

EXPERTS PUSH ETHICAL CASE FOR CLIMATE ADAPTATION POLICIES



Image credit: Lawrence Hislop

Speed read

- Adaptation policies should express principles in existing international agreements
- These include the need to avoid unnecessary harm and the right to access data
- A new report fleshes out a framework for adaptation

[BRATISLAVA] The strong ethical case for governments and individuals to help communities adapt to the threats of climate change — on top of purely practical or political factors — is emphasised in a report by the top UN committee responsible for monitoring science ethics.

Climate adaptation policies need to acknowledge and express ethical principles already enshrined in international agreements, according to the report approved yesterday (29 May) by the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) at a

meeting in Bratislava, Slovakia.

Such principles include the need to avoid causing unnecessary harm, to treat all individuals fairly and to provide equitable access to a decent standard of living, says the commission, which operates under the auspices of UNESCO (the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

The principles also include the need to recognise the right to access and benefit from scientific information, which could strengthen poorer developing countries' demands for access to climate data obtained by richer nations using complex or expensive monitoring equipment.

"The report sets out what anyone who is involved in policymaking on climate change adaptation should be responsible for," said Rainier Ibana, chair of the philosophy department of the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, as well as of the COMEST working group on environmental ethics, which produced the report.

"We are not only addressing [central] government policymakers," Ibanez told *SciDev.Net* during the meeting. "At a local level, for example, we hope that our principles could be put up on the wall of a mayor's office."

According to Ibanez, one important aspect of the report is its emphasis on the ethical reasons for addressing the needs of the most vulnerable members of any community, expressed as the need to respect "intellectual and moral solidarity".

The report says: "Because the poorest people are already struggling with day-to-day survival, the poorest countries will face more difficulties as they attempt to overcome the damage done by climate change — flood, storm, rainfall, weather-related illnesses — and to find ways to adapt themselves".

It also underlines some of the responsibilities that need to be exercised by all those involved in creating and applying adaptation policy.

For example, the report says that the exchange of knowledge vital for adaptation policies should not be a one-way street, with policymakers learning about these issues not only from scientists but also from local and indigenous sources.

"[Such sources] also have specific knowledge relevant to adaptation to climate change that should be drawn on, and indeed shared where relevant", it says.

The report provides a detailed justification of a two-page declaration that the commission adopted in 2011 as an ethical framework for climate adaptation policies.

The framework followed a 2009 decision to abandon efforts to produce a universal set of ethical principles on combating climate change due to countries' cultural and political differences.

By limiting itself to providing a framework, COMEST has left it to individual countries to decide how they will express their own ethical principles in their climate change policies and related activities.

The commission also decided that, to speed up deliberations, it would initially focus on the ethics of adaptation policies, setting to one side the trickier area of the ethics of mitigation policies.

COMEST member Workineh Kelbessa Golga, associate professor of philosophy at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, said the report will be "a very useful document, particularly for those in developing countries who need to know what their responsibilities are for combating climate change".

According to Ibana, the next step will be to expand the working group's agenda to include the ethical aspects of climate mitigation.

Source : <http://www.scidev.net/global/climate-change/news/experts-push-ethical-case-for-climate-adaptation-policies.html>