



Climate Justice

OPINION · EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

13 March 2024

The full text of the Opinion “Climate Justice” as well as all accompanying information and documentation issued by the German Ethics Council on the topic are available at <https://www.ethikrat.org/en/topics/current-ethics-council-topics/climate-ethics>.

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Jägerstraße 22/23 · D-10117 Berlin

Phone: +49/30/20370-242 · Fax: +49/30/20370-252

Email: kontakt@ethikrat.org

www.ethikrat.org

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»» INTRODUCTION

- 1) Tackling climate change brings up serious questions about justice and responsibility. At the centre of the discussion, there are three intertwined dimensions of climate justice: an intra-societal, an international and an intergenerational dimension. Burdens and responsibilities must be shared in a fair way in these dimensions.
- 2) Beginning with a brief description of the current situation (chapter 2), the German Ethics Council in this Opinion develops a concept of climate justice, which aims to distribute the burdens and responsibilities in all three dimensions in such a way that the minimum requirements for a good, successful life will be fulfilled now and in the future (chapter 3). Based on this concept, the Ethics Council discusses the key issues regarding responsibility in climate change (chapter 4) and formulates recommendations (chapter 5).

>> CURRENT SITUATION

- 3) Climate is defined as the average of dynamic long-term processes in the earth's atmosphere, determined by means of meteorological methods, and summarises regional and global weather phenomena. There can no longer be any valid doubt that since the beginning of industrialisation, human influence has led to a global climate warming, especially through the combustion of fossil fuels.
- 4) Unabated further global warming would have catastrophic consequences. Even now, extreme weather events like torrential rains, flooding, heat waves and droughts have become increasingly frequent. The destruction of human livelihoods may lead to indirect damages like poverty, hunger and migration. Heat also threatens human health, as does the spread of pathogens and climate-change related psychological stress.
- 5) Reactions to the challenges of climate change include measures to reduce global warming (mitigation), measures to adjust (adaptation),

and technological approaches to change the climate (climate engineering).

- 6) Examples of mitigation measures are the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in power generation, food production, the heating of buildings, traffic, industrial manufacturing and private consumption.
- 7) Adaptation strategies to climate change include changes in agriculture, robust infrastructures like dams and storm-proof power lines, or the preparation of the health system for the consequences of global warming.
- 8) Climate engineering comprises technical measures to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere in a targeted manner, and other interventions in the climate system, like the reduction of solar radiation by depositing large amounts of sulphur dioxide in the stratosphere.
- 9) Among the population, the attitudes towards measures to combat climate change are varied, and are influenced by the discourse in the media. It is the task of climate ethics to show the possibilities of responsible political and individual action in managing climate change, to work out and justify morally acceptable options for action, and thereby reduce uncertainties.

>> CLIMATE CHANGE AND JUSTICE

- 10) Both the causal responsibility for climate change and the dangers, damages and losses caused by it, as well as the means to cope with it, are unequally distributed. Such inequalities raise questions of justice.
- 11) Justice determines in a reasoned manner what is appropriate for individuals and groups. The central ethical problem of climate change concerns the appropriate distribution of the associated burdens and responsibilities.
- 12) The concept of climate justice advocated in this Opinion incorporates egalitarian, sufficientarian and prioritarian considerations. At the core of egalitarian theories lies the principle of equal treatment. Sufficientarian concepts focus on the minimum requirements for a good, successful life. Prioritarian approaches advocate that the most disadvantaged people should be given preference.

- 13) The German Ethics Council combines these three perspectives in the framework of a human rights approach to a *sufficientarian threshold concept of climate justice*. This means firstly that, as a principle, all human beings should have equal opportunities to lead a good, successful life (egalitarian). Secondly, nobody should fall below certain threshold values for essential basic goods or abilities, like health, food, water, safety or mobility, which must be defined as a minimum requirement for such a life. Thirdly, climate protection measures should be designed in such a way that those who are most affected by climate change can reach the relevant thresholds (prioritarian).
- 14) Since tackling climate change is commanded by ethical considerations of justice and requires a comprehensive transformation at both individual and social levels, ideas of a good, successful life will in many respects not be feasible in the form of current Western consumption behaviours. At the same time, such a transformation opens up new opportunities.
- 15) The concept of climate justice introduced above leads to ethical consequences in at least three dimensions: in view of different population groups within a society, in view of people in different countries and world regions, and in view of current and future generations.
- 16) Within society, different groups of people suffer more or less severely from the damages and burdens due to climate change and the measures to contain it, also in Germany. Especially people with limited financial means are hit particularly hard. This is why it is necessary to prevent an aggravation of social disruptions and conflicts, and to distribute burdens in such a way that the requirements for a good, successful life are fulfilled for everyone. As a consequence, climate protection measures must be examined in particular with regard to their reasonableness for those who are not so well-off, and effective compensatory as well as support measures are required to ensure that relevant threshold values can be met.

- 17) At an international level, the long history of colonialism and industrialisation must be taken into account, as well as ongoing neo-colonial dependencies. Contributions to global warming, climate damages and the possibilities to protect oneself from them are geographically unevenly distributed. Therefore, a distinction must be made between growth in countries of the global South that are catching up on development, and further growth of consumption and resource use in industrialised countries, and appropriate compensatory payments must be negotiated. People from all countries deserve equal opportunities to lead a good, successful life, and must be able to achieve corresponding threshold values. Again, those who are furthest away from achieving this should be favoured first.
- 18) From an intergenerational perspective, young people and people who are not yet born will have to bear the major burdens of a changed world climate and the measures required to deal with it. Therefore, it is imperative to take all necessary and reasonable measures today in order to prevent that future generations can no longer achieve the minimum requirements for a good, successful life. At the same time, all solutions under consideration must leave future generations sufficient scope for decisions and actions, and must not impose lasting disproportionate burdens on them.
- 19) With regard to all three dimensions, the path to more climate justice is characterised by considerable conflicts. This is why procedurally just dialogue processes are indispensable.
- 20) Within our society, the established normative principles and procedures of the liberal-democratic order apply. They require an open and equitable agreement between all those affected and all those in charge. Suitable institutions and procedures must be (further) developed. This presupposes fair access and participation opportunities to the public political discourse on climate justice, and a transparent comparison of different arguments and options for action.

- 21) Internationally, a procedurally just debate on issues of climate justice requires better dialogue and closer co-operation. Sustainable political decisions may only be negotiated in fair, multilateral processes and must be laid down in contractual agreements. In the longer term, the establishment and extension of international institutions ensuring fair political decision-making procedures in climate issues seems indispensable in order to consolidate such communication processes.

- 22) With regard to the intergenerational dimension, it is necessary to appropriately take into account the interests of younger and future generations. In this context, ideas under discussion are a stronger involvement of young people in political processes, and ways to represent and advocate for future generations in today's negotiation processes.

>> RESPONSIBILITY IN CLIMATE CHANGE

- 23) Responsibility presupposes freedom, and freedom includes responsibility. This principle also applies for climate change; it is crucial for our free and democratic society and safeguarded and guaranteed by law. Social coexistence requires mutual restrictions of freedom, in order to provide equitable freedom for all.
- 24) The inner and rationally guided realisation of the necessity for action leads to self-commitment as an expression of one's individual freedom. This may imply that people question their former lifestyle or adapt their behaviour, for example by voluntarily abandoning certain vacation, consumption or mobility practices.
- 25) On grounds of justice, it can be morally required to contribute to measures to tackle climate change. If one's own exercise of freedom interferes in an unjust manner with the freedom and welfare of others or of future generations, for example through consumption that is harmful to the climate, the authorities may intervene with restrictions

of freedom. As long as there is no regulatory obligation, it is left up to the individual to accept a moral obligation to co-operate.

- 26) Responsibilities and obligations to co-operate are inter-linked on different stakeholder levels that comprise actors with different structures and specific roles. The fulfilment of individual moral obligations to co-operate, such as adapting one's individual mobility behaviour, is facilitated by supportive framework conditions and, in some cases, is only made possible in the first place. Creating such conditions is largely subject of state regulation, but also requires private organisations such as companies to assume responsibility. In order to avoid a diffusion of responsibility, it is necessary to clearly attribute responsibilities in a well-founded concept of multi-actor responsibility.
- 27) Individual responsibility is often at the centre of the climate debate. However, it would be inappropriate to expect that climate change could be tackled by the efforts of individuals alone. The authorities cannot oblige people to lifestyle and consumption behaviours causing lower emissions unless the economic and social order provides suitable conditions for it.
- 28) Nevertheless, it is true that the responsibility to protect the climate partly lies with individuals and their consumption decisions, at least within the scope of individual levels of freedom and the availability of reasonable lower-emission alternatives. Individual contributions may be small, but they remain morally relevant. Insofar as they become a habit and routine in the behaviour of many individuals, they promote the emergence and development of a culture of assumed responsibility. Individual responsibility can also be assumed by contributing to democratic decision-making and opinion-forming.
- 29) At the level of non-governmental or private organisations, companies in particular have a moral responsibility to enable individuals to develop climate-friendly consumption behaviours. According to the

ability-to-pay principle, especially large multinationals are obliged to contribute. The companies' moral obligation to co-operate must not burden them excessively. Rules of competition and framework conditions for economic activities should be designed in a way to promote, and not impede, climate justice, at least at the national level.

- 30) At the political level, the task is to provide the social conditions and the legal framework so that behaviours that cause lower emissions are possible without unreasonable personal or entrepreneurial encumbrances, and so that burdens are distributed fairly. Measures must be effective, necessary and proportionate, and be democratically legitimised. Moreover, they should be structured in a foresightful manner, so that individuals and private organisations can brace themselves for them, and planning security for companies is ensured, for example.
- 31) Given the global dimension of climate change, an effective global strategy that goes beyond existing international agreements is urgently needed. Germany must, via supranational agreements, integrate as many countries as possible into the efforts for climate protection, and must let itself be integrated, too. The state has a significant responsibility to foster global agreement on more climate justice and to achieve binding global conventions with effective reduction targets, which will in fact be implemented.
- 32) There are currently considerable obstacles at all levels to the equitable fulfilment of climate responsibility. In view of the considerable risks posed by climate change, the German Ethics Council considers it the duty of state actors to make vigorous efforts, even if it is uncertain whether ambitious targets to limit global warming can actually be achieved. Considering the extremely serious consequences of unabated global warming, it would be irresponsible to refrain from taking national and European climate protection measures simply because a worldwide implementation of such measures does not yet seem to be guaranteed. Moreover, efforts to reach more effective international

climate protection agreements would not be politically credible without making efforts at the national or European level at the same time.

- 33) Germany can assume international responsibility particularly in the field of technological development, both at state and business level. In doing so, the mitigation of greenhouse gases and a more precautionary approach regarding adaptation to climate change must be at the core of long-term climate-friendly and just development. At the same time, the development of technologies to achieve “negative emissions” must be fostered, among them techniques for carbon capture and storage. However, such technologies may not be misused to relax emission reduction efforts, since otherwise a vicious circle of increasing emissions and increased need for carbon capture would be triggered.
- 34) From the considerations detailed above ensues the responsibility to scrutinise climate-relevant framework conditions for politics, business and technology – both nationally and globally – from an ethical justice perspective, and to develop alternatives. With regard to the current economic system based on competition and quantitative growth, industrialised countries are faced with far-reaching questions about a fundamental transformation.
- 35) An open debate in society is necessary in order to discuss the required balancing of interests, and to make the purpose of corresponding measures clear and transparent. Actors at all levels jointly bear the responsibility to make such a transformation towards a sustainable and climate-neutral society a key issue, and to develop alternatives for a good, successful life without further growth in consumption and exhaustion of resources.
- 36) When it comes to reaching agreement on political measures, communication across society is particularly important, especially in the media and in politics. All actors with communicative reach in society

bear responsibility for factual and transparent reporting and a differentiated presentation of different positions.

- 37) Demands to suspend democratic freedoms and processes in order to impose the measures required for lower-emission activities in a technocratic or ecoauthoritarian manner must be firmly rejected. Nevertheless, on all levels mentioned above, the responsibility arises to reflect on the further development of current institutions and processes of democratic opinion-forming, given the challenges of climate change.

>> CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 38) Responses to the challenges posed by climate change must adequately take into account the interests, concerns and abilities of all human beings living today, as well as of future generations. This is why in this Opinion, the German Ethics Council has developed a concept of climate justice, which aims to distribute burdens and duties in such a way that the minimum requirements for a good, successful life can be achieved for all human beings now and in the future.
- 39) On the basis of the considerations detailed above, the German Ethics Council recommends:
1. The challenges and opportunities of the socio-ecological transformation that is required to tackle climate change should be discussed more clearly in public, in politics and across society. In these discussions, climate justice and responsibility should take centre stage. Political parties, civil society, media and science should consider and develop perspectives for a good, successful

life in a sustainable and climate-neutral society without further growth of consumption and exhaustion of resources.

2. Material and immaterial costs to implement climate protection measures should be defined as precisely as possible, communicated in a transparent manner and distributed equitably and responsibly, within society as well as internationally and inter-generationally. This process should be guided by threshold values for important basic goods and capabilities as minimum requirements for a good, successful life, and prioritise the needs of people whose provision does not reach certain threshold levels.
3. Climate protection measures should be interconnected in an overall political concept which includes changes in the energy sector, the promotion of low-emission technologies, the reduction of climate-damaging subsidies, regulations to reduce emissions and corresponding economic incentives, far-sighted measures to adapt to the inevitable consequences of climate change and the development and testing of technologies to capture carbon from the earth's atmosphere. For every decision on technical measures, possible new path dependencies at the expense of future generations must be avoided, for example if they are burdened with maintaining a global economy for carbon capture in the long term.
4. At a national level, care must be taken to quickly and effectively fulfil the commitments undertaken by Germany in the Paris Agreement. This can best be done by expanding and intensifying carbon pricing on products and services. In doing so, justice within society must be ensured, e.g. by means of the compensatory effect of a general per-capita refund from carbon pricing to all residents. Moreover, it must be ensured that attractive climate-friendly alternatives are available. In addition, regulatory instruments like disproportionately high pricing on particularly

climate-damaging products or services must be considered in order to make these less attractive for wealthy persons, too.

5. The fair distribution of responsibilities for these and other climate protection measures is mainly a task for the state. In order to fulfil this task, companies and other private organisations must be more strongly obliged, too, and be supported through appropriate framework conditions. The widespread focus to date on the personal responsibility of individual persons does not do justice to the problem. Individual freedom of choice is always influenced by the collective action of many, and strongly determined by political framework conditions. This is why clear legal regulations are required to make it easier for individuals to behave in a climate-friendly way. It is inappropriate for state actors to expect climate-friendly consumption from individuals as long as the conditions for such behaviour are largely unfulfilled or even thwarted within the economic and social order desired and supported by the same state, so that lower-emission choices still require a kind of “moral heroism” in many respects. Moral criticism of private lifestyle and consumption decisions is no substitute for necessary political measures.
6. The legitimate expectation of policymakers to create more effective framework conditions for climate protection does not, however, release individuals from their personal moral obligation to co-operate. Everyone has a moral responsibility to contribute to the fulfilment of social responsibilities. This includes a reconsideration of one’s personal conduct, way of life, and civic engagement with regard to the challenges of climate change and the ways to deal with it, and to change them accordingly, as far as possible and reasonable – irrespective of regulatory standards.
7. The debate on fair ways to deal with climate change and its consequences must be pursued in a framework of open societal

discourses. In this process, fair access and participation opportunities must be ensured, as well as transparent consideration of different pieces of information, arguments and options for action. Taking binding decisions must be reserved for the democratically legitimised bodies intended for this purpose, especially the parliaments. Scientific expert committees and extra-parliamentary civic engagement are part of the public discourse in a liberal parliamentary democracy; however, they cannot replace democratic decision-making. A potential destabilisation of democracy must be counteracted at all levels. Individual commitment and protests must abide by democratic rules, too.

8. Media and politics bear a particular responsibility to facilitate and lead a constructive, solution-oriented discourse on climate change. A credible discussion about realistic solutions to climate change requires fact-based reporting that neither glosses over nor exaggerates problems, and offers appropriate space for the range of positions found in society and science. Doubts that are barely substantiated by facts, evasive strategies or pseudo-solutions should not receive too much attention. Exaggerated alarmism or a one-sided focus on problems should both be avoided. In view of the great challenges of a socio-ecological transformation, the expected positive aspects should also be sufficiently highlighted.
9. Given the various health hazards of climate change that can be observed even today – also in Germany – and which are expected to increase, the health sector has a particular responsibility to respond to these challenges and to implement protective measures. Legislators should change the rules and distribution of resources in the healthcare system in such a way that special attention is paid to climate adaptation issues in the regulation, control and organisation of the healthcare system.

10. Climate change and its consequences cannot be tackled at the national level alone. Especially at an international level, global warming must be addressed more effectively. Decisions on an internationally just distribution of burdens arising from climate change and the measures to deal with it require an intensification of intergovernmental understanding and co-operation. Therefore, Germany should give high priority to further increasing its current efforts in order to achieve effective global agreements to limit global warming and to set binding reduction targets whose implementation is guaranteed by the nation states. In order to achieve this, all diplomatic possibilities must be deployed and agreements made within alliances of states like the EU and G20, as well as other multinational agreements, as intermediate steps. Particular emphasis should be given to mechanisms for the effective implementation of the adopted measures.
11. Wealthy industrial states must support countries of the global South in financing the necessary investments to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change. The support payments that have already been promised must be actually paid, used for efficient measures in the recipient countries, supported by transfer of technologies and through fair trade relations, and their climate-protecting effect independently verified.
12. It is to be expected that some states will try to refrain from making their own contribution to climate protection for as long as possible, in order to benefit from the efforts of others. This free rider problem should be countered by broad international co-operation involving as many countries as possible, in order to keep the costs and risks for all participants within reasonable limits, even if not all actors are prepared to make their contribution right from the start.

13. For reasons of intergenerational justice, the necessary steps to contain climate change and to adapt to its consequences must be taken as soon as possible. Given the serious effects on the livelihoods of younger and future generations, there is no ethical justification for waiting, stalling or delaying. The perspectives and interests of young people and future generations should be given more weight in political opinion-forming and decision-making on measures to tackle climate change. Appropriate instruments that politically implement and institutionalise the consideration of these perspectives and interests must be developed and expanded further.

>> DISSENTING VOTE

In a dissenting vote, three Council members discuss aspects where they disagree with the Opinion.

Members of the German Ethics Council

Prof. Dr. med. Alena Buyx (Chair)
Prof. Dr. iur. Dr. h. c. Volker Lipp (Vice-Chair)
Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h. c. Julian Nida-Rümelin (Vice-Chair)
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Susanne Schreiber (Vice-Chair)

Prof. Dr. iur. Steffen Augsberg
Regional bishop Dr. phil. Petra Bahr
Prof. Dr. theol. Franz-Josef Bormann
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Hans-Ulrich Demuth
Prof. Dr. iur. Helmut Frister
Prof. Dr. theol. Elisabeth Gräb-Schmidt
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Dr. phil. Sigrid Graumann
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Armin Grunwald
Prof. Dr. med. Wolfram Henn
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Ursula Klingmüller
Stephan Kruip
Prof. Dr. theol. Andreas Lob-Hüdepohl
Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Annette Riedel
Prof. Dr. iur. Stephan Rixen
Prof. Dr. iur. Dr. phil. Frauke Rostalski
Prof. Dr. theol. Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl
Dr. med. Josef Schuster
Prof. Dr. phil. Mark Schweda
Prof. Dr. phil. Judith Simon
Prof. Dr. phil. Muna Tatari