Abstract: We live in a world which is both spectacularly rich and distressingly impoverished. As Indian economist, philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen puts it, while there exists ‘unprecedented opulence’ in the world, ‘an astounding number of children are ill fed, ill clad, ill treated, and also illiterate and needlessly ill.’ The prospect of a child is determined based where he or she is born. The high standards of living and affluence we witness in some parts of the world, as we all know, are attributable, in large part, to the advances in science and technology (S&T), which have radically increased productivity and efficiency of various sectors of the economy. The same knowledge and technology could lift these needlessly afflicted children from desperate poverty.

The theme of science and technology for a sustainable future is one that is close to my heart – a theme that forged my own intellectual journey and personal development as a professor and researcher for many years. At the UNU we are working on embedding this theme in our programmes and activities. The motto of the United Nations University is ‘advancing knowledge for human security, peace, and development.’ The focal point of our research, education and capacity building is now centered on the twin challenges of climate change and global poverty. We believe the solution to these twin challenges can be found only through science, technology and innovation as well as through peace and good governance. We call this programme sustainable innovation.

We seek to guide technological change and innovation in order to create new opportunities, jobs and income for all in a sustainable manner.

There is no more pressing issue in the world today than sharing the fruits of science, technology and knowledge with the billions of people who live on the margins of society. Since advances in knowledge, in science and technology, made the developed world prosperous, why can’t we have the same for the developing world? Should S&T be the privilege and privatized domain of just a few? How can we globalize and diffuse the innovations and knowledge derived from S&T to the needy?

Our focus now must be on the need for an equitable globalization of S&T. In other words, we must work towards the diffusion and flowering of S&T in developing countries. By globalization, I do not mean the irresponsible and unregulated neo-liberal globalization of financial capitalism that is crumbling in front of our eyes today. I do not mean, ‘prostrations to the gods of the market place’, to borrow Kipling’s memorable verse. I mean responsible and shared globalization of S&T.

When we discuss the subject of S&T co-operation with developing countries, the transfer, diffusion and uptake of S&T in societies that are now on the margins, we must do so with a clear-headed historical understanding of how S&T has flourished in what we now call the industrialized world. It should not be thought of as an act of charity or an obligation forced on the well-off. It should be thought of as fair circulation of human knowledge. No matter where it was first developed, in which society, culture, region or country, science and technology is part of our world heritage of human knowledge. Intellectual borrowing is a civilizational attribute. Developing new tools and
technologies, based on one’s own original thinking and borrowed ideas, is integral to human nature. We can see the chain of intellectual relations that link S&T development through the ages that connect nations and societies in the world, but now, alas, dichotomized into developed and developing worlds. In this lecture, I will focus on these and related issues.