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UNESCO ASSISTING BIOETHICS COMMITTEES PROJECT
2007

Meeting to discuss the establishment of the National Bioethics Committee.
Lilongwe, Malawi, 16-20 June 2007

Objective

This exploratory technical mission was undertaken as activity in the ABC project (Assisting Bioethics Committees). The National Commission of Malawi has responded positively at the request to inform us about intentions to set up national bioethics committees. Some preparatory work has been done by the National Commission in order to identify potential organisations and future members. The National Commission had organised a preparatory meeting on 16 February 2007 (with financial support from UNESCO Headquarters). A report of this meeting was circulated in advance to all participants in the current meeting.

The mission has been composed by dr Harald Schmidt, Assistant Director of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics in the United Kingdom, dr. Vasantha Muthuswamy, Senior Deputy Director General & Chief, Division of Basic Medical Sciences, Traditional Medicine & Bioethics of the Indian Council of Medical Research in India, and myself. Since this is the starting phase of the project, it has been important to adopt an identical approach with subsequent missions in the project to Togo (Ten Have), Ghana (Solbakk and ten Have), Jamaica (Solbakk), and Madagascar (Solbakk), while another mission has been planned for November in Gabon (Solbakk).

Meeting

The nature of the mission was fact-finding. First of all, a good overview of existing activities in the area of bioethics was imperative in order to identify the various stakeholders and interested experts. Secondly, on the basis of such overview, a better insight can be obtained into the possibilities and opportunities for establishing a National Bioethics Committee.

The first day was a consultation meeting with several representatives and experts. Mr Charles Mwandakire, the Executive Secretary of the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO opened the meeting, followed by opening remarks by mr Alick Manda, representing the National Research Council, who chaired the meeting.

The first presentation discussed the role and functions of the National Research Council. Mr Manda, Chief Executive Officer of the Council explained that the Council, established in 1974, is advising the government in matters of Research and Development. Its role is also to promote R&D but it does not do research itself. The Council has 9 technical committees, for example the Agricultural Sciences Committee, the National Health Sciences Research Committee, and the Genetic Resources and Biotechnology Committee. The Council also is running several scientific programmes (National Biotechnology Programme, for instance) and it produces publications. Challenges are funding, equipment and monitoring and evaluation of funded projects.

The second presentation was an in-depth discussion of the role and functions of the National Health Sciences Research Committee. Dr. Charles Mwansambo, chair of this Committee, one of the technical committees of the National Research Council, explained that the Committee was established in 1988 as a research Unit in the Ministry of Health, and in 1993 became incorporated as committee in the National Research Council. Its mandate is to review health related research proposals in Malawi. It therefore engages in review of the scientific and ethical aspects of research and it also clears publications. The goal is to make sure that research with human beings is following the internationally accepted standards and guidelines. The committee meets at least once every 6 months. The Committee is funded by payment of 10% from the budget of reviewed research projects. Challenges are the low staffing levels in the secretariat, the lack of funds in general, the lack of legal and ethical requirements at national level, the export of biological specimens and unauthorized research.

The third presentation, given by Mike Csikeda (instead of Professor Paul Ndebele who could not participate) discussed the activities of the Bioethics Research Unit in the College of Medicine, University of Malawi in Blantyre. The College has also a research committee (COMREC – College of Medicine Research and Ethics Committee), established in 1996, that reviews research proposals initiated or conducted in the university. Projects of national interest will go to the National Health Sciences Research Committee which has overriding authority as a government committee. COMREC meets every month to review proposals. The College of Medicine (the only university education facility in the country for physicians) has been established in 1991. In 2001 a position has been created for bioethics, with professor Joseph Bengo as the professor of bioethics. At the same time, in May 2001 the Malawi Bioethics Unit (MABRU) has been founded, which was renamed in 2006 as Centre for Bioethics in Eastern and Southern Africa (CEBESA). This Centre has a regional function. It is included in the Department of Community Health. Its main activities are teaching, training and research. Its vision is to promote research in bioethics in Africa. It has achieved that bioethics education for undergraduates is now compulsory (during year 1-5 of the medical curriculum). Research is focused on anthropology and bioethics and clinical ethics. The Centre has published more than 40 studies in bioethics.

During the afternoon session the ABC project and UNESCO's ethics programme have been presented (Henk ten Have). This was followed by a general discussion and presentations of the experiences of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics in the United Kingdom ("Ethics Committees in the UK") by Harald Schmidt and the National Bioethics Committee in India (Vasantha Muthuswamy).

Evaluation

The meeting had a different character as other meetings in the ABC project. On the one hand, there are already substantial activities in the country in the area of bioethics. Malawi is one of

the few countries in Africa that has a Bioethics Centre in the university with a compulsory teaching programme and research projects, with a dedicated staff supervised by a professor of bioethics. At the same time there is a functioning research ethics committee in the only medical school in the country, as well as a research review committee at the national level. These various entities represented are probably not immediately convinced of the need to establish yet another committee at the national level that can infringe on their activities. Sensitivities were noticeable during the meeting between the various stakeholders, while important experts were absent.

The UNESCO experts tried to explain that in the perspective of UNESCO a National Bioethics Committee will have a mandate beyond science and ethics and review of research. Such a Committee will not be involved in research review but will focus on developing ethical frameworks, make proposals, if necessary for legislation, advice government and policy makers in ethical issues, and will reach out in ethical debate and awareness-raising in society. Many ethical issues will not have to do with research ethics, but will focus on health care and prevention.

Discussion also focused on practical and organisational issues. The current focus of bioethics is on research ethics and most activities are based in the College of Medicine. The Centre for Bioethics has a range of activities and is therefore concerned with obtaining funding for its activities. At the same time, if a National Bioethics Committee will be established, it need probably to be located at national level, for example in the National Research Council. But the Council does not seem to be directly positive of the idea of established another technical committee, now that two other committees are in the process of establishment, e.g. the National Biosafety Committee and the National Biotechnology Committee, both of which will include ethical issues.

In discussions, the UNESCO experts pointed out that there are indeed structures and expertise in bioethics to draw upon; there is a opportunity for creating a National Bioethics Committee that will not interfere with the existing activities. Practical arrangements for the structure and location of the committee need to be further explored. UNESCO can provide technical support as soon as a committee has been established (on the basis of a Memorandum of Understanding) but UNESCO is not a funding agency so that financial support will be very limited. Further exploration of the possibilities of establishing a National Bioethics Committee will therefore be necessary. Mr Mwandawire closed the meeting, concluding that a small group will draft the Terms of Reference for such committee and then organise a stakeholder meeting to test the draft TOR.

The follow-up of this conference will be practical but will depend on the steps taken in Malawi. As soon as the decision is taken that a National Bioethics Committee is needed, the Committee has been established, inaugurated and its members appointed, UNESCO will proceed in making a Memorandum of Understanding, specifying the needs of the Committee and the technical assistance given by UNESCO in the context of the ABC project. Preliminary planning will focus on (1) developing a training course in working methods (following Guide 2 in the series of guides for national bioethics committees) perhaps early next year, (2) developing a training course in the field of ethics, based on the proposal for a core curriculum in the area of bioethics. We will also develop networking activities, for example with the upcoming Global Summit of National Bioethics Committees in 2008 in Paris, and a joint meeting with an experienced National Bioethics Committee in one of the Member States.