

SPEECH BY
Y.B. DATUK DR MAXIMUS ONGKILI
MINISTER OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION
AT THE OPENING OF THE 6th ORDINARY SESSION OF THE WORLD
COMMISSION ON THE ETHICS OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND
TECHNOLOGY (COMEST)
16 JUNE 2009

His Excellency Dr. Pierre Sané,

Assistant-Director-General for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO

His Excellency Dr. Alain Pompidou,

Chair, Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology
(COMEST)

Distinguished Experts and Participants

Ladies and Gentlemen;

1. It gives me great pleasure to bid “SELAMAT DATANG” and welcome to our distinguished participants including our guests from abroad who are here for the 6th Ordinary Session of the Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST). I have been informed that there are about 60

international participants from 34 countries from as far as Angola, Iran, Russia and Brazil with us here today. As a co-sponsoring country, Malaysia is honoured to host this important event.

2. It is a pleasure for me to be invited by the Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) to address this scientific gathering of this 6th Ordinary Session of COMEST.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

3. The session will be an excellent opportunity to extend discussions through the UNESCO Asia-Pacific School of Ethics and gather experts from around the globe on the ethical issues concerning science and technology in Asia and the Pacific. It gives us the chance to enlarge the framework of the debate and to reinforce future activities throughout the region and beyond. I understand a Youth Forum on the ethical and social responsibilities of scientists in Asia has also been incorporated into the program, with a view to involve young researchers and representatives of youth organizations in the work of COMEST and UNESCO.

4. COMEST 2009 will be discussing various strategies to instill ethics as a culture for researchers. It is our hope that the deliberations at this meeting will

yield input for the possible formulation of a general code of ethics that can be applicable to Malaysian scientists and technologists as well as those involved in the management of science in our country.

5. It is perhaps now more than ever that all of us need to be aware of the need to balance our developmental needs with ethical issues that impact our society and its environment. We are open and excited by the immense potential new technologies and discoveries such as stem cells, genetic modification technologies, nano technologies and new biofuels can potentially revolutionise the way we are able to treat diseases, grow our food and sustain our environment

6. But we also have to recognize the need to balance their use with ethical considerations that put people and communities first. This is very much in line with Malaysia's new tagline of 1Malaysia, people first.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. Ethical scientific practice includes the need to recognize and address potential risks and develop methods to mitigate them without sacrificing scientific progress or development. The rapid development and deployment of these technologies have also sowed seeds of uncertainties and even suspicion in the eyes of the public.

8. Thus, there may be a need to develop the ethical code to reinforce society's trust in scientists and to invoke the basic values of science and ideals of social responsibility and accountability. I understand COMEST 2009 will also come up with policy options for ethical frameworks for science and technology that may be adopted by countries.

9. COMEST as an advisory body of UNESCO aims to identify needs and priorities as well as oversee the preparations and implementation of activities in the region in regards to ethics of S&T and bioethics. COMEST hopes to promote the role of ethics in the formulation and evaluation of development strategies and programmes, and disseminate information.

Ladies and Gentlemen;

10. In 2000, the Malaysian government had in principle agreed on the importance of ethics education programme as part of the implementation of the UNESCO Declaration. Universities were urged to incorporate the subject *Professional Ethics and Morals* into the science, medicine and engineering undergraduate curricula.

As a natural progression, it is perhaps an opportune time for Malaysia to formalize a central National Ethics Committee to spearhead this and other efforts pertaining to the enculturation of ethics into science and technology practice.

11. We believe that to nurture Malaysian scientists and engineers to be socially responsible, the study of ethics must be an integral part of their education, training and professional practice. Ethics education and training programmes can help inform individual scientists and engineers about their ethical and legal responsibilities when conducting research and engaging in everyday professional practice. This can thus help promote a culture of responsibility and raise awareness among scientists, engineers and students of science and engineering about ethical issues.

12. Universities and National Accreditation Boards can also play an important role in this regard by requiring academic staff and students to learn to adhere to relevant codes in research and by providing mandatory ethics programmes in the curriculum.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. These issues rank high in the concern for any developing country and even more unavoidable as globalization is now a reality, irrespective of world political conditions and economic trends. We must remember however that globalization

in respect to the new technologies is to serve the interest of the country in which the application is carried out while respect for religion, culture, heritage and choices of the people are taken into consideration.

14. Echoing the call by our Prime Minister for the *transformation* of Malaysia utilising S&T based on innovation, ethics for scientists in the country must be integrated fully into the whole value chain of research development and innovation. What we perhaps need urgently is to develop a comprehensive mechanism to define a framework for the formalization of a code of ethics such as through a National Ethics Committee.

15. I believe such an effort has been integrated into this week's programme and MOSTI is happy to be part of this noble effort. Let us remind ourselves however that such an effort should have a facilitative role rather than a restrictive outcome and that the primary goal of the advancement of science and technology for the good of the nation shall always be at the forefront of our deliberations.

16. There are already some codes of ethics, loosely formed, and existing in isolation, in some areas of STI and code of ethics in medicine and engineering practice in Malaysia. In many universities, research proposals, especially those involving human or animal subjects, have to be screened and approved by an ethics committee.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

17. The Malaysian vision for Science and Technology is “To become a nation that is competent, confident and innovative in harnessing, utilizing and advancing Science and Technology towards achieving Vision 2020.” This was inscribed within the Second Malaysian Science and Technology Policy for the 21st Century which was produced together with A National Plan of Action in 2003. Incorporated within the policy is a show of awareness in ethics as given in the phrase “to foster societal values and attitudes that recognize Science and Technology as critical to future prosperity. This is ensure that the utilization of Science and Technology accords emphasis toward approaches that are in conformity with sustainable development goals including alignment with societal norms and ethics.”

18. Similar ethical emphasis have been imbedded in National policies such as the 9th Malaysia Plan which prescribes strategies and plans for forging ahead in all areas identified by harnessing STI to meet global challenges and competition. We must also draw attention to MOSTI’s urgent emphasis that STI is vital to create a knowledge-based economy essential to our achieving *Vision 2020*.

19. The formulation of a national ethics framework is in the spirit of the Federal Constitution, the philosophy and principles of the *Rukun Negara* as well as the aspirations of *Vision 2020* and the National Mission.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. With the spawning of educational and research institutions and the convergence of new and dynamic discoveries in many areas of science, especially in biotechnology, nanotechnology, stem-cell research, photonics and computational science; the inter-play of various disciplines are rapidly flourishing towards practical use for society.

21. The natural incorporation of ethical norms into this multidisciplinary network can only have a positive outcome which will be reflected in how we develop our science policies and prioritize our efforts.

22. Whatever is in existence in the country concerning STI is not only good but consistent with national goals and aspirations. To really transform achievements to greater heights, it will be prudent to have a mechanism to co-ordinate various aspects of science including funding, and these can be incorporated in an STI or Science Act for Malaysia.

23. This idea is not new and members of the scientific profession had mooted it to MOSTI to consider and study. The STI or Science Act for Malaysia will provide the platform and framework for Malaysia to transform the STI development in a more coordinated manner to achieve the vision of the country under the *1Malaysia* concept. MOSTI will study this proposal in depth and take the inputs of the scientific profession, corporate sectors and the general public.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

24. I am confident that this Meeting will provide the opportunity for Delegates to share experiences on best practices, identify opportunities in facing the challenges of globalization, and explore the possibility of stepping up cooperation in the area of ethics. I hope you will succeed in launching specific projects and programmes towards this end.

25. Let me once again wish a warm welcome to all the participants from abroad, and I wish you a pleasant stay here. I hope your discussions will be productive and successful. On that note, it is now my pleasant duty to officially declare open, the 6th Ordinary Session of the Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST).

Thank you.