

Training of the National Bioethics Committee Members by UNESCO: Experience from Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Although Nigeria became a signatory to the 2005 UNESCO Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights in 2005, it did not have a National Bioethics Committee until 2023. The Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights advocates for the establishment of an independent, multidisciplinary and pluralist ethics committees. The Committee is to advise the government, policy makers and relevant stakeholders on ethical issues facing the member state, as well as reinforce the role of UNESCO as an international clearing house for ethical issues and to act as an intermediary body for the implementation of the normative instruments adopted by members states. With the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee and the inauguration of members on the 18th of April 2023, there was a need to train the committee members given that they had different backgrounds that were not related to bioethics. The training was aimed at enhancing the understanding of the Committee members and the Secretariat staff on bioethical principles, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue, and establish foundational frameworks for engaging bioethical issues. More importantly, the training sought to equip the Committee members with bioethical skills to help them establish and strengthen infrastructure in Bioethics and Ethics of Science and Technology to deliver sound informed, more acceptable and well-adapted public policies that are citizen oriented, reflecting the needs and concerns of the Nigerian Society. Once the National Bioethics Committee was established, and members inaugurated, the next line of action was the training of the Committee members.

Keywords: Bioethics, Members, National Bioethics Committee, Training, UNESCO

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Introduction

After a protracted effort to establish the National Bioethics Committee that span from 2009 to 2023, the Federal Government of Nigeria invited UNESCO to train the Nigerian National Bioethics Committee Members. The training sought to equip the Committee members with skills to help them establish and strengthen infrastructure in Bioethics and Ethics of Science and Technology to deliver sound informed, more acceptable and well-adapted public policies, reflecting the needs and concerns of the Nigerian Society. More importantly, the training not only aimed at improving and enhancing the knowledge of the committee members and staff of the Secretariat, but it also educated them on Bioethical principles, fostered interdisciplinary dialogue, and established fundamental frameworks for ethical governance.

The inaugural training of the National Bioethics Committee members was held in Abuja, Nigeria 9th to 13th December 2024 at the United Nations Building. The Federal Government of Nigeria in collaboration with UNESCO organized this training. The UNESCO Assisting Bioethics Committee Programme sponsored it. The training was a groundbreaking event that brought together 20 Committee members with diverse educational backgrounds, five secretariat staff, five staff of UNESCO attached to the Social and Human Sector Office of UNESCO, and five staff of the National Biotechnology Research and Development Agency which is the National Secretariat of the National Bioethics Committee as support staff for the training. It was a five-day training course that was rich with 27 training topics and several case studies that made the training very interactive, practical and interesting. The training generally underscored the importance of having a National Bioethics Committee and Bioethics as an important tool in resolving bioethical challenges the country might face.

A wide range of critical topics was explored during the training. These included a brief on the Assisting Bioethics Committee (ABC) Program of UNESCO, Differences between Ethics and Bioethics, the Belmont principles, the Universal Declaration on Bioethics & Human Rights, Ethics of AI, neurotechnology, Climate Change, Roles of the Committee Chair, the membership and the functions of the Secretariat. Issues of gender and many case studies that made the training very practical were also explored.

The training underscored the pressing need for an effective and vibrant National Bioethics Committee to help the government with bioethical challenges the country might face. This paper elaborates key insights, discussions, practical's, and recommendations from the training. It also proposes actionable strategies for the effective functioning of the Committee to address ethical challenges in the country.

Establishment of a National Bioethics Committee that is independent, multidisciplinary, pluralistic and hinged on the Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights (DBHR) is a requirement for Member States of UNESCO. The purpose of the National Bioethics Committee is to provide advice on ethical challenges relating to research development and application of scientific knowledge, formulate recommendations concerning guidelines and legislation, develop tools for standard setting, strengthen, coordination and contacts among experts and institutions (e.g., through databases and networking) and foster debate, education and public awareness and engagement in Bioethics (ABC of UNESCO, 2008). The National Bioethics Committee of Member States are to reinforce the role of UNESCO as an International Clearing House for ethical issues, as well as act as an intermediary body for the implementation of the formative instruments adopted by the Member States of UNESCO (ABC of UNESCO, 2008). This is so because, once a National Bioethics Committee is established, it becomes an essential component of UNESCO's capacity building effort in Ethics of Science and Technology (ABC of UNESCO, 2008). Prior to the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee by any Member State, UNESCO, through its Assisting Bioethics Committee (ABC) Program, initiates the training process for the Member State to guide them adequately for the purpose of establishing a National Bioethics Committee.

Assisting Bioethics Committee (ABC) Program of UNESCO

The Assisting Bioethics Committee Program of UNESCO is a program designed by UNESCO to assist Member States in different phases of the establishment of a National Bioethics Committee. It is a key element of UNESCO's capacity building efforts in Bioethics and Ethics of Science and Technology.

The first phase is the preparatory stage to drive the process of establishing the National Bioethics Committee. During this stage, UNESCO explains to the Member State how to begin the process of establishing the Committee. This is done first by understanding the needs of the Member State so as to draw up a plan of action that would take into consideration the ethical challenges that the country may encounter. When the plan to establish the Committee has been put in place, the second phase would be the establishment of the Committee and the inauguration of the Committee Members with a signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Member State and

UNESCO. This will mark the beginning of the third stage, which is the three-year period of Technical Support by UNESCO.

After the Committee has been established, and members inaugurated, the third phase, which is the implementation of the three-year Technical Support from UNESCO, begins with training of the Committee members. So, the three phases are: Drive the process of establishing the National Bioethics Committee, establish the National Bioethics Committee, and training of the Committee members.

UNESCO and the Nigerian National Bioethics Committee

The drive to establish a National Bioethics Committee in Nigeria began in 2009 by UNESCO at the invitation of the Federal Government of Nigeria. UNESCO, through its Assisting Bioethics Committee (ABC) Program, sponsored and organized the first National Bioethics Stakeholders meeting in Abuja, Nigeria. The objective of the meeting was to provide the Nigerian Government with the information required for the establishment of the National Bioethics Committee [1].

In 2017, UNESCO sponsored and organized the second National Bioethics Committee stakeholders meeting at Akwanga, Nassarawa State, Nigeria. The objective of this meeting was to prepare and review drafts of the proposed National Bioethics Committee. This second meeting was a follow up of the 2009 National Bioethics Committee Stakeholders Meeting. At this meeting, a Roadmap was drawn with timelines for the establishment of the Committee with a specific mandate for the Committee and MDAs to be invited [1].

Establishment of the Nigerian National Bioethics Committee

In August 2019, the third National Bioethics Committee Stakeholders Meeting was organized by the Federal Government of Nigeria following the two National Bioethics Committee Stakeholders meeting by UNESCO in 2009 and 2017 respectively. The main objective of the third meeting was to develop two important documents: the National Bioethics Framework Document and the National Bioethics Policy Document [2]. These two Documents are essential guideline Documents for the establishment of the National Bioethics Committee. The two National Bioethics Documents were ready by December 2019 and sent to the Federal Executive Council for approval. On the 11th of May 2022, the National Bioethics Documents were approved by President Muhammadu Buhari and the Committee was established and members inaugurated 18th April 2023 [1,3].

The training of the National Bioethics Committee was done by UNESCO in Collaboration with the Federal Government of Nigeria from 9th – 13th December, 2024. This marked the beginning of the three-year Technical Support of UNESCO Assisting Bioethics Committee Program to the Nigerian National Bioethics Committee.

Methodology

In 2024 after the inauguration of the Committee Members and the establishment of the Committee by the Federal Government of Nigeria, several meetings on how to organize and progress with the training were held. International experts were invited as Resource Persons. Committee Members were told to send in case studies to be discussed at the training. The Case studies were to reflect the ethical challenges faced by Nigeria. About eight virtual meetings were held by the UNESCO Abuja Office, the National Commission for UNESCO and the Focal Point for Bioethics in Nigeria, geared towards planning the training programme. Three meetings with UNESCO Headquarters, the UNESCO Abuja Office, the National Commission for UNESCO and the Focal Point for Bioethics in Nigeria were held before the training. Every meeting was followed up with an exchange of emails, WhatsApp messages, text messages, and phone calls all geared towards planning a successful training programme.

The training began with introductory lectures on the, basics of Bioethics, history of Bioethics, National Bioethics Committees, Belmont Principles, UNESCO Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, and Overview of UNESCO Bioethics. There was in-depth training on the workings and importance of establishing a National Bioethics Committee and the importance of Bioethics to Society. There were 49 participants comprising of 20 Committee members, five secretariat staff,

five UNESCO staff and seven staff of the National Biotechnology Research and Development Agency (NBRDA), which is the National Secretariat of the Committee as well as 12 others comprising of support staff and the resource persons.

The robust topics discussed at the training were: [4-6]

- Introduction to the ABC Project of UNESCO
- What is Ethics and Bioethics?
- The Multi- and Transdisciplinary nature of bioethics
- Deliberations in bioethics: Reasoning and Arguments
- Bioethics at UNESCO: Global Bioethics
- Overview of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights: Principles, Scope and Areas of Concern
- Ethics of converging technologies: AI, Neurotech
- The environment – Sustainable development
- Ethics of climate change: Declaration of ethical principles in relation to Climate Change
- Case Studies in Clinical and Public Health Settings
- Cases from Nigeria and discussions on climate change/agriculture, biodiversity
- Working methods 1: Different types of ethics committees and scope of national bioethics committees
- Review and adoption of the Draft Rules of Procedure
- Continuation of the Review and Adoption of the Draft Rule of Procedure
- Method 2: Effective Membership
- Education and training for members
- Dignity and human rights
- Benefit and Harm
- Resources, training of UNESCO, Ethics Teaching Trainers Curriculum (ETTC), training of Committee members, Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM)
- Respect for Human Vulnerability and Personal integrity
- Autonomy and Individual Responsibility
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- Equality, Justice and
- Gender and Bioethics

The topics and case studies were tailored towards interpreting Bioethical norms and principles based on the morally significant diversity of human experience and the fundamental morals and values of their diverse cultures. Some of the case studies discussed and suggested by Committee members included: [4-6]

- Illegal harvest of kidneys
- Oil spillage by multinationals and the effect on citizens.
- Legislative imposition of harmful laws to public health
- Approval of GMOs with due Consultation.
- Health Services, deaths and dying: Health professionals vs citizen responsibilities and relations.

Key Highlights Areas of the Training

The five-day training explored a wide range of critical titles, each emphasising the complex, evolving and important nature of Bioethics and the NABEC. Prior to the training was an opening ceremony which featured presentations from the UNESCO Representative to Nigeria, the Director General/CEO of the NBRDA who also doubles as the Chair of the National Bioethics Committee, the Chief of Bioethics and Ethics of Science and Technology, and a keynote address by the Honourable Minister of the Federal Ministry of Innovation, Science and Technology, and finally a vote of thanks by the Secretary General of the National Commission for UNESCO.

The purpose of the training was:

- To enhance the understanding of the Committee members and the Secretariat staff on Bioethical Principles, foster interdisciplinary dialogue and establish foundational frameworks for ethical governance.
- To equip the Committee members with skills to enable them to establish and strengthen infrastructure in Bioethics and Ethics of Science and Technology so as to deliver sound informed, more acceptable and well adapted public policies, reflecting the needs and concerns of the Nigerian Citizens.
- To review and adopt the Draft Rules of Procedures for the Committee.
- To have the first sitting of the Committee.

Training Outcome

The training was an eventful experience. It availed the Committee of the following:

- Committee members and Secretariat staff broadened their knowledge of Bioethics and the importance of having a National Bioethics Committee in the country.
- The Draft Rules of Procedure for the National Bioethics Committee were reviewed and adopted.
- The National Bioethics Committee had its first official sitting during the time of the training.
- The National Bioethics Committee had its first task of documenting the nature, state and dynamics of renal diseases in Nigeria. A five-man Sub-Committee drawn from the Committee was set up to carry out this assignment.
- A Sub-Committee was also set up to proffer solutions on how best to fund the National Bioethics Committee
- There would have been the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) by the Federal Government of Nigeria and UNESCO, but this was not achieved due to a misunderstanding of some legal terms.
- Members of the Committee, the resource persons, Secretariat staff, and all other supporting staff had the opportunity to pay a courtesy call to the Minister of the Federal Ministry of Innovation, Science and Technology, which is the Host Ministry for the National Bioethics Committee
- The roundup session involved reviews through discussions and addressing practical examples and issues, ending with a major project being selected by the house to be pursued. The enthusiasm and rigor of this session, in addition to the sense of a peak congeniality among members and a sense of fulfilment by all concerned, underscores the success of the entire training.

Conclusion

The first training of the Nigeria National Bioethics Committee members provided a unique forum for Committee members and the Secretariat staff to learn, broaden their horizon on Bioethics and to discuss in depth the importance of having a National Bioethics Committee, the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights. It also helped to advance a national agenda for the Committee.

The goals for the training were to educate the committee members and the secretariat staff, adopt the Rules of Procedure for the Committee, and have the Committee's first official sitting were accomplished, and members were very satisfied with the five-day training programme. Committee members understood that Bioethics was a unique field that cuts across every sector and discipline. It was clear to participants as they engaged in debates and discussions on various topics that not everything that is legal is ethical and vice versa. They learnt how to view things ethically. They understood that in Bioethics, there is no wrong or right answer, but every answer must be justified. Committee members also learnt clearly how to accept and reject issues brought up before the Committee. For example, a case of illegal harvest of human organs is clearly not a case for the Committee, but for the Security Agency, the Nigerian Medical and Dental Council and the Court.

So, if such a case is brought to the Committee, the Committee would refer it to the appropriate authorities for the necessary action.

It was concluded that adequate funding of the Committee would come from the government by giving the running of the Committee a budget line. This will help sustain the Committee function effectively and efficiently. Committee members recognized that the current mode of funding the Committee was not adequate and would limit the work of the Committee.

Establishing Bioethics Committees at the institutional and local levels will help reduce the workload of the National Committee. The issue of getting legislative approval for an Act for the Committee arose repeatedly. Committee members believed that an Act by the National Assembly would give the Committee the stability and legitimacy to carry out its ethical duties effectively. At the same time members feared this may cause the Committee to be politicized.

To ensure that the momentum and enthusiasm generated during the training continues, subcommittees made up of members were formed to carry out certain important tasks from discussions, such as research priority and funding. The research subcommittees were to co-opt external experts to join statutory members.

The Committee's Draft Rules of Procedures was thoroughly reviewed and adopted. Some terminologies were rephrased. The issue of the Committee taking up research proposal review was expunged, and the Committee was advised to maintain its mandate as an advisory body to government, policy makers and relevant stakeholders.

The Committee had the opportunity to have its first meeting to deliberate how best to progress, who should send issues to the Committee and what type of issues the Committee should accept. The Committee chose its first task through voting amongst suggested topics raised by committee members.

Recommendations

There is a need for the Committee members to engage in regular self-training as well as attend online bioethics courses to enable them to understand their roles as National Bioethics Committee members. Capacity building should not be a one-off thing. It should be a continuous education, so that the National Bioethics Committee members can stay updated, enhance their expertise, and effectively address the complex bioethical challenges arising in the country.

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