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# Sharing an ethical responsibility to reduce GHG emissions

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The climate change debate continues to be framed – particularly by politicians and the media in national arenas – around the science of climate change and the economic impact of mitigation strategies. These are surely important factors to consider; yet climate change is not only a scientific, economic and political issue, but an ethical issue, as well. What are ethically "acceptable" versus ethically "dangerous" levels of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions targets can mean the difference between life and death for some victims of climate change; and yet ethics are barely spoken of in the debates or in the target-setting process. It is important that we address the issue of ethics and what we may consider ethically "acceptable" targets, in order to better understand what is at stake this December in Copenhagen.

To better understand this issue, we must first look at how ethics fit into the climate change debate and then discuss what might be considered ethically "dangerous" versus ethically "acceptable" levels of GHG emission targets.

### Climate change as an ethical issue

There are three important reasons why climate change is very much an ethical issue and why appealing to ethical obligations is a necessary and urgent step that nations must take in order to ensure GHG emission targets reach an ethically "acceptable" level going forward.

### *The separation of time and space*

Climate change is an example of an environmental problem where the greatest effects are not experienced by the countries causing the greatest damage, but most harshly by people in other parts of the world. Because GHG emissions are released into the atmosphere and not localized to one spot, the detrimental effects are not necessarily felt by the offenders, but can be impacting people far removed from the actual source of pollution and the original polluters. In addition, the detrimental effects are not immediate but build up over time. This separation between space and time can make people feel less responsible for the damage caused by their activities. In the case of climate change, richer developed countries share the most responsibility for creating the climate change problem, yet the world's poorest nations face its harshest effects. Furthermore, the countries facing the greatest impact of climate change have little means to reduce this threat.[1]

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[1] Brown, Donald A, 2009, 'Ethical Failures of National GHG Emissions Reduction Proposals Approaching Copenhagen', *ClimateEthics*, http://climateethics.org/?p=147.

# An ethical responsibility

## Catastrophic consequences

The ethical responsibility of people to stop activities that cause harm to others can hardly be denied. When those affected the most from climate change are not the ones causing the problem and have no means to reduce these threats, the offenders have an ethical obligation to mitigate or prevent these consequences, particularly if such consequences are catastrophic. Climate change places human life, health, and welfare at risk, as well as threatens plants, animals, and delicate ecosystems. Climate change further threatens to increase instances of drought, storms, floods, and can cause social conflict as people face a scarcity of natural resources, clean water, and a rise in disease.

## Lack of accountability to foreign lands

There is currently no international government or law in existence that can make any one country responsible for the citizens of another. Governments can keep their citizens accountable to each other, but this often does not extend beyond their own borders. While the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) attempts to provide a system of accountability, governments tend to yield to national pressure and agendas above all else. Therefore, appealing to ethical arguments is necessary to persuade countries to look beyond their own self-interests and constituents to that of foreign citizens and the international community as a whole.[2]

## What is an ethically "acceptable" versus ethically "dangerous" GHG emissions target?

Depending on the reasoning one uses to determine what is ethically acceptable or dangerous, you will reach different answers to this question. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) holds that a warming of more than 2°C in global climate temperature will lead to dangerous impacts from climate change. However, depending on one's location and vulnerability, the effects of climate change may already be dangerous at present long before the "dangerous" threshold of 2°C has been reached. According to a report published by the Global Humanitarian Forum, human-induced climate change is already responsible for some 300,000 deaths per year.[3,4]

Scientific uncertainty about the sensitivity of the climate to different GHG atmospheric stabilization levels further contributes to the problem of defining dangerous levels of emissions. This fuels debate over whether 450 ppm $CO_2$ would still threaten to surpass the 2°C level set by the IPCC.[5] Jim

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[2] Brown, Donald A., 2009, 'Ethical Failures of National GHG Emissions Reduction Proposals Approaching Copenhagen', *ClimateEthics*, http://climateethics.org/?p=147.

[3] Global Humanitarian Forum, 2009, *Human Impact of Climate Change*, http://www.ghf-geneva.org/.

[4] Brown, Donald A., *The Crucial Missing Element in Media Coverage of the US Climate Change Debate: the Ethical Duty to Reduce GHG Emissions*, 15 August 2009, http://climateethics.org/?p=138.

[5] Brown, Donald A, 2009, 'Ethical Failures of National GHG Emissions Reduction Proposals Approaching Copenhagen', *ClimateEthics*, http://climateethics.org/?p=147.

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Hansen adds to this debate with his recent paper arguing that additional warming should be limited to only 1°C and that carbon emission allowances should be lowered to only 350 ppm.[6]

Is a 2°C then considered ethically "acceptable" or should this threshold be reduced to the 1°C as suggested by Hansen? If climate change is already contributing to the deaths of a third of a million people each year and even a 1°C rise in global average temperature is dangerous for the world's poorest populations, then can any rise in temperature be tolerated? Should not any rise in temperature be considered ethically "dangerous"?

However, what about the threat to the economic welfare of developing countries brought on by attempts to completely reconfigure systems to avoid any rise in temperature? According to a recent policy brief published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), the estimated welfare loss for developing regions due to climate change is five times greater than the damage to the United States and more than doubles the damage of all other OECD countries. Furthermore, Africa, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean face the possibility of economic damage equal to between 7 to 10 times greater than faced by the United States. Yet, the brief goes on to argue that "compelling developing countries to cut emissions at this stage of their development constitutes an inappropriate – and unworkable – approach to facilitating progress".[7]

Developing countries should not be forced to choose between climate change mitigation and development even though they may stand to face the most damage from climate change. Yet, how do you reconcile what constitutes an "acceptable" level of economic damage caused by higher levels of GHG emissions and climate change with economic damage caused by mitigating it? Is there a point, then, where a minimal rise in temperature is preferable and more ethically "acceptable" than to avoid severe strains on development?

It is quite difficult, as we have seen, to determine where to draw the line between an ethically "acceptable" versus "dangerous" threshold for GHG emissions. However, even though the line is difficult to define, this does not mean that we should not do whatever we can to reach as ethical solution as possible.

## Ethical Responsibility

Leading up to the fifteenth Conference of Parties (COP15) in Copenhagen this year, the debate over the negotiating texts has largely centred on both the determination of acceptable levels of GHG emissions and finding an equitable solution to the climate challenge through the UNFCCC's principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities". While each element

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[6] Hansen, J., Sato, Mki., et al., 2008, 'Target atmospheric CO2: Where should humanity aim?', *Open Atmos. Sci. J.*, Vol. 2, pp: 217-231.

[7] Ahmad, I, Kozul-Wright, R., et al., 2009, 'Climate Justice: Sharing the Burden', *UN-DESA Policy Brief* No. 21. New York, NY: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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requires economic and scientific consideration, ethics is deeply entrenched in the idea of equity and should be brought back into the dialogue at both the international and national level.

As the international community prepares for Copenhagen this December, ethics should be considered a critical factor in the debates and in the target-setting process. However, realistically, there is little likelihood that ethical arguments will gain enough ground between now and Copenhagen to impact negotiations. Despite this, there is still a great need to bring the discussion of ethical obligations to lower GHG emissions into the dialogue in national politics and media. At the national level, appealing to people's sense of ethical obligation can be the catalyst for activism and greater political will to lower GHG emissions beyond the targets currently under consideration. Countries are already suffering from the dangerous effects of climate change and as global temperatures rise, these effects will only become more catastrophic. The time is upon us to look beyond our own national interests and accept our ethical responsibility to the greater international community in our struggle against climate change.

## About Climatico

Climatico is a network of researchers and experts providing independent analysis of climate change policy. We cover national and international policy and negotiations focusing on policy developments in the G20 countries.

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