

IMMEDIATE

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“First International Symposium identifies Climate Change as an issue of Human Security”

Ethics met science last week, ahead of next Saturday's huge “Live Earth” concerts, as a group of leading scholars met in Oslo at the first international symposium on climate change, human rights and human security. They debated for the first time whether climate change was not just a scientific or economic issue, but one of human rights and human security. The five key themes emerging were that climate change is:

- Active Infliction of Harm (on future generations and poor countries),
- A “Perfect Moral Storm” Facing 21st Century Civilization; and that:
- Economics Alone is Inadequate to the Task,
- Poverty, Climate Change, and Development are Inextricably Linked; and
- U.S. Inaction and on Geo-engineering have moral implications.

The Exploratory Workshop was funded by the European Science Foundation in an effort to bring together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to discuss emerging research issues. The symposium finished with announcement of the recent launch of a new clearinghouse on the ethical dimensions of climate change.

Active Inflicting of Harm:

“Human security is having the capacity to respond to threats to social, human and environmental rights” explained Karen O'Brien, co-organizer of the meeting and Chair of the Global Environmental Change and Human Security project, headquartered at the University of Oslo, Norway. “Climate change's impacts will depend upon how society is organized and the ways that individuals can respond: climate change is an issue that is first and foremost about human security.”

“Business-as-usual is not just a failure to act, but an active inflicting of harm,” said Oxford political theorist Henry Shue, known worldwide for forging the ideas on “basic rights” which have been widely adopted by national and international agencies. Shue

advanced his concern for ethics and foreign affairs addressing the ethical aspects of climate change. “Not acting on climate change now harms future generations, and the longer we take to act, the more generations we will harm.”

“What do we want future generations to think of us?” questioned Andrew Light, of the University of Washington, US, “that we tried, or that we did nothing?”

A “Perfect Moral Storm:”

“It is difficult to think jointly about future generations,” Shue reasoned, “but we are inflicting harm on defenseless others.” He pointed, however, to the opportunity that climate change presents to act positively “to protect people who are entirely at our mercy—future generations.” Simon Caney, also of Oxford, agrees that climate change violates the rights of people, as those who are responsible for climatic changes are the ones who benefit most. Ethical assessment of climate change, however, must go hand in hand with economic justice, Caney argued.

One problem identified by Shue and followed up by several other experts was that it is difficult to perceive our responsibility to others who are further away, not yet living, or whom we hurt only by our actions as a group (polluting). Even worse is that harming others by *failing to act* is a moral offense more difficult to perceive.

Stephen Gardiner of the University of Washington (U.S.) called climate change “A Perfect Moral Storm” because it is the convergence of three obstacles to ethical action on the issue: “(a) it is a genuinely global problem, (b) it has a large intergenerational dimension (so that we are passing major costs on to the future), and (c) our current theories are ill-equipped to deal with many aspects of it.”

Most ethicists present in the meeting agreed in that there is a quite clear consensus that climate change harms people, primarily the poor, and more importantly that it harms the life chances of future generations. The scientific consensus on this is documented in major reports such as those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). A similar argument was made by Asun St. Clair, who stated that we must avoid political solutions to climate change that follow the principle of the wealthy countries putting their own adaptation first. The poor are the most likely victims of climatic changes: the poor and vulnerable will not only suffer first but also in a more intense way. Those most likely to die are the severely poor.

However this is changing, argued Desmond McNeill, development expert at the University of Oslo, because real impacts are being felt already, and often closer to home than expected.

“Carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels remains in the atmosphere causing potentially devastating effects for hundreds of years, and some changes may be irreversible,” said Helge Drange, scientist at the Nansen Center and the Bjerknes Center

in Bergen, Norway, pointing to stunning predictions made this spring by the IPCC in reports written and reviewed by hundreds of scientists around the world.

Joan Martinez-Alier of the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona, Spain, puts climate change in a broader set of environmental impacts inflicted by wealthier nations on the poor. “An ecologically unfair exchange happens each time undervalued products from the global South are sold to the North: a ecological debt is owed by the world’s wealthy to the poor.” He continued that rather than being called “‘market externalities,’ pollution and environmental degradation should be seen as a case of ‘cost-shifting success.’”

Economics Has Legitimacy, but is Inadequate to the Task:

Donald Brown, of Penn State University in the U.S., argued that knowingly compounding climate change is a human rights violation, but that “only three types of priests are allowed in the room to discuss climate policy: scientists, economists and lawyers.” Brown said philosophers were partly to blame for failing to address the issue early enough and in approachable language, a problem the meeting was designed to address.

Several philosophers examined the ethics implicit in economic logics which calculate the costs and benefits of acting aggressively to fight climate change, applying “discount rates” to future generations’ suffering, as did last fall’s landmark “Stern Review.” Stephen Gardiner described the ethics underlying most economics as “an overly simple, even simplistic, version of utilitarianism,” which do not recognize as valid the attention to basic human rights and security. Caney made the comparison to other moral decisions: “One cannot kill or torture because it will reduce costs.”

Standard neoliberal economics as well as standard ethics are frameworks for analysis not adequate to the task,” said Asun St. Clair, an organizer of the event from the University of Bergen, Norway. “Ethics as usual will not do the job.”

Martinez-Alier put it very bluntly: “Using economic analysis is not good for poor people.” Timmons Roberts, of Oxford and the U.S.’s College of William and Mary agreed, saying that “in the environment and in society, waste tends to flow downhill.” He described global patterns of suffering from climate disasters which were explained largely by national poverty, inequality, and disadvantaged position in the global economy.

Poverty, Climate Change, and Development are Inextricably Linked:

This raises issues of human development and the relations between the value systems of basic human needs, human rights and human security, argued Desmond Gasper of the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Netherlands. These points were considered by several experts on adaptation to climate change, including Neil Adger, University of East Anglia, UK, Karen O’Brien and Siri Eriksen of the University of Oslo, and Livia Bizikova, of the Institute for Forecasting, Slovakia and the University of British Columbia, Canada.

A consensus among these scholars was that climate change threatened the prospects of positive development in poorer nations, often compounding existing vulnerabilities. Vulnerable people in both the global North and South are likely to suffer most and will need to adapt. Local people need to be incorporated in research and decision-making about how to adapt to climate change, said Jon Barnett, of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Otherwise, costly and self-defeating options may be adopted. Barnett and Adger have recently completed a report on the links between human insecurity, violent conflict and climate change.

On U.S. Inaction and on Geo-engineering:

Donald Brown of Penn State University focused on the unethical argument of many in the U.S. to not act until China does. “The arguments being used in the U.S. to delay action are a red herring,” he argued, since China has not been responsible for major past accumulation of climate change gases in the atmosphere, because per person its emissions are still less than a quarter that of Americans, and because China is now doing much of the world’s manufacturing.

Stephen Gardiner argued that geo-engineering solutions like launching mirrors into space or dumping sulphur dioxide (soot) into the stratosphere place impossible demands on future generations. These solutions, discussed by Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen, raise particular moral dilemmas if catastrophe looms, and Gardiner calls for “special scrutiny” for such calls. Rather, preventing the emergency is the only moral thing to do, and Crutzen’s proposal “could worsen the problems of political inertia and intergenerational moral corruption.”

A New Clearinghouse on the Moral Dimensions of Climate Change:

Brown’s institute at Penn State has established a new clearinghouse on the issue, called climateethics.org, which documents efforts worldwide. It addresses issues such as Allocation, Distributive and Intergenerational Justice, Economics, Procedural Justice and Fair Process, Scientific Uncertainty, and Carbon Trading.

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Further contacts are available from the organizers.

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