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## German Ethics Council: Burdens in the fight against climate change must be distributed fairly

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The German Ethics Council presents its **Opinion on climate justice today**. In it, the Council discusses crucial issues of justice and responsibility in the struggle against climate change, and gives 13 recommendations on how a turnaround in global warming can be brought about in a fair manner.

“Tackling climate change and its consequences is a colossal task for society: How can we distribute the burdens in a fair way? Who bears responsibility? And what can we do to avoid running out of steam in the process?” the Chair of the German Ethics Council Alena Buyx explains. “We all need to work together – political parties, civil society, the media and science – to develop new perspectives for a good life in a sustainable and climate-neutral society without further growth in consumption and resource use.”

In its **Opinion**, the German Ethics Council develops a concept of climate justice: Burdens and duties in the fight against climate change should be distributed 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. The needs of people who are furthest away from achieving these minimum requirements and who bear the heaviest burdens of climate change should be prioritised.

“People’s contributions to climate change vary greatly – this alone raises major questions with regard to justice”, explains Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl, spokesperson of the working group on climate ethics. “It starts within our own society. Wealthy people fly more frequently, while people with less money are burdened severely by many climate protection measures. At an international level, we can see great differences between the main polluters in the global North and the people in the global South, who often suffer particularly from the consequences. And young persons and people who are not yet born will have to bear dramatic consequences from climate change in the future that have mainly been caused in the past or are being caused now”, Schlögl-Flierl stresses. Burdens and responsibilities must be shared fairly in all three dimensions: within society, internationally and intergenerationally.”

### Climate change: Who bears responsibility?

“Individual responsibility is often at the centre of the climate debate”, Armin Grunwald, deputy spokesperson of the working group, explains. “However, in our view, it is inappropriate to expect that climate change can be tackled by individual people alone, for example by changing their consumption or mobility behaviour.” The German Ethics Council therefore pursues a concept of multi-actor responsibility. This includes clear attributions of responsibility towards the state, private organisations such as companies, and individuals. Central to this is: Politics must provide the social conditions and the legal framework so that a behaviour that causes lower emissions is possible without

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leading to unreasonable personal or entrepreneurial encumbrances, and that the burdens are fairly distributed.

“Those who are better equipped to do so – and who maybe also contribute more strongly to climate change – must assume more responsibility and should be the first to pay their share”, Armin Grunwald emphasises. “This holds true for countries and companies, as well as for individuals. In view of the extremely serious consequences of unabated global warming, it would be downright irresponsible to start taking action only when others do so, too.

#### **Democratic discourse: Media and state bear special responsibility**

“Even today, dealing with climate change is a palpable burden, including in public debate”, Alena Buyx says. “It is very important to implement measures that are socially fair, and to consider carefully who is responsible for what. At the same time, it is essential to face this enormous challenge in a constructive and solution-oriented way. Politics and the media play a crucial role in this process. However, the new positive visions of how we imagine a good future for ourselves are something we all must develop together.”

#### **Recommendations**

The 13 recommendations in this Opinion take up these topics and call for a public debate on climate change that is focussed on climate justice and responsibility, as well as for a transparent and fair distribution of burdens. They highlight the responsibility of German politics to work towards a more rapid, effective and fair implementation of climate protection measures, both within our society and internationally. Politics must create better framework conditions that make it easier for individuals and private organisations such as companies to behave in climate-friendly ways, and that more strongly take into account the concerns of young and future generations. At the same time, the recommendations point to the individual moral duty of all people to co-operate, and to contribute to the containment of climate change within the scope of their possibilities. In a dissenting vote, three Council members discuss aspects where they disagree with the Opinion.

*The full text of the Opinion can be accessed (in German) on the following link: [www.ethikrat.org/fileadmin/Publikationen/Stellungnahmen/deutsch/klimagerechtigkeit.pdf](http://www.ethikrat.org/fileadmin/Publikationen/Stellungnahmen/deutsch/klimagerechtigkeit.pdf). An English translation of the executive summary and recommendations is available at <https://www.ethikrat.org/en/publications/kategorie/opinions>. The full text will be available in English in due course.*