, Higher Education and Research, were then invited to close the event.

François Gros began by retracing the role played by the members of the French Academy of Sciences in the early stages of the creation of ICSU. While he saw the election of a third French President of ICSU, in the person of Catherine Bréchnignac for 2008, as an active perpetuation of the relationship of trust between France and ICSU, he emphasised that, in the intervening period, these excellent relations had been and were still nourished by the work of the French international scientific unions committee (COFUSI), created in 1967 by the French Academy of Sciences and already mentioned by Edouard Brézin in his opening address. COFUSI ensures that France and its researchers play their role both nationally and internationally and evaluates the various aspects of these relations, so that it is able to inform the highest ministerial authorities on a regular basis. It is evidently assisted in doing so by the location of the ICSU headquarters in Paris – a location that is moreover highly advantageous for the interaction of ICSU and UNESCO and OECD, both of which are based in Paris.

By referring in his closing address to most of the topics raised during the day, which had included environmental sciences, climatology, systems for observing the Earth and forecasting natural disasters, research into new source of energy, access for all to scientific data worldwide, the

reinforcement of scientific skills – particularly in developing countries through the opening of regional offices, education, the battle to defend the principle of the universality of science, and the expanding place granted to social and human sciences, François Gros positioned them in the context of ICSU's work.

He thanked all those at both ICSU and the French Academy of Sciences who had given him their support over the past ten years, and saw in their meeting today at the French Academy of Sciences, coming as they did from such varying horizons, the very expression of the federating role of science in a just cause – contributing to progress of, and for, humankind through the development of knowledge. He finished with the reminder that there remained a lot to do; ICSU still had many challenges to take up.

Gilles de Robien, for his part, also mentioned the honour this high-level international meeting represented for France. The globalisation of knowledge, although it was a source of progress, also generated new difficulties and it was for politicians to provide an answer to these. Generalised awareness at the highest level of the importance of issues connected with education, skills and knowledge was increasing. Gilles de Robien listed three major challenges – the knowledge economy, education for science, and protecting the planet.

He said that knowledge had become almost the main factor in economic competitiveness – this had given science a fundamental role to play, with financing on an unprecedented scale, but there was also the risk of its usefulness being reduced to its economic exploitation. France had, therefore, taken care to maintain a balance between fundamental research and applied sciences, and that was the onus of the Research Pact set up recently with a reinforcement of research and unprecedented financial support. Competition was a good thing but, in excess, it could also lead to serious problems and undermine one of the fundamental values of science – its integrity. It was also one of the causes of the “brain drain”, which was particularly damaging for under-developed countries.

Education in science was currently suffering from lack of interest. The Minister saw two principal reasons for this – society understands less and less the value and the purposes of science because of its increasing specialisation, and the ideologies of progress are in decline. It was therefore necessary to make young people aware once again of the beauty of science. It was envisaged, *inter alia*, in France to expand the hands-on operation called *La Main à la Pâte*, launched in primary schools by Georges Charpak in 1996, to lower secondary schools.

As for protecting the planet, Gilles de Robien recalled that France had been the first country to include an Environment Charter in its Constitution; France was extremely aware of environmental problems, and he also referred more particularly to the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), whose reports had provoked political awareness, and whose role had never been more pertinent. So many other major issues required political action, but such action was senseless if it was not based on an unquestionable diagnosis shared by all and issued by a strong and united international scientific community. Seen in this light, ICSU's role was more than irreplaceable and its battle for the universality of science was on the agenda more than ever. France today was renewing its support as it had 75 years ago, and was accompanying it on the path towards knowledge.