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**UNESCO'S PROGRAMME ON THE PROMOTION OF SCIENTIFIC FREEDOM
AND THE SAFETY OF SCIENTISTS AND A RELATED CALL TO ACTION**

SUMMARY

The item has been included in the provisional agenda of the 219th session of the Executive Board at the request of the following Member States: Chile, Denmark, Lithuania, Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Norway, Paraguay, Philippines, and South Africa.

The corresponding explanatory note is included in this document.

Financial implications: none.

Decision required: paragraph 6.



Job: 202400527

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Our world needs science now more than ever. Challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, growing inequalities and shifting demographics require responses based on scientific evidence, tapping into the capacity of science to innovate. Scientific inquiry, however, can only flourish in an open and safe science ecosystem; where, in the spirit of the UNESCO Constitution, ideas flow freely, and scientific research is conducted without undue interference. When scientific researchers enjoy intellectual autonomy and safety, the diffusion of science is facilitated, international scientific cooperation enhanced, and ultimately scientific progress accelerated for the benefit of all humanity. In the current context where trust in science has declined in many places, particularly when linked to policy development, this agenda becomes essential. The freedom and safety of scientific researchers is thus as indispensable for scientific advancement and the prosperity of our societies as media freedoms are for accountable and democratic institutions, and artistic freedom for cultural life. Scientific freedom is not only about the status of scientific researchers but also about the way in which science ecosystems are organized and financed.

2. During the 216th Session of the Executive Board, UNESCO Member States called for a more rigorous implementation of the 2017 Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (hereinafter referred to as the “2017 Recommendation”), with a particular focus on the freedom and safety of scientific researchers ([216 EX/Decision 45](#)). Following this decision, UNESCO and the Kingdom of the Netherlands co-organized an inclusive dialogue process, involving experts and policymakers. A milestone was the online policy dialogue convened on 3 October with 36 Member States participating. These exchanges started an inventory of the safety-related challenges and threats that scientists face and of gaps in policy frameworks and operational responses. A clear takeaway message of this process was the need to act and the agreement that UNESCO is well-placed to drive this agenda forward. These efforts culminated in the decision of Member States at the 42nd session of the General Conference in November 2023 to establish a programme to promote scientific freedom and strengthen the safety of scientists in line with the 2017 Recommendation and in direct connection Output 7.SHS1 of the 42 C/5 Programme and Budget ([42 C/Resolution 26](#)).

II. UNESCO’S PROGRAMME ON THE PROMOTION OF SCIENTIFIC FREEDOM AND THE SAFETY OF SCIENTISTS AND A RELATED CALL TO ACTION

3. The policy dialogue of last October, jointly organized by UNESCO and the Kingdom of the Netherlands, highlighted the need to raise the profile of the agenda of freedom and safety of scientific researchers. While available data point to an increasing pressure on scientific researchers, the issue has not yet received adequate attention. Science policy advisors from 36 Member States (42 C/54, page 2) agreed that a Call to Action on the Freedom and Safety of Scientists would be an appropriate instrument to attract attention to this topic, mobilizing Member States but also all other concerned actors, and discussed the possible contours of a possible Call to Action. A draft Call to Action was developed by the Secretariat drawing on the preliminary findings of a research paper on data, trends and typology of threats to the safety of scientific researchers* presented at the policy dialogue and discussions thereat. It was then shared for consultation with the Member States that participated in the Policy Dialogue as well as with Member States that have expressed interest in this initiative.

4. The Call to Action highlights common priorities and puts forward a set of proposals for advancing the agenda of the freedom and safety of scientific researchers. Among others, the Call to Action calls upon Member States, UNESCO and the wider United Nations system, and other stakeholders to: (1) highlight the importance of promoting the safety of scientific researchers as an integral component particularly of science, technology and innovation (STI) policies, and a particularly important element to foster trust in science; (2) raise the profile of this agenda in national strategies, including through the assessment of the science ecosystem and the allocation of

* The report developed by Professor Dr Janneke Gerards (Utrecht University, Kingdom of the Netherlands) and Niels Schattevoet (UNESCO) brings to the fore insights on the safety of scientific researchers based on existing studies and points to knowledge gaps. It will thus serve as a source for inspiration for the development of the Programme on the promotion of the freedom and safety of scientists.

appropriate resources; (3) build alliances with all concerned constituencies to raise awareness; (4) enhance data collection and analysis of trends, including through the production of a periodic report and/or the establishment of a global observatory; (5) create a space for regular dialogue among science policy advisors to identify States' needs and priorities and optimize the provision of support through the development of appropriate guidelines, policy briefs, good practice compendiums, indicators, and other tools; and (6) develop an action plan to promote this agenda at the international level, including through the United Nations system.

5. The Member States proposing this item express their commitment to this important agenda and call upon their peers to engage with the Secretariat in support of the Programme on the promotion of scientific freedom and the safety of scientists. The active participation of Member States will be critical for the successful deployment of activities within this framework, notably the organization of regular meetings of the Programme, the convening of policy dialogues with science policy advisors, the organization of a ministerial round table, data collection and analysis as well as awareness-raising.

Proposed draft decision

6. In light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling 42 C/Resolution 26, on, inter alia, promoting scientific freedom and strengthening the safety of scientists in line with the Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017),
2. Also recalling [39 C/Resolution 85](#), [41 C/Resolution 71](#) and [216 EX/Decision 45](#),
3. Having examined document 219 EX/30,
4. Welcomes the “Call to Action on the Freedom and Safety of Scientists”, as set out in the Annex to document 219 EX/30, so as to elevate this issue on the national and international agenda, and to guide UNESCO’s programme on the promotion of scientific freedom and the safety of scientists;
5. Calls upon all Member States of UNESCO to support the “Call to Action on the Freedom and Safety of Scientists”;
6. Invites the Director-General to pursue her efforts to develop and upscale the programme on the promotion of scientific freedom and the safety of scientists in line with 42 C/Resolution 26 and the Call to Action on the Freedom and Safety of Scientists, in close cooperation with Member States, inter alia through the development of an action plan, the organization of policy dialogues, enhanced data collection, analysis and the preparation of an annual report on the subject, as well as raising awareness;
7. Requests the Director-General to include information on progress made on the implementation of 42 C/Resolution 26 in her report to it at its 220th session in line with [216 EX/Decision 45](#);
8. Also calls upon all Member States of UNESCO to further support the development of UNESCO’s programme on the promotion of scientific freedom and the safety of scientists as a pillar for the implementation of the Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers (2017), notably through voluntary contributions, in-kind support, including secondment of staff and deployment of Junior Professional Officers and the mobilization of experts, the sharing of data on national policy and practice and the creation of informal support networks.

ANNEX

CALL TO ACTION ON THE FREEDOM AND SAFETY OF SCIENTISTS

Preamble

We, the Member States of UNESCO,

Recognizing that science, technology and innovation are essential to consolidate peace in the world and to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), advancing the well-being of societies, especially their vulnerable segments, and reducing poverty, hunger and global disparities,

Recognizing the role of reliable science to address the pressing challenges of our times, including climate change and other human-system processes exceeding planetary boundaries, inequalities, and digitalization,

Acknowledging that science can only thrive and be trusted within research and innovation ecosystems that promote openness¹ and safety, where science is preserved, respected, nurtured, developed and diffused and ideas and knowledge are generated and exchanged freely,²

Acknowledging the vital importance of human capital for a sound and responsible science system³ and to that end, the need for an enabling environment with adequate human, financial and institutional capacities, inclusive, non-discriminatory and safe work conditions and stronger investment in the protection of scientific researchers,

Recalling the importance of creativity, autonomy and freedom of scientific research⁴ as well as the rights to share in scientific advancement and its benefits and to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from scientific production, as enshrined in article 27 paragraphs 1 and 2 respectively of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

Reiterating that preserving and promoting the intellectual freedom of scientific researchers entails also protecting them and the environment in which they operate from any undue influences on their independent judgement and activities⁵, including attacks on their freedom of thought,

Underscoring the importance of protecting scientific researchers from hostile or dangerous environments for their health and safety (including physical and psychological)⁶,

Expressing concern about the increasing pressure on the safety, freedom and career progression of scientific researchers, particularly that of women and other underrepresented groups, with rising hostility, harassment and threats in the real and the digital worlds,

Affirming that addressing these challenges requires strengthened international cooperation in line with UNESCO's 2017 Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers, which provides a unique and comprehensive global framework to guide these efforts,

Stressing the interconnection between the promotion of the freedom and safety of scientific researchers and efforts to strengthen scientific culture, public trust and support for sciences

¹ Ref.: paragraph 5, Recommendation on Open Science.

² Ref: article 15 paragraph 2, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

³ Ref.: UNESCO General Conference (2017), Resolution 39 C/85.

⁴ Ref.: paragraph 10, Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.

⁵ Ref.: paragraph 16a, Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.

⁶ Ref.: paragraph 32, Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.

throughout society⁷ and to use scientific and technological knowledge in decision-making and policies⁸,

Noting that UNESCO as the UN specialized Agency mandated to promote the free flow of ideas and freedom of expression plays a key role to promote the freedom and safety of critical voices, such as journalists, artists and creators, educators and scientific researchers, through UNESCO's normative instruments related to these specific professions,

Call upon Member States, UNESCO as well as scientific communities, organizations and other stakeholders to join hands in promoting and ensuring the freedom, protection and safety of scientific researchers and to that end to:

1. **Raise the profile of this agenda at local, national, regional and global levels** and inter alia sensitize the various stakeholders on the importance of promoting scientific freedom, the safety of scientific researchers and trust in science, not least in the face of conflicts, environmental crisis, pandemics, digital threats and disinformation, as well as in the context of critical democratic processes such as elections.
2. Ensure that scientific research and science, including citizen science, curiosity-driven science and indigenous knowledge systems, operate in pluralist, **open and transparent science ecosystems**, and that scientific researchers, as well as the infrastructures and data they produce and use, are fully supported and protected to advance their work. This includes also the right of scientific researchers to freedom of association⁹ and the principle of freedom of movement for scientific researchers.¹⁰ In the same way **ensure the use of scientific and technological knowledge in decision-making and policies** in line with the UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.¹¹
3. Design, adopt, implement, monitor and evaluate **well-resourced national legislative or policy frameworks** to promote multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary science, evidence-based policy making, scientific freedom and the safety of scientific researchers.
4. **Recognize the specific safety and health challenges and vulnerabilities** faced by women, youth and other underrepresented groups in science, provide for the conditions allowing scientific research to thrive, create robust accountability mechanisms in line with relevant international instruments, such as the UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.
5. Foster strategic **advocacy, outreach and education** in favour of the freedom and safety of scientific researchers, making connections as appropriate with efforts to consolidate trust in science and strengthening the science-society interface, including the communication of scientific information, engaging all stakeholders, particularly underrepresented groups.
6. Enhance **data collection to fill the data gap, facilitate transparency and conduct analysis for global understanding of emergent trends and issues**, including by improving the use of existing data, in particular in the context of UNESCO's periodic consultation on the implementation of the UNESCO Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers. This implies collaboration on the development of a set of indicators to facilitate the assessment of different dimensions of safety and of relevant trends; and enable a deeper understanding of

⁷ Ref. paragraph 5 (c), Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.

⁸ Ref. paragraph 5 (g), Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.

⁹ Ref. paragraph 42, Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers in conjunction with Article 20, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

¹⁰ Ref. paragraph 11, Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.

¹¹ Ref. paragraph 5 (g), Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.

challenges, also through the production of periodic reports and the establishment of a **global observatory**.

7. Strengthen and support **institutional capacities** to design, adopt, implement, monitor and assess legislative, policy and other initiatives towards strengthening the safety and freedom of scientific researchers, at all levels.
8. Establish under UNESCO's leadership a dedicated and inclusive **platform for continued and unhampered dialogue** among science policy advisors to identify countries' needs and priorities, that could meet at different levels, including at Ministerial level, and optimize the provision of support through knowledge- and experience-sharing, and the development of appropriate tools (such as international guidelines, policy briefs and recommendations, good practice compendiums, voluntary codes of conduct, evolving indicator frameworks, landscape report etc.).
9. Create **opportunities for enhanced exchanges amongst scientific researchers and scientific networks** and establish linkages with the abovementioned UNESCO-led science policy advisors' platform towards greater coherence and concertation.
10. Prioritize the **protection of the safety and freedom of scientific researchers** in the context of broader efforts to protect and preserve science **in instances of conflict and emergencies**, including scientists displaced in such circumstances, and define concrete steps in this direction, notably within UNESCO-led efforts in these fields.¹²
11. Ensure that national legislative or policy **frameworks for the ethics of science and technology** contribute to strengthening the freedom and safety of scientific researchers.
12. Foster **alliances and international collaboration** with all concerned constituencies by leveraging existing networks, as well as existing and future platforms and dialogue spaces, to promote this agenda at the local, national and international level, including through the UN system and related bodies and mechanisms, and to enhance coherence and joint action.
13. Establish **an Action Plan** to facilitate this international cooperation to support scientific freedom and the safety of scientific researchers, structured around key action areas, such as awareness-raising, standard-setting and policy-making, monitoring and reporting, capacity-building, academic research and coalition building, highlighting upcoming opportunities, milestones and distribution of roles between stakeholders in order to facilitate effective and coordinated action.

¹² Ref.: paragraph 25, Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers.