

DG/2004/066
Original: English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

on the occasion of the opening address
at the Extraordinary Session of COMEST

UNESCO, 14 May 2004

Mr Chairperson,
Distinguished Members and Ex-Officio Members of COMEST,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this Extraordinary Session of the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST). Let me thank you all for your willingness to contribute to UNESCO's reflections and activities on the ethical issues raised by the advances of science and technology. Your presence here today and your support for UNESCO's mission are much appreciated.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to Mr Fenstad, the Chairperson of COMEST, for his vital contribution. Since his election as Chairperson in December 2001, a mandate that was renewed for a further term last December, his leadership, vision and conscientious efforts have had the effect of quickening the pulse of COMEST's work, thereby contributing to a greater awareness of ethical issues in the world, and in the scientific world in particular. Mr Fenstad's impact has perhaps been greatest in turning COMEST in a more policy-oriented and action-oriented direction. This fresh approach is exactly what is needed and I am most appreciative of Mr Fenstad's commendable efforts as a catalyst for this re-orientation.

I have called for this Extraordinary Session, at the request of the Chairperson of COMEST, for several reasons. First, the membership of COMEST has recently changed considerably, with the replacement of half of the membership by nine new members. Let me take this opportunity to warmly welcome these new members, for whom this Extraordinary Session is important in order to integrate them into COMEST's work. Let me also pay tribute to the continuing members for all their contributions and for engaging so productively with the Commission's developing agenda.

Second, as I will explain in a little more detail shortly, the recent 169th session of the Executive Board of UNESCO was quite a momentous occasion for the Organization's agenda as far as the ethics of science and technology is concerned. As COMEST is vitally involved in these developments, this meeting is a useful opportunity for the Commission to consider their implications for its future work plans.

Third, the growing importance of the ethics of science and technology for UNESCO, and particularly the role of COMEST in this regard, requires that the Commission's working methods and procedures be improved so that the new agenda of activities can be fulfilled efficiently and effectively. This Extraordinary Session is necessary in order to bring these working methods into proper effect. As a result, the work of COMEST will become more closely integrated with UNESCO's priority concerns in this field. This is good news for UNESCO and for COMEST too.

It is for these reasons that this Extraordinary Session has been called. It is a sign of the seriousness of our intent and the high value that UNESCO – in terms of both the Secretariat and the Organization's governing bodies – places on COMEST and its work. The ethics of science and technology is one of the principal priorities of UNESCO, and COMEST is an essential tool for giving expression to that priority in the form of action and outcomes.

The priority of the ethics of science and technology within UNESCO's programme in the 2004-2005 biennium will be most visible, perhaps, in our enhanced efforts to promote the teaching of ethics. UNESCO will also play a capacity-building role through the construction of ethics databases and their dissemination, and through the establishment and reinforcement of ethical networks.

Meanwhile, as noted earlier, UNESCO's Executive Board at its recent 169th session was a significant moment for enriching our agenda in the area of the ethics of science and technology. The Executive Board unanimously recognized and welcomed the new approach of COMEST to the global debate on the ethics of science and technology, namely, by bringing it to the regional level.

This new approach was successfully launched at the Third Ordinary Session of COMEST held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in December 2003. Compared with previous sessions, which were attended by no more than fifty participants, the Brazil meeting attracted over 600 participants and stimulated wide interest. It was particularly important because it gave the members of COMEST an opportunity to dialogue with scientists and policy-makers rooted in the realities of their region. Such two-way dialogue is essential for reinforcing the relevance of COMEST's work and for ensuring that the global debate on the ethics of science and technology is anchored in actual contexts and concrete applications. The meeting in Brazil was also useful for establishing a network of experts and setting up a platform for future activities in the whole region where the ethics of science and technology is a growing priority.

Next year, thanks to the generous invitation of the Thai Government, we will have the opportunity to organize the Fourth Ordinary Session of COMEST in Bangkok, which will offer an invaluable opportunity to give continuity to this policy in Asia and the Pacific region. I very much regretted my inability to attend the COMEST meeting in Brazil. I am pleased now to inform you that I shall be attending the Bangkok meeting in March 2005.

In general, this regional approach will enable UNESCO to better address the needs and expectations of Member States and to establish platforms of policy-oriented debate and action that reflect regional as well as international priorities. On the basis of the recommendations and work of COMEST, UNESCO will be able to assist Member States in such key areas as capacity-building, awareness-raising,

standard-setting and dissemination of information. UNESCO will also help the international community to engage with the ethics of science and technology in concrete ways.

During its last session, the Executive Board also broadened and deepened the Organization's agenda regarding the ethics of science and technology in three main ways. First, the Executive Board adopted a resolution requesting me to keep it informed of the action I intend to take, on the advice and recommendations of COMEST, concerning the advisability of drafting an international instrument on the ethics of outer space. Second, the Executive Board also requested me to prepare a study, in cooperation with the International Council for Science (ICSU), on the advisability of elaborating an international declaration on science ethics concerning an ethical code of conduct for scientists. And, third, it invited me to keep it informed of the studies undertaken to examine the principles of environmental ethics and to identify possible international actions in this field.

I count on your assistance to enable me to accomplish these important tasks. The issues involved will test UNESCO's ability to address the moral challenges presented by today's scientific and technological innovations. Our ethical responses need to be innovative too if we are to keep pace with unprecedented scientific and technological developments and their far-reaching implications. The need for new normative frameworks and guidelines flows out of a recognition that we have entered uncharted waters and our old moral compass is no longer adequate. COMEST's work is vital for lighting the way towards appropriate ethical or normative responses. Those responses need to be not only relevant to current and emerging problems but also grounded upon the fundamental principles and values at the heart of UNESCO's mandate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A revitalized COMEST is critically important for UNESCO in the face of the ethical challenges presented by rapid scientific and technological change. If COMEST did not exist, we would have to invent it! Let me encourage COMEST to continue its work and to redouble its efforts. At the same time, let us bear in mind that ethics in general and the ethics of science and technology in particular are not the property of any single commission or organization. The ethical challenges we face affect us all and they are therefore the responsibility of all. It is UNESCO's particular duty to assist countries and the international community in the search for responses and solutions that attract consensual agreement. COMEST's work is vital for this purpose.

I have spoken about the tasks ahead but let me conclude with an expression of appreciation of the work already achieved by COMEST. Since its creation in 1997,

COMEST has made important strides forward. It is on that solid base of achievement that we can aspire to do even more.

It remains for me to thank you all once again for your participation in this meeting and for your active involvement in and commitment to the ethics of science. I wish you every success in your deliberations during this Extraordinary Session of COMEST.

Thank you.