



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Netherlands  
National Commission  
for UNESCO

- Recommendation regarding the advisability of a
- Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles in
- relation to Climate Change

#### Background

In October 2009 during the 35<sup>th</sup> General Conference, the UNESCO Member States adopted a proposal to investigate the advisability of drafting a Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change. To this end, the UNESCO Secretariat is currently conducting regional consultations. Member States of the European and North American Region will be consulted during a meeting in Paris on 3 and 4 June 2010. In preparation for that meeting, the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO invited national experts from a range of committees to discuss and respond to the proposal for the Universal Declaration. The recommendation which follows is the result of that national consultation.

#### Context

The idea to draw up a Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change grew out of a report issued by the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) in September 2009 [see: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001838/183801e.pdf>]. COMEST proposes that UNESCO should draft a framework of ethical principles relating to climate change. The report provides an overview of current insights and of the already existing instruments that contain normative perspectives – such as the Earth Charter and Kyoto Protocol – while leaving room for additional values and principles.

#### Recommendation

The Dutch experts appreciate the COMEST report because of its focus on the wide range of ethical implications of climate change. They lend broad support to the proposal for ethical reflection on climate change and climate science. They consider it of great importance to investigate the links between the normative assumptions implicit in existing documents. However, the Dutch experts were not undividedly enthusiastic about the idea of drafting a Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change at once, given the lack of an adequate scientific foundation at this time. The ethical implications of possible climate change and of the uncertainties therein have not yet been sufficiently explored. The Dutch experts believe that further reflection is needed before determining whether to draft a declaration.

Nevertheless, the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO anticipates that the Member States of UNESCO will be keen to draft a Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change in the short term. The draft decision to investigate the advisability of such a declaration enjoyed broad support at the 35<sup>th</sup> General Conference. Amendments proposed by the Netherlands (among others) to prioritise process precision above speed met with major resistance from other Member States.

Accepting this reality, the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO recommends that the Netherlands should participate actively in the drafting process of the declaration and take charge of calling attention to the following themes:

- The process of drafting a declaration can be at least as important as the outcome, provided the process is structured with the greatest possible degree of openness, with room for diverse visions on the climate problem and balanced representation of Member States. Where the latter aspect is concerned, UNESCO can play a constructive role, because within this UNESCO Member States from the South feel themselves fuller and more equal partners in the discussion than in many other United Nations bodies.
- In drafting the declaration, it is recommended to employ one evaluative framework originating from principles of justice. The 'capabilities approach' (as elaborated by Sen and Nussbaum) could offer a solid basis for a broad human rights-oriented approach. The approach focuses on what people are effectively able to do and to be, that is on their capabilities, to enhance their quality of life. The framework ties in with different national and local political, social and cultural contexts and consequently functions at a less abstract level. Capabilities can be considered goods which should be distributed fairly and serve as criteria for signalling (distributive) injustices or a lack of recognition or participation.
- The climate is a complex system. It is itself part of an overarching human-geosphere-biosphere system. That complexity places limits on both its predictability and comprehensibility. In the public debate, these considerations must be taken into account more effectively. Underlying values should play a more explicit role in political decision-making. The discussion about ethical dimensions can help to clarify sticking points in the current climate debate – and thus, at a similar level of abstraction, provide more cohesion in the existing documents, that already have their own normative principles. Also, it is important to explore new ethical directions.
- In many instances, the COMEST report fails to fully incorporate the nuances of the foundation documents issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). As an example, paragraph 97 of the COMEST report states that 'climate change through global warming is caused, or at least contributed to, by human activity', whereas the IPCC describes climate change as being 'very probably caused by humans'. Also, in paragraph 73 of the COMEST report the first sentence is formulated quite forcefully: 'What is already unequivocally known about global climate change is that it poses an ethically unacceptable harm which is uncertain only in terms of magnitude and timing'. But what is 'unacceptable harm', and to what extent is such 'harm' the consequence of human activities? Could the origins of the observed changes also be in part natural? Often, attribution is impossible, given the scale of the natural fluctuations. It will be vital to ensure that, in this respect, the declaration is shaped as a well-balanced document.
- The position of science vis-à-vis politics. The independence of scientific research must be safeguarded via the application of existing principles of research ethics. It is recommended that the declaration under discussion includes a description of the ethical principles that direct the pursuit of and communication about (climate) science, such as having due regard for both sides of arguments, the ability to accommodate diverse scientific visions, integrity and the willingness to adjust personal beliefs.

May 2010

Appendix – List of participants at the Dutch experts meeting on 15 April 2010

The experts listed below took part in an independent capacity and therefore do not represent the positions of any body or organization:

Name	Organization
Frans Brom	Rathenau Institute, independent technology assessment organisation; research institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Science
Hans van Delden (chair)	Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO / Utrecht University Medical Center
Martin Drenthen	Radboud University Nijmegen
Josee van Eijndhoven	Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO / Erasmus University Rotterdam
Gerbrand Koomen	Former Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute / Former Dutch representative Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
Anders Schinkel	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Sabina Voogd	Oxfam Novib