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Consortium of Social Science Associations

AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition Reflects on Five Years

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The [Science and Human Rights Coalition](#) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) held its biannual meeting on July 14 and 15. COSSA is a member of the Coalition, which is a “network of scientific and engineering membership organizations that recognize a role for scientists and engineers in human rights.” This year marks the fifth anniversary of the Coalition’s founding, and the meeting provided an opportunity for members to look back on what has been accomplished and consider new directions for the future. An anniversary celebration is planned for October of this year.

Forensics and Internet Freedom: Science and Human Rights at the State Department

The keynote address was delivered by Patricia Davis, Director for Global Programs in the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), who started her career in government as a AAAS Fellow. Davis highlighted two areas supported by DRL at the intersection of science and human rights. First, in the field of forensics, DRL supports programs in countries that have a legacy of human rights abuses, including Bosnia, Iraq, Cambodia, and Chile. These programs serve as a source of accurate, objective information on past atrocities (including the number of missing, the circumstances under which people disappeared, and the locations of mass graves); they support the development of processes for recovering and genetically identifying victims; and the knowledge they generate empowers victims and their families to advocate for justice. DRL also supports programs focused on internet freedom issues. Davis observed that while the spread of internet access around the world has allowed people to enjoy the benefits of science (as enshrined in Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights), the impact of internet access has not been entirely positive. Some governments exploit the technologies of the internet to limit freedoms through surveillance, de-anonymization, and persecution of dissenting voices. DRL’s comprehensive internet freedom portfolio takes a “venture capital” approach by providing seed money for new ideas and supporting scalable existing programs aimed at combating internet censorship.

Innovations in Science and Technology and Human Rights

A series of “lighting presentations” illustrated the breadth of applications for emerging science and technologies to human rights. Jennifer Wagner, AAAS Congressional Fellow and formerly of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Integration of Genetic Healthcare Technologies, talked about potential uses for DNA identification in preventing human trafficking. Genetic identification has applications for use in identifying victims, family reunification, and prevention of illicit adoptions.

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Wagner described a program in Dallas in which sex workers have voluntarily submitted DNA samples to a database that can assist investigators in post-mortem identification.

Eric Ashcroft, AAAS Geospatial Technologies and Human Rights Project, explained how satellite imaging and remote sensing technologies have been used to track land use in Bahrain (which blocks Google Earth). Geospatial technologies are used to track expansion of man-made islands, vegetation loss, and urbanization, giving researchers a better sense of how resources are being used in a nation where reliable information is limited.

Ana Ayala, O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law at Georgetown University, demonstrated the [Global Health and Human Rights Database](#), which uses data mapping to analyze trends in global health. The database brings together legal rulings on human rights and global health, allowing users to sort by region, health topic, and specific human right. Ayala explained that the database is a resource for both researchers and human rights advocates to compare legal analysis and judgments across regions.

Nahal Zamani, Center for Constitutional Rights, discussed an approach to applying social science research to documenting abuses of economic, social, and cultural (ESC) rights. She noted that the emergence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a diagnosis has led to consideration of the lasting traumatic impacts of human rights violations like torture. Zamani posed the question of how to consider analogous lasting impacts for violations of ESC rights. She proposed that the “daily hassles” model, which suggests that the aggregated effects of small, minor complaints can have lasting impacts on well-being, might be of use to those attempting to document the impact of abuses of ESC rights.

Funding for Science, Technology, and Human Rights

Moderator Romesh Silva, Johns Hopkins University, led a discussion about funding both human rights work influenced by science and technology and science with human rights implications. Michael Kleinman, Humanity United; Liz Steininger, Open Technology Fund; Liza Dawson, National Institutes of Health (NIH); and Jeffrey Mantz, National Science Foundation (NSF), provided perspectives from both the private/non-profit and public sectors.

Kleinman explained that Humanity United is a private foundation that makes grants in support of conflict prevention and stopping human trafficking. He emphasized the importance of being able to gather and analyze reliable information in order to determine what is actually happening. Kleinman noted that observers sometimes fall into the trap of thinking of technology as something that will “solve” human rights problems. Kleinman rejected this utopian conceptualization and instead described technology as one way to help organizations on the ground do their work better.

Steininger discussed how the Open Technology Fund supports freedom of expression and internet freedom. She observed that the resources and tools her organization provides can at times be just as important as the funding itself. She also emphasized the importance of encouraging collaboration and openness, building relationships, and flexibility.

Dawson, who works in the Division of AIDS at NIH’s National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, focused her remarks on the relationship between HIV/AIDS research and human rights. She noted the overlap between populations at risk of contracting HIV and those at risk of human rights violations—including migrant workers, sex workers, men who have sex with men, and women who live in cultures in which they lack control over their sex lives. The same groups who are susceptible to HIV infection also



tend to lack access to health care, increasing the chance that they will spread the virus further. HIV/AIDS researchers have responded to these challenges by documenting the epidemic among key population, designing accessibility into interventions, targeting interventions to at-risk populations, and partnering with advocacy organizations to reduce the barriers to treatment and prevention.

Mantz, who directs NSF's Cultural Anthropology program and is the foundation's Human Subjects Research Officer, explained that because NSF is dedicated to funding basic science research, applicants pursuing funding for work that has implications for human rights still need to focus their proposals on the how the research would advance scientific knowledge in their discipline. He also recommended that applicants describe the "broader impacts" of their research in terms of its relevance to the United States.

