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UNESCO ASSISTING BIOETHICS COMMITTEES PROJECT
2007

1st Preparatory mission on the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee in Mauritius, Mauritius, 5-11 August 2007

Objective

This mission was undertaken at the request of H.E. Mrs Indira Thacoor-Sidaya, Ambassador of the Republic of Mauritius at UNESCO. She recommended to undertake an exploratory mission to find out which activities to strengthen the ethical infrastructure, particularly the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee, can be scheduled in order to include Mauritius in the Assisting Bioethics Committees project.

Meetings

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 of the possibilities and opportunities for establishing a National Bioethics Committee. The Ambassador, in cooperation with the Mauritius National Commission for UNESCO, has arranged meetings with interested ministries and organisations, culminating in a workshop organised by the University of Mauritius.

- Meeting with the Minister of Education & Human Resources, Mr Dharam Gokhool. The Minister expressed his interest in the mission and the need for activities in the area of ethics of science and technology in the country.
- Meeting with representatives from different ministries and institutions at the University of Mauritius to have a first brainstorm about the opportunities in the field of ethics of science and technology, and particularly the possibilities of establishing a National Bioethics Committee. The meeting has been coordinated by Dr. Prity Pugo-Gunsam, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Science, Department of Health Sciences. The chair of the meeting was Professor Shyam Bhagwant, Department of Health Sciences. The meeting was opened by Professor Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, Professor of Organic Chemistry and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mauritius (and

laureate of the 2007 L'Oreal UNESCO award for Women in Science). The following persons and organizations have been represented in the meeting:

- D. Puchooa, Davulty of Agriculture, University of Mauritius
- D. Meenowa, Principal Veterinary Officer, Division of Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agro-Industry and Fisheries
- Dr. Nitin Gopaul, Research Coordinator, Mauritius Research Council
- Dr. D. Marie, Project Officer, Mauritius Oceanography Institute
- Dr. V.S.Fareed, Ministry of Environment & NDU
- K. Gunesh-Bajaghee, Principal State Counsel, Attorney General's Office
- Gerard Requin, Director, Pharmacy Services, Ministry of Health
- H.K.Buktowar, Pharmacist, Training and Drug Information, Ministry of Health
- S.Moolo, Ag.D.Director
- K.A.Kasenally, Advisor National Environmental Laboratory, Ministry of Environment
- Lan Cheong Wah, Department of Medicine, University of Mauritius
- Jullien Worrin, Office of the United Nations, Resident Coordinator in Mauritius
- Assoc.Professor S. Bhagwant, Health Science Department
- Dr. P. Pugo-Gunsam, Health Science Department
- Dr. A. Mohit, Ministry of Health

Representatives of the Ministry of Health explained that guidelines exist for the general conduct of research, for the use of animals in research and for biomedical research involving human subjects, but that a legal framework is absent. Bioethics teaching in the university has been introduced in 2005 with an undergraduate programme in the Department of Medicine. The Ministry of Health has a National Research Committee addressing issues of scientific validity and ethical dimensions of research. It was articulated that there is a need for more training in the ethics of research, and that there is a need for policy-advice in the area of ethics of science and technology.

- In a meeting with Professor Bhagwant I discussed his experiences and activities in the domain of ethics teaching. He provided me with materials of his teaching program in bioethics and asked for feedback. We will forward him the standardised forms to input his information into the Global Ethics Observatory.
- Meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Trade & Cooperation, Mr. Madan Dulloo. He expressed his interest in the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee. He will approach the Office of the Prime-Minister about this issue. At the invitation of Mrs Thacoor-Sitaya he furthermore agreed to open the workshop later in the week. As a follow up with this meeting, we prepared materials for a briefing of the PM about these matters, as well as input into the draft speech of the Minister for opening the workshop.
- Meeting with Mr. Claudio Caldarone, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Mauritius & Seychelles. He explained some of the activities of UNDP in the region and stated that the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee will be interested. His Office wishes to be informed. It is also recommendable to contact the WHO representative, so that activities will be perfectly coordinated in the context of One UN.
- Meeting with the Minister of Tourism and External Communication, mr Xavier Duval. In the company of two Egyptian experts of the Bibliothexa Alexandrina and the Chairman of the Mauritius Museums Council it was explained that the Ministry is planned to set up a museum on the history of the island and its biodiversity. There is

also scientific cooperation with experts from natural history museums in Leiden and London regarding the reconstruction of the dodo trail and the possible cloning of dodos.

- Meeting with the Minister of Justice and Human Rights, Mr. Rama Valayden, Attorney-General. He was also informed of the proposal for establishing a National Bioethics Committee and expressed his support. Such Committee will be helpful in the development of relevant information, also on a regional scale. The country is facing problems in regard to the export of apes for medical experimentation, the unauthorized transfer of biological materials (among others from the coral reefs), medical and animal research in the country, doctor-patient interaction, and the distribution of milk powder for feeding babies.
- Meeting at the Ministry of Environment and National Development Unit, Mr Grish Gunesh, Permanent Secretary. I could explain the activities in the area of environmental ethics. At the moment, there are several issues where UNESCO could assist. They welcomed the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee since it can also address environmental issues (when two principles in the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights are focused on such issues).
- Meeting with the Minister of Agro-Industries and Fisheries, Mr. Arvin Boolell. He endorsed the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee and recommended to involve the Mauritius Research Council.

Workshop

The workshop was focussed on the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee in Mauritius. The first address was made by Professor Indur Fagoonee, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Mauritius. He explained what bioethics is and underlined the need for a National Bioethics Committee to better address the challenges of contemporary science and technology. H.E. Hon. Mr. Dulloo, Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Trade & Cooperation made the subsequent speech. He explained the context of the ethics programme of UNESCO, the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, and the need for its implementation. He also set out that in the context of the Assisting Bioethics Committees project UNESCO will assist Member States in setting up a National Bioethics Committee. Such Committee will have different roles: recommendations concerning legislation, for example in regard to research with human beings, research with animals, organ donation and transplantation; promotion of public debate; ethics education. He also announced that a National Bioethics Committee will be established in Mauritius. As soon as the Committee has been established, UNESCO will make a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the modalities of cooperation and technical assistance for the next three years. Setting up a National Bioethics Committee in Mauritius can also have a regional outreach, for example through promoting the establishment of a Regional Centre for Bioethics and through the application for establishing a UNESCO Chair in Bioethics. He finally announced that the UNESCO Website of the Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS) will be launched with free access in the country. After the two opening addresses, UNESCO had the occasion to illustrate the various activities of UNESCO in the area of ethics of science and technology, particularly those in capacity-building. Indications were given about what assistance UNESCO could provide in this area.

The workshop which was attended by approximately 50 persons representing many ministries and organizations was continued after the break with a small group of persons interested in a National Bioethics Committee. Several aspects of such a committee as well as the subsequent steps towards its establishment were discussed in detail. It was agreed that Professor Bhagwant, University of Mauritius, will coordinate the activities.

The last day of the mission, the workshop was reported on national television; the announcements of the Minister of Foreign Affairs were broadcasted so that wide scale publicity has been given to the intention to establish a National Bioethics Committee.

Evaluation

This mission had a different character as other activities in the ABC project. On the one hand, it aimed to find out whether there are activities in the country in the area of ethics of science and technology, in particular bioethics. Mauritius has a National Research Committee at the Ministry of Health that is reviewing research protocols, also regarding ethical aspects. The Committee has developed guidelines but legislation is lacking. In the University of Mauritius there is ethics teaching for undergraduate students. On the other hand, the mission made clear that there is a great interest in establishing a National Bioethics Committee. Relevant ministers were all interested and supportive, in conjunction with the Mauritius Research Council and the University of Mauritius. The University of Mauritius will take the lead in further developing the steps necessary to create such a committee.

The follow-up of this mission will be practical but will depend on the steps taken in Mauritius. We will liaise with professor Bhagwant and provide him with relevant materials, so that Statutes and Terms of Reference for the committee can be drafted. As soon as these are approved and as soon as the Committee has officially been established 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. At the moment the Committee will be inaugurated, this can create an opportunity to officially sign the Memorandum of Understanding during a public event on bioethics (as a rotating conference with experts from the International Bioethics Committee and the World Commission for the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology).