



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Executive Board

Hundred and ninetieth session

# 190 EX/10

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## **REPORT ON ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE DESIRABILITY OF PREPARING A DECLARATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN RELATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE**

### **SUMMARY**

The Executive Board at its 186th session concluded that “the outcome of UNFCCC COP 16 and related international processes have not yet resulted in clear and sufficient information to proceed with the preparation of a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change” (186 EX/Decision 9), a view subsequently noted and endorsed by the General Conference (36 C/Resolution 36). The Board also requested the Director-General “to pursue the examination of this issue and to report on the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change at its 189th session based on clear scientific and scholarly findings and on the conclusions and the outcomes of UNFCCC COP 17”. It was subsequently agreed to delay consideration of this item to the 190th session.

The present report has been prepared in response to the above request. It reviews scientific and scholarly findings and the conclusions and the outcomes of UNFCCC COP 17 and proposes further action to assess the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change.

Financial implications: see paragraph 15.

Action expected of the Executive Board: proposed decision paragraph 16.

## I. BACKGROUND

1. In line with the United Nations system-wide Climate Change Action Framework and the Bali Road Map launched at the 13th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP 13), UNESCO initiated the Strategy for Action on Climate Change in 2008 (180 EX/16 Rev.) and the Enhanced Plan of Action for the Strategy for Action on Climate Change in 2009 (182 EX/INF.7 Annex). The UNESCO Climate Change Initiative was also designed in pursuance of the implementation of the Climate Change Strategy.

2. These initiatives note that ethical consideration is essential to respond appropriately to climate change. Action to address climate change requires assessment tools that can take adequate account of extended and poorly understood causal chains across time and space, conflicting bases of responsibility, fundamental uncertainties relating to the knowledge needed for effective policies, and the challenge of responsible management of collective risk at the global scale.

3. Noting this point, as well as the fact that ethical principles in relation to climate change, while explicit or implicit in many existing legal instruments, have not been consolidated or articulated in a single comprehensive statement, the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) at its 6th Ordinary Session in 2009 recommended that UNESCO develop an ethical framework of principles in relation to climate change, in order to enable UNESCO Member States, and the international community generally, to address adequately the multidimensional challenge of global climate change.

4. Examining the COMEST recommendation and relevant facts, the General Conference at its 35th session in 2009 considered that ethical principles in relation to climate change “may be the subject of a declaration” and that further study of this issue was necessary, and requested the Director-General to submit a report on the desirability of preparing a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change (35 C/Resolution 36).

5. The Executive Board, noting the above-mentioned report at its 185th session in 2010, did not decide to proceed with the drafting of such a declaration (185 EX/Decision 13), but did request further study in this area. In her report (Document 185 EX/13), the Director-General had suggested that (1) the contribution of environmental ethics could be best ensured by means other than a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change; (2) it was unclear whether an agreed basis of relevant principles was available or capable of being developed in a reasonably short time-frame; and (3) there was no consensus among Member States that preparation of such a declaration would make a useful contribution to international response to climate change.

6. A follow-up report on the issues relevant to the assessment of the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change was submitted in 2011 to the 186th session of the Executive Board (Document 186 EX/9). The Board reaffirmed its view that “the outcome of UNFCCC COP 16 and related international processes have not yet resulted in clear and sufficient information to proceed with the preparation of a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change” (186 EX/Decision 9), a view subsequently noted and endorsed by the General Conference (36 C/Resolution 36), and requested the Director-General to pursue the examination of this issue and to report at its 189th session based on clear scientific and scholarly findings and on the conclusions and the outcomes of UNFCCC COP 17. It was subsequently agreed to delay consideration of this item to the 190th session.

7. COMEST has analysed the ethical principles relevant to climate change in consultation with expert communities. Reports on this analysis were considered at the 7th Ordinary Session in 2011 and at the Extraordinary Sessions in 2010 and 2012. COMEST has given particular attention to the ethical principles potentially available for a hypothetical declaration, taking account of scientific and scholarly findings in relevant disciplines and of the diversity of expert opinions.

8. At its Extraordinary Session in 2012, COMEST summarized its assessment in a Statement on Issues Relevant to Consideration of the Desirability of Preparing a Declaration of Ethical Principles, which expressed the view that, by developing universal ethical principles in relation to climate change, UNESCO would, if it saw fit, complement other efforts under way within the United Nations system and provide invaluable support to climate change responses at various levels, and in particular to design of appropriate equitable adaptation policies.

9. COMEST considered that the Framework of Ethical Principles and Responsibilities for Climate Change Adaptation adopted at its 7th Ordinary Session in 2011 could, if UNESCO Member States wished to build on it, constitute a consensual and practical basis for certain aspects of a universal declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change. Specifically the framework identified five principles to guide climate change adaptation: (1) avoiding harm, (2) fairness, (3) equitable access, (4) the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind, and 5) environmental sustainability.

10. However, the aforementioned statement also noted the difficulty of elaborating consensual and relevant ethical principles to address all aspects of climate change, including mitigation. COMEST therefore proposes to pursue its work on ethical principles in relation to climate change in order to establish the background for a more comprehensive framework, dealing with all aspects of the subject. If it appears possible to do so, COMEST proposes subsequently to elaborate such a framework for adoption at the latest at its Ordinary Session in 2015. The work of COMEST would thus be available in due course to inform any further consideration Member States may wish to give to this matter.

11. It remains uncertain whether an expert consensus on these issues is achievable. Furthermore, there are doubts about the value of an ethical initiative by UNESCO on climate change, given the current state of international negotiations on the subject.

12. UNFCCC COP 17, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2011, decided to “launch a process to develop a protocol, another legal instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all Parties, through a subsidiary body under the Convention hereby established and to be known as the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action” stating that this Ad Hoc Working Group “shall complete its work as early as possible but no later than 2015” (FCCC/CP/2011/9/Add.1).

13. As a specialized agency of the United Nations, UNESCO’s consideration and preparation of a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change should be coherent with and support the broad framework of the United Nations on climate change and the comprehensive legally binding agreement on climate change to be presented by 2015 by the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties. Taking account of this timetable, and of the proposed timetable for the substantive background work of COMEST, it appears unhelpful for the Executive Board to give further consideration to this matter before 2015.

14. In parallel with possible future consideration of the desirability of preparing a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change, UNESCO will continue to promote and support regional scientific cooperation in the social and human sciences directed at analysis of climate change impacts and adaptation, *inter alia*, through the work of COMEST and the mechanisms of the intergovernmental programme on Management of Social Transformations (MOST). The practical usefulness of ethical reflection will thus be ensured independently of any normative process.

15. The action called for in this report is covered by existing provisions in document 36 C/5. It has no financial implications, except in so far as its scope may be expanded subject to the availability of extrabudgetary funding.

## II. Proposed draft decision

16. Accordingly, the Executive Board may wish to consider adopting the following draft decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 190 EX/10,
2. Recalling 35 C/Resolution 36, 185 EX/Decision 13, 186 EX/Decision 9, and 36 C/Resolution 36,
3. Taking note of the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (180 EX/16 Rev.), the Enhanced Plan of Action for the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (182 EX/INF.7 Annex), and the Director-General's Climate Change Initiative,
4. Further taking note of the Framework of Ethical Principles and Responsibilities for Climate Change Adaptation adopted by the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) in Doha, Qatar, at its seventh ordinary session,
5. Considering, on the basis of the outcomes of the 17th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP 17), that the international negotiation process is moving forward towards a comprehensive international agreement on climate change by 2015,
6. Welcoming the proposal by the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology to conduct background work towards a framework of ethical principles for climate change which would, if it proves feasible, be available for the consideration of UNESCO in 2015,
7. Invites the Director-General to promote research on the social and ethical dimensions of climate change, and to strengthen policy support for Member States in relation to the social dimensions of climate change at the national and regional levels, through the work of the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology and the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme,
8. Requests the Director-General, in her report to the General Conference at its 37th session, to indicate that further consideration of the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change should be postponed until the 38th session of the General Conference, by which time the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology will have completed its technical background work, and further information will be available about the outcome of negotiation processes under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.