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Meeting to discuss the establishment of the National Bioethics Committee, Praia, Cape Verde, 4-8 May 2008

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Item Type	Conference proceedings
Authors	Assisting Bioethics Committees Project
Publisher	UNESCO
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Download date	2026-07-08 02:45:50
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/168049



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

SHS/EST/ABC/REP/11

UNESCO ASSISTING BIOETHICS COMMITTEES PROJECT (ABC)
2008

**Meeting to discuss the establishment of the
National Bioethics Committee
Praia, Cape Verde
4-8 May 2008**

I. Background and motives

The mission took place in the framework of the ABC project, one of the three actions of the first priority of the Main Programme III: Social and Human Sciences. The purpose of this project is to provide the necessary technical support to Member States who either have a National Bioethics Committee or want to set up one. During technical support missions, practical information on the establishment and the functioning of National Bioethics Committees will be provided to national institutions.

A National Bioethics Committee is indeed the privileged body for assessing ethical, legal, scientific and social issues related to research projects with human beings and technological choices. It provides advice on ethical issues and formulates guidelines for policymakers. Each Member State is thus encouraged to create one, as stated in articles 19 and 22 of the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights*.

Aware of the ABC project, and determined to inscribe her country in this effort, Mrs. Ivette MORAIS, Secretary General of the National Commission for UNESCO of Cape Verde, invited the Regional Unit for Social and Human Sciences of the Dakar UNESCO Office to provide technical support to the Commission and the country.

There is actually no information about Cape Verde in the Global Ethics Observatory databases of UNESCO, be it on ethics experts, ethics institutions, higher education programs or professional codes of conduct. Even legal and administrative measures taken by the authorities have not been integrated. An expert mission therefore was necessary in order to assess the current state of ethics in Cape Verde.

II. Purpose

The mission had three main objectives:

- To provide practical information about the establishment and functioning of a National Bioethics Committee in Cape Verde and its National Commission for UNESCO, as well as to potential drafters of the statutes of such a committee.
- To meet the principal authorities concerned with implementing the bioethics declarations of UNESCO, in particular the Ministries of Education and Higher Education, Health, Human Rights and the Environment.
- To give to the appropriate persons a questionnaire for the databases of the Global Ethics Observatory of UNESCO regarding ethics experts and institutions.

III. Participants

- Mr. Kwami Christophe DIKENOU, Consultant, SHS, UNESCO, Dakar
- Dr. Evariste LIKINDA BOFONDA (Democratic Republic of Congo and Chair of the National Bioethics Committee of DR Congo), Member of the ABC task force of experts.

IV. Activities

A. National Commission for UNESCO

Mr. Bruno Sumbah, assistant to the Secretary General, had made contacts and appointments. Unfortunately, the Secretary General was ill at the time of the mission.

The first work session with Mr. Bruno Sumbah took place in the morning of May 5, 2008. The activities of UNESCO in the field of ethics of science and technology in general and bioethics in particular were explained. UNESCO plays a leading role with the adoption of three important Declarations that Member States are encouraged to implement. The work of the National Commission for UNESCO in implementing articles 22 and 19 of the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* (2005) about independent, multidisciplinary and pluralistic ethics committees will be of public interest.

Dr. Evariste Likinda Bafonda in turn demonstrated that bioethics issues, far from being a luxury, are actually a necessity for African countries going through very difficult times in a time of globalization of science and technology. African countries need to protect their population, to build skills in ethics and to provide guidance to their citizen with regard to bioethical issues. They have a moral obligation to take part in the global debate on bioethics.

Mr. Bruno Sumbah expressed his appreciation for the support that UNESCO/BREDA always brings to the Commission in implementing UNESCO programmes in Cape Verde, including the ABC project. He also called over the phone each of the potential drafters of the statutes and founders of the future National Bioethics Committee of Cape Verde. Exchanges continued with Mr. Bruno Sumbah in the afternoon.

B. Ministry of Education and Higher Education

Mrs Filomena Martins, Minister of Education and Higher Education, President of the National Commission for UNESCO was unavailable due to the ongoing municipal campaign. She asked her chief of staff, Mr. Alberto Gomes Borges Semedo, to meet with the UNESCO Delegation.

The activities of UNESCO in the field of bioethics were explained, reminding in particular that Member States adopted the following three important declarations:

- the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights (1997) ;
- the International Declaration on Human Genetic Data (2003) ;
- the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005).

Also, the *Declaration of Head of States and Governments* adopted at the 8th Summit of the African Union (Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia, 2007) encouraged Member States to “look for strict implementation in Africa of ethics of science in order to, on the one hand, preserve the continent’s environmental and natural resources and, on the other hand, prevent practices detrimental to African population”.

The heads of states and governments also called, in the same declaration, UNESCO to assist the continent to “*implement the decision of the summit on science and technology*”.

The opportunities offered to Africa by UNESCO and in particular the Sector of Social and Human Sciences in setting Africa as their main priority in the implementation of the Programme of Ethics of Science and technology in the biennium 2008-2009 were underlined. Finally, the ABC programme for Cape Verde in terms of solidarity and international cooperation, especially with Portuguese-speaking countries and ethics committees were emphasized.

In his address, Mr. Semedo thanked UNESCO for the technical support that it brings to his country and assured the support of the government of Cape Verde to the ABC project and to the National Bioethics Committee of Cape Verde to be.

Before leaving, Mr. Semedo were offered, for Madam Minister, the three UNESCO declarations, the guidebooks n°1 *Establishing Bioethics Committees* and n°2 *Bioethics Committees at Work: Policies and Procedures*.

C. United Nations Funds and Programmes in Cape Verde

A work session took place at the office of the United Nations Funds and Programmes in Cape Verde (UNFP) in the framework of ONE United Nations.

Mrs Nélide Rodrigues, Chief of the Human Capital Development Unit and acting Resident Coordinator, Mrs Sonia Lima, Coordination Specialist, Liaison Officer with non resident agencies, Mrs Eunice Gomes of the Environment Unit and M. Abdelkader Bensada, Principal

Technical Advisor to the “UNDP GEF Protected Areas Project” took part in this meeting (7 May 2008). Mrs Rodrigues presented the programmes of UNFP and provided information concerning the existence of a Research Ethics Committee created in 2004 by a decree of the Ministry of Health.

D. Work session with potential drafters of the statutes of the National Bioethics Committee

This session took place in the afternoon of May 7, 2008 at the National Commission for UNESCO of Cape Verde.

After a word of welcome by Mr. Bruno Soumah, the Ethics programme of UNESCO was presented, with emphasis on the three declarations in bioethics, which demonstrate the success of the international community in committing to universally shared values and principles requiring national implementation. This is why there is a need for the group to help Cape Verde to implement these principles.

The Global Ethics Observatory of UNESCO was also presented, indicating at the same time the lack of data about Cape Verde.

Dr. Likinda in turn emphasized the need for Africa and Cape Verde in particular to take the necessary legal, administrative and other measures in order to protect natural resources and populations against detrimental activities. He illustrated his point with examples of trans-border research, clinical experiments and experiments on vulnerable populations.

Dr Maria da Conceição Moreira Carvalho, of the General Direction of Health, President of the Committee for Ethics and Professional Deontology of the Medical Association, President of the National Ethics Committee for Health Research, acknowledged that her country is facing bioethical issues. This situation led the Ministry of Health to create, through a 2007 decree, a Committee for Ethics in Research. A Committee for Ethics and Professional Deontology already exists within the Medical Association.

But she also admitted that creating a National Bioethics Committee would not be redundant. Created under the leadership of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, it would essentially be devoted to bioethics education and training, all the more since the young University of Cape Verde will grow in the coming years. It could also effectively contribute to public awareness.

The representative of the Ministry of the Environment, Ribeira Nuno, pointed out that the National Bioethics Committee created in accordance with art. 19 and 22 of the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* could help his country to protect its environment (as stated in art. 17 of the said Declaration).

The group unanimously recognized that the National Bioethics Committee as advocated by the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* has a large scope and can only be complementary with the Research Ethics Committee of the Ministry of Health. There could

not be competition, but rather complementing and mutual benefit for the benefit of Cape Verde.

Indeed UNESCO's approach to the reality of a National Bioethics Committee recognizes that it is not only a body assessing research, but that it also provides advice on ethical issues, formulates recommendations and fosters debate, education and public awareness. The group was convinced of the need for a broader scope.

The following work plan for June to December 2008 has been decided by the group:

- Drafting the statutes of the National Bioethics Committee of Cape Verde
- Engage in necessary administrative steps for the official recognition.

Each group member received one copy of the following documents:

- *Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights* (1997) ;
- *International Declaration on Human Genetic Data* (2003) ;
- *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* (2005);
- Guidebook n°1: *Establishing Bioethics Committees*;
- Guidebook n°2: *Bioethics Committees at Work: Procedures and Policies*;
- Statutes of the National Bioethics Committees of the following African countries: Guinea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo.

Dr. Moreira Carvalho was given questionnaires for the databases GEObs 1 on ethics experts and 2 on ethics institutions. She in turn handed to the UNESCO representatives the decree for the creation of the Research Ethics Committee of the Ministry of Health.

V. Final remarks

As the municipal campaign kept politicians busy, it was not possible to meet with the Ministers of Education and Higher Education, Health and the Environment. But the technical support for establishing a National Bioethics Committee was successful. The managers of the National Commission for UNESCO now have a clearer idea of the need for Cape Verde to implement the principles of the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* and of the public service that the commission can deliver in this regard. The working group drafting the statutes of the Committee and taking administrative steps for its installation has been set up and the work calendar has been determined.

The positive reactions experienced with everyone in Cape Verde is an invitation for all partners to seize the opportunity of succeeding in an exemplary manner in an African Portuguese-speaking country where UNFP is already very active.