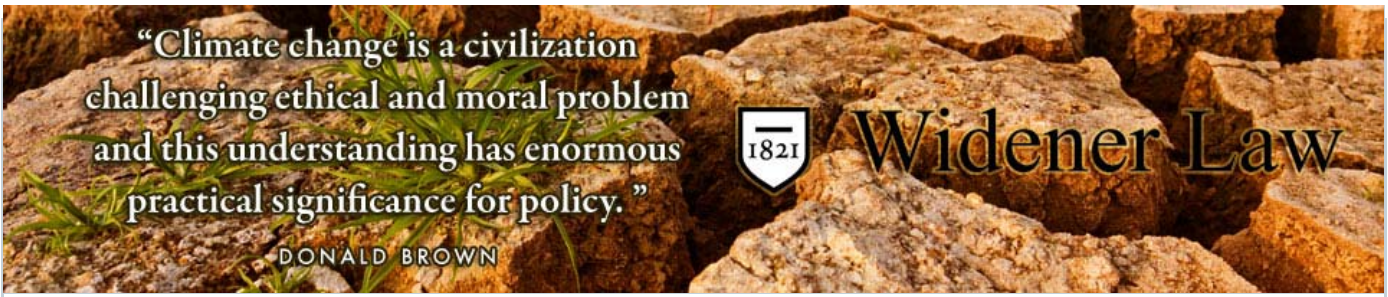
Ethical Issues Raised by the Work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)



Ethical Issues Raised by the Work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): Report On The Bali Workshop (COP-13)

Organized by: Penn State University, the Rock Ethics Institute, and The Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change, The Brazilian Forum on Climate Change, Coordination of Post Graduate Programs in Engineering of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro -The Energy Planning Program

I. Introduction

This report examines ethical issues raised by the work of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The report summarizes conclusions reached at a workshop at the 13th Conference of the Parties (COP-13) of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Bali, Indonesia on December 14, 2007. The sponsors of this workshop thank Dr. Ogunlade Davidson, Co-chair of IPCC Working Group III, for responding to the issues raised in the workshop. His thoughtful responses and remarks have been helpful in guiding our thinking. Climate change raises many different types of profound and unprecedented questions of justice and ethics for the world. By ethics in this report we mean the domain of inquiry that examines claims about what is right or wrong, obligatory or non-obligatory, or when responsibility attaches to human actions. A number of the most important ethical issues raised by climate change were examined in the White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change released by the Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change (EDCC) at COP-12 in December 2006 in Nairobi, Kenya. (White Paper, 2006). http://rockethics.psu.edu /climate/whitepaper-intro.htm

At COP-13, EDCC for the first time examined ethical issues raised by the work of IPCC. In December 2007, IPCC received the Nobel Prize for its work on climate change. The accomplishments of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are laudable – Nobel Peace Prize, four assessment reports, and wide recognition as the authoritative body on climate change science. (Rosales) Although EDCC believes that IPCC is justifiably highly respected by the international community, as more fully described below, the way it synthesizes the scientific and socio-economic literature on which it relies occasionally raises unexamined ethical issues, and IPCC procedures can be improved to deal better with procedural justice issues. (Rosales). As we shall also see, ethical issues should also be a guide to future IPCC work.

This ethical analysis of IPCC's work is not necessarily a criticism of IPCC, for its mission is to synthesize the existing scientific and social-economic climate change

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literature for policy-makers. Some of the ethical issues identified in this report are embedded in the scientific and economic literature which IPCC has a mandate to summarize for policy-makers. If there are unexamined ethical issues in this literature, then IPCC's role is most likely limited to spotting the ethical questions entailed by this literature provided that this literature or the literature that comments on this work identify the ethical questions. If the literature does not identify the ethical questions, then IPCC has no mandate to do an ethical analysis of the underlying scientific and socio-economic literature. EDCC seeks to encourage serious ethical analyses of this literature so that IPCC can include this analyses in its future work when it fulfills its responsibility to synthesize the scientific and socio-economic climate change publications for policy-makers. As more fully explained below, one of the purposes of this report is to begin to develop the literature which spots ethical questions raised by the literature upon which IPCC relies to do its syntheses.

In addition, partially in response to IPCC's respected scientific conclusions that have convinced many around the world that we need to move from studying the climate change science into taking action, the international climate regime is moving more toward greenhouse gas reductions commitments. The ethical and justice issues identified in this report point to how IPCC might re-organize some of its future work given the need to think seriously about how to share the burdens of reducing the threat of climate change on the basis of equity and justice. For instance, because distributive justice is concerned with how harms and benefits are distributed, scientific and socio-economic literature should better disaggregate how the harms and benefits of climate change are disaggregated so that policy-makers can consider options guided by distributive justice. This information will provide the international community with information about how to set climate change policy priorities, particularly in regard to adaptation issues. For this reason, the ethical issues identified in this report should be relevant to IPCC's future work even though IPCC does not have a mandate to take a position on prescriptive questions.

The first four major climate change reports published by IPCC were necessarily focused on the science of climate change, its likely impacts, and what broad approaches to remediation could reduce climate change's threat. As IPCC Working Group III Co-chair Oglande Davidson said in Bali, IPCC's work has been expanding throughout its history to take on new issues that were relevant to the climate change debate at the different times IPCC reports were published. Future IPCC work could provide scientific and socio-economic guidance on priority setting, including priorities for adaptation and mitigation of climate change impacts, guided by ethical and equity concerns such as those discussed in this report. This work, in turn, will also need to better consider the views of the people most vulnerable to climate change impacts and thereby improve IPCC performance on procedural justice issues.

This report summarizes both the conclusions reached in the Bali workshop and several papers prepared in preparation for the Bali meeting. (See the list of papers below) The full papers presented at the Bali workshop will soon be published on ClimateEthics. (http://climateethics.org).

The types of ethical issues about IPCC's work examined in the workshop can be placed into the following categories:

1. Ethical Issues Concerning IPCC's Scientific Syntheses.
2. Ethical Issues Concerning IPCC's Socio-Economic Syntheses
3. Ethical Issues That Should Drive Future IPCC Work.
4. Procedural Justice and IPCC.

II. Ethical Issues Concerning IPCC's Scientific Syntheses

The IPCC defines scientific uncertainty quite broadly. (Averill) The definition distinguishes between the lack of information and disagreement, it recognizes that

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some things may not be knowable, it recognizes a variety of sources of uncertainty, and it endorses both quantitative and qualitative representations of uncertainty.

How the IPCC addresses scientific uncertainty raises many different ethical issues including the fact that stakeholders, decision makers, and others who rely on IPCC's work need to be fully informed about what is known and what is unknown about the impacts of climate change. (Averill) If those who rely on IPCC's conclusions are not accurately informed about the scientific uncertainty embedded in IPCC's climate change syntheses, they will be misled about the nature of climate change's threat. Also, scientific uncertainty about the consequences of human actions that cause climate change damages raise ethical questions about who should have the burden of proof concerning the threat of climate change and what quantity of evidence should satisfy that burden of proof. (Brown) This is so because once there is a reasonable scientific basis for concern about others being harmed, an ethical question necessarily arises about whether the person who desires to continue potentially dangerous behavior or the potential victim of the harm should have the burden of proof in regard to the nature of the harm.

For these and other reasons, IPCC should clearly identify the scientific uncertainties on which its reports are based and what is the nature of these uncertainties. For the most part IPCC does a very good job both being transparent about and explaining the nature of these uncertainties. (Averill) IPCC has made reporting on the nature of uncertainty a high profile part of Working Group I, II, and III's work, and for this IPCC should be commended.

Nevertheless, IPCC should continue to make improvements in the following areas:

The IPCC has gone to great lengths to be transparent about uncertainties and to explain uncertainties carefully and consistently, using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, all working groups use common descriptors of confidence and likelihood linked to specific probabilities. Working Group I has developed a series of scenarios to portray what is likely to happen in the future. It then builds statistical confidence intervals around each of the scenarios. Working Group III uses a two-dimensional scale based on expert judgment that addresses the level of agreement on a particular finding and the amount of evidence available for the finding. Such strategies promote understanding and avoid confusion, misunderstanding, and over- or under-reliance on particular findings.
The IPCC should continue to develop strategies to make understanding of uncertainties as accessible as possible to audiences at all levels of sophistication. (Averill) Uncertainties are embedded in both the information presented and in how it is received and understood. Portraying scientific uncertainties accurately helps people to evaluate how science relates to their interests and helps decision makers to decide when and how to take action. But care should be taken in the way uncertainties are presented. The IPCC should consider differences in capacities to absorb and act on information and tailor its reports accordingly.

Procedural justice requires transparency. In order to evaluate their climate positions and vulnerabilities, people need to know what information is available, how variable or certain that information is, and how the certainty is likely to change over time. Clear and detailed portrayals of uncertainties can improve perceptions of the salience of reports, to help people decide what information is relevant to the problem. It also can improve perceptions of credibility, of how good the science is. And such portrayals can help readers to see reports as more legitimate, as fair and unbiased.

The IPCC should identify and explain uncertainties in assumptions as well as in findings. (Averill) Most scientific studies employ assumptions about issues such as important variables, how they interact, and other issues. Choices of assumptions affect findings before any data are collected. Scientists often disagree about those assumptions, and different studies often reach different results primarily because of

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differing assumptions. Computer models used in the past often are incorporated, along with their assumptions into new studies. Transparency demands that assumptions be carefully identified. Audiences will be better able to understand the bases for uncertainties if differences in and rationales for assumptions are carefully described.

In addition to describing the nature of scientific uncertainties in its conclusions, IPCC should indicate what it would take to reduce them. (Averill) Decision makers can make better decisions about how to act in the face of uncertainty if they understand the nature of the uncertainties relating to their decisions. They need to know which uncertainties are reducible and which are not, and what it will take to reduce the uncertainties, including costs and new technologies. Decision makers need information about the expected time frame for reductions of uncertainties. They also need to know how uncertainties vary across groups, such as nations or regions.

The IPCC should consider ethical issues relating to climate change and disaggregate data, including associated uncertainties, in order to facilitate debate. (Averill) The role of the IPCC is to be policy relevant but not policy prescriptive. The IPCC cannot make policy recommendations or take positions on ethical debates, but it can and should anticipate those debates, present data, portray uncertainties to facilitate discussions of equity and other ethical issues. This will allow negotiators, decision makers, and other stakeholders to ground important ethical discussions in relevant science.

Policy makers and scientists need to understand that how scientific uncertainty is approached raises normative and ethical questions because such questions as who should have the burden of proof to reduce uncertainties is an ethical question. (Lemons) These normative questions need to be expressly identified so that they are not hidden in scientific descriptions of impacts of human actions. (Lemons) This is particularly the case when there are scientifically plausible but insufficiently understood serious and irreversible consequences of human actions. (Lemons)

There is a potential conflict between IPCC's mission to synthesize the peer-reviewed scientific literature, which normally requires high levels of scientific proof before drawing conclusions, and the precautionary principle that is in article 3 of the UNFCCC, which requires governments to act despite scientific uncertainties (Brown). A precautionary science would identify all scientifically plausible impacts, not only those impacts that can be identified with relatively high levels of scientific certainty. (Lemons) If the precautionary principle is to be taken seriously, then decision-makers should be informed about potentially catastrophic but low probability impacts of climate change. If IPCC does not have the mandate to do this, someone in the scientific community should be given the responsibility to do so and IPCC should make it clearer that it is relying on scientific conclusions in the literature that have reached relatively high levels of certainty. (Brown) Yet, since the UNFCCC expressly adopts the precautionary principle, a case can be made that IPCC should identify all scientifically plausible impacts. If it were to do this, IPCC should of course be clear that these impacts are less certain than others.

In estimating and displaying the impacts of climate change, IPCC sometimes ignores the tails of a distribution. (Brown) This approach restricts information provided to policy-makers about all potential adverse climate change impacts, particularly catastrophic harms that have less than a 5 per cent probability of occurring. Since these impacts would be extremely catastrophic for life and the environment, a strong ethical case can be made that the IPCC should more clearly identify these low probability but catastrophic impacts. (Brown). Many laws, for instance, require governments to protect against risks of harms of between 10-4 and 10-6, yet IPCC, by cutting off the tails of distributions about climate change impacts, is not informing policy-makers of catastrophic harms that have a probability of less than one in 25 of occurring. (Brown). Governments and policy-makers need to be fully informed about all scientifically plausible potentially catastrophic impacts of climate change. In

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barriers to climate change policy barriers to sustainability cliamte justice climate change climate change and morality climate change denial climate change deniers climate change disinformation climate change disinformation campaign climate change ethics climate change policy climate change skepticism climate change skeptics climate change video climate ethics climate ethics and policy economics and ethics of climate change Ethics and Climate Change ethics and climate change policy ethics and climate change science Ethics and Global Warming ethics of climae chagne ethics of climate change ethics of global warming fair allocation of national greenhouse gas targets global wariming ethics global warming ethics global warming video introduction to climate ethics obstacles to sustainability Qatar climate change negotiations Romney and Climate Change scientific uncertainty and climate change skepticism and climate change sustainability ethics sustainable development and ethics. the media and climate change US climate change policy US ethical responsibility for climate change. US media and climate change US media failure on climate change US performance on sustainability US press and climate change US response to climate change video on climate change ethics

various places in its reports, IPCC has often said that impacts could be worse than displayed. Yet such disclaimers are often buried in texts, which blocks communication of likely impacts around the world and warnings about potentially worse impacts. (Brown) In other cases, IPCC should more prominently display the scientifically plausible worst-case scenarios. (Brown)

III. Ethical Issues Concerning IPCC's Socio-Economic Syntheses

As we have seen, IPCC has no authority under its mandate to take positions on ethical questions (Averill) but it should spot ethical issues entailed by the economic analyses on which it relies. (Brown) Some of the literature that IPCC relies upon is based upon very controversial ethical assumptions. Although IPCC should refrain from taking position on these ethical issues, it should identify controversial ethical assumptions in the literature it relies upon because not to do so would hide ethical controversies behind what appear to be value-neutral facts.

For example, some of the economic models relied upon by IPCC contain hidden ethical assumptions. (Baum) For instance, some models assume that global welfare maximization should be the goal of public policy, that benefits that accrue to future generations should be discounted, and that discount rates for future benefits should be based upon how people value benefits to them not on how benefits should be valued by those most vulnerable to climate change impacts. (Baum) These hidden ethical assumptions often conflict with other theories of justice and ethics such as human rights and distributive justice principles. (Brown) For instance, theories of distributive justice provide guidance about how to fairly distribute harms and benefits while some cost-benefit analyses aggregate harms and benefits as if distributive issues are not important. Cost-benefit analyses are often treated in the economic literature on which IPCC relies as the preferred rational basis for prescriptive guidance for climate change policies and in this way implicitly undermines duties based upon distributive or retributive justice concerns. (Brown)

IPCC should identify the ethical assumptions embedded in its socio-economic syntheses, not so that IPCC can take a position on these issues, but to avoid misleading users of its analyses about important ethical questions. This can be done by spotting ethical issues. (Brown) A recent cost-benefit analysis of climate change mitigation options prepared by Sir Nicolas Stern for the United Kingdom is a good example of how a cost-benefit analysis could spot ethical issues for decision-makers. (Brown)

Occasionally, IPCC, misrepresents certain ethical principles in its socio-economic synthesis. (Brown) For instance, in Working Group III in the fourth assessment, IPCC stated in the technical assessment on page 35 that:

Different approaches to social justice can be applied to the evaluation of the equity consequences of climate change. Given the strong subjective preferences for certain equity principles among different stakeholders, it is more effective to look for practical approaches that combine equity principles.

This statement could be understood to take a normative position, thereby overstepping IPCC's mandate to refrain from drawing prescriptive conclusions, and conflates all ethical principles with "preferences." Many ethicists do not see ethical principles as preferences but as binding normative guides for behavior. The way to resolve differences among competing prescriptive claims is to subject competing theories to deep ethical scrutiny. Clearly, some of the proposals advanced for allocating national emissions targets would not withstand deep ethical scrutiny. (Brown) To call equity principles "preferences" robs a moral argument of its force. To call ethical positions simply "preferences" is to basically misunderstand what ethics is about. (Brown) Strong arguments can be made that governments that are emitting greenhouse gases above their fair share of safe global emissions have an immediate duty to reduce emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions without regard to global cost-benefit analyses. What is fair is a question of ethics and

justice, not simply a matter of "preferences."

Again, IPCC should not take a position on ethical issues but it could do a better job on spotting ethical issues embedded in its socio-economic syntheses.

IV. Ethical Issues That Should Drive Future IPCC Work

As we have seen, ethics not only has relevance for how IPCC synthesizes existing scientific and socio-economic literature, but also is relevant to under-developed or under-studied scientific and socio-economic questions. That is, serious ethical reflection should be one of the drivers of scientific and socio-economic research.

For instance, the above analyses make it clear that IPCC could assist climate change policy makers deal with ethical considerations by better identification of scientifically plausible, highly catastrophic climate change impacts even if they are of low probability. Once national goals for greenhouse gas reductions targets are determined based upon equity, economists could help nations achieve targets by more analyses of "cost-effective" climate mitigation options.

There are other areas where IPCC should encourage further scientific and socio-economic analyses that are compelled by ethical concerns including the following:

The first is the need to deal more extensively with energy efficiency and conservation issues. (Dernbach). Three normative principles in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change support the conclusion that IPCC should expand its work on energy efficiency and conservation. These principles in the UNFCCC include the duty of the developed nations to take the leadership to reduce greenhouse gases, the responsibility of the developed nations to consider climate change impacts on developing nations, and the right to sustainable development. (Dernbach) These normative principles that are also now well settled matters of international law lead to the conclusion that unless developed nations have reduced their emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions, they have a duty to maximize energy efficiency and conservation. For this reason, IPCC should: (a) prepare a special report on energy efficiency and conservation, and (b) examine methods, opportunities, and trends in developed countries to reduce per capita assumption of energy through energy efficiency and conservation. (Dernbach).

In addition, the obligation of nations to reduce their emissions based upon "equity" and on the basis of "common but differentiated responsibilities" is expressly acknowledged in Article 3 of the UNFCCC. This points to future scientific and socio-economic work that should be an additional foci of IPCC's work. This future work should, among other things, examine the science and socio-economic dimensions of post-Kyoto, second UNFCCC commitment period proposals for regimes that satisfy principles of equity and ethics. (Hogenhuis) Numerous post-Kyoto regime proposals are circulating that raise unexamined and sometimes deeply problematic ethical issues. (Brown) One recent proposal, for instance, bases future allocations on development rights that although perhaps not as ethically problematic as other post-Kyoto proposals, nevertheless raises a number of unexamined ethical questions (Hogenhuis). All post-Kyoto proposals should be subjected to ethical examination (Hogenhuis). This is not the mission of IPCC, but IPCC should encourage that scientific and economic research needed to do this ethical evaluation be accomplished.

In the past, IPCC has treated all such proposals as "preferences," suggesting that there are no rational criteria for deciding which proposals meet minimum criteria of just distributions. (Brown) Serious ethical reflection on these proposals would not necessarily lead to a complete consensus among all ethicists about greenhouse gas allocations among nations, but it would help disqualify those proposals that fail to meet minimum ethical criteria while pointing to compromises among formula that are ethically acceptable. (Brown) The IPCC could call for much deeper ethical reflection on what "equity" requires of nations in meeting their fair share of safe global

emissions without taking a position on equity. This ethical analysis will in turn trigger deeper scientific and socio-economic research about ethically acceptable multilateral regimes. At minimum, the IPCC should not suggest that all proposed allocation formula are entitled to equal respect, that is, are mere "preferences." (Brown) IPCC should also put greater emphasis and focus on issues under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change that are both of great interest to developing countries and are recognized policy prescriptions under the UNFCCC, including "common but differentiated responsibilities," "technology transfer", and "equity." (Miguez and Muylaert). In such cases, IPCC is not taking a position on normative principles because these normative principles are already a matter if international law. IPCC's role is to encourage scientific and socio-economic work needed to implement these principles.

Although IPCC has no mandate to take position on ethical acceptability of criteria for assigning responsibility for climate change impacts, it could encourage scientists and economists to examine the scientific and economic implications of various formula that are under consideration to allocate responsibility and that pass ethical scrutiny. For instance, recently a group of scientists looked at the scientific ability to make differentiations among countries for climate change responsibility based upon different historical emissions levels. (Müller) Once this scientific and economic analyses is completed, IPCC could report the results of this work to policy-makers around the world. (Müller)

V. Procedural Justice and IPCC

Procedural justice requires that decisions are made and implemented according to fair processes. Procedural justice requires at a minimum: a) that like cases are treated alike and any distinctions be ethically justified; b) that the decision-making and implementation treat people fairly and impartially; c) that those directly affected by the decisions have a voice and representation in the process; and d) that there be transparency in the decision-making process.

As we have seen, the IPCC mission is to synthesize the scientific and socio-economic literature for climate change policy makers, and most observers give high marks to IPCC for accomplishing its mission. However, there are several improvements in its procedures that could be made to improve its performance in regard to procedural justice, particularly in regard to assuring that those who will be affected by the work of IPCC have a voice and representation in the IPCC decision-making process. (Miguez and Muylaert) (Rosales). Of particular concern is that the developed countries are disproportionally represented in the IPCC review process. (Miguez and Muylaert), and the vast majority of the science and socio-economic literature relied upon by IPCC is science from developed countries. (Rosales) (Miguez and Muylaert) Absent from consideration is the knowledge of people who directly rely upon natural resources to sustain them in developing countries. (Rosales) The majority of core contributors to IPCC's work are members of the global epistemic elite, a group of like-minded professionals working on climate change. (Rosales) There is little room for input from non-state, non-expert, non-technical, yet highly knowledgeable inhabitants and victims. (Rosales) Even after assessment reports are written, reviews are relegated to "expert" comment. (Rosales) The reports are vetted by a narrow group of experts trained and privileged by larger structures of globalization. (Rosales) For this reason, IPCC should broaden its contributors on comments to have better global representation.

In addition, because procedural justice demands that those who will be affected by a institution's decisions have a right to free informed consent to decisions that will affect their interest, IPCC should refrain from giving implicit support for total global welfare maximizing responses to climate change without expressly acknowledging the issue so that those who may be most adversely affected by decisions made on such bases have a right to representation and consent. (Brown)

For these reasons, in the years ahead to deal with these procedural justice issues, IPCC should :

- Expressly integrate the scientific work being done in developing countries into its analyses and syntheses including, but not limited to, the non-English scientific literature. (Miguez and Muylaert)
- Make sure that more scientists from developing countries are represented in IPCC's work. (Miguez and Muylaert) (Rosales)
- Seek to integrate the knowledge of those people in developing countries closest to natural resources and that do not come from large western scientific institutions. (Rosales)
- Because those affected by climate change decision-making have a right to free-informed consent about decisions that affect them, seek to assure that solutions to climate change analyzed and considered by IPCC Working Group III have the support of those who will be most adversely affected by climate change impacts. (Rosales) Since to exercise free informed consent, parties must possess all relevant information and understand policy options, IPCC should seek broader understanding and participation of its work in developing countries. (Rosales) (Miguez and Muylaert).

By:

Donald A. Brown,

Associate Professor of Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law, Penn State University,

dab57@psu.edu.

Professor John Dernbach,Widener University School of Law, Jon Rosales, Ph.D., St. Lawrence University,Marilyn Averill , Attorney, Doctoral Student in Environmental Studies, University of Colarado. José Domingos Gonzales Miguez – Executive Secretary of the Brazilian Interministerial Commission on Global Climate Change and Maria Silvia Muylaert – Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, John Lemons, Professor of Biology and Environmental Science, Department of Environmental Studies, University of New England

Papers presented at the workshop referenced in these reports (These papers will soon be posted on climateethics.org):

Donald A. Brown, Associate Professor of Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law, Penn State University, An overview of the work of the Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change and introduction to ethical issues raised by the work of IPCC.
Professor John Dernbach, Widener University School of Law, Examination of ethical Issues that arise in IPCC Working Group III because of assumptions about remedies in economic analyses.
Jon Rosales, Ph.D., St. Lawrence University, The ethical responsibility to include the participation of those who are most vulnerable to climate change in the work of the IPCC.
Marilyn Averill , Attorney, Doctoral Student in Environmental Studies, Ethical issues that arise in the work of IPCC because of the unavoidable need to deal with scientific uncertainty.

Christiaan Hogenhuis, World Council of Churches, The need of remedies looked at by IPCC to consider post –Kyoto regime approaches to national allocations that deal with international equity.
Benito Müller, Oxford University, Looking at historical responsibility in the Post Kyoto framework in the work of IPCC.

Papers referenced in the workshop that were prepared for the workshop but not presented include the following:

Professor José Domingos Gonzales Miguez – Executive Secretary of the Brazilian Interministerial Commission on Global Climate Change and Maria Silvia Muylaert – Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Equity issues that arise from IPCC scientific assessment review process. (paper presented after the workshop due to Professor Miquez's negotiating responsibilities)

John Lemons, Professor of Biology and Environmental Science, Department of Environmental Studies ,University of New England, Climate Change, the Normative Dimensions of IPCC's Approach to Scientific Uncertainty.

Seth Baum, Doctoral Student. Dept of Geography, The Pennsylvania State University, Ethics and Modeling: Putting Ramsey model-based climate change assessments in perspective.

Category: Adaptation and Responsibility for Damages

February 1, 2008 at 5:29 pm Donald A. Brown