

Scientific Associations and Human Rights

Douglas Richardson

Richardson: Thanks so much, Mona. I see so many fellow association members in the audience, and I see so many people who worked very long and very hard to help put this coalition together. So I'm humbled to be able to provide a few ideas of my own and then hope to learn from the rest of you about all of the other reasons why we should be working together in this most important coalition. And I certainly have to thank Mona, who has been absolutely heroic in pulling this together. But there have been a lot of people in this audience who've worked very hard as well, many harder than I have.

I was asked to think about associations and why they might participate in something like the Science and Human Rights Coalition. And I must say, when I first encountered the coalition and the idea about 18 months ago, I was skeptical. I know, as most of you know who are in associations, that associations are highly complex organizations with multiple and often conflicting perspectives, goals, missions, and personalities. Whenever you get a group of associations together, there's always a lot of fun, a lot of interest, and a lot of talking. And it goes on and on and on. And many of us have been in associations. I mean, some of them work great. Howard is here, Howard Silver, from COSSA, which is a highly successful model that we might look at for how we can work together in this coalition. Paula [ph] has got an association that's newer and is growing and moving, coming together. So there are a lot of models out there.

But, again, those of you in associations, especially association leadership, also know that there are really dozens of different associations of associations that we already belong to. Many of them are successful, but many of them simply consume a lot of time. They become bureaucratic. There's a lot of grandstanding, publicity. Sometimes you wonder, with some of these associations, whether any real work is getting done or whether there's just a lot of public relations and posturing going on. This is not that kind of coalition. I've learned, working together with many of the folks here, that I think the power of the human rights issue brings people together and transcends a lot of the sorts of things that can drag down a coalition.

I know that, in most of our lives, certainly, we're all concerned about human rights, and in our personal and professional lives we seek meaningful ways to act on these concerns and values. And I know, in our own association, in geography, this has been a very strong current throughout the entire life of our association, which is over 100 years old. For examples, just briefly, of the sorts of things that we're doing, there is a handout in the back that you can pick up. But just briefly, the kinds of things that happen there, and it's similar in most, is that we have a specialty group that focuses on human rights, ethics, and social justice. We've been engaged with AAAS and with Lars Bromley, who is here in the audience, on some very interesting work on using geospatial technologies to monitor human rights abuses and to document those and, in some cases, to try to prevent them by keeping an eye on, for example, threatened villages in Darfur and

places like that. This is something that Lars has really pioneered, and many of our members are engaged in this process, as are we, as an association.

We're also putting together a clearing house on geography and human rights in which we have all kinds of resources, including a recent program of compiling a very substantial bibliography of research that geographers have done on human rights issues, both in the technologies area but also in ethnographic work, regional field work, et cetera. And this offers a resource that we hope will be useful for tribunals, for example, that are trying human rights abusers and also for intervention in situations on the ground, in short notice, where this kind of research needs to be identified, people engaged need to be mobilized quickly and so forth. So those, together with working on this coalition, are the kinds of things that our association has been doing for a long time.

So, someone asked me the question, "Well, you're doing a lot of this work, why have a coalition?" And I think there are many answers to the questions of why we should come together in a coalition, as associations, and I'll touch on just a few in the few minutes that I have here. I think the most obvious one is that it's an opportunity to collaborate together with one another. Science does not find solutions in a vacuum. It doesn't find solutions within only one discipline. Most large, tricky issues require interdisciplinary approaches. They're so complex that one discipline doesn't have the resources alone to address those. So most scientific research needs to be interdisciplinary to be successful in other arenas, and this offers an opportunity in an actual vehicle to achieve that kind of interdisciplinary approach, both to research and to resolving issues on the ground.

As examples, when we're doing work with remote sensing on various human rights abuses, one also needs on the ground verification of, say, satellite imagery and so forth. That kind of verification often is available through work done by many other associations, as well as through the work of geographers who are doing regional studies around the world. And those many human rights abuses involve massive cases of contamination, pollution, and so forth. We need to work with the American Chemical Association to help integrate, help identify sources of that pollution, for example. These are just obvious examples of where we can benefit by working together to address human rights issues.

Another major advantage is that this allows us an opportunity to collaborate as scientific associations with the human rights community. It's a community which is comprised of some of the most remarkable individuals in the world, and with lots of experience on these issues. And I think that we have a great deal to learn from them, and hopefully we have something to contribute back, which I firmly believe that we do.

Thirdly, almost all associations—certainly ours—has as part of its written and formal mission to bring science to the benefit of society and humankind, to diffuse science. This is a key part of the mission of our associations. And it's also a part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 27. So, I think that internally we have already essentially the mission in place, and often we struggle on how best to implement that. And I think this coalition offers a new and very exciting and productive way to make that happen.

In addition, this coalition allows us to pool our expertise and our scientific resources. Together, each of us has substantial things to offer. I know sociologists certainly do. I know that anthropologists do, that chemists do. And we think that geographers do, among others. We have over 10,000 members practicing science at various levels with universities throughout the world. We pool that together with the membership of all of these other associations. It's a truly impressive set of expertise. And working through the association network, we can access that relatively rapidly, put it together with other associations, and bring expertise to bear on crucial problems of human rights.

Then there are the obvious internal ones. Obviously, we're concerned about the welfare of scientists within our own associations. That's been a long tradition of work. And we've had many instances of intervening on behalf of our members who have been imprisoned or in other ways subject to repression or suppression of science—repression individually or suppression of their scientific work. And so that's an obvious internal kind of thing. I think also we need to protect the freedom to conduct our science, which is a key factor in having science flourish and also in providing its benefits to society.

Finally, I think that learning from one another is a tremendous asset, learning from other associations about human rights, learning from the human rights organizations themselves. This coalition offers a real practical and meaningful way to learn from one another about how best to intervene in human rights kinds of issues. It will help to build a—we talk about space a lot in geography—but to build a discursive space, I think, for science and human rights

to come together and find viable, meaningful solutions to some of these problems. And also, ultimately, through the years, I hope that we'll build a community of practice around these issues that will be valuable as models and as lessons for other associations as we move forward. So these are many reasons.

But I think for me, personally, and for many people, the most important reason is simply the compelling nature of human rights abuses. We're all human beings as well as scientists, and in our work it's important, I think, to most of us that there's some meaningful engagement with improving the world. And certainly, one cannot ignore human rights abuses. They're just too much a part of our collective psyche and consciousness that something must be done.

So, there are many reasons internal to our organization why we should do this, and many reasons for science why we should do this. But there are these overarching reasons why, I think, we should come together and do this. We have a slogan that we've developed at the AAG that I think applies to some of this: "What the world needs now is understanding." What the world needs now is understanding—understanding of the world, which science can help provide, and also understanding in the world, which hopefully efforts such as this can help foster.

So, I urge the associations here to join this coalition. Let's work together. Let's make it work. It's very easy to join. All that's required is for an association president or executive director to send an e-mail or a brief letter to me or to Mona indicating that you'd like to join and give us your contact information. We assume that if that comes from the executive director or the president that the

proper authorizations have been made. So it's very simple to join—three-sentence letter, you're in. No fee. No entrance fee. No dues. This is a really unique association of associations in that regard.

So we welcome your joining as associations. We also welcome unaffiliated scientists to join as individuals, as Mona mentioned. So, with that, I'd like to open it up for some brief discussion. I'm sure many of you have much greater insight into this than I do. But let me just say, in conclusion, that personally I really look forward to working with many of you in the years ahead on these most important issues. Thank you.