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**Speech by
Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the opening of the 11th Global Summit of
National Ethics/Bioethics Committees
in Berlin
on 17 March 2016**

"There is no greater individual interest than to espouse that of the community." It is with this guiding principle of the universal man of letters Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz that I greet you today. It is a fitting way to begin here in the Leibniz-Saal in the year when Germany is celebrating a twofold Leibniz anniversary. The 370th anniversary of the birth and the 300th anniversary of the death of the great scholar.

As a researcher, as a champion of research and as a political adviser, Leibniz embodied a conviction that also shapes your work, ladies and gentlemen. Namely, that there is an inextricable link between researchers' own yearning for new findings and the good of humanity as a whole. And where you are now meeting, here in the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Leibniz' principle of serving the common good, the "commune bonum", is particularly palpable. After all, it was he who was behind the founding of this centre of research and then became its first president. And even back then, the idea of international exchange played a central role.

Your work to promote an ethical science and this meeting are also inspired by the idea of cross-border dialogue. Combining the gaining of knowledge and the gaining of well-being, what is more across territorial and cultural borders, as a guiding principle of a responsible, ethically grounded science is today more important and topical than ever. After all, research has now literally arrived at the very core of humankind.

The success of science has cast us more and more into the role of co-authors of evolution. This in parallel increases our responsibility for

Creation – the word “Creation” taking on a new meaning given the rapid development in the so-called life sciences, for example when we hear reports on new ways of technically accessing the brain or new methods of genetic engineering. There is great hope vested in this kind of research but it also triggers concerns. It seems that ambivalence and dilemmas are on the increase. On the one hand, there is the hope of finding cures to heal the chronically ill, of success in combating hunger in the world, in fact, the hope of less suffering and fewer trials and tribulations for humanity. On the other hand, there is the concern about ruinous aberrations, for example about human dignity being undermined and fundamental human rights being violated by targeted modifications to human genetic material. Procedures involving the brain also raise questions of autonomy, individuality and identity. Or we remember the dangers posed by research on micro-organisms meaning that newly cultivated pathogens could be misused in warfare or for terrorist attacks.

What we are talking about here are the opportunities and risks of modern research that are increasingly demanding international responses – also because science and research are quickly forging closer links across borders. The tasks facing national ethics committees may vary in part, as does research in the field of life sciences in your respective countries. Yet, the awareness of new research processes and findings is spreading apace. Particularly in life sciences, the findings are often of fundamental importance for all people. The spirit of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, the conviction that all countries – industrialised, developing and newly industrialising countries alike – are together duty bound to make their contribution to a better world, this spirit also impacts the ethics of research. After all, bioethics questions are questions which go to the core of our shared understanding of ourselves, to what it means to be human.

That is why it is so important to bolster international debate about how our ethical bedrock can keep pace with globalisation. This conference is making a major contribution to this crossborder bioethics discourse. After all, only intensive exchange can bring about agreement on a joint rulebook for bioethics. I would like to thank all participants and organisers for approaching this dialogue with such dedication.

The broad spectrum of subjects in your programme bears witness to the diversity of the challenges faced in the bioethics debate. What methods are we talking about? What opportunities and risks do they harbour? And how do we weigh up the potential advantages and disadvantages of the various new scientific possibilities? What yardsticks are we to apply to this process? And who actually checks that research is conducted in an ethically responsible manner? What role are politics and law to play here?

At the same time such questions highlight the difficult task shouldered by national ethics bodies when it comes to assessing research or formulating guidelines on reaching and dealing with research findings whose repercussions cannot perhaps be foreseen. Despite or perhaps precisely because of these unknown quantities, ethics committees can help heighten awareness of how important it is to discuss questions pertaining to research ethics. Which fields of research should be promoted, where do we draw the line? Are we setting the right priorities? Are we paying enough attention to spheres of research that were neglected for a long time, even though they are key to the survival of millions of people, first and foremost the poor?

Improved health and better living conditions are not least the result of priorities set in the past, also financial priorities. Ethically sound research and research policy also mean further stepping up efforts to provide healthcare in developing countries. Epidemics such as Ebola and Zika leave absolutely no doubt as to the urgency of this task. I am pleased therefore that this is one of the focal points of your conference.

Together, you are helping raise awareness of the entire spectrum of bioethics questions. The discussion on research ethics needs to be given considerable space in the public sphere: in schools, at universities, in the media as well as in scientific organisations. After all, it is only if the citizens feel increasingly able to understand, to assess and to consider what is behind key terms such as genome editing or Human Machine Interface, what is happening in research fields such as nanotechnology, synthetic biology or systems medicine, that society can re-connect with research. And how could research live up to its social responsibility without constant and public scrutiny as to whether it is actually serving humanity?

Of course, there is no simple answer to this, nor can bioethics provide such an answer. But with our research ethics infrastructure which we are working on at national and international level, we do have an important navigation system. The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights issued in 2005 is an important step in the right direction. Human rights, I am convinced, provide a strong and good foundation for the further development of global bioethics. Historic and cultural influences clearly play an important role when it comes to finding responses to the many different questions in the field of bioethics. But all cultures have points of reference for the idea of human rights. Not least because human rights underpin plurality, because they thus promote or at least do not hinder cultural diversity, are they recognised internationally and seen to be universal. Despite our diversity, we, the people, are united by a primordial goal: to protect and promote human dignity. This is the very heart of the idea that every human being without distinction should benefit from the same high ethical yardsticks for research in social sciences.

As scientific and technical possibilities grow, the question of what developments we can reconcile with our view of humanity will become ever more pressing. And this is a question that concerns us all. Science, society and politics need to play their part. At national and international level, we need ongoing efforts to ensure reflections and regulations on bioethics keep up with science and research. Allow me to wish you strength and inspiration for this weighty task. May you be like Leibniz who upon wakening had so many good ideas that sometimes even a whole day was not enough time to think them through and commit them to paper.

Thank you very much and let me wish you a successful conference.