



GESDA's 2021 Vision: "Using the Future to Build the Present"

Abstract

GESDA was founded in the belief that anticipatory science diplomacy can help renew multilateralism. It reflects Switzerland's ambition to maintain Geneva as one of the foremost centres of global governance and operational hub of the international community. GESDA serves as an honest broker of science-backed information, remaining neutral and objective as it gathers ideas through broad consultations.

Participants

Moderated by:

Michael Møller, Chairman, GESDA Diplomacy Forum, Denmark

With:

Chorh Chuan Tan, Chief Scientist, Ministry of Health, Singapore; Board Member, GESDA, Singapore

Jeremy Farrar, Director, Wellcome Trust; Board Member, GESDA, UK

Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice-Chancellor, University of Cape Town; Board Member, GESDA, South Africa (remotely)

Highlights

Introduction

The creation of GESDA, an independent, private, non-profit Swiss foundation established at Geneva in 2019, was based on the premise that the 21st century's acceleration in pioneering science and technology demands a parallel acceleration in ensuring their uses to humanity are as universally beneficial as possible, a process that will require nations to participate more broadly in multilateral frameworks through scientific anticipatory diplomacy. Operating on the principle of a public-private partnership, GESDA works to accomplish its vision of using the future to build the present by bringing together diverse communities that can jointly anticipate scientific and technological advancements as the basis for developing inclusive and global solutions for a sustainable future. In so doing, GESDA also seeks to renew international Geneva's infrastructures and to strengthen the role of Geneva and Switzerland as a neutral and inclusive location where the topics raised by tomorrow's multilateral world can be discussed.

Mamokgethi Phakeng's input to the vision for GESDA



"This space of dialogue that GESDA has created between science and diplomacy is incredibly important. Science and technology are advancing at a phenomenal pace, and if we do not anticipate how it is going to change us humans, how we relate and how the world functions, then we will exacerbate the global challenges that the world is currently struggling with. Just in case we did not know it already, COVID-19 is teaching us that as people of the world, we are connected. This is irrespective of nationality, race or religion, so it is important that we start considering those different questions – before it is too late. A first key question is how GESDA will enable equity and inclusivity? What are the possible major challenges?"

"I think we have got lessons to learn from the challenges that we are facing with achieving the [UN] Sustainable Development Goals in Africa, which include financial resources, maintaining peace, measuring progress, and in accountability. Another important aspect of accountability relates to the ethics of potential new scientific advances, such as genetic editing.

"First, such development needs to include people from different demographic groups in any form. The pharmaceutical industry is already familiar with the tendency for different racial groups to respond differently to various products. So, genetic advances need to address genetic differences in people from the Global South. It is often easy to leave these people out, because sometimes it's difficult to reach them. I see my role and participation in this space to ensure that we are constantly thinking about those communities.

“Second, such important technological advances must not be restricted only to the better-resourced nations. Otherwise, we run the risk of dividing humanity into different species that are separated by genetic enhancements. This is not only unfair for all humanity, but it puts the world at risk of conflict based on genetic inequality. Just as trade is regulated through agencies like the World Trade Organization, and bilateral and multilateral treaties, there is a need for similar kinds of arrangements to regulate the application of any technology that has the potential to advance the human species. Any intervention to ensure that the developing world or Africa benefits from breakthroughs would need to also help build political will. Previous initiatives, such as the USAID Global Development Lab and the UK-based Newton Fund, rely largely on partnerships with the private sector to address most of these challenges. However, as one analyst explains, the private sector and entrepreneurs are not a like-for-like replacement of international development and local initiatives. There are pressing needs to build infrastructure, support health, health and education systems, and support governance and civil society structures. And these are necessary for science to flourish and for technology to transform.

“So, it is important for each African nation to be introduced to how science and technology are advancing fast and how they will affect them or can shape their life for the better. And perhaps for each nation to translate each of the breakthroughs into its own national plan of action, thus contributing to a better future for its own peoples, and by extension to a better future for the world. Objectives need to take into account both the historical marginalization of the developing world and in particular, Africans, and their potential to contribute significantly to the global development.”

Chorh Chuan Tan's input to the vision for GESDA



“On one hand, we have very daunting global challenges: climate change, pandemics. On the other hand, we have very exciting research discoveries. And in between we have a long series of very deep valleys, which are very hard to traverse. And many have worked for a long time to accelerate the translation

of research into solutions and technologies that can be applied to solve problems. But I think GESDA is unique, has a powerful vision, which is different in several ways.

“The first is it is not just looking at translating research into solutions, but to take it beyond: to also enable those solutions to be accessible to a much wider range of communities around the world. To benefit a much wider range of people from different countries around the world. So, we need to therefore traverse more valleys.

“The second is that it takes a stringent but globally inclusive approach to identifying the most high-potential research discoveries in science and technology so that it creates a strong foundation which is evidence-based, evidence-informed, upon which subsequent decisions can be confidently rested upon.

“And the third is it brings together to the GESDA Anticipation Situation Room many different stakeholders. And have those stakeholders help us understand the nature of those valleys, based on how they perceive them. That enables us, therefore, to figure out ways in which we can build the bridges together that will enable us to cross these valleys in order to reach the ultimate goal, which is to make science and technology solutions accessible and available to the maximum number of people.

“This all is a very complex process. But what has been particularly impressive has been the purposeful, the systematic, and the globally inclusive way in which the methodology is being developed to do this so that it will allow us to replicate, to build upon and to systematically develop better ways to learn how to cross all these areas. This is a very bold undertaking. My sense is that the first few bridges built might not be the best bridges. But it's a learning process, because we are not just at the end trying to build solutions. We are trying to also learn how to build those bridges in a much more systematic and a much more coherent manner that builds on the best of science and is responsive to the needs of most people in the world. So, it is a very powerful mission and vision. And I feel very privileged to be able to play a small part in this.”

Jeremy Farrar's input to the vision for GESDA



“I am a medical doctor. My background is in emerging infections. The progress in the last 18 months, as we heard, has been nothing short of staggering. Vaccines developed, drugs developed, new diagnostic tools developed. And science has given us the potential to transform the first pandemic of the 21st century. And yet we have really failed! Multilateralism, which sits here in Geneva, was invented here. We are in a stage now when, despite having those tools, they are only available to a certain sector of society, a certain number of countries. And so, if we are going to change that – because all of the great challenges of the 21st century have common features – science and culture will help provide solutions to them. But if we end up with those being inequitably available globally, we will not have solved those challenges. We will have just added to them. And I am convinced science can play a role.

“But science needs to change. Science needs to accept that it cannot exist in its ivory towers. Science can no longer be in its silos of short-term thinking, chasing short-term grants. As scientists, we have got to think beyond our own spheres and take into account what is happening in society and what is happening in other sectors of science. But the diplomatic and political community – and this is not a criticism – is inevitably behind the curve in that scientific endeavour. It cannot be ahead of the curve, because of all of the constraints of politics and diplomacy, and also, frankly, because not enough scientists go into politics and diplomacy. If GESDA achieves anything, I think it will be to open the minds of scientists that they have a broader role in society, that they need to engage with and take societies with them, not assume that what scientists do will be accepted by everybody.

“I think the political and diplomatic class need to embrace those scientists, not for tomorrow in the short-termism of today's politics, but to think what challenges are coming five, ten, 25 years down the road, and what science is being done now that we need to think about in order to maximize the potential for the maximum number of people globally. We need to move away from being reactive

to that change to being proactive and ahead of it. Because if we are reactive, we will put in place bad regulation and we will not take societies with us. So, it is at the heart of GESDA to get ahead of ourselves to break down those silos and think how can we make the maximum benefit of science for the maximum number of people in order to avoid the growing inequalities globally. That is why I wanted to and was honoured to join the board of GESDA.”

Takeaway Messages

Science must become more accessible and inclusive, and its benefits more equitable. GESDA can work to accomplish that by considering how different communities are affected by advances.

Building trust – before it is needed in a crisis – is essential to getting diverse communities involved in science and persuading them of its benefits.

Scientists can play a broader role in society through forward-looking thinking beyond research projects that revolve around short-term grants.

Anticipatory science diplomacy will depend on 'bridge-building' among communities through a learning process that is responsive to the needs of people globally.

More information

[Session recording on YouTube](#)

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Michael Møller