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REPORT ON THE ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE ASSESSMENT OF THE DESIRABILITY OF PREPARING A DRAFT UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN RELATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

SUMMARY

In 35 C/Resolution 36, the General Conference considered that “ethical principles in relation to climate change may be the subject of a declaration and that further study of this issue is necessary” and requested the Director-General “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”.

On the basis of the report submitted to it at its 185th session, the Executive Board (185 EX/Decision 13) 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”.

The present report proposes conclusions, based on recent scientific and scholarly findings on the ethics of climate change and assessment of the outcomes of UNFCCC COP 16 and related international processes, with regard to the desirability of proceeding with the preparation of a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change.

Financial implications: see paragraph 13.

Action required of the Executive Board: see decision paragraph 14.

I. BACKGROUND

1. In considering that “ethical principles in relation to climate change may be the subject of a declaration and that further study of this issue is necessary”, the General Conference (35 C/Resolution 36) took account, *inter alia*, of the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change, as approved by the Executive Board at its 180th session (180 EX/16 Rev.), of the request by the Executive Board, at its 181st session (181 EX/Decision 15), that the Director-General enhance the Plan of Action on Climate Change, in particular through focus on the social and ethical implications thereof, of the recommendation made by the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) at its Sixth Ordinary Session (16-19 June 2009) “that UNESCO should develop an ethical framework of principles in relation to climate change”.

2. Within the Director-General’s Climate Change Initiative and within the larger strategic focus adopted by UNESCO with respect to climate change, ethics has an important contribution to make. Response to global environmental change requires assessment tools that can take adequate account of extended and still to be understood causal chains across time and space, including the conflicting bases of differentiated responsibility in mitigation and adaptation, fundamental uncertainties relating to the knowledge bases required for the successful elaboration of effective policies, and the challenge of responsible management of collective risk at the global scale. In addition, there are major ethical issues with respect to the scope, focus, availability and accessibility of basic science, monitoring information and early-warning capacity that should be taken into account in the development and management of environmental knowledge.

3. The UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (180 EX/16 Rev.) and the Enhanced Plan of Action for the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (182 EX/INF.7 Annex) ensure 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 thirteenth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP 13) in Bali in December 2007. As outlined in the publication *Acting on Climate Change: The United Nations System Delivering as One* (see page 8 and pages 11-19) presented by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to UNFCCC COP 14 in Poznan (December 2008), UNESCO together with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) is entrusted within the CEB climate change action framework with the responsibility as convener for the cross-cutting area of interdisciplinary climate knowledge: science, assessment, monitoring and early warning. Furthermore, insofar as UNESCO has a specific ethical mandate, reflection on the ethical challenges of climate change should figure as among the key inputs expected from UNESCO within the comprehensive CEB response.

4. In light of the above background, the desirability of preparing a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change was assessed in 2010 through a process of consultation and study designed to answer the following three questions:

- (a) whether, if feasible, preparation of such a declaration might be expected to make a useful contribution to international response to climate change;
- (b) whether an agreed basis of relevant principles is available or capable of being developed in a reasonably short time-frame;
- (c) whether there exist alternative approaches or more flexible means to ensure enhanced ethical awareness and behaviour.

5. In her report to the Executive Board at its 185th session, the Director-General concluded that:

- (a) with respect to international response to climate change, and in particular to enhancement of the adaptation capacity of Member States, the contribution of environmental ethics can be best ensured by means other than a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change;
- (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 international response to climate change and the opinions of Member States also remain divided.

6. Having considered these findings, the Executive Board declined to initiate a process to prepare a draft declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change for submission to the General Conference at its 36th session.

7. In its decision 185 EX/Decision 13, the Executive Board requested that the matter be followed up and specifically that the Director-General “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”.

8. Complementary analysis of the ethical principles relevant to climate change has been conducted, on the basis of the academic literature and in conjunction with COMEST, drawing on several expert meetings, including the international conference on “Environmental ethics: biodiversity and climate change” held in Monaco, with the support of the Government of the Principality, from 8 to 10 December 2010. **The preliminary conclusion adopted by COMEST at its 2010 Extraordinary Session (Paris, 28-30 June 2010) confirms that the currently available internationally recognized ethical principles do not offer an adequate basis for a hypothetical declaration.**

9. The scholarly literature is at considerable variance with the current consensus of the international community as expressed in particular in the UNFCCC negotiation process. Debates in the specialized environmental ethics literature do not provide support for a consolidation and reaffirmation of currently recognized ethical principles. Conversely, the call, which runs through much of the recent literature, for a fundamentally new ethical approach to responsibility and solidarity in the face of climate change does not appear to offer a practical basis for work towards a hypothetical declaration.

10. Furthermore, regardless of the fundamental assessment of the ethical principles themselves, it is clear from the expert debates that they 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 the programmes of the Social and Human Sciences Sector, between environmental and work on the social and human dimensions of climate change.

11. Activities since the 185th session of the Executive Board have notably confirmed the importance of developing ethically grounded capacity-building tools in the areas of science and adaptation. Thus, ministers and delegates participating in the meeting on “Climate Change Adaptation in the Caribbean: Science, Ethics and Policies”, held in Basseterre, Saint Kitts and Nevis, 8-9 March 2011, invited UNESCO 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 mechanisms of the intergovernmental programme on Management of Social Transformations (MOST)”.

12. In the outcome document of the United Nations Summit on the Millennium Development Goals (A/RES/65/1, §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 17, held in Cancun, 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.

13. The action called for in this report is covered by existing provision in the 35 C/5 or is incorporated in proposals submitted to the Executive Board with respect to the draft 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. CONCLUSION

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

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 186 EX/9,
2. Recalling 35 C/Resolution 36 and 185 EX/Decision 13,
3. Also recalling the request by the Executive Board, at its 181st session (181 EX/Decision 15), that the Director-General enhance the Plan of Action on climate change, in particular through focusing on the social and ethical implications thereof,
4. Further recalling the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (180 EX/16 Rev. – October 2008) and the Enhanced Plan of Action for the UNESCO Strategy for Action on Climate Change (182 EX/INF.7 Annex – September 2009),
5. Taking note of the Director-General’s Climate Change Initiative (December 2009) which foregrounds ethical and social questions in relation to climate change,
6. Concludes, from recent scientific and scholarly findings on the ethics of climate change and assessment of the outcomes of UNFCCC COP 16 and related international processes, that not sufficient evidence is available at the present time to proceed with preparation of a declaration of ethical principles in relation to climate change,
7. Requests the Director-General to ensure linkages between activities in environmental ethics, including through the work of COMEST, and social and human science dimensions of climate change, including through the MOST Programme, with a view to enhancing understanding of adaptation challenges and development of adaptation capacities through national policies.