

**Launch of the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition
Washington DC, January 14, 2009**

Mary Robinson

It is a great pleasure to participate in the launch of the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition. I congratulate the AAAS Science and Human Rights Program and the many scientific associations and societies that have come together to form this timely and important initiative. I am aware that my friend Mona Younis played a role in this, and I commend her warmly on seizing the moment!

A vehicle for collaboration among scientific organizations on questions of human rights is tremendously welcome. A vehicle that will increase collaboration between the scientific and human rights communities, and bring human rights to scientists and the conduct of science is particularly forward-looking. It is no exaggeration to say that everyone stands to benefit from such a project.

It is fitting that the backdrop to this launch is the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the world commemorated one month ago. On that day, the world community reaffirmed the truly historic and profound significance of what had been accomplished on December 10, 1948, when governments unanimously agreed to ensure the "effective recognition and observance" of the human rights deemed vital to human dignity and well-being. Marking this historic anniversary were human rights defenders in virtually every country in the world who recommitted to completing the task set out 60 years ago. Despite the litany of missed opportunities, preventable failures, and deliberate disasters, as well as on-going abuses resulting merely from neglect, we can point to genuine progress, particularly in the understanding of governments' responsibilities. Indeed, owing to the painstaking work of several generations, international human rights treaties have been drafted and adopted, and human rights standards established and elaborated. Today, there is no government in the world that does not know what its human rights obligations are, what it must do, and why it must do it.

But that is not enough as the thousands of non-governmental organizations throughout the world that call on their governments to meet their legally-binding human rights obligations know too well. This growing and diverse community is actively engaged in monitoring and reporting, naming and shaming, as well as advising and guiding governments to ensure that they respect, protect and fulfill the full spectrum of human rights. Scientists have much to contribute to each of these endeavors and to helping us make sure that another 60 years do not pass without the full realization of human rights for all.

In this monumental task, each community's unique contributions are needed. Arguably no single community enjoys as diverse an array of expertise and specialized knowledge as the scientific community possesses collectively. Science and scientific methods have

made much of our human rights work possible. Social scientists contributed rigorous methodologies for the collection, organization, and analysis of evidence – the hallmark of human rights documenting, reporting and litigating. We just heard about the pioneering work of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, which helped to make forensic and genetic sciences basic human rights tools, enabling us to identify victims of mass atrocities and bring their perpetrators to justice. I remember meeting members of the team on one of my visits as High Commissioner to Timor Leste, who invited me into the morgue where they were working. I was deeply impressed by the humanity and kindness they brought to their task, and their understanding of the trauma for families of not being able to find or identify the body of a loved one.

As economists have joined with the human rights community we have begun work to assess governments' compliance with their duty to expend the "maximum available resources" to ensure the "progressive realization" of economic and social human rights. And, most recently, as geographers have educated us about the potential uses of satellite imagery, we are more hopeful of being able to document, and perhaps one day prevent, violations that would otherwise remain far from sight and mind. But considerably more is needed and can be done.

In 2000, as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights I had the privilege of addressing an international conference on "Statistics, Development and Human Rights." The conference brought together over 700 statisticians, development specialists and human rights experts from 123 countries and 37 international organizations to consider how best to make use of the expertise of statisticians in monitoring and measuring progress in human rights development and human rights. At that time I observed that "The subject of [their] work ...[was] nothing less than a quest for a science of human dignity. When the target is human suffering, and the cause human rights, mere rhetoric is not adequate to the task in hand. What are needed are solid methodologies, careful techniques, and effective mechanisms to get the job done."

Marshalling the array of scientific tools, techniques and technologies that your disciplines collectively possess will make it more likely that we do indeed get the job done. Collaborating across disciplines holds tremendous promise for new, multi-disciplinary approaches that match the holistic nature of human rights where all rights are interrelated and interdependent. It also requires greater direct work with human rights organizations in diagnosing and recommending appropriate science-based solutions to a myriad of challenges that we face. Both require a better knowledge of the human rights system on your part, and a better knowledge of science on ours. Indeed, the work done so far has come from individual scientists who took the time to look into human rights and recognized in it something worthy of their time, skills, and knowledge. Human rights practitioners too need to become more comfortable with and knowledgeable about how science and technology can further enhance our work. The Coalition's commitment to this bridge-building and developing the means and resources for communication between our two communities holds much promise.

Let me give you an example.

Yesterday in New York I joined with Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) in launching its report “Health in Ruins: A Man-Made Disaster in Zimbabwe”. Brave members of PHR, including two physicians with expertise in public health and epidemiology, carried out a seven-day investigation of the health system. One of them, Professor Chris Beyrer of Johns Hopkins University will address you tomorrow. The report illustrates how the cholera epidemic is a symptom of the utter collapse of the healthcare system itself. The team found people drinking from sewers, and the water supply system filled with human waste. Health workers – themselves starving and unpaid – try to treat the sick, dehydrated and malnourished in hospitals with no running water, basic drugs or food. What makes their message on the crisis in Zimbabwe so powerful is the combination of medical science expertise and a passionate commitment to health as a human right.

Bringing your skills and expertise to the benefit of society and to improving people’s lives is at the heart of your mandates as scientific associations. You may be surprised to know that it is more than that; it is in itself a fulfillment of a human right that is not well known.

Among the Universal Declaration’s least well-known rights is the “right ... to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (article 27). This right was subsequently affirmed as “the right of everyone to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications” in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – an international human rights treaty. The deliberations that accompanied the drafting of the Universal Declaration assure us that the rights enumerated therein were not chosen arbitrarily; the framers knew what they were doing. International human rights law now obligates governments to respect and protect intellectual property, “the freedom indispensable for scientific research,” and “international contacts and co-operation in the scientific field.” Governments must also act to “conserve, develop, and diffuse science.” Scientists can readily recognize the necessity of this human right; you have an immediate stake in seeing this right enforced as it is vital for free scientific inquiry and for your and your colleagues’ wellbeing. By protecting free thought and exchange, governments are also more likely to retain their educated professionals, such as health workers that are now hemorrhaging from countries where they are so desperately needed. This right, therefore, serves all.

Indeed the right to the benefits of scientific progress is also indispensable for the realization of other human rights. Like all human rights, it is both a right in itself as well as “interdependent” with and “indivisible” from all the other rights. Inclusion of this right as a fundamental and inalienable human right was prescient, as it may well be argued that the sharing of scientific progress is needed for rights to be enjoyed in the future. A good example is the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information.” In our lifetime science and technology have transformed what the enjoyment of this right to information requires. In 2007, fewer than one-fifth of the world’s people had access to the Internet, meaning that the majority remain unable to exercise their fundamental right to information, resulting in deprivations of many other kinds. Because the right to the benefits of science is the lynchpin to other rights, it is commendable that this coalition of scientific associations is taking up the promotion of the right as an overarching initiative.

No community is better placed to document and articulate the importance of this neglected right, and to see that it is realized, than the scientific community.

I would urge you to integrate a human rights approach into scientific research and development – for example, to ensure that vaccine research and development is of benefit to all, including treatment for diseases that predominantly affect poor women and girls, such as HPV.

As President of Ireland I championed the need for more girls to study science and supported WITS, an organization of women in science and technology. More recently, as chair of the committee of patrons for Dublin's successful bid to become the European City of Science in 2012, I emphasized the importance of promoting the role of women in science. Could I suggest that the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition might plan a major event in Dublin during 2012 to take stock of the difference you may have made through the Coalition. I would be delighted to promote this from the Dublin end!

The human rights I refer to include the broad international human rights agenda. It is worth noting that among the G8 countries, the US alone has not ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The lack of US ratification of this treaty has many consequences. Among them is the limited awareness in this country that human rights is inclusive of both civil and political rights – such as freedom of belief, equality before the law, and freedom from arbitrary arrest, as well as economic, social and cultural rights, such as an adequate standard of living, social security, and housing. Excluding economic, social, and cultural rights means that the US scientific community has had very little engagement in the work on nutrition, development, the environment, health, and other rights *as human rights*. As my colleague Professor Paul Hunt, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, so eloquently put it: “an effective health system is a core social institution, no less than a court system or a political system. The right to a fair trial underpins a good court system. The right to vote underpins a democratic political system. And the right to health underpins the call for an effective health system accessible to all.”

This broader approach helps the convergence between human rights and a number of fields, such as development, business, health and climate change. A human rights framework improves policy coherence across sectors and disciplines, and has huge potential in climate change adaptation and mitigation research agendas. A number of us are exploring the concept of climate justice – recognising that global warming is caused by human behavior in the developed part of the world, and impacts severely on the vulnerable life chances of those in poor countries who have not contributed to the problem. It would be great to link your coalition with the emerging alliance on climate justice.

Scientists have been responsible for advancements in every realm of human life. Agronomists have made previously unimaginable levels of food production possible. But we also need you with us in advising governments on how they can fulfill the human right to adequate nutrition for all people. Psychologists have documented the damage

that brutality causes. But we also need your help in both preventing acts of brutality and securing mental health services as a human right. Hydrologists have identified the threats to the world's water resources. As human rights organizations work to ensure equitable access to clean water, will you be there? In short, your expertise is vital both for improvements in the human condition as well as the realization of human rights – two inter-related but distinct projects.

And this work is needed throughout the world but also at home. Eleanor Roosevelt, a leading member of the Human Rights Commission that drafted the Universal Declaration, called on everyone to consider the meaning of universal human rights “close to home.” She urged that “Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”¹ I understand that the Coalition members are committed to doing just that: bringing human rights back home -- to your disciplines, to your research, to your places of work. Many of your associations have a long and proud history of speaking out against human rights violations of all kinds. More recently, several associations have grappled with the responsibilities that emanate from human rights standards and norms for the practice of your professions. During the previous US administration, the explicit rejection by several associations of participation or cooperation in torture, unlawful detentions, and other human rights abuses was heartening. I urge you to add to the contributions you make to human rights, your voices, as a matter of conscience and responsibility that transcend any one discipline and any one country. In doing so you strengthen our chances of success in holding governments – all governments – to their legally-binding international human rights obligations.

Thank you for the opportunity to launch this important initiative with you. The task before you is inspired and inspiring. I congratulate you for taking it on and look forward to fruitful collaboration between our respective communities in the years ahead. Eleanor Roosevelt would undoubtedly be pleased at this example of “concerted citizen action” between scientists and human rights activists!

¹ Full quote: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."