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Ethics in science and technology: a new culture of public dialogue

Reply to Recommendation[1]: Recommendation 2176 (2020)
Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has carefully examined Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 2176 (2020) on "Ethics in science and technology: a new culture of public dialogue". It has forwarded it to the Committee on Bioethics (DH-BIO) and to the Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice (CDPPE) for information and comments.

2. The Committee fully agrees with the Assembly that democratic governance requires citizen involvement in decisions having a crucial impact on society and individual lives. As set out in the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine (ETS No. 164, Oviedo Convention), fundamental questions raised by developments in biology and medicine, and their possible application, shall be subject to appropriate public discussion and consultation. Despite the potential benefits of emerging and converging technologies, their application inevitably raises human rights challenges which require appropriate consultation and public debate.

3. The Guide to Public Debate on Human Rights and Biomedicine was developed by the Committee on Bioethics (DH-BIO) as a tool to assist member States in involving the public in discussions on biomedical issues and the possible concerns they raise about integrity, dignity, autonomy, privacy, justice, equity and non-discrimination among human beings. The Committee of Ministers agrees that these principles could be extended to encourage ethical consideration of scientific and technological developments more generally. The promotion of the Guide is foreseen under the Strategic Action Plan on Technologies and Human Rights in Biomedicine (2020-2025). The Committee of Ministers points out that work has begun on the translation of the Guide into several languages and its presentation at international events. It further informs the Assembly that the fostering of dialogue to promote democratic governance and transparency is reflected in paragraph 16 of the above-mentioned Strategic Action Plan (Assembly recommendation, paragraph 3.1).

4. The Committee concurs with the Assembly on the importance of strengthening the culture of public dialogue among young people as well as the wider public. It recalls that the fostering of a culture of democracy through quality education as a fundamental and enabling human right lies at the core of the Council of Europe's Education Programme. The Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)10 on developing and promoting digital citizenship education and the related project on Digital Citizenship Education are of particular relevance in this context. The recommendation sets out nine guiding principles which define and shape digital citizenship development initiatives and educate learners to critically use technologies in order to participate actively in democratic processes both in and outside school. Other ongoing educational activities which contribute to the goals of cultivating dialogue and the ability of young people to understand and analyse complex matters include the project "Free to Speak – Safe to Learn Democratic Schools for All" and the Council of Europe Platform on Ethics, Transparency and Integrity in Education (Assembly recommendation, paragraph 3.2).

1. Adopted at the 1401st meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (15 April 2021).

5. In view of the current dependency on digital platforms due to the pandemic, leading to increased adaptation to digital discourse, the Committee notes with interest the Assembly's recommendation that consideration should be given, in co-operation with the European Union, to initiating pilot projects on the use of specialised tools for online public debate to make cross-national and multilingual public debates feasible. It encourages the relevant sectors of the Organisation to take this into account in their work (Assembly recommendation, paragraph 3.3).