Lindau in the 21st Century: more women, more dialog, more passion

An interview with Countess Bettina Bernadotte and Wolfgang Schürer from the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings

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EMBO Reports (ER): What are the key aims for the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting? What do you anticipate that you achieve by bringing young researchers together with Nobel Laureates?

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Bettina Bernadotte (BB): What we want to achieve through this dialog is to inspire the scientific youth. It was clear to my father, Count Lennart, who started the Lindau Meetings after World War II, that young people would profit from contact with Nobel Laureates, and that has proven to be the aspect that the Laureates find inspiring too. So it is a dialog between the generations, and between young scientists and Laureates, which brings together people from all over the world. For young scientists, this is a once in a lifetime experience, where they can benefit from this stimulating environment, explore mutual scientific interests, and share their personal experiences with friends and colleagues when they return to their home countries.

Wolfgang Schürer (WS): In Lindau, the dialog encompasses more than two generations. Laureates and young researchers are at different stages of their careers. Some Laureates may no longer be in the lab every day, but they can convey their experience

that reaches back more than half a century. In fact, it is the experience of a lifetime, dedicated to science. Others are involved in cutting-edge research and can directly relate to young researchers’ own situations. Then, you have a mixture of undergraduates, graduates, and post-docs. Some are at an early stage, and some have already made significant contributions to research. The Laureates are fascinated by the questions that the new generation of scientists asks. There are topics in science that are timeless, and there are topics that are specific for a certain time or context. The science and society dialog is an integral part of Lindau’s DNA. It addresses issues of ethics, responsibility, and the role of science in society at large. Last but not least, international cooperation in science contributes to creating mutual understanding. This aspect has been at the core of the Lindau dialog ever since it was founded as a European initiative of post-war reconciliation. Discussing all these questions goes beyond the scope of traditional scientific conferences, but it is an integral part of Lindau’s DNA.

ER: How do you think things have evolved since the beginning of the Lindau Meetings in the ‘50s? As society is changing, science and technology are changing. So how does that influence and affect the meetings?

BB: We adapted the meetings by increasing the number of participants, expanding the number of research fields, and increasing the number of countries from which participants come. And the meeting has evolved from a lecture-based event to

include more opportunities for dialog. I also think the relationships between the young researchers and the Nobel Laureates have developed: It is much more dynamic and more proactive. Nowadays, a young scientist walks up to a Nobel Laureate and says, “Hey, I read about your work and I always asked myself how did you do that?” That would definitely not have happened in the 1960s, and I read that as a very good sign because it means that there is lots of interaction. I also think that through developments in new media, it has become easier for many people to follow what is happening in Lindau, which is a great way of furthering its impact beyond the confines of the meeting.

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WS: Initially, the meeting was attended by predominantly young German researchers, today participants come from more than 80 countries. The demand to attend the Lindau Meeting is growing year on year, and one of the biggest challenges is the selection process, as thousands of excellent young researchers apply every

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Countess Bettina Bernadotte of Wisborg, born 1974 in Scherzingen, Switzerland, is the oldest daughter of Countess Sonja and Count Lennart Bernadotte. Following her degree in Business Administration in Tourism: Destination Management at the University of Cooperative Education in Ravensburg and work as an independent corporate consultant for companies in the tourism industry, she prepared to assume direction of the Mainau GmbH company by serving as Personal Assistant to her mother and as Authorized Signatory from 2002 to 2006.

Countess Bettina Bernadotte assumed leadership of Mainau GmbH in 2007, with the goal of leading the family business into a successful future with secure jobs in both tourism and the new segments of Quality Management and Continuing Education. Yet another important issue for Countess Bettina is Mainau's continuous pursuit to maintain the values outlined in the Grne Charta (Green Charter), which promotes respect for nature and its preservation. She also seeks to make a meaningful contribution toward encouraging those who visit or encounter the Isle of Mainau in some way to slow down from the stress of everyday life and to simplify their lives.

Since October 2008, Countess Bettina Bernadotte is President of the Council for the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings and member of the Board of the Foundation Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings. She has been a member of the Council since 2005.

invite anyone interested in science to follow the lectures and discussions. This is our token of gratitude for the public support of Lindau, and we intend to raise interest in science and research among pupils, teachers, and the public at large. We thus provide access not only in the context of the actual annual meeting, but beyond that by broadening participation, sharing, and welcoming the public interest in the best Lindau tradition. Today applicants are encouraged from all over the world—for example, you can now apply from Latin America, from the Middle East, and from nearly all Asian countries. Regarding Africa, we will launch a cooperation with the African Union Foundation as of 2015. Various barriers that existed in the past have fallen away. I would also like to follow up on the comment of Countess Bettina, which I think is very important. In the '50s and '60s, there was often a formal respect. Today, there is far less formality, and that corresponds, in some way, with the modern lab environment. And there is one more change, which we see as hugely positive—the 2014 meeting was the first time that more than half of the participants were female. Lindau is for us a permanent invitation to reflect upon change and adapt to it.

ER: Given that the proportion of women attending is slightly greater than men this year, we wondered whether that happened by chance, or whether you tried to push the gender balance? Did you enforce a quota or did you just ask people to be mindful of both genders?

BB: The fact is that there are more women in science, and we therefore wanted to have more women at the meeting. It is really making a positive difference, because I think it enriches the dialog. But of course, Lindau continues to focus on quality as the principle requirement.

WS: We do not believe in quotas, so the participating female scientists were selected because of their qualifications, not their gender. There are certain parts of the world, however, where it is harder to convince academic partners that we want the best possible gender balance. Numbers of male and female applicants also vary depending on the focus of the meeting—for example, in physics, the balance is different from medicine. However, all our colleagues and all the chairpersons encourage our partners to invite highly qualified

year. Lindau's academic partners contribute to this process in an exemplary fashion. So in order to serve the principle of science and dialog in our commitment, we have developed another opportunity for

participation. Applying young researchers have to pass a rigorous selection process. But those who fail to qualify for attending can nonetheless join the dialog by watching the lectures in our mediatheque. We also

Wolfgang Schürer pursued his studies at the University of St. Gallen, Graduate School of Business, Economics, Law and Social Sciences, where he obtained his M.B.A. in 1970. In 1969, he set up the International Students Committee (ISC), which annually organizes the International Management Symposia at the University of St. Gallen. Under his leadership, the Symposia have evolved into a forum of international reputation. In 1973, Mr. Schürer founded with partners the consulting boutique, MS Management Service AG. He served as its Chairman. From 2001 to 2009, he served as a Distinguished Professor in the Practice of International Business Diplomacy, at Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service, Washington, DC. The University of St. Gallen awarded him an Honorary Doctorate in 1999, and from 2005 to 2010, he served as a permanent visiting Professor for Public Affairs. Mr. Schürer is a Fellow of the International Academy of Management, USA. Currently, he also serves on the Advisory Board of SwissRe, and since 2000, he is Chairman of the Board of the Foundation Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings.

young women. But we do not set quotas. It would be totally unfair to the top excellent female and male scientists, and it would violate the principles for the entire operation.

ER: How easy is it to encourage people from developing countries to attend?

WS: When we started recruiting attendees from Latin America, we began in Chile and Argentina. After the fall of the iron curtain, we started with Poland and Czechoslovakia. In each quarter of the world, you have some countries where academics are genuinely interested in

joining, and those countries serve as flagships. At the end of the day, however, we can only provide the intellectual facility—the meeting—but it is the participants, after having come to Lindau, who become the ambassadors of the experience, which we call the “Spirit of Lindau”. They reach out to their peers and encourage them to apply. It is a never-ending process, and after a few years, messages get across. When a scientist like Martin Chalfie invites a young Lindau participant to join his lab, or when another Laureate is willing to co-publish an article with a young researcher who attended the meeting, this is the currency of the day, this is what carries the torch. These are indicators that we might have indeed initiated sustainable development.

ER: You ask participants’ institutions to only pay half of the traveling costs, but in many countries, that is still a very large amount of money. Is there the option of full support for people coming from poorer countries?

BB: We are very creative and through the Lindau Foundation or other supporters, money has never been an obstacle to coming to the meeting. We are grateful that some of our partners have established fellowship programmes that cover these costs.

ER: Bill Gates is a member of the Honorary Senate of the Foundation Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings. How was this achieved and does it influence the meeting?

WS: We have inducted him because we are deeply impressed by his and Melinda Gates’ commitment to focus on science and research projects, not least in the context of Africa. We invite personalities to become honorary members of the senate when they serve Lindau’s Mission Education as they provide ideas and trigger initiatives that help us develop it even further.

ER: How do you attract Nobel Laureates to come to the meetings?

BB: We don’t, you, the young scientists, do!

ER: We noticed that some Laureates stay a few days, and some stay the whole week. Of course, that depends on what other obligations they have, but we have the impression that some of them really like to interact with young people and stick around as long as they can.

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BB: Most of the Laureates who stay only a few days are there in their first year. After that, many of them stay the whole week. As Professor Schürer mentioned, laureates are not paid any honorarium for coming to Lindau, and what persuades them is that they know that in Lindau, they will experience a week of interaction with dedicated, interested, and inspiring young people.

ER: The Lindau meeting covers medicine and physiology, chemistry, physics, and economics. Why is there not a focus on literature or peace as well?

BB: The focus on the natural sciences comes from the original idea to bring together physicians with Nobel Laureates. It was two physicians from Lindau who had the original idea to start these meetings, so the focus at the beginning was on medicine. It came naturally that it expanded to the natural sciences, and then, it took some time until we included economics. While there is no meeting specifically focussed on peace or literature, we invite laureates in these fields to Lindau because they offer a different

dimension to natural science and can be hugely inspirational. When Mohammed Yunus [a Bangladeshi economist who received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2006] attended the Lindau Meeting on Economic Sciences in 2008, it had a real impact on the young people because it gave them one more question to think about “how to find a new way of creating regional added value”. The same happened in 2014 when we had literature laureate Mario Vargas Llosa at the economics meeting, because it also made participants think about what this gentleman has gone through, asking themselves: “How will I use what I’m learning now, later on in my life?”

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WS: There is another element: Peace is subject to many disciplines. Take for example International Relations, International

Law, Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, and many more. You will have to invite students from a mix of disciplines such as international law, diplomacy, or strategic and peace studies. Another very important group of potential participants would be young activists for peace. They would benefit most from the direct interactions. But to pick up on what Countess Bettina mentioned, there is some degree of passion as a common denominator, because passion for peace, literature, or science can be equally inspiring. This year, whoever had the chance to listen to Oliver Smithies [a British-American geneticist who received the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 2007] heard something that they will take with them perhaps for the rest of their careers. We have the chance to look over the shoulders of giants. If you reflect on the work of Einstein, you will see that it is not “just” the ability to think outside the box that sets him apart, it is his passion and respect for scientific principles and his curiosity.

ER: Countess Bettina, Mr. Schürer, many thanks for the interview.

The interview was conducted by Adam Gristwood, Alessandra Maria Casano and Ivana Nikić, European Molecular Biology Laboratory.