The Significance of the Work of COMEST
for the International Community

Welcome Address to the Extraordinary Session of the
World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology,
12-13 November 2008

Pierre Sané
UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences
Members of COMEST, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Director-General, to this Extraordinary Session of COMEST. I wish to extend a particular welcome to the members of COMEST appointed or reappointed in 2008. By accepting the Director-General's invitation to serve on COMEST, you are joining a process that I expect – and wish – to take on growing importance in UNESCO’s programmes in the ethics of science and technology.

In recent years, the work of COMEST has been less visible than the work of the International Bioethics Committee – to the point that stakeholders are not always clear why there are two bodies and how they are distinguished. The difference in visibility is understandable, in so far as bioethics has a very strong, coherent and recently adopted normative framework, which other areas of the ethics of science and technology lack. That does not mean, however, that we should be satisfied with lower visibility and awareness among key stakeholders.

On the contrary, the mandate of COMEST is of crucial importance to some of the central concerns of the international community. Furthermore, the thematic priorities chosen for COMEST’s work in 2008-09 are of profound significance, not just ethically but also politically. As you know, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has chosen to define his high-level personal initiatives in terms of “global goods” to be protected, secured and developed.

Science and technology are, precisely, among such global goods. Their status follows unambiguously from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 27(1) of which enshrines the human right “to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”. The correlative principle that science and technology should be organized and conducted for the benefit of humankind as a whole is clearly asserted in both the 1974 Recommendation on the Status of Scientific Researchers and the 1999 Declaration on Science and the Uses of Scientific Knowledge.

Yet the least one can say is that the institutional mechanisms to ensure that science and technology serve the needs of humankind are inadequate. Research and development are often driven far more by commercial and security considerations than by human rights or human needs. And even knowledge and technologies that would be relevant may not be available because of restrictions on access or on international scientific cooperation.

Responses to these challenges are, of course, within the scope of science and technology policies. The key point that I wish to underline very strongly is that science and technology
policy issues are inherently ethical, as exemplified by the whole structure of the 1974 Recommendation on the Status of Scientific Researchers. If the ethical responsibilities incumbent on scientists are not embedded in the institutional structures of science and technology systems, they will remain purely rhetorical. In that case, the human right “to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” will not be honoured and urgent human needs will not be met.

In other words, it is precisely because COMEST’s normative framework is less developed, less coherent, and less up to date, that its ethical work is so important.

With this general context in mind, I should like to focus my remarks on three areas in which the work of COMEST intersects with key international concerns. These conveniently correspond to the three components of UNESCO’s programme in the ethics of science and technology: science ethics, environmental ethics, and emerging ethical challenges.

1. **Science ethics**

If we bring together the human rights framework for scientific progress, the ethical thrust of the 1974 Recommendation and the 1999 Declaration, and the high-level agenda adopted by the international community in 2000 in the form of the Millennium Development Goals, an immediate conclusion follows. It is a practical and ethical imperative to mobilize science and technology for peace and development.

One of your tasks will be to consider these matters and to report on them in 2009. You may wish to formulate recommendations to the Director-General in such diverse areas as monitoring implementation of the 1974 Recommendation, developing “a general ethical framework to guide scientific activity”, or working with relevant stakeholders to develop codes of conduct for specific areas of scientific activity.

With your deliberations in mind, I should like to emphasize three topics that I consider to have great relevance in this regard.

- Science and technology can play the role the international community has conferred on them only if the integrity of science is protected and enhanced. Scientific misconduct and questionable research practices are not new. Neither are they necessarily more prevalent than before. However, incidents of falsification or fabrication of data – to mention just one
category – seem now both more visible and less acceptable. Without public trust, science is hampered in both its pursuit of knowledge and its response to human and social needs.

- International scientific cooperation is central to UNESCO’s constitutional mandate. In many ways, it has never been more dynamic, or indeed less dependent on UNESCO’s own programmes. Equally, however, international scientific cooperation is polarized and distorted in ways that limit its capacity to support development. In the absence of a truly global dynamic, science and technology cannot be expected to respond effectively to the needs of humankind as a whole.

- Weak research systems – assessed by their policies, resources and performance – are unlikely to be ethically strong. Consistently with the connection between ethics and institutionalization made by the 1974 Recommendation, science ethics both depends on and contributes to the strengthening of national research systems, which is a major intersectoral priority for UNESCO.

2. Environmental ethics

I doubt that I need to spend much time here explaining why environmental ethics is currently of major significance for the international community. Suffice it to say that UNESCO Member States have recently been expressing in strong terms their belief that global climate change is a key priority to which they expect UNESCO to make a major contribution, particularly with respect to its social and human dimensions.

Again, it is proposed that you report on this subject in 2009. Without prejudice to the discussion that will start this afternoon, on the basis of the activities of the COMEST working group on environmental ethics, I should like to emphasize three areas where I look forward to your conclusions with particular interest.

- UNESCO’s strategy to address the challenge of global climate change, as endorsed by the Executive Board in its most recent session, comprises two main pillars: reinforcement of the scientific knowledge base and policy support for adaptation strategies. There are many issues raised by adaptation, but the one with perhaps the greatest ethical significance is the risk that, by default, the heaviest burden should fall on the most vulnerable. Knowledge of vulnerability is imperfect, particularly at regional level;
adaptation strategies in many developing countries are still poorly specified. It is of great importance, therefore, that the gradual enhancement of the knowledge base and of policy capacities should proceed with due regard for an operational ethical framework for policy assessment.

- It is a key ethical issue to develop criteria to assign responsibilities and to allocate burdens consistently with such assignment. You know, I am sure, how politically sensitive is the balance between the “common” and “differentiated” responsibilities established by the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Clarification of its ethical status will not displace the political bargaining process, but it will make it more transparent to the underlying human needs and vulnerabilities.

- Awareness of the implications of global climate change has significantly increased in recent years, thanks notably to the ever stronger scientific consensus produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. However, as noted, awareness tends to remain at a very generic level, partly because of gaps in the scientific knowledge base – including social science knowledge about social and human impacts –, partly because awareness-raising efforts have not necessarily focused on policy communities and other key stakeholders in the adaptation process. The ethical dimension of discussion about appropriate awareness-raising strategies follows directly from the human right “to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”.

3. Emerging ethical challenges

It is a key UNESCO mission to alert Member States to ethical issues that might arise and to consider proactive options to address them. The scientific and technological developments that fall under the remit of COMEST are not the only sources of emerging ethical challenges, but they are among the most important. You are not called upon to report specifically in this area in 2009, but your deliberations may nonetheless be of great importance in alerting UNESCO to concerns not currently addressed in its programmes. In the course of the Extraordinary Session, you will be discussing follow-up of COMEST’s policy recommendations on nanotechnology ethics as well as ethical issues relating to the information society. Please feel free, in addition, to point to ethical challenges in other areas. In doing so, there are, I think, three dimensions to be kept in mind.
- Identification of issues needs to build on science and technology foresight, but must also be solidly rooted in ethics. Some emerging challenges, especially but not uniquely in the area of bioethics, are matters of great public concern and relate directly to cutting-edge research, yet are covered in entirely adequate fashion by existing ethical principles and mechanisms. Conversely, certain ethical challenges may have little to with new technologies but derive rather from changes in the social structures and processes of scientific activity. Intellectual property issues are, perhaps, a case in point. What the international community needs to be alerted to, and if appropriate to respond to, are trends of all kinds that circumvent, undermine or exceed the ethical principles and mechanisms currently available to deal with them.

- It follows from this that ethical challenges need to be addressed by development of appropriate principles and mechanisms. What requires detailed discussion in any particular case is whether existing principles – for example the very general ones enshrined in the 1974 Recommendation – can be applied directly, or adapted without undue strain, to new issues, or whether new normative developments are required. In the latter case, it is also important to clarify at what level such development might be pursued. As noted by COMEST in its Extraordinary Session in 2006, some ethical objectives are better addressed in a pluralistic manner by scientific unions and other professional bodies than through a uniform intergovernmental process. Similarly, it is a matter for analysis whether unchanged principles require new implementation mechanisms, and if so at what level, in order to address unanticipated challenges.

- Even when existing ethical principles and mechanisms are adequate, they can serve to address emerging challenges only if the relevant stakeholders are aware of the full range of scientific, technological and ethical issues. In its earlier work on nanotechnology ethics, COMEST drew attention to the risk of a “nano-divide” detrimental to developing countries. Similarly, concern is often expressed that legitimate preoccupation with biosecurity might have the effect of limiting developing country access to cutting-edge knowledge and materials from the life sciences that may be of great significance for their national development objectives. As I stressed in my earlier comments about environmental ethics, these problems of access to science and technology deserve to be regarded as, inter alia, ethical in nature. It follows that awareness raising with respect to emerging ethical challenges should have its place in your discussions.
People sceptical about the relevance of ethics to key contemporary challenges often dismiss it as mere “preaching”. The criticism is not always unjustified. It will be clear from my remarks, however, that the conception of ethics that underpins UNESCO’s current Medium-Term Strategy is broader, more ambitious and more practical. Ethical objectives can be attained only if ethics is embedded both in strong institutions and in public consciousness.

Your challenge, therefore, in this Extraordinary Session, in next year’s Ordinary Session, and beyond, is to articulate analysis of challenges, elaboration of principles, development of mechanisms, and awareness-raising, education and training.

I make no apology for the scale of the task that faces you. It simply reflects the importance and urgency of the ethical issues with which you are called upon to deal.

Thank you, and please accept my best wishes for a very successful Session.