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The Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change Issues Report to Press at COP-15

By DONALD A BROWN on December 12, 2009 6:27 PM | [0 Comments](#) | [0 TrackBacks](#)

Editor's Note: The Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change (EDCC), a program comprised of 17 ethics institutions whose secretariat is Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State University, held several events at the United Nations 15th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, (COP-15). At a press conference on December 11, EDCC issued the following statement about the ethical dimensions of issues on the Copenhagen negotiating agenda and the failure of some nations to approach the Copenhagen negotiating agenda as an ethical issue.

Ethics: Crucial Missing Element in Negotiations: Duties and Responsibilities, Not Just Narrow National Economic Interest

Preamble

Climate justice is a welcome theme at the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its related instruments, including those being discussed at Copenhagen, include ethical principles that are meant to guide the implementation of the treaty framework. What we see instead is that too many Parties are ignoring climate justice, and even the ethical principles embedded in the treaty and acting instead out of narrow self interest.

If parties recognized and acted on their ethical duties, obligations, and responsibilities when negotiating the Copenhagen text certain issues still under negotiation could be more easily resolved.

Long-term vision and national commitments

If parties acted on ethical principles in the negotiations on long-term vision and national commitments, we contend they would:

- Take a position based not only on their domestic economic interests, but acknowledge their duties and obligations to those most vulnerable to climate change including future generations. Given this, nations that do not support limiting additional warming to the lowest achievable target should be required to justify their position.
- Acknowledge that the principles of common but differentiated responsibilities and protection of the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations should guide mitigation commitments.
- Recognize that an atmospheric stabilization goal will affect not only health and the environment but also, the availability of natural resources on which life depends, and the very existence of some counties. Given this, national economic interest alone is an ethically bankrupt justification for national positions on long-term vision and national emissions reduction targets.
- Make commitments on national emissions targets that would represent their fair share of total global emissions necessary to achieve the atmospheric concentration goals mindful of the fact that scientists now believe that global emissions must peak in the next few years and be reduced by 25% to 40% by 2020.
- Furthermore, mitigation commitments must consider the biosphere as a whole - what has been called the commonwealth of life.

Adaptation

Ethical considerations should also guide the way adaptation issues are being debated. For example:

- Ethical considerations argue for the development of a process for overseeing adaptation efforts that is participatory, that is, represented by individuals from all geographic areas, and include the active input from all interested parties, especially the most vulnerable parties experiencing the most severe impacts of climate change, as well as transparent. Furthermore, distributive justice concerns must structure decisions as to which countries are eligible for funding for adaptation projects and how much funding can be so requested.
- The current text being negotiated leaves unresolved the status of ethical principles that are well established in the UNFCCC such as the precautionary principle; the principle of common but



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differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities; and the polluter pays principle, leaving it uncertain whether the obligations are binding (shall) or voluntary (should). Also included in this section and still up for negotiation is the status of the claims that the adaptation decisions be guided by the best available science and traditional knowledge, and include all relevant stakeholders in a participatory and gender-sensitive manner. Ethical considerations would require that all of these principles become binding obligations.

- Also currently up for debate is the strength of the commitment that financial support for adaptation be in addition to resources provided by developed country parties to meet their official development assistance (ODA) targets. Ethics would demand that the adaptation funds are in addition to the ODA funding.

- We commend the ethical integrity of the negotiating text for adaptation in upholding the polluter pays principle. This principle implies distinct and essential duties and responsibilities for both mitigation and adaptation. In regard to adaptation, it maintains that polluters compensate those affected by unavoidable and unavowed harms and. However, the fact that adaptation has been elevated to the position of importance that it has in the current negotiations is an indication of the failure to date to mitigate climate change as well as a clear expression of the fact that developing nations have demanded that justice concerns be an essential element of the negotiating text and taken on such importance.

REDD

Negotiations on REDD should also be guided by the demands of justice. For example:

- REDD protects forests in order to reduce greenhouse gases. Justice demands that developed countries support programs that effectively reduce deforestation.
- The draft REDD text contains promising ethical language, including obligations to "respect the knowledge and rights of indigenous peoples and members of local communities" and promote "the full and effective participation of all relevant stakeholders." Some positions on REDD could lead to practices that endanger the livelihoods and traditions of indigenous peoples who depend upon forest resources. Procedural justice therefore requires that the REDD process be participatory and transparent and equitable in terms of how burdens and benefits are distributed.
- Some positions on REDD could undermine biodiversity though the support of such practices as monoculture plantations. This raises ethical issues regarding our duties to future generations as well as to the biosphere as a whole.
- Many ethical questions remain about accountability, implementation, measurements, and funding. In addition, timely and appropriate support for capacity building is essential to ensuring that a broad range of developing countries can participate in the REDD mechanism. These principles need to be articulated in a clearer and more compelling fashion if they are to inspire the trust and confidence of the peoples of the world and help to propel the changes in behaviour that all citizens must embrace. Difficult as the necessary ethical choices may be, a consensus can be achieved if principles that have already been agreed to are strengthened and deepened.

Conclusion

Although there is growing acceptance that the issues issue being debated in Copenhagen must be understood as raising profound moral and ethical issues, it is clear that some parties continue to base their decisions on national economic interest.

The time has come to demand that nations be required to formulate policies in response to the climate change crisis on the basis of what justice requires. Therefore, we call on citizens around the world to demand that all nations accept their obligations and responsibilities to not harm others or the natural resources on which they depend. The press can play an important role in transforming how issues such as these we have discussed today are debated by asking those nations who appear to support their position based on national economic interest to justify their failure to accept their duties and responsibilities to others.

The Collaborative Program on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change (EDCC) is comprised of seventeen institutions around the world working on climate change ethics, with secretariat at the Rock Ethics Institute at Penn State University. For further information contact Don Brown dab57@psu.edu or Nancy Tuana ntuana@psu.edu

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