



United Nations
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SHS/EST/ABC/REP/13

UNESCO ASSISTING BIOETHICS COMMITTEES PROJECT
2009

Meeting to discuss the establishment of the National Bioethics Committee
Abuja, Nigeria, 29 March – 1 April 2009

Background

The objective of the Mission was to provide the Nigerian authorities the information required to make steps toward the establishment of a national bioethics committee. The Mission was undertaken in the framework of the UNESCO project on Assisting Bioethics Committees (ABC project). The objectives of this project are:

1. to create a national bioethics committee in 12 Member States
2. to enhance the functioning of the committees established
3. to train members of established committees.

Participants

The Technical Mission was composed of Mr. John Nkinyangi, SHS Regional Adviser in Africa, and Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Swailem, Biotechnology Engineering Department, King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Chair, Saudi Arabia National Bioethics Committee. Other participants in the meeting from Nigeria were:

1. The representative of the Research Ethics Committees (RECS) of the Federal Ministry of Health;
2. The representative of the Nigerian Medical Association;
3. The representative of the Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria;

4. The representative of the Philosophical Association of Nigeria;
5. The representative of the Federal Ministry of Justice;
6. The representative of the Christian Association of Nigeria;
7. The representative of Islamic Council of Nigeria;
8. The representative of Human Rights Commission;
9. The Director-General of the Nigeria Television Authority;
10. The representative of the Dept. of Bioethics, University of Ibadan (The only University teaching Bioethics in Nigeria);
11. Emeritus Prof. David Adedayo Ijalaye, Dept. of International Law, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State. (IBC Member);
12. The Director General, National Food, Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC);
13. The Chief Medical Director, Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital, Zaria;
14. The Medical Director National Hospital, Abuja;
15. Dr. Charles Wambebe, Pro-Chancellor, Bingham University, and an accomplished pharmacist that developed NICOSAN a drug for treating sickle cell anemia using local herbs;
16. The Medical Director, Federal Medical Centre, Azare;
17. The Director-General, National Biotechnology Development Agency, Abuja;
18. The Director/Representative UNESCO Abuja Office;
19. The representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
20. The Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Education.

Meeting and discussions

The consultation, formally known as First Preparatory Meeting on the Establishment of a National Bioethics Committee in Nigeria, was held at the Transcorp Hilton Hotel in Abuja and brought together about 30 participants representing institutions and stakeholders in Nigeria with an interest in bioethics.

The meeting was opened by an official of the Ministry of Education, in the absence of the Minister and President of the Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, Dr. Sam Egwu. The overall meeting was coordinated by Dr. Olujide Odewale, who is responsible for SHS activities in the National Commission.

Following a presentation about the UNESCO project on Assisting Bioethics Committees (ABC project) and an outline of UNESCO activities in Africa, Dr. Odewale provided an overview of the process thus far toward establishing a National Bioethics Committee in Nigeria. He spoke of the exchanges that had gone on between the National Commission and UNESCO and stakeholders in Nigeria, leading to the visit of the Technical Mission and the Preparatory Meeting on Establishing a National Bioethics Committee in the country.

There was considerable discussion following the presentation of the UNESCO project on Assisting Bioethics Committees (ABC), as well as clarification regarding various UNESCO instruments on bioethics, including the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005).

Following a concern expressed by a participant that the establishment of a national bioethics committee would duplicate efforts with the National Health Research Ethics Committee – NHREC – of Nigeria, the members of the technical mission discussed the different forms of ethics committees to be found among UNESCO Member States, including those narrowly focused on “research ethics”, and stressed the difference between these committees and the broad-based national committees that are promoted by UNESCO.

Eventually, there was consensus reached that a national bioethics committee that is independent, pluralist and multi-disciplinary should enjoy a broad mandate and could incorporate among its stakeholders other entities such as the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria.

The importance of establishing a national bioethics committee was illustrated by the presentation on Saudi Arabia by Professor Abdulaziz Al-Swailem, Chairperson of the National Bioethics Committee of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His presentation particularly found good resonance with participants since Nigeria has a large Muslim population.

In addition to providing information on establishing a national bioethics committee, the technical mission outlined the kind of assistance that UNESCSO can provide for the three years after a Memorandum of Understanding is signed between the Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO (on behalf of the Committee) and UNESCO following the establishment of the Committee, so as to make provisions on how the Committee would be assisted in becoming both operational and effective.

It was clarified that UNESCO support would not be by way of providing finances (because of its rather limited resources) but through arranging different types of assistance, such as training in working methods, training in ethics, providing relevant documentation, helping source internships for the Secretariat and organizing ethics education programmes for Committee members.

A number of key working documents were shared with the participants to assist with deliberations on key aspects of establishing a national bioethics committee.

Conclusion and follow-up actions

The meeting proposed a list of about 16 institutions and stakeholders to be invited to nominate members to the proposed Nigerian National Bioethics Committee. The Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO expressed a wish to visit the key institutions and stakeholders with a view to sensitizing them further on the need to establish a national bioethics committee and on the importance of nominating top-level professionals of high integrity. The Commission also undertook the responsibility for the revision of the Draft Statutes of the proposed Committee and the Draft Memorandum of Understanding to be signed with UNESCO, in order to incorporate the inputs of the meeting in Abuja.

The Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO expressed its intention to formally to request UNESCO to facilitate the launch of the National Bioethics Committee before the end of year 2009.