Commission suisse pour l'UNESCO
Schweizerische UNESCO-Kommission
Commissione svizzera per l'UNESCO
Cummissiun svizra per l'UNESCO

Check against delivery

UNESCO & HUMAN RIGHTS:

GENEVA DIALOGUES FOR ENHANCING COOPERATION & EFFECTIVENESS

The Right to Science

OPENING REMARKS

25 April 2022

Thomas Zeltner, Chair of the Swiss Commission for UNESCO

First of all, in the name of the Swiss Commission for UNESCO, let me thank Ms Gabriela Ramos, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences of UNESCO, and Ms Nada Al-Nashif, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR, for their inspiring words.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome all of you today to the second session of the dialogue series on human rights in the fields of Education, Science, Culture and Communication launched under the auspices of the Swiss Commission for UNESCO.

The Right to Science has its origins in Article 27 of the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in the aftermath of World War II. In 1966[1], the UN turned these commitments into binding obligations under international law. In turn, the implication is that, just as governments are expected to respect freedom of speech, for instance, so too must they implement measures to uphold and respect the Right to Science.

[1] 1966: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)

The existence of this right is important not only for researchers, but also for society as a whole. It adds both a legal and a moral dimension to a range of fundamental issues. However, in spite of its immense potential for furthering science and human rights causes, the Right to Science has not received the attention it deserves.

As noted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS): "governments have largely ignored their Article 15 obligations and neither the human rights nor the scientific communities have brought their skills and influential voices to bear on the promotion and application of this right in practice"[2].

I am therefore very honored to open this dialogue on the Right to Science today, as I'm convinced that, even though it's been recognized in international law for decades, the right of all of humanity to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications has received far too little attention, yet is more relevant than ever in the present context.

It is worth mentioning that the pandemic has come as a stark reminder that the Right to Science as a fundamental human right is not self-evident in every corner of the world, neither in its respect nor in its practice. Various barriers limit the universal dissemination of scientific knowledge and the fair distribution of its benefits among all members of a society.

One of the primary challenges we face is determining how to strike a balance between intellectual property rights (IPR) and scientific endeavor. Although IPR can stimulate innovation by making the research and development process more economically viable, and thereby aid the conversion of good science into tangible benefits, the fact that these

[2] https://www.aaas.org/programs/scientific-responsibility-human-rights-law/resources/article-15/about

intellectual property rights are often susceptible to monopolization can create tension between private profit and public good.

Intellectual property rights are, of course, essential to protect and remunerate creative work, but they can also hinder the exchange of ideas and information upon which science thrives. Productive scientific inquiry requires the free and rapid flow and exchange of information.

As a former Secretary of Health of Switzerland and Director of the Federal Office of Public Health, I am only all too familiar with the tension between patent rights on pharmaceutical products and the right to health, which is directly linked to the Right to Science.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I strongly believe that, within the Right to Science lies enormous potential for responding to the myriad of challenges facing the world. Pandemics, climate change, biodiversity loss, rising socio-economic inequalities and attaining the Sustainable Development Goals, for example, all constitute global challenges that involve science in various ways and that can only be addressed through a truly *global* discourse.

The complexity of global issues is far too vast for any party to tackle alone. These large-scale problems require new kinds of partnership, cross-border collaboration, open innovation and knowledge-sharing, and systems thinking.

Scientific analysis, critical thinking and evidence-based decision-making would go a long way towards solving these problems. There is no other sustainable path than to include the scientific arsenal in all dimensions of human action. And this means to *globally* strengthen the Right to Science.

Global challenges require global solutions – Global solutions require Science.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another challenge encompassed by the Right to Science is the loose ties between science and society. This is manifested by the lack of scientific literacy among the wider population, and the increasing proliferation of falsified information. The limits of the dissemination of scientific knowledge and its appropriation by “ordinary” citizens have been highlighted on numerous occasions, even by researchers themselves.

Indeed, new scientific knowledge is sometimes expressed in terms that are opaque or even unintelligible to the majority of citizens. Moreover, scientific knowledge is regularly conveyed through traditional channels, such as academic publishing houses or scientific journals: a process that means it takes several months, or even years, to make new scientific knowledge accessible to the public.

Unfortunately, this gap between researchers, experts and ordinary citizens can often turn into mistrust, especially when digital tools are involved. Online platforms can play conflicting roles in the scientific education of populations, depending on how they are used. Social networks, for example, are places where new communities of learning and sharing of scientific knowledge emerge. But these same networks sometimes serve as relays for pseudo-scientific or simply incorrect information that can harm people’s scientific literacy, which is particularly detrimental when it involves public health issues.

We have all witnessed this gap between scientific experts and ordinary citizens grow during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the spread of

disinformation casting doubt on the scientific consensus. Already in 2019, the World Health Organisation considered the distrust of vaccines, fueled by social networks, to be one of the "ten enemies to global health"[3] that the world is facing.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me finish by saying that there cannot be any guarantee of upholding the Right to Science without simultaneously guaranteeing the safeguarding of other rights, such as academic freedom and the freedom of expression.

All rights are interconnected and interdependent on each other. Even if scientists wish to disseminate the results of their investigations more widely and express themselves freely in public, they do not always operate within an enabling environment that provides them the opportunity to do so.

Academic freedom is a core principle for all scientific disciplines. It supports a universal right to engage in scholarly practices such as research, analysis and exchange of scientific ideas, theories and methodologies without interference or suppression. As rightly pointed out by the International Council of Science: "Without academic freedom, the advancement of science and social benefits derived from science will be impaired".

This is precisely why the Right to Science cannot be viewed as self-sustaining and self-sufficient: the Right to Science is inextricably linked to the other human rights. The challenges posed by the unequal distribution of the benefits of science cannot be solved if wider actions are not

[3] https://www.who.int/fr/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019

undertaken to support other freedoms. Simply put, there cannot be any cherry picking.

I wish all of you a fruitful discussion and look forward to the results. Thank you for your attention.