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## Report by the Director-General on the advisability of elaborating an International declaration on science ethics to serve as a basis for an ethical code of conduct for scientists

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Item 5.28 of the provisional agenda

**REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON THE ADVISABILITY  
OF ELABORATING AN INTERNATIONAL DECLARATION  
ON SCIENCE ETHICS TO SERVE AS A BASIS FOR  
AN ETHICAL CODE OF CONDUCT FOR SCIENTISTS**

**OUTLINE**

**Source:** 169 EX/Decision 3.6.1 and 172 EX/Decision 17.

**Background:** Under the terms of 169 EX/Decision 3.6.1, the Director-General was invited to continue preparatory work on the advisability of elaborating an international declaration on science ethics to serve as a basis for an ethical code of conduct for scientists and to submit this study to the Executive Board at its 175th session. At its 172nd session, the Executive Board examined document 172 EX/18, which is contained as an annex. By 172 EX/Decision 17, it decided to recommend to the General Conference to adopt the draft resolution contained in paragraph 10 of that decision.

**Decision required:** paragraph 2.

1. At its 172nd session, the Executive Board examined document 172 EX/18 (see annex) and adopted 172 EX/Decision 17 by which it recommended to the General Conference to adopt the draft resolution contained in paragraph 10 of document 172 EX/18.
2. Accordingly, the General Conference may wish to consider adopting the following draft resolution:

“The General Conference,

1. Recalling 29 C/Resolution 13, paragraph 2.C(d), 30 C/Resolution 20, 31 C/Resolution 21.1(a) and 32 C/Resolution 26, calling upon UNESCO to promote ethical reflection associated to the advancements of science and technology, with the advice of COMEST,
2. Bearing in mind the Declaration on Science and the Use of Scientific Knowledge, prepared by the 1999 World Conference on Science and adopted by the General Conference at its 30th session,

3. Recognizing that ethics and responsibility of science should be an integral part of the education and training of all scientists and that it is important to instil in students and scientists a positive attitude towards reflection, vigilance and awareness of the ethical dilemmas that they may encounter in their professional life,
4. Having taken note of 169 EX/Decision 3.6.1,
5. Congratulates the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), on the high standard of its work;
6. Thanks the Director-General for his initiatives to enhance the impact and visibility of UNESCO's programme of ethics of science and technology;
7. Takes note of the recommendations taken by COMEST at its Fourth Ordinary Session (23-25 March 2005) supporting UNESCO's proposal to undertake a feasibility study on elaborating an international declaration on science ethics;
8. Requests the Director-General to prepare a feasibility study, in cooperation with the International Council for Science and COMEST, on the elaboration of an international declaration on science ethics to serve as a basis for an ethical code of conduct for scientists, and to submit this study to the Executive Board at its 175th session;
9. Also invites the Director-General to report to the General Conference at its 34th session on the implementation of this resolution. ”

ANNEX

United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization

**Executive Board**

**eX**

**Hundred and seventy-second session**

172 EX/18  
PARIS, 29 July 2005  
Original: English

Item 17 of the provisional agenda

**REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON THE ADVISABILITY  
OF ELABORATING AN INTERNATIONAL DECLARATION ON  
SCIENCE ETHICS TO SERVE AS A BASIS FOR AN ETHICAL  
CODE OF CONDUCT FOR SCIENTISTS**

**SUMMARY**

The present document contains the report of the Director-General informing the Member States on the measures that have been taken by UNESCO in order to prepare a study on the advisability of elaborating an international declaration on science ethics to serve as a basis for an ethical code of conduct for scientists, in accordance with paragraph 7 of 169 EX/Decision 3.6.1 of the Executive Board. The report represents an overview of activities undertaken by the Organization in this field, including the results of the meeting of experts that took place on 7 March 2005 at UNESCO Headquarters, as well as the recommendations made by the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), at its Fourth Ordinary Session (March 2005).

Decision proposed: paragraph 10.

## I. BACKGROUND

1. The 1999 World Conference on Science, jointly organized by UNESCO and the International Council for Science (ICSU) in Budapest (Hungary), devoted special attention to the issue of ethical principles and responsibilities in the practice of science. This concern was carefully taken into account in the conference document “Science Agenda – A Framework for Action”, which emphasizes the need for ethics in science education and practice. On that occasion it was unanimously recognized that a primary reason for developing ethical standards for science is to restore society’s trust in scientists by explicitly connecting the basic values of science to the notions of social responsibility and accountability. This document attributed to the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), in cooperation with the International Council for Science (ICSU), a special responsibility to follow up on this issue. This task was fully endorsed by the 30th session of the UNESCO General Conference in 1999.

2. In October 2001 the United Nations Secretary-General established a Policy Working Group on the United Nations and Terrorism that produced a report including a number of recommendations. The United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Security Council endorsed the report and its recommendations, transmitting it to all the organizations and specialized agencies of the United Nations system.

3. At the invitation of the Director-General of UNESCO, a United Nations inter-agency consultative meeting was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, on 26 February 2003. One of the outcomes of this United Nations inter-agency meeting was a general recommendation to encourage ethical codes of conduct for scientists and engineers and promote ethics of science education and awareness. The task given by the World Conference on Science to COMEST and ICSU regarding ethics was then recalled and reinforced. One of the final recommendations of this meeting was that “existing relevant bodies such as COMEST could in particular play a decisive role in fostering a continued dialogue on education and ethics of science”, also calling for the “specific involvement of COMEST together with ICSU” promoting ethical responsibility in science.

4. Subsequently, in order to explore the wider field of science ethics and relevant topics for future international action, at its third ordinary session, in December 2003, in Rio de Janeiro, COMEST held a meeting to examine procedural issues and its advisory activities in regard to the UNESCO programme of ethics of science and technology for the 2004-2005 biennium. Among the major issues related to the Organization’s normative role the Commission agreed on recommending that UNESCO focus on the possibility of elaborating an international instrument related to the ethical standards of conduct for scientists. A preliminary evaluation and studies for the elaboration of these ethical standards were also carried out and discussions on this issue took place during the Extraordinary Session of COMEST at UNESCO Headquarters in May 2004.

5. In April 2004, 169 EX/Decision 3.6.1 requested the Director-General, with the advice of COMEST, to undertake studies on the advisability of elaborating an international declaration on science ethics to serve as a basis for an ethical code of conduct for scientists. Preliminary steps have already been taken towards carrying out such a study. The Division of Ethics of Science and Technology gathered and examined materials relating to the themes, including the work of ICSU’s Standing Committee for Responsibility and Ethics in Science (SCRES), which examined 115 existing ethical standards for science, including 39 international standards and 76 national standards representing 23 countries on six continents.

6. In order to examine the advisability of elaborating an international declaration on science ethics to serve as a basis for an ethical code of conduct for scientists, UNESCO’s Division of Ethics

of Science and Technology, responsible for the execution of the Organization's programme in this area, convened a meeting of prominent scientists, experts and representatives of other international organizations on 7 March 2005 at UNESCO Headquarters. The following experts were invited and they represented a wide range of relevant stakeholders:

- Mr Robert Coupland, International Red Cross, Legal Division;
- Mr Malcolm Dando, United Nations Institute for Disarmament;
- Mr Pieter Drenth, All European Academies;
- Mr Jens Fenstad, Chair of COMEST;
- Mr Andre Jaegle, World Federation of Scientific Workers;
- Ms Michele Jean, President of the International Bioethics Committee;
- Mr Alex Michaelos, Canadian Commission for UNESCO;
- Mr Graham Pearson, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford;
- Mr Cathage Smith, International Council for Science (ICSU);
- Mr Sang-yong Song, Member of COMEST;
- Mr Zbigniew Szawarski, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, Warsaw University;
- Mr Hub Zwart, Faculty of Sciences, Radboud University Nijmegen;
- Ms Julia Hasler, Natural Sciences Sector, UNESCO.

The following persons were unable to attend, but indicated a strong interest to contribute:

- Mr Jose Esquinas-Alcazar, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Subcommittee for Ethics;
- Mr Barry Grear, Vice-President, Engineers Australia;
- Mr Ali Kazancigil, International Social Science Council;
- Mr Dominique Peccoud, International Labour Organization.

7. During the meeting the feasibility of developing an ethical code of conduct for scientists was explored and the analysis focused on the following questions:

- What should be the scope of a possible code – should it concentrate on threats from biological weapons or have a broader scope?
- What should be the focus of a possible code – should it focus on specific sciences or cover all sciences?
- What should be the contents and nature of a possible code?

8. The group of experts discussed the various issues and reached the following conclusions:

- (a) **Feasibility.** It is important to make a distinction between two categories of ethical issues in present-day science: internal and external problems. Internal ethical issues have to do with undesirable and unacceptable behaviour of scientists: the focus here is on notions such as integrity, honesty and trust. External ethical issues are related to the social context of science, the independence of scientists, the responsibility of scientists, the potential misuse of science and the hostile use of life sciences. Based on this distinction, a two-tier approach should be

taken: UNESCO could focus on developing a normative framework for external ethical issues, whereas national and regional codes regulating the internal ethical issues could be developed by professional organizations and academies of science. With such an approach, developing an international declaration as a basis for ethical codes of conduct for scientists would be feasible. UNESCO can effectively draw upon its experience in drafting normative instruments and provide a general and inspirational framework of ethical principles. At the same time ethical requirements specific to national or regional contexts and specialized sciences can be developed later on the basis of the aforementioned UNESCO declaration, articulated in codes of conduct drafted by national or regional professional organizations and academies of science.

- (b) **Scope.** It is advisable to consider a wide scope, taking into account a variety of problems and risks for present-day science, and not focus exclusively on risks of bio-terrorism. It is necessary to cooperate intensively with other organizations engaged in the issue of a code of conduct. There is a need to follow complementary approaches: (a) UNESCO should concentrate on developing the ethical framework in conformity with its mission to contribute to peace and development; and (b) it is necessary to strengthen the instruments prohibiting weapons, in coherence with the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) processes, which comprise a parallel political commitment.
- (c) **Focus.** A declaration should cover science in general (as well as the engineering sciences), and thus have a wide range, without limiting itself to specific scientific disciplines (such as the life sciences). A global and universal approach is required, and is endorsed by many academies of science. If general principles could be identified, specific additional rules can subsequently be derived for specific disciplines and sciences.
- (d) **Content.** Concerning the possible contents of a declaration, the following recommendations have been made:
- it is important to explain that one of the purposes of a declaration is to raise awareness among scientists of possible misuse and create interest in the scientific community;
  - a declaration should formulate principles of good scientific work, emphasizing the responsibilities of scientists;
  - the focus should be not only on individual scientists but also on large-scale science with collective networks;
  - it is very important to underline the need for implementation rules; and
  - if a declaration on science ethics is prepared, it will provide an important framework for ethics teaching in the sciences.
- (e) **Character.** With regard to its form and legal status, after briefly considering the merits in various possible forms in order to identify the one that would be most effective and have the greatest impact on political, legal, scientific and public spheres, the group of experts came out in favour of a non-binding instrument, possibly a declaration, which would be best suited to a context that is constantly evolving, such as scientific research and technological development, and which would enable the broadest consensus to be reached among Member States. Codes of conduct, practice, and ethics can give significant guidance to researchers or academic scholars with regard to what they can or cannot do. However, codes of conduct, unless backed up by legislative authority or enforcement, are by their very nature voluntary and they rely upon the positive inclinations of those affected by the code to follow their provisions. The two-tier approach has been underlined: UNESCO should develop a general declaration of

ethical standards that should be reflected and specified in codes of conduct within Member States. In this declaration examples can be given regarding the specific character of a code that can be derived from the encompassing principles; the drafting of specific codes of conduct based on the UNESCO declaration, however, will be the duty of professional associations and academies of science. At this moment however it was deemed premature to further explore the content of a declaration as well as that of the derived codes. This approach, as well as the relationship between the declaration and the codes will be one of the main subjects of the proposed feasibility study.

9. Finally, at the Fourth Ordinary Session of COMEST held in Bangkok from 23 to 25 March 2005, the reflections and conclusions of the expert group were examined in the light of the decision of the Executive Board at its 169th session (169 EX/Decision 3.6.1). The Commission decided to endorse UNESCO's proposal to undertake a feasibility study on elaborating an international declaration on science ethics, which could serve as a basis for the elaboration of codes of ethical conduct for scientists, as recommended by the meeting of experts held at UNESCO Headquarters on 7 March 2005.

## II. CONCLUSION

10. Having considered this document, the Executive Board may wish to adopt the following decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 172 EX/18,
2. Recommends that the General Conference adopt the following draft resolution at its 33rd session:

“The General Conference,

1. Recalling 29 C/Resolution 13, paragraph 2.C(d), 30 C/Resolution 20, 31 C/Resolution 21.1(a) and 32 C/Resolution 26, calling upon UNESCO to promote ethical reflection associated to the advancements of science and technology, with the advice of COMEST,
2. Bearing in mind the Declaration on Science and the Use of Scientific Knowledge, prepared by the 1999 World Conference in Science and adopted by the General Conference at its 30th session,
3. Recognizing that ethics and responsibility of science should be an integral part of the education and training of all scientists and that it is important to instil in students and scientists a positive attitude towards reflection, vigilance and awareness of the ethical dilemmas that they may encounter in their professional lives,
4. Having taken note of 169 EX/Decision 3.6.1,
5. Congratulates the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), on the high standard of its work;

6. Thanks the Director-General for his initiatives to enhance the impact and visibility of UNESCO's programme of ethics of science and technology;
7. Takes note of the recommendations taken by COMEST at its Fourth Ordinary Session (23-25 March 2005) supporting UNESCO's proposal to undertake a feasibility study on elaborating an international declaration on science ethics;
8. Requests the Director-General to prepare a feasibility study, in cooperation with the International Council for Science and COMEST, on the elaboration of an international declaration on science ethics to serve as a basis for an ethical code of conduct for scientists, and to submit this study to the Executive Board at its 175th session;
9. Also invites the Director-General to report to the General Conference at its 34th session on the implementation of this resolution”.