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# 11<sup>th</sup> Global Summit

of National Ethics / Bioethics Committees

Deutscher Ethikrat



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### Global Health – Global Ethics – Global Justice

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#### Introduction

Thank you very much, Mr. President, for your profound speech. We deeply value your appreciation of the Global Summit and your support for our joint effort to foster health, ethics, and justice on a world-wide scale.

This brings me to this year's Leitmotiv: "Global Health, Global Ethics, Global Justice". This title unfortunately does not describe the present shape of our world. But it expresses a powerful aspiration. This aspiration has moved all of us to be here and to engage in international exchange. Hopefully, our debates will form the basis for future action which makes this world a better place. But how can the work of National Ethics and Bioethics Bodies in the fields of health and life sciences make the best possible contribution to such progress? In the few minutes I have, let me stress two features that I believe to be crucial.

- First: National Ethics Committees provide a space for independent moral deliberation, for a debate guided by moral values and the strength of moral arguments and not by the advocacy for partisan interests and by power politics.
- Second: National Ethics Committees allow for moral pluralism under the umbrella of universal ethical claims.

As to the first one, value orientation:

Scientific and technological progress in medicine and life sciences like genome editing in human embryos and digitalization of all our data as well as challenges to health care like Ebola and Zika outbreaks confront us with new challenges. We must fully understand them and we must carefully assess their impact from all relevant perspectives. When the picture is clarified

that far, the relevant moral values and ethical principles must be identified, considered and balanced. On that basis, we are finally in a position to give reasonable guidance on future action.

Here are a few of those challenges and all of them will form the subject of our debate in the days to come: How can we guarantee a proper access to decent health care for all people? Is it ethically justified to change the genome of a human embryo, thus also changing the genetic makeup of future generations? What is necessary to protect the privacy of individuals in times of digitalized health research and health care? Who is responsible in terms of political or legal action and which procedures are just and equitable? How to find and implement effective measures and mechanisms to strengthen the commitment of such an important document like the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights from 2005?

Well, it is easily said that “ethical principles” should be guiding us on all those difficult questions. In fact, the reality looks quite different. Still too often, the striving for a person’s scientific career, for the financial profit of a commercial enterprise or just for power thrust ethical considerations and even human rights aside.

I assume and I trust that all of us being here and attending the Global Summit of National Ethics/Bioethics Committees agree on the priority of value-oriented reasoning and acting - while at the same time also taking into account justified individual, economical and political interests and demands. The debates in our Committees should provide provide examples for how value-oriented debate can take place with regard to other societal challenges as well. Think of all the crises, which are currently setting our world on fire: war, terrorism, waves of refugees, hatred of foreigners, humiliation of women, financial crises and intolerable global inequalities concerning the access to fundamental goods. Ethics in contrast to violence, hatred, subjugation and egoism acknowledges one fact: The fact that deliberating with other human beings is the morally only and best way we have in order to find good solutions to the challenges for our societies and our global community. In doing so, National Ethics/Bioethics Committees also become places where we can show what positive energy humans can develop if they work together. “Fraternité is not only the goal but also the means” – as my colleague Hans van Delden, President of the International Bioethics Commission at UNESCO, phrased it.

Let me now turn to the second feature, moral pluralism and universal ethical claims:

I am convinced that National Ethics and Bioethics Committees regardless of their different scopes and constitutions are – or at least can be - the paradigmatic places in society to highlight the paramount importance not only of ethical guidance as such, but also of the need for and the limits of moral pluralism under the umbrella of universal ethical claims.

To accept the primacy of ethical categories and the universality of ethical claims does not mean of course that all of us will find the same answers to a specific question and the same solutions of a specific problem. Universality does not mean uniformity. Though: together with a lot of philosophers I am convinced that there is a kind of common morality as expressed in some fundamental moral rules and ethical principles like “do not kill”, “do not deprive from freedom”, or “respect dignity and autonomy”. These rules and principles underly the Human Rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, as proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris almost 70 years ago.

But - what these rights exactly mean and how moral rules and ethical principles are to be applied in specific fields of research and health care is a matter of controversy. There are a lot of differences in beliefs, preferences, images of the human nature, perceptions of benefits and harms, the balancing of conflicting values, and so on. Often different religious or cultural backgrounds result in quite diverse, sometimes even opposite ethical premises and convictions. To accept this diversity is not tantamount to a relativistic approach to ethics. On the contrary, it is perfectly compatible with its universal claim. Some controversy is thus not only justified, but even desirable and enriching. Yet, as well there are also limits of a reasonably defensible moral pluralism as well as limits of permissible ways to deal with moral disagreement. There is for example no ethically defensible reason to exploit vulnerable people in clinical research for the sake of financial gain. There is no ethically valid reason to deny education to women. And it is not an ethically justifiable way to use violence in order to suppress those who have unwanted moral beliefs.

National Ethics / Bioethics Committees can and should help to delineate the area of necessary consensus and the area of justified moral disagreement by elucidating the exact understanding of a given problem, by weighing possible benefits and harms in a transparent way, by revealing the respective premises and by arguing for one or if appropriate for more than one solution in a culture-sensitive way. Fostering and integrating societal debate is of major importance throughout this effort.

On the global plane, moral pluralism is even more inescapable in light of the various ways of living, the different cultures, religious beliefs, societal structures and political systems. That does not mean however, that a reference to a cultural background or to religious beliefs is an ethical argument in its own right. Rather disagreements with regard to the interpretation and application of universal human rights rather have to be justified by thorough analysis and deliberation.

Let me come to a last point of my introduction – a brief reflection, or rather a personal and emotional concern regarding the word “global”. Global sounds very big. Global means that

there is a huge world with issues touching all of the countries – either because every country has to deal with a specific issue locally, or because a challenge is a cross-border-issue from the beginning like an epidemic outbreak or the Big-Data-technology, which can only be effectively regulated internationally or at least regionally.

Perhaps I may tell you a private experience. Last Friday I was invited to a literature festival in Cologne, my home city. We listened to the readings of extracts from novels and poems about all sorts of crises – marital, financial, maturation, and so on. At one point when listening to all the personal feelings and thoughts about the private past and future I caught myself thinking: “Wow, these protagonists are all just moving within their narrow individual horizons. What a small world they are living in.” As you will understand my last weeks were dominated by the preparation for this Global Summit and obviously I thought that I was dealing with the ‘big world’, much bigger than my own small life. But then I suddenly became aware of something that is actually self-evident, but all too quickly forgotten: The global scale of health, ethics and justice must not conceal, that in the end it is always the individual human being in his or her social environment who is affected in his or her possibility to live a life in freedom and dignity according to his or her own assumptions about what is a good and meaningful life. What happens in the ‘big world’ and seemingly far away is eventually affecting billions of ‘small individual worlds’. And in the end it is these billions of individual human beings who constitute our common ‘big world’ by living their lives, building societal institutions, developing technologies and shaping our future.

That being said, it is obvious for me, that National Ethics / Bioethics Committees can usefully transcend the great many individual horizons in order to work together for the sake of global health, global ethics and global justice, which, in the end, are relevant for every area of society. This precious possibility entails a responsibility and together we should try to live up to it.

After these preliminary thoughts I’m coming to the end – an end full of gratitude and appreciation. First of all I want to thank the two secretariates: the permanent secretariat of WHO with Abha Saxena, Reva Gutnick, Andreas Reis and Patrick Hummel - and the secretariat of the German Ethics Council especially with Joachim Vetter, Christian Hinke, and Christian Jolibois. All of them prepared this Global Summit with huge dedication, patience, and prudence. UNESCO supported this work constantly and very constructively – thank you very much, Dafna Feinholz.

Another thanks goes to the steering committee. From our first telco on April 13 of last year we have been working together intensively in drawing up this program, finding the right issues together with the National Ethics/Bioethics Committees of the six WHO-regions etc. etc. We learnt that global communication is basically possible by webex, even though for some there are still major technical problems. My deep appreciation goes to Mohamed Ben Ammar from

Tunesia, who also had been President of the 9th Global Summit 2012 in Tunesia, to John Ayotunde Bewaji from Jamaica, to Anoja Fernando from Sri Lanka, to Khem Karki from Nepal, to Simon Langat from Kenya, to Bagher Larijani from Iran, to Laura Palazzani from Italy, to Sangeun Park from South-Corea, to Manuel Ruiz de Chávez from Mexico, who had presided over the 10th Global Summit in 2014 in Mexico, to Aissatou Touré from Senegal, and to Nikolajs Zeps from Australia. I also want to give thanks to Hugh Whitall from the UK and Aamir Jafarey from Pakistan, who served on the Steering Committee as advisors. We gratefully experienced that it was a very good idea to have you with us!

Furthermore I want to express my deep gratitude to all the experts, who developed the thought-provoking and comprehensive background papers for our sessions, and to those who constructively commented on the papers. I am impressed with the results. They will be a very fruitful starting point for our discussions.

Thanks as well to the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities for this splendid location and infrastructure to host this Global Summit.

Last but not least I want to thank the German Ministry of Education and Research. With its financial support it was possible to prepare and to host this Global Summit and additionally to give travel grants to 19 representatives of low and middle income countries.

So, thank you all so much – you made it possible that this Global Summit might become a great success. It's up to all of us now, that it can hopefully contribute to making this world a better place – for the sake of fostering global health, promoting global ethics, and implementing global justice – eventually for allowing all individual human beings to live a meaningful and happy life. Let's make it happen – together.

Now it is my pleasure and my honour to officially declare the 11th Global Summit of National Ethics- and Bioethics-Committees open.

Maintenant j'ai l'honneur d'accueillir la sous-directrice générale Marie-Paule Kieny. Dr. Kieny – la parole est à vous.