

# CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY SHOULD PASS A 'HUMAN RIGHTS TEST'

Using the human rights framework to tackle challenging ethical questions can guide climate policy, argues political philosopher.

The international community recognises climate change as one of the largest problems facing humanity. But while the impacts are often framed in purely economic terms, the challenging ethical questions climate change raises are often overlooked.

These are questions such as what should be the goals of climate policy, and who should bear the burdens of climate change? Who should be included in decision-making about mitigation and adaptation strategies?

The human rights framework is a valuable way of addressing these challenges and has clear practical implications for science, technology and innovation.

## **A dangerous target**

A human rights framework provides guidance in three ways. First, it helps specify the aims of climate policy. Article 2 of the UN Framework Convention

on Climate Change refers to dangerous anthropogenic interference but what counts as dangerous?

Many define the goal of climate policy as avoiding an increase of more than two degrees Celsius in global mean temperatures compared with pre-industrial times. But it is far from clear, from a scientific and ethical point of view, why this is the appropriate target, and the process by which it was adopted as a target has been criticised. [1, 2]

A human rights approach helps here, defining dangerous climate change in terms of changes which undermine peoples capacity to enjoy fundamental rights to life, food, water and health. This means that a two-degree target is likely to be too high to safeguard these rights. [3]

A human rights approach can also help guide adaptation by asserting that the goal of adaptation policies is to protect these rights without compromising other entitlements.

### **Sharing the burden**

Second, a human rights framework should inform the way that the international community tackles the question of how the world should share the burdens of combating climate change.

It is crucial that whether we follow the polluter pays principle (those who have created the problem should pay) or the ability to pay principle (those who have the greatest wealth should pay) the costs of combating climate change should not compromise people's fundamental human rights to food, water, life and health.

This point has implications for the sharing of rights to emit greenhouse gases access to energy must be protected by mitigation policies.

It also applies to policies that involve developing new energy sources, such as biofuels. For example, the US bioethanol policy, Brazilian production of bioethanol from sugarcane, and the production of biodiesel from palm oil in Malaysia have been charged, respectively, with compromising the human right to food, with violating labour rights, and with dispossessing people of their traditional lands. [4]

A human rights framework has a third implication namely that people have the right to be informed about, and to participate in, climate policies that have a profound effect on their lives.

### **Practical implications**

In addition to providing guidance for how to tackle the challenges raised by climate change, the human rights framework has three important practical implications especially for science and technology (ST) policy.

First, it explains why extensive technology transfer from the affluent to the least advantaged to enable them to adapt to climate change is a matter of justice, and why the affluent should meet these costs. In addition, those who have developed through industrialisation owe the least advantaged the technology they need to develop in ways that do not exacerbate climate change.

Second, although humanity needs to move to a low-carbon economy, new energy sources should also pass a human rights test. This can be implemented through certification schemes that require any new energy source to meet five key standards, including contributing to a net reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, and to an equitable distribution of the costs and benefits resulting from new technologies. [4]

Third, ST policy should focus on the rights of individuals it is a mistake simply to focus on, say, emissions from states, which tend to sideline issues such as inequalities within states. Focusing on individuals requires, for example, ensuring that certification schemes use human rights criteria and that transferred technology goes to individuals, not unaccountable elites.

### **Collective action, collective impact**

Climate change is the result of many different actors (billions of people as well as firms, governments and international institutions) acting without considering their collective impact on the environment. To address it successfully thus

requires dealing with both a problem of collective action, and the marginalisation of environmental concerns.

This requires going beyond legal declarations. Institutions which shape energy policy from national legislatures and international organisations like the World Trade Organization and World Bank, to bodies funding research into new technologies need to build a human rights test into their decision-making processes.

Second, it requires that these institutions coordinate and cooperate with each other to ensure that social and economic policies are not pursued in ways that destroy the environment. Climate change cannot simply be left to environment agencies.

Third, a human rights framework requires accountable political institutions that enable those affected to assert and defend their rights.

Above this, it requires that policymakers (especially those in affluent countries) provide incentives for the creation of new clean energy sources and technologies, and their diffusion to those who need them to adapt and to develop.

Source: <http://www.scidev.net/global/human-rights/opinion/climate-change-policy-should-pass-a-human-rights-test--1.html>