

PUSH FOR WIDER USE OF GENOMICS IN ALL COUNTRIES

Relevant for: Science & Technology | Topic: Biotechnology, Genetics & Health related developments

The World Health Organization's Science Council, in its first report, has called for accelerating access to genomics across the world.

The report argues that it is not justifiable ethically or scientifically for countries with lesser resources to gain access to such technologies long after the rich countries do. The field of genomics tries to use human genetic material to study and research cures and treatments for medical conditions, and is used in a wide range of applications in animal sciences, and agriculture.

Expanding access

After the WHO constituted the Science Council of experts in April 2021 to provide guidance on the science and research strategy of the organisation, it identified genomics as the focus of its first report. The report calls for expanding access to genomic technologies, particularly in low- and middle-income nations, by addressing shortfalls in financing, laboratory infrastructure, materials, and highly trained personnel. Noting that the costs of setting up genomic technologies are definitely heading south, making them all that more affordable, it is essential to lower them further, it said.

Harold Varmus, a Nobel Laureate and former Director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, who also chairs the Science Council said: "It is already clear that genomics can make enormous contributions to human health, from surveying populations for infectious agents, such as the virus that causes COVID-19, to predicting and treating a wide variety of diseases, such as cancers and developmental disorders."

WHO Chief Scientist Soumya Swaminathan said: "Genomic technologies are driving some of the most ground-breaking research happening today. Yet the benefits of these tools will not be fully realised unless they are deployed worldwide. Only through equity can science reach its full potential impact and improve health for everyone, everywhere."

The report also makes a series of recommendations addressing four themes — advocacy, implementation, collaboration, and associated ethical, legal and social issues — to promote wider use of genomics.

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