

Balancing Ethics and Climate Change: A Framework for Decision Making

In many communities around the globe, climate activists are raising the issue of climate justice. By doing this, they are, in part, framing the issue of climate change from an ethical perspective. Given the high profile of climate change and, in many places, the increasing demands of citizens to take action, it is worth considering how ethics and climate change may be related, and how ethical principles can contribute to climate action planning and the development of adaptation programs.

Global Ethics

One way to look at the climate challenge is from a “global ethics” perspective. Today's challenges, as we witness in the financial crisis and in global climate change, force us to look outside our own boundaries. Our “group” is increasingly viewed as not just our city, state, or country but other communities around the world to whom we must justify our behavior. This idea of global ethics is germane to these reflections on climate change and the ethical responsibility of public officials vis-à-vis this issue.

Guiding Principles for Local Decisions

The impacts of climate change must ultimately be managed at the local level, because the consequences of droughts, rises in sea level, increased storm intensity, and other impacts are played out at the local level. New Orleans, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, is a terrifying example.

Just as the public manager's professional code of ethics serves as a guide for day-to-day management decisions, it can also be applied to decision making around the climate change issue. Protecting communities from harm, for example, has always been part of the professional manager's ethical responsibility. For many, protecting their communities from climate impacts is an integral part of that charge, just as environmental protection, public health, and emergency management programs are.

Leading-edge communities are developing climate mitigation and adaptation strategies to counteract climate change disasters.¹ But where do ethics come to play in the decision-making process? Here are principles that can be applied to specific issues and questions that may be raised in the process of designing and developing climate action programs.²

DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

The principle of distributive justice is concerned with the fair and equitable distribution of resources and offers a guide for the equitable distribution of wealth. When it comes to climate change, the principle of global distributive justice suggests that wealthier nations—those that contribute the most carbon emissions (the global North)—are responsible for assisting the poorer countries (the global South) as they adapt to climate impacts.

On the local level, related ethical questions might arise: Who is responsible for paying for the damages of climate impacts? And who is responsible for the costs of adaptation? Applying the distributive justice principle to the question, decision makers will need to consider who may be the most vulnerable in the community and to what degree they have contributed to the carbon (and other greenhouse gas) emissions locally. Generally, those with the most wealth have a larger carbon footprint than their poorer counterparts. Local climate adaptation plans focus on the vulnerabilities of the region and how different neighborhoods will be affected by anticipated climate impacts.

INTERGENERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Planning for the future is inherent in any climate action program. Looking at a time frame of 20 years and beyond, intergenerational considerations force us to ask what sort of long-term burdens today's actions are generating. A key ethical question that underlies any local climate change program is: What environmental devastation and debt are we leaving the next generation if we do not stabilize the changing climate?

PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

In the case of climate change, local leaders and community members may resist taking action until there is far greater certainty about the expected severity of the impacts. Applying the precautionary principle, it is prudent if not mandatory to take action to reduce serious risk in the face of uncertainties that the risk will actually occur.

In the case of climate change, there is a consensus among mainstream scientists that climate change is in fact occurring now and the risks of dangerous and even catastrophic change are increasing at an accelerating rate. Governments, corporations, and individuals have often used scientific uncertainty as justification for lack of action.

In the face of high risks coupled with uncertainties, the precautionary principle in its simplest form suggests that we plan for worst-case scenarios. Regional and local climate data are strong enough at this point to support the need to face the potential of harm to communities, despite lack of total certainty. If governments wait until all uncertainties about climate change impacts are resolved, it is likely to be too late to prevent potentially catastrophic damages.

HUMAN RIGHTS

When a community is deciding what to do, if anything, about climate change, another ethical principle to be considered is that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and personal security as recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The UN predicts such impacts of our changing climate as desertification, food shortages, diminishing water supplies, and

rising sea levels, all of which could contribute to millions of refugees worldwide over the next few decades.

The human rights principle can clearly be applied here. All people have the right to be protected from threats to their lives and health caused by others. Current and future climate impacts pose a real and serious threat to these rights.

DO NO HARM

The “do no harm” principle applies largely because climate change will lead to serious harm to many people (as well as to animals and other biotic systems) who have not caused the problem. In addition, those people most likely to be severely affected by climate change—the poor, the young, and the elderly—do not have the wherewithal to prepare for, or adapt sufficiently for, the severe consequences of climate impacts.

A serious ethical question that managers have had to answer in relation to local emergency management planning is: Will anyone be harmed if no action is taken? When the do-no-harm principle is applied to climate efforts, the failure to develop effective climate adaptation and mitigation plans may in fact cause harm to citizens.

Guidance for Decision Makers

Local government managers regularly use ethical principles and rely on their professional ethical code when deliberating about important decisions. The community expects that ethical principles will be applied to tough decisions; that justice, fairness, and equity will be key perspectives guiding any problem-solving process; and that ethics will inform the decision-making process.

Climate change is a critical issue that has major ethical implications. Applying appropriate and relevant ethical principles is one way to frame the issue to help identify fair and equitable strategies to manage the consequences of this global challenge.

Notes

¹ For case studies of how cities are dealing with climate change, see "Adapting to Climate Change: Strategies for Local Government," *IQ Report*, January 2009, published by ICMA.

² For a full presentation of these principles see the *White Paper on the Ethical Dimensions of Climate Change* by the Rock Ethics Institute of Penn State University, available online at <http://rockethics.psu.edu/climate>.

Adapted from Mary Walsh, “Balancing Ethics and Climate Change: A Framework for Decision Making,” April 2010 *PMPlus*, published by ICMA. Mary Walsh is professor, Peace and Social Justice Program, John Fisher College, Rochester, New York.