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Scientists and Human Rights

ON 10 DECEMBER 1948, THE WORLD'S GOVERNMENTS MADE HISTORY WHEN THEY ADOPTED the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and agreed to ensure its "universal and effective recognition and observance." Over the course of six decades, this declaration has generated both tremendous hope and a substantial body of law obliging governments to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights inherent to all human beings. Though reaffirmed at every turn, one lesson of the past 60 years is that governments' commitment to human rights is only as strong as the demands of their citizens. As respected members of society, scientists are vital to securing governments' adherence to human rights.

Scientists have contributed valuably in making human rights a reality for all. They have defended the freedom to engage in scientific inquiry and to report their findings without interference. They have applied their knowledge and skills to reveal truths about human rights violations and have come to the aid of colleagues under attack. Notable scientific contributions to human rights include the forensic exhumation of mass graves in Argentina, the Balkans, and Rwanda that revealed evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity; the use of DNA evidence to identify victims of mass killings in Bosnia and free wrongfully convicted prisoners in the United States; the introduction of information management techniques to illuminate large-scale human rights violations, from attacks on civilians in Kosovo to neglect of HIV/AIDS in South Africa; and, more recently, the use of satellite imagery to document the destruction of communities in remote locations around the world. Each of these cases reveals what is possible when scientists treat human rights as an area suitable for and deserving of robust scientific inquiry.

Much more could be done. In 2000, addressing the International Association for Official Statistics, Mary Robinson, then United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, urged that to end human suffering and achieve human rights, "What are needed are solid methodologies, careful techniques, and effective mechanisms to get the job done." Getting the job done requires engagement from science and scientists.

A good starting point is for scientists to better understand human rights, not as some vague set of aspirations, but as specific obligations of government. These obligations include the social and economic rights essential to human well-being, such as the rights to health, food, a clean environment, and as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "share in scientific advancement and its benefits." Indeed, just as governments are required to respect the rights to freedom of expression and a fair trial, so too are they obligated to uphold the right to the benefits of scientific progress. Scientists have a unique and vital role in giving visibility to this neglected right, which elevates fundamental scientific values, such as equitable access to scientific knowledge, scientific freedom, and international cooperation, to universal government obligations.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is for the scientific community to become a constituency for human rights. Many scientists eschew such involvement as too "political," and thus in conflict with scientific traditions of impartiality and independent inquiry. But these and other traditions, such as rigorous analysis and peer review, are both compatible with and essential to the realization of human rights. Indeed, their contributions to human rights are limitless so long as they are applied with scientific integrity and an awareness of the boundaries of science and policy.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is therefore fitting for scientists to commit to joining the global effort to realize human rights, both at home and abroad. As history and recent events have shown, we cannot take human rights for granted—to do so invites transgressions. We urge the scientific community to add its expertise and voice to global efforts to ensure that all governments respect, protect, and fulfill that which is fundamental to human life—human rights.

— Leonard Rubenstein and Mona Younis

