



## General Conference

36th Session, Paris 2011

# 36 C

United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

36 C/21

17 August 2011

Original: English

• Item 5.8 of the provisional agenda

### CONSIDERATION OF THE ADVISABILITY OF PREPARING A DRAFT UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN RELATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

#### OUTLINE

**Source:** 35 C/Resolution 36.

**Background:** At its 35th session, the General Conference requested the Director-General to conduct consultations and study the desirability of preparing a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change and to report to the Executive Board. At its 185th session, the Executive Board concluded (185 EX/Decision 13) that it was not then desirable to proceed with such preparation and that, furthermore, the technical basis for a declaration was not established. The Board requested a follow-up report on the subject at its 186th session, which, in due course, reached a similar conclusion (186 EX/Decision 9). The Director-General was requested 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.

**Purpose:** To take note of the consultations and studies conducted to assess the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change and the decisions of the Executive Board thereon.

**Decision required:** paragraph 15.

## I. BACKGROUND

1. The UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change, approved by the Executive Board at its 180th session (180 EX/16 Rev.), is designed to help Member States to build and maintain the requisite knowledge base, and to adopt measures to adapt to the impacts of climate change, contribute to the mitigation of its causes, and enhance sustainable development. The UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (180 EX/16 Rev.) ensures that UNESCO's actions are coherent with and supportive of the United Nations system-wide climate change action framework initiated by the United Nations system Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and the Bali Road Map launched at the UNFCCC COP 13 in Bali in December 2007.
2. Within the Director-General's Climate Change Initiative (formally presented at the Copenhagen Conference in December of 2009) and within the larger strategic focus adopted by UNESCO with respect to climate change, ethics has an essential contribution to make both to strengthening of the social and human sciences knowledge base and to reinforcement of adaptation capacities. Action to address climate change needs 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 required for effective policies, and the challenge of responsible management of collective risk at the global scale.
3. Noting the above general points, as well as the existence of a recognized body of ethical principles that has not, hitherto, been consolidated or articulated into a single comprehensive statement relating to climate change, the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) made the following recommendation at its Sixth Ordinary Session (16-19 June 2009); namely, in view of the nature and extent of the scientific, social and human challenges of global climate change, which necessitate adoption of policies at the global level to address the pressing needs of the most vulnerable in the face of major uncertainties and the exigencies of international cooperation, and of the urgency to determine universal ethical principles to guide responses to such challenges, UNESCO should develop an ethical framework of principles in relation to climate change.
4. Taking account, *inter alia*, of the recommendation of COMEST and of the decision of the Executive Board (182 EX/Decision 56) that ethical principles in relation to climate change may be the subject of a declaration, the General Conference, at its 35th session, requested the Director-General "following consultations with Member States and other stakeholders, including relevant United Nations' agencies, further study on the matter by COMEST and the UNESCO Secretariat, to submit to the Executive Board at its 185th session, a report on the desirability of preparing a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change and to prepare, if found appropriate by the Executive Board, a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change, taking into account the conclusions reached at the 15th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP-15) to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009, and to submit the outcome to the General Conference at its 36th session".
5. In response to the above request, an extensive process of consultation and study was conducted in 2010 in order to clarify the main issues relevant to assessment of the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change. The outcomes of the process supported the following conclusions:
  - (a) in certain clearly identified areas, the contribution of environmental ethics to the international response to climate change can probably be ensured by other, more flexible means than by preparation of a declaration of ethical principles;
  - (b) it is unclear whether an agreed basis of relevant principles is available or capable of being developed in a reasonably short time frame;

- (c) there is no consensus that preparation of such a declaration would make a useful contribution to the international response to climate change, and the opinions of Member States also remain divided.

6. In particular, COMEST concluded at its Extraordinary Session (28-30 June 2010), after reviewing the outcomes of its work and of the study process as a whole, that the preparation of a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change would not be feasible for submission to the General Conference at its 36th session. As an alternative approach to operationalization of environmental ethics for policy support, COMEST decided to pursue work on development of an ethical framework for climate change policies, an interim report on which was published in 2010.

7. On the basis of these considerations, the Executive Board determined (185 EX/Decision 13) that it would not be appropriate at the present time to proceed with the preparation of a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change.

8. The Executive Board further requested the Director-General “to take into account recent scientific and scholarly findings on the ethics of climate change and submit to it at its 186th session a report reviewing the issues relevant to the assessment of the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change, with particular reference to the outcomes of the sixteenth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP-16) and to related international processes, with a view to informing deliberation on the follow-up to 35 C/Resolution 36 by the General Conference at its 36th session” and to invite COMEST “to continue to work on the desirability of an ethical framework for climate change policies”.

9. The follow-up report submitted to the Executive Board at its 186th session did not provide evidence of any major change in the issues relevant to consideration of the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change.

10. Further study confirms that the currently available internationally recognized ethical principles do not offer an adequate basis for a hypothetical declaration. Indeed, with reference to the scholarly literature, debates in the specialized environmental ethics literature do not provide support for a consolidation and reaffirmation of currently recognized ethical principles. Furthermore, such principles are not generally specific enough to offer concrete answers to the practical challenges of climate change. It may reasonably be considered, therefore, that the most urgent feasible task is not to expand, extend or reinterpret existing principles, but rather to explore the practical tools that, by taking account of ethical principles, can foster normatively acceptable responses to the challenges of climate change, taking due account of the diversity of circumstances and situations. Such an approach requires strong connections, particularly within Major Programme III, between environmental ethics and work on the social and human dimensions of climate change (where climate change is one of the elements within a broader of global environmental change).

11. In the Outcome Document of the United Nations Summit on the Millennium Development Goals (A/RES/65/1, paragraph 26), the General Assembly maintained “the Framework Convention as the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change”. Consideration of the outcomes of UNFCCC COP-16, held in Cancún, Mexico, in November-December 2010, confirms the conclusion reached by the Executive Board at its 185th session that the current international climate change negotiating process should be brought to fruition before the possible relevance of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change is re-examined. The adoption of a broader approach to climate change, including more balanced consideration of adaptation issues, ensures that key ethical concerns are addressed more directly by the Conference of the Parties than within a narrow mitigation framework. Furthermore, even in the absence of a comprehensive legally binding agreement on all aspects of climate change, the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties has shown its capacity to

achieve consensus on specific issues. Separate consideration of a declaration of ethical principles in an alternative forum appears thus to have limited added value at the present time.

12. On the basis of these considerations, the Executive Board considered (186 EX/Decision 9) that clear and sufficient information is not currently available to proceed with the preparation of a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change.

13. Noting the important contribution that environmental ethics can make to climate change adaptation, the Executive Board further requested the Director-General “to ensure linkages between activities in environmental ethics, including through the work of the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), and the social and human science dimensions of climate change, including through the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme, with a view to contributing to the understanding of adaptation challenges and the development of adaptation capacities through sustained national policies”. The requested linkages have been proposed in the draft 36 C/5 document.

14. Finally, wishing to review the issue periodically, the Executive Board requested the Director-General to pursue examination thereof 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 the 17th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP-17) to be held in Durban, South Africa, in 2011”. Provision for work in this regard is included in the draft 36 C/5 document (Major Programme III).

## II. CONCLUSION

15. The General Conference may wish to adopt a resolution along the following lines:

The General Conference,

1. Recalling 35 C/Resolution 36, requesting the Director-General to consult on and to study the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change,
2. Considering the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change, as approved by the Executive Board at its 180th session (180 EX/16 Rev.), the Enhanced Plan of Action for the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (182 EX/INF.7 Annex – September 2009), and the Director-General’s Climate Change Initiative (December 2009), which foregrounds ethical and social questions in relation to climate change,
3. Having taken note of 185 EX/Decision 13 and of 186 EX/Decision 9,
4. Considering that it would not be appropriate at the present time to proceed with the drafting of a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change,
5. Requests the Director-General to maintain and enhance the proposed linkages between activities in environmental ethics, including through the work of the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST), and the social and human science dimensions of climate change, including through the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme focus on social transformations arising from global environmental change, with a view to contributing to the understanding of adaptation challenges and the development of adaptation capacities through sustained national policies;
6. Also requests the Director-General, on the basis of the report to be submitted to the Executive Board at its 189th session and of such follow-up as may be requested

thereto, to report to the General Conference at its 37th session on the issues relevant to the assessment of the desirability of preparing a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change, taking account in particular of scientific and scholarly findings, of relevant international negotiation processes, and of the impact of ethically-informed support for national adaptation policies, as implemented through Major Programme III and through the Intersectoral Platform on Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation.