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REDBIOÉTICA - A UNESCO INITIATIVE FOR LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF HISTORY

*** Bioethics arrived in Latin America in the 1970s, introduced by Professor José Alberto Mainetti, in Argentina. However, only in 1994, when the Second World Congress of the International Association of Bioethics (IAB) was held in Buenos Aires, did it definitively become rooted in this region.**

*** The Bioethics Network for Latin America and the Caribbean (REDBIOÉTICA) was founded in May 2003, in Cancun, México, in parallel with an international meeting of the Human Genome Project, as a consequence of the evolutive process outlined above. The reference point that stimulated its creation was directly related to the World Congresses promoted by the IAB in Japan (1998) and Brazil (2002).**



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*** The official themes chosen for the two events – “Global bioethics” and “Bioethics, power and injustice” – encouraged the start of discussions relating to the search for appropriate ethical responses for the moral conflicts in this region. From this start, it was evident that the bioethical agenda needed to be expanded beyond the biomedical and biotechnological questions.**

*** The first meeting revived the pioneering ideas of Potter, relating especially to judiciousness in applying knowledge and to environmental matters, and the second contributed towards expanding and politicizing the international bioethics, thereby giving greater visibility to health and social topics.**



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The discussions relating to the creation of REDBIOÉTICA started in 2000, at the suggestion of the Mexican geneticist José Maria Cantú. The idea was put into operation at the Sixth World Congress of Bioethics, which was held in Brasília, in 2002, at a meeting of academic researchers who had already discerned the need to found a new bioethics organization that would have another viewpoint: more critical and directed towards the persistent day-to-day problems in the lives of people, communities and countries in the region.

This group of researchers determined that, after centuries of foreign domination and criminal dictatorships established from the north to the south of the continent, the time had come to start to view the regional conflicts through their own eyes and think out the local problems using their own brains, while naturally making use of the knowledge accumulated by schools, researchers and cultures from other contexts and places.



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Since the outset of this whole process, UNESCO has decisively supported the Network's activities and actions, initially through its Regional Office in Mexico and currently through the Social and Human Sciences Sector of the Regional Science Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, which is based in Uruguay, and always with attentive participation by UNESCO's Division for Ethics in Science and Technology, based in Paris.



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2. THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE ACTIONS OF REDBIOÉTICA

Alastair Campbell, who was President of the IAB during the final years of the twentieth century, was in South America in 1998, a few months before the World Congress in Tokyo. Impressed with what he had seen, he expressed the view in the *President's Column* published in the *IAB News* (European Spring edition of that year) that after his visit he started to perceive the nature of bioethics differently:

I had glimpsed what it must be like to sustain a public health service with minimal resources and massive problems of poverty. I had seen something of the environmental challenges of massive urbanization without adequate infrastructure to sustain it. In the midst of this, I met people determined to find a Bioethics that makes a genuine difference to the health of their nation and the quality of their environment... “Global Bioethics” need not be a neo-colonial ambition to make people conform to our paradigms of moral behavior or even to persuade them to argue in our style of reasoning. (my highlighting)



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The topic of healthcare in particular has been studied within the context of bioethics by researchers in this region since the beginning of the 1990s. In the preface for a book published in Brazil in 1995, Professor Giovanni Berlinguer, a former member of UNESCO's International Bioethics Committee (IBC), commented thus:

... I greatly appreciated the interpretation of health policy as a means of reducing the inequalities between people and making society fairer... This book is substantially an initial, yet successful, attempt to approach the subject from a viewpoint that starts from the experience of a major country in the southern hemisphere of the world that is rich in popular movements and cultural experiences, while tormented by poverty and injustice, without being restrained by boundaries or limits but, on the contrary, making links with European philosophical traditions and with the international bioethics debate.



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Through the global expansion of the neoliberal market model of the 1990s and the multiple crises that came to ravage the world at the start of the 21st century, especially the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and the acute economic world economic crisis of 2008, a perverse sociopolitical situation has been laid bare: social wealth and power remain in the hands of the few; the depredations of the environment continue; and the majorities of populations continue to be distant from the benefits of development.

The search for new paradigms of production and consumption, and for a new type of life within society, requires reappropriation of politics for citizens' rights, along with construction of new public spaces in which to debate alternatives for development. This debate has so far been blocked by the prevailing economics-centered view, which exalts growth and ignores its effects on society.



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The concept of Gross National Happiness that was adopted in the 1970s in Bhutan, a small kingdom wedged in the Himalayas, between China and India, defines that the basic principle for ensuring happiness is that the economy should be at the service of the population's wellbeing. This is very different from what was seen in the recent worldwide economic crisis, when unimaginable amounts of public money – enough to do away with poverty and social exclusion in the peripheral world – were applied by the central capitalist countries to avoid bankruptcy among large private companies, in the name of maintaining production, virtually guaranteed jobs and survival of the system. Since all of this is directly connected with people's quality of life and survival, it seems appropriate that, over the coming years, Bioethics should start to include in its discussions the concept of Biopolitics, as developed by Michel Foucault.



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One interesting contribution that originated in Latin America, bringing new ideas to the debate on “development” is the concept of *Living Well*, an ancient philosophy of life among indigenous societies of the Andean region, especially in Bolivia, which has not incorporated this into its constitution. In this concept, what is counted is not so much wealth, i.e. the things that people produce, but rather, what the things produced concretely provide for people’s lives. In formulating the “philosophy of living well”, not only the material goods but also other reference points such as knowledge, social and cultural recognition, ethical and spiritual codes, relationships with nature, human values, visions about the future, and so on, are counted.

Within this context, the economy should be governed by living together in solidarity, without misery and without discrimination, while ensuring a minimum of things needed for everyone to survive in a dignified manner. *Living Well* expresses an affirmation of rights and social, economic and environmental guarantees. Everyone equally has the right to a decent life with assurances of health, food, clean water, pure oxygen, adequate housing, environmental sanitation, education, work, employment, rest and leisure time, physical culture, clothing, retirement pension, and so on.



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Many of the ideas expressed here, through the theoretical-practical construction of this Latin American bioethics that was produced and defended by REDBIOÉTICA ended up being incorporated into UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, in 2005. The IBC meeting that is being held in Mexico City in November 2009 is an opportune moment for Latin America to claim paternity of the idea of including health and social issues within the context of the Declaration and the necessary and indispensable politicization of these issues.

Recently, Ten Have and Jean (10) edited a complete book that recounts the history of the Declaration and analyzes separately each of its 28 articles, noting that it was homologated in Paris in October 2005, after long and laborious construction, with unanimous support from 191 countries (9). REDBIOÉTICA takes the view that this is the most important collective and historical document ever constructed by Bioethics, because of its openness and repercussions.



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Article 14 in particular, which deals with “Social Responsibility and Health”, has special value for the Network, because of the Network’s advocacy, since the start of the debates, that healthcare is everyone’s right and that States have a duty to provide all the conditions for their populations to have access to this. In the abovementioned book, this chapter was developed by Martínez-Palomo, a Mexican scientist who is a member of the Boards of Directors of REDBIOÉTICA UNESCO’s IBC (10). It should be noted that the IBC has been developing intensive international discussions for deepening and improving this article, with the aim of stimulating countries to put it substantially into practice.



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3. ANTECEDENTS AND JUSTIFICATIONS

Almost 40 years since the creation of Bioethics, it has had significant development in Latin America and the Caribbean. There is a growing trend in many countries of the region to organize National Bioethics Commissions or Boards, with the task of analyzing major moral conflicts. Other types of ethics committees – for Research on Human Beings or on Non-Human Animals – evaluate protocols for biomedical research, particularly in universities, hospitals and other institutions. Some countries have already defined their national regulatory norms, while this process is still under construction in other countries.

* In universities and research centers, there are growing numbers of units or groups working on various controversial emerging and persistent topics that relate to different matters of interest for Bioethics.

* Several countries already have clinical bioethics committees or healthcare bioethics committees functioning regularly.

* Congresses, meetings and academic events of continental, national or local scope relating to this specialty are increasingly common.

* Growing creation of new scientific journals relating to bioethics.



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In the same way in which the world congress in Argentina definitively opened the eyes of the continent to Bioethics, the even held in Brazil gave concrete shape to the need to create mechanisms for regional exchange and dialogue on this matter, as well as proposing the construction of new academic reference points relating especially to the realities of this continent. It needs to be emphasized that many of the discussions developed in this region came into being only as a reaction to debates that had already taken place in developed countries, thus relegating the specific local problems to the background, with consequent loss of identity and cultural diversity.

This is the scenario within which REDBIOÉTICA operates, faced with an enormous diversity of themes and focusing preferentially on some problems that are more common within its setting, such as: respect for differences; plurality; cultural diversity; the need for theoretical and conceptual mastery of the material; the search for language that is comprehensible to all participants in the process; and the inclusion of themes relating not only to human rights but also to duties. All of this is faced from the perspective of a common sense of humanity.



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4. OBJECTIVES OF REDBIOÉTICA

The Network has had defined objectives since its first formal meeting. Many of these have already been achieved or are in progress, and all of them have a direct or indirect link to UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights. The list of defined objectives included the following, among others: To identify, catalogue and reinforce regional, national and local groups that are interested in Bioethics; To promote interlocution for effective exchange of experiences, information and proposals for work and production in Bioethics; To encourage research on topics within Bioethics that are of interest for Latin America and the Caribbean, in accordance with the realities of the region and for the benefit of the most vulnerable groups; To stimulate education and capacitation at all levels of the teaching-learning process, including a program of study bursaries; To establish strategies for having an impact on political players... in order to establish juridical reference points that are appropriate for the different questions that form part of the Bioethics agenda; To create an internet portal to facilitate communication and interchanges between all groups that are interested in and capacitated to participate in REDBIOÉTICA.



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5. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES DEVELOPED

* The organizational structure of the Network is formed by a Board of Directors composed of 11 members from different countries with a President, and an Advisory Committee with a variable number of participants, generally around 12.

* Also has a PORTAL that is currently hosted in Buenos Aires (www.redbioeticaunesco.org), and the REDBIOÉTICA UNESCO Journal, a half-yearly virtual publication that will be carried by the portal from 2010 onwards.

* The repercussions achieved by the Program for Continuing Distance Education in Bioethics should also be noted. Offered to interested parties throughout the region, at extremely low cost (<http://www.redbioetica-edu.com.ar>), two courses per year, with 200 hours each, including a significant number of study bursaries: in 2009 to promote the 4th. Course of Introduction to Ethics in Research on Human Beings and 3d Course of Introduction to Clinical and Social Bioethics - 300 regular students in the two courses; among these, no less than 254 are bursary-holders (85%) of UNESCO.

* Permanent Forum of discussions on the internet with more 400 former students.



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Since its creation, REDBIOÉTICA has promoted or supported around 40 scientific and technical activities scientific on Bioethics in the region.

In addition, there have been two International Congresses specific to the Network itself, which were held respectively in Foz do Iguacu (Brazil, 2005) and Córdoba (Argentina, 2008), and three Scientific Meetings of its former students, which were held in São Paulo (2007), Córdoba (2008) and Rio de Janeiro (2009).

Moreover, the various public seminars promoted in different countries to present and discuss the content of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay and Mexico), and the promotion of subregional meetings (in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba and the Anglophone Caribbean, i.e. Trinidad and Tobago) also need to be mentioned.

Nevertheless, the most important and effective initiatives were the following Academic Symposia, which were held in different countries and gave rise to a series of scientific publications from REDBIOÉTICA in number of five (5) books until 2008.



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Two important documents that were produced regionally by the Network and had international repercussion need to be mentioned. The first, called THE CHARTER OF BUENOS AIRES, was drawn up at the end of a meeting organized by the Human Rights Department of Argentina, in November 2004, to discuss the future content of UNESCO's Bioethics Declaration, which was under construction at that time. This Charter was drawn up and signed by researchers from 12 countries in the region, and this was the occasion on which REDBIOÉTICA expressed its firm criticism of the reductionism that was being imprinted on the content of the future Declaration, particularly through actions by representatives from the rich countries. The criticisms centered on the need to expand the bioethics agenda beyond the biomedical and biotechnological domains, to include health, social and environmental questions in a new agenda.



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The second document, THE DECLARATION OF CÓRDOBA, was signed in November 2008, by researchers from ten countries in the region who strongly repudiated the changes introduced in the Declaration of Helsinki in relation to research on human beings, which had been approved one month earlier at the World Medical Assembly in Seoul, Korea. The document completely rejected double standards in clinical research with consequent flexibilization of the ethical reference points for the use of placebo, along with the introduction of non-commitment of the research sponsors towards the study subjects when the study finishes.



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The Network has also provided support for the UNESCO Chairs of Bioethics that have been established in this region, in Brasilia, Buenos Aires and México. The Chair at the University of Brasília, which has already trained around 350 specialists in Bioethics since 1998 (annual courses with 400 classroom hours), today offers a *Stricto Sensu* postgraduate program that is based on UNESCO's Bioethics Declaration and regulated by the Brazilian Ministry of Education, with a continual renewable total of 60 students, of whom 40 are working towards a Master's degree (two years) and 20 towards a doctoral degree (four years).

The Executive Secretariat of REDBIOÉTICA, which provides technical support for the activities proposed and implemented, is based in Montevideo, Uruguay, together with the Bioethics and Ethics Program for Science of UNESCO's regional office. Finally, the support given by the Network to the timely projects promoted by UNESCO's Division of Ethics in Science and Technology needs to be mentioned, especially the ABC Project (Assistant Bioethics Committees), along with the implementation of UNESCO's Basic Curriculum for Bioethics, in several countries.



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6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the end of these reflections, it is essential to acknowledge the extraordinary historical importance of the scientific and ethical knowledge developed in first-world countries. The theoretical and methodological tools that originated from central nations and which are available to researchers throughout the world for contributions towards solutions for moral conflicts have unquestionable value.

However, three points deserve to be noted. The first is that, as never before, the modern world has been taking account of the definitive need to change the old concepts, in relation to the conflicts that result from development at any cost, versus sustainable development. The second is that autochthonous and peripheral cultures need to be maintained, in order to preserve their identities and respect moral pluralism, and this is the sign of participative democracies in the 21st century. Lastly, only five centuries after the discovery of Latin America and the Caribbean, they definitively have the historical right to free themselves from economic, religious, cultural, political and also ethical colonialism, which has suffocated the region.



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Thus, with support from UNESCO, the aim of REDBIOÉTICA is to provide the countries and peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean with an additional new instrument for improving democracy, citizenship and human rights in the region, from constructing an expanded and more politicized concept of Bioethics and promoting wholesome transdisciplinary interchange (regional and worldwide) on this theme. The reach of these ambitious objectives is progressively gaining concrete shape through actions that are directly committed to the socioeconomic and cultural realities, to the various vital necessities observed here and to international dissemination of the results that are being achieved.



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Muchas gracias !!!