

The 2022 Prince Mahidol Award Conference: Building the World We Want

Humanity is facing many challenges, ranging from COVID-19 to climate change, and from natural resource depletion to social inequity. The Prince Mahidol Award Conference is an annual event held in Bangkok, where leaders and experts meet to discuss global challenges. This year, the theme was 'The World We Want: Actions Towards a Sustainable, Fairer and Healthier Society'.

The opening session centred around six megatrends: changing population, changing demographics, urbanisation, climate change, land-use change, and transformative technologies. The panellists explored the relationships between these issues and how to address them through leadership, policymaking and collective action.

The world population has increased dramatically since the 1950s, and will continue to soar in the coming decades, with profound consequences for human health and natural resource management. The rise in the world's population has also been accompanied by demographic changes. Statistics show that the population is getting older, which coincides with a rise in non-infectious diseases, such as diabetes, strokes, and Alzheimer's disease. Such changes in demographics are thus likely to significantly impact global health, requiring more researchers to shift their focus to these diseases. A third change forecasted by experts is the rise in megacities. This profound change is already posing significant challenges, such as increasing pollution and related urban diseases.

Another pressing global issue is climate change, which is already producing extreme weather conditions and having serious repercussions on health. The 21st Century will also be marked by radical changes in land use. Natural habitats are substantially decreasing, as more land is needed for agriculture. Such changes are associated with species extinction and 'hot spots' for diseases. The final megatrend discussed at the 2022 Prince Mahidol Award Conference is the rapid development of transformative technologies, such as artificial intelligence. These technologies could be essential in overcoming world challenges, by helping to forecast natural disasters, monitor the environment, and advance medical procedures.

While the past decades have been marked by remarkable innovation, this innovation is not always equally and fairly distributed across different countries. The most recent example of this is the COVID-19 vaccine, which is far more accessible in some countries than others, slowing down global recovery. Therefore, international collaborations should ensure that they are fairly distributed across all countries.

Another key challenge that will need to be tackled collectively by all countries worldwide is the rise of fake news and misinformation. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a perfect example of this trend, as it gave rise to conspiracy theories, which were widely disseminated on social media.

Many of the conference's panellists emphasised the need to bring diverse stakeholders together, including people who are well-acquainted with various world issues and experience them every day. To identify tangible solutions to global issues, all sectors will also need to come together and share their knowledge. Even when discussing a particular issue, such as climate change, leaders should ideally consider the views of experts in various disciplines. While all speakers emphasised the need for unity, the current geo-political landscape might not be helping to achieve this. Over the past decade, many governments have stopped prioritising global issues, in favour of national problems.

Ultimately, the 2022 Prince Mahidol Award Conference reiterated the need to join forces to create the world we want, while also ensuring that technologies and advancements are equally distributed across the globe. As panellist Ayoade Olatunbosun-Alakija concludes: 'To create the world we want going forward, we need to welcome transformative leadership. We also need to ensure that a life in Mumbai is worth the same as a life in Brussels or that a life in Lagos is worth the same as a life in London. To do that, we need the voices of the global South to be at the table, we need to have the whole world together, as one. That is the world we want.'