

Science and Human Rights Coalition: Planning Meeting Themes

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We began considering the question: Is a Science and Human Rights Coalition Needed? This question begs what sorts of value-added a Coalition might potentially bring to the work of practitioners in the human rights community as well as to the work of scientific associations with regard to human rights. We, therefore, took up the question of value-added as a threefold consideration: 1. for professional associations, 2. for members of such associations, 3. and for the human rights community. In a variety of ways the point was made that typical association members (and human rights practitioners) are usually working with limited resources and too many commitments. And so the general idea of leveraging our respective efforts by coordinating through AAAS is, in theory, attractive. But “leveraging” can happen in a variety of ways.

Members of scientific associations are typically not engaged in front-line advocacy work, but do work in fields with potential applications for human rights, research human rights problems, or the human rights community itself. We are also typically professionals in other capacities than human rights, but recognize specific kinds of human rights-related concerns and needs, based upon our respective professional activities. Whatever “value-added” contribution, it was noted, should address the needs, interests, and capacities of scientific professionals. Initially, one basic consideration for our Coalition should be to recognize these practical limitations and to facilitate the human rights work of scientific associations through both information sharing and burden sharing. But about what? One place to start, it is clear, is to learn more about the footprint of human rights across the different scientific associations. To this end, part of our discussion was concerned with how best to do that. Should we, for example, conduct a short survey? (For more details on the question of a survey, consult p. 2 of our Planning Meeting Notes, which can be obtained upon request.)

One limit to better and more regular collaboration among scientific associations in terms of human rights is that typical scientific practitioners understandably tend to be zeroed in on their own professional field of possibilities, through which “human rights” might look very different, depending upon disciplinary history, expertise, and topical concerns. Part of our conversation, then, addressed how the Coalition might work to bridge the various doorways into human rights available to distinct disciplines, including their professional practices, orientations, skill sets, and problems, and in ways pointing to convergences and complementarities of expertise that enhance our respective individual efforts and mutual “piggybacking.” If we agreed that human rights do not fit within any single disciplinary framework, the Coalition should yet strive for a sharper recognition of the particularities of different sorts of scientific concerns, and the relationships that scientific associations have to the human rights regime. In short, one important Coalition purpose might be to help scientific organizations learn what they need to know about each other in pursuing their various human rights objectives.

To do this, we agreed, part of our task is to more clearly define what the relationship to human rights is among typical scientific associations. This would seem to include at least four items: 1. Advocacy on behalf of particular members (or scientists) as human rights victims, 2. A particular expertise or familiarity with specific kinds of human rights issues, given the prevailing topical concerns and methods of a given scientific community, 3. A concern with the particular ways that research methods and data collection might directly contribute to current and new human rights agendas, 4. and more direct interventions of a collaborative sort with professional colleagues in the human rights community.

Another thread running through our initial discussion was that the AAAS leveraging of the human rights work of scientific associations could facilitate their greater participation in otherwise hard to access human rights “theaters,” such as the UN system. Important here is that members of scientific associations often express their concern for the relative marginality of their work to relevant public issues of the day, and so, the ways that their own scientific efforts and professional associations might matter outside the Ivory Tower, as “applied,” and in “public debates” (e.g., about issues of “policy”). Seeking to provide more coordinated access to such forums as the UN, our Coalition could be a potentially valuable voice in the many internal debates across scientific communities about the right balance between academic and applied, and in helping to think constructively about how scientific practitioners can better publicly address the human rights issues most important to them but also human rights concerns receiving dramatic public awareness.

These concerns, then, beg another question about the geographic focus of our efforts. As director of AAAS’s Science and Human Rights Program, Mona Younis explained, the initial Coalition meeting in 2005 was convened with the goal of “bringing human rights home” and was funded by the Mertz Gilmore Foundation on that basis. To a significant degree, we agreed, the domestic/international distinction is artificial since a proper view of the international human rights framework recognizes their relevant application to all governments “everywhere and at all times.” Of course, we also know that the devil is in the details and that this glosses the many ways that in transnational terms human rights are differently perceived, applied, and sometimes understood to be problematic..

We should thus ask: In what ways is the human rights agenda different domestically and internationally? What, if any, are the implications of this for the Coalition’s work? When we ask ourselves, for example, what “human rights” are, is it enough simply to reference the International Bill of Rights? The fact is that human rights groups in the US are part of US society. As such, they have tended to meaningfully prioritize human rights that are most compatible with the US constitution, its legal system, and societal values – what we typically call “civil rights.” In the domestic US context, then, defining human rights via the Universal Declaration is itself novel. How the work of our Coalition chooses to approach or to bridge the domestic and the international will in part define how it participates in future policy efforts and public debates.

If we should seek to clarify how our Coalition would help to leverage the existing work of scientific associations, it is at least as important to consider what kinds of constructive

contributions scientific practitioners can make to human rights work. This means that an important aspect of the Coalition's efforts, we agreed, should be to canvass the human rights community about what its needs are, and to open a channel of sustained dialogue with human rights professionals to consider how scientists can enhance their work. The Coalition might function as an ongoing workshop for both communities to meaningfully characterize the best role for scientific associations in human rights work, to educate each other regarding the requirements and possibilities of human rights research and analysis, and perhaps most rewarding, to explore together how scientists might help human rights practitioners break new ground in the best pursuit of often difficult to bring into focus human rights problems such as ESC (economic, social and cultural) rights. We need to learn from human rights people, as colleagues, about their perceptions of "science," about what is not getting done, and about what sorts of constructive engagement from the scientific community would be most welcome.

As we move forward with our effort to define the agenda and purpose of the Coalition, we need to ask ourselves: What are we doing? What kinds of rights, outcomes, or form of effectiveness are we striving for? What, in short, is our end game? To this end, we began to outline a tentative agenda, which included the following: 1. Inventorying what diverse scientists in fact do on behalf of human rights, 2. Considering how scientists can evaluate the effectiveness of methods of data collection, research, and presentation of evidence by human rights practitioners, 3. and hearing from human rights groups about their priorities and challenges. This, we all agreed, is no small task. Some first steps include such agenda items for our next meeting as: conducting an exploratory survey, obtaining buy-in from our respective associations, carrying out more outreach with key constituencies, as well as opening up channels of dialogue with human rights organizations. I look forward to our next discussion!