Ethics and Climate Change

Chrystin A. McLelland

Gonzaga University

ORGL 610: Communication and Leadership Ethics

Dr. Robert Doyle

Ethics and Climate Change

Climate change raises difficult questions about the duties and rights of developed nations and global companies and organizations as well as broader aspects of human well-being - issues that cannot be addressed without also confronting difficult ethical issues. (Dietz, Hepburn & Stern, 2008) The earth's climate is changing because of human activities and will continue to change, with short term impact unavoidable at this point. While climate change has global impact, developing economies, and the citizens of developing countries, are already experiencing the greatest impact from climate change. This is one of the major ethical questions facing developed countries and globalizing private organizations: what duties do developed nations and global organizations who benefitted from creating environmental harm for economic gain in the past have towards preventing further harm in the present and future, and what duty to they have in supporting developing economies and nations in reaching equitable levels of success in more sustainable ways. Answering these ethical questions allows for the development of relevant policies and operations that balance the competing needs of the environment, global economies, societies, and stakeholders.

Climate change necessitates the consideration of multiple ethical perspectives because it involves the regulation of human activities regardless of political borders, economic systems, and established standards to minimize undesired consequences. The impact of policies and operations reaches beyond the economic impact of developing and using green technologies and policies: there are also the ethical considerations of human rights and freedoms; prevention of harm; historical actions and cultural impacts of globalizing more sustainable practices. In this paper, I will establish the dilemma facing the world today regarding climate change and what impact policy may have on the micro and macro level; define key ethical theories applicable to analyzing and identifying important elements for decision makers to consider; and develop clear recommendations for organizational and political policy maker considerations for developing sustainable climate policies.

The Ethical Dilemmas of Climate Change

Climate Change is a multi-faced global issue that encapsulates not only a huge number of causal factors but also a myriad of effects on different ecosystems, societies, and stakeholders. The impacts of climate change are long-term, so too are its effects on humanity. There are no longer quick and easy answers to solving the issue – in fact, many solutions may take decades to be fully realized and create a return on investment. Acknowledging the complexity of the topic, this paper will focus specifically on the ethical considerations necessary to develop ethically sound global standards for public policy and private company operations.

The anticipated impacts of climate change raise challenging ethical questions of rights and subsequent duties. In terms of short-term impacts of climate change in the coming decades, which are largely unavoidable, developed countries (and the companies and organizations established there) are obligated to compensate emerging economies for the harm caused by past emissions. (Dietz et al., 2008, p. 3) Policies on both the micro (global companies and organizations) and macro (political policies and regulatory actions) level can have a tremendous impact on the global environment and societies in both the short and long term, in both positive and negative ways. Should carbon dioxide levels stabilize at 550ppm, for example, there will be substantially different impacts for developed vs undeveloped nations. In North America, these levels would raise wheat productivity by 10 to 30 percent. In Africa, the same situation would decrease wheat productivity by 15 to 25 percent. (Mueller, 2006)

For political seats and companies in North America to consider this from a strict, local economic perspective, it may seem to have a net-positive impact. However, this limited perspective fails to account for global cost and impact. Therefore, it is critical for organizations and political bodies to intentionally recognize the *global* impact, not just the local impact, and

create policies that are intentionally inclusive of actions that benefit global societies to minimize the impact of climate change. (Johnson, p.238)

Key Ethical Theories Considered

Climate change has raised difficult questions due to its global impact and consequences, which span many generations and are not well understood even today. It has the potential to not only transform the natural environment, but also impact the quality of life and the way humans continue to live on the planet both now and for generations to come. Each political body and organization will have unique boundaries and operations, so it is impossible to create a single checklist for developing policy. Instead, when creating policy regardless of if it is political or organizational in nature, the ethical implications should be considered. Key ethical theories that have been considered in the creation of the recommendations of this paper are discussed in greater detail here.

Dialogic Ethics.

Dialogic ethics is a conceptual form of marketplace engagement that is constantly attentive to conversational partners and their context, and is concerned with what is, what was, and with negotiating what could be in new possibilities. (Arnett, McManus, & Fritz, 2018, p. 95) Within the scope of policy making considerate of climate change, this is a critical element of developing truly ethical policy. Global climate change impacts various stakeholders differently, and actions taken that only consider economic or localized impacts as a part of the decision-making process are failing to ensure actions taken truly beneficial globally (Johnson, p. 238) and not just a few local stakeholders. Dialogic ethics begins with an organizational understanding of their own standards and values, but also creates space to allow for learning and engaging with others who have their own standards and values. The ultimate intention of this dialog is in developing understanding in order to move forward in an ethically considerate way. (Arnett et al., 2018, p. 95) Any methodology to approaching ethical decision making that does not insist on

understanding before judging is inadequate. (Hinman, 2012, p. 50) This is especially valid for decision making that involves engagement with other cultures and requires an account of morality that allows for diverse viewpoints in a meaningful way. (Hinman, 2012, p. 51)

Potter Box.

When developing policy, it is important to have a guide for ethical decision making. A Potter Box is an ethical tool that allows a high-level ethical analysis of a situation through the identification of 4 key elements: Precise definition of the facts; identification of the underlying values; the application of ethical principles; and identifying involved or potentially impacted loyalties and stakeholders. (Christians, 2013, p 4) This concept can be visualized as a box, as seen in figure 1:

Figure 1: Potter Box

1. Facts	4. Loyalties
2. Values	3. Principles

By first collecting the facts of a situation and then identifying the important values that a company or organization holds, the Potter Box then provides a way to evaluate potential actions. The identification of ethical principles to consider - Aristotle's Virtuous Mean and Confucius's Golden Mean, Kant's Categorical Imperative, Mill's Utility, Rawl's Veil of Ignorance, etc., allows the development of a wide range of options when determining potential actions. The final step, identifying loyalties provides clarity of direction to determine how to act in line with values and principles while also meeting the needs of multiple stakeholders. The steps are repeatable until there is an acceptable level of alignment.

Rest's Model.

Rest's ethical behavior model establishes four stages of moral development leading to ethical decision making. The steps that produce moral action are "(1) moral sensitivity (recognition), (2) moral judgement, (3) moral focus (motivation), and (4) moral character" (Johnson, p. 236). This requires the explicit understanding and acknowledgement that policies, actions, and decisions will impact others.

In policy development, the four-component model describing the cognitive processes that individuals use in ethical decision making would be implemented as: Recognizing an ethical issue that necessitates considering how action and behavior will affect others; identifying potential courses of action; determining the consequences of each potential option; and making the conscious decision to act ethically based on this evaluation. (Johnson, 2011, pp. 236-237).

Power, Politics and Influence

While no form of power is inherently immoral, it is important to identify what power political offices and global organizations have, particularly over vulnerable populations. When organizations, whether public, private or political, fail to identify the power they hold over others and the influence that may have, it becomes easier to overlook the valid concerns and ethical principles held by those vulnerable populations. However, this same power can also be used to influence good: the examples set by powerful organizations and companies, or leading political figures, can have great influence over the perception and actions of others.

Formal and Informal Culture

Today's corporation is global. It is one in which occupations, histories, ethnic groups, and nationalities all play a role. The world is no longer the same. It is not just about organizational cultures anymore; it is about occupational, organizational, and even national cultures. And in the

future, it will continue to evolve to be less about organizational culture and more about occupational and national culture. (Mike, 2014) Recognition and acknowledgement of the importance of not just *organizational* culture and viewpoints but *global* cultures and viewpoints is critical in when developing policy and its potential impact to the climate crisis.

Within a company, culture emerges from an organization's leaders, who have a set of values and principles by which they want to run their organization. (Mike, 2014) There are both formal and informal cultures, with alignment of the two not necessarily being true. The formal culture is represented by an organization's stated values and expectations. The informal culture is the reality of how that culture plays out due to leadership ethics, policy, or accepted norms. It is not enough for an organization to rely on formal culture as their only means of considering ethical policies when it comes to climate change and stakeholders – it must be part of the informal culture as well. Without understanding both the formal and informal cultures – and what changes may need to happen – enacted policies, even of the best intentions, are unlikely to be implemented in reality, or leave any lasting impact if they are.

Memory and Dwelling

Organizations have different perspectives on their goals and the types of communication that will help them achieve those goals. Those communications shape the organization's dwelling place. The communication structures define what is good and bad, what is included and what is excluded. (Arnett et al, 2018) The "What" and "How" of communication practice compose community memory: it acts as a guide and point of accountability, and it is central to understanding beyond one's immediate perspective. (Arnett et al., 2018, p. 134). Memory and dwelling are communal and stretch beyond the boundaries of an organization – nations and cultures have shared community memory and dwelling places. Within organizations and global

cultures, memory is not just a collection of past events, but a guide for how to engage with the future.

Organizations, both private and political, will be judged by their actions and the impacts they have on global communities and interests. If an organization in the past has failed to deliver on promises, that will color the future encounters with the communities it failed. Each policy and action taken by an organization will be weighed by those it impacts, and there will be an effect, whether positive or negative, on the future of the company. This may be trust built over years, or it may be loss of opportunities due to a record of disregard of the impacts of policies. Any policy (and any action resulting from the policy) must be considered and weighed against the potential impact it will have to memory and dwelling.

Recommendations for Policy Development

Each political body and organization will have unique boundaries and operations, so it is impossible to create a single checklist for developing policy. Instead, regardless of if it is political or organizational in nature, the ethical implications of any policy should be considered against clear guidelines. Using the ethical theories and concepts identified above, Tables 1, 2 and 3 presents a guide for developing ethical policies that are inclusive of climate change impact:

Table 1

Prior to developing new policy….	Related Ethical Reference
1. Is there a clear understanding of my organization's ethical values and priorities? *Are these ethical values and priorities:* Recently reviewed and updated? Aligned with current organization goals?	 Dialogic Ethics
2. Do these ethical values and priorities allow for developing an understanding of others ethical values and priorities in a non-judgmental environment to learn from?	

Table 2

When Developing New Policy…	Related Ethical Reference
1. Have the facts leading to the development of this new policy been identified?	
2. What values are associated with this policy?	
Are any these identified values: Representative of other impacted groups? At conflict with organizational ethics? Are sources of or in conflict with others? Specific to long- or short-term concerns? Mutually harmonious? Synergistic?	Potter Box
3. What philosophical or ethical principle are at work? Which of these principles would create opportunity for the greater good?	
4. Have loyalties been identified? Are potential actions aligned between values, principles, and loyalties? If there is conflict, has there been re-evaluation?	
5. Is this policy in alignment with both formal and informal cultures of: The organization? Stakeholders? Impacted Parties?	
6. Have cultural impact and ethical viewpoints been considered though engagement and learning, and not through assumptions or history?	Culture
7. Have historic actions and impact been considered? Has mitigation for potential crisis or negative impact been discussed and/or implemented?	Memory and Dwelling
8. Has the impact of implied or actual power been considered on engagement with others?	
9. Is the power held by my organization creating a positive or negative influence within the organization?	Power, Politics and Influence
10. Is it creating positive or negative influence on stakeholders/vulnerable populations/political actions?	
11. Is the power held by my organization being used to prioritize self-interest over others, or exclude certain groups from dialog?	
12. Is the use of organizational power or influence in this policy aligned with organizational ethics and goals?	

Table 3

When Developing New Policy or Reviewing Prior Policy…	Related Ethical Reference
1. Have all impacted parties or stakeholders been identified including non-entities such as environment? *Impacted populations, natural environments, organized/community groups, board members, stockholders, natural resources, government systems, unions, climate, etc.)*	
2. Have evaluations of the policy included both short- and long-term impacts?	Rest's Model
3. Does the policy prioritize the wellbeing of one group above another? If so, have clear ethically sound discussions occurred ensuring alignment with organizational values and ethics?	
4. Was space created for learning and engagement with other involved parties to understand their unique concerns or potential impacts?	
5. Have multiple courses of action been identified and discussed IAW applicable ethical references?	
6. Is there enough information to move forward with decision making in an ethical way?	
7. Can the organization commit to taking action in alignment with this decision?	

*Note: In all tables, the word **organization** is used interchangeably to mean political office or position, company, organization, MNC, or group.*

Use of these tables, in whole or in part, provides a generalized template for how to approach policy making from any level to identify and consider potential impacts to entities and concepts beyond the limits of the organization, including impact to global climate.

Conclusion

Ethical climate policies can have a significant impact on the global climate by changing both the current situation and the likelihood of catastrophic outcomes in the future. A stringent mitigation policy that reduces greenhouse gas emissions implemented by a company, for example, will reduce climate impact in the short run but will have a localized economic impact. However, in the long run, by avoiding climate damages, the hazard rate in all future periods will be diminished as global temperature rise is reduced. Furthermore, when both short and long-term effects on nearby populations, tax breaks, and social reputation are considered, there is an overwhelming net positive. Explicit climate policy should not be the only time climate impact is considered in policy making. Only by making the conscious commitment to develop political and organization policy by first analyzing the situation from multiple ethical perspectives and considerations – of which climate policy is one - will allow for the identification of acceptable and unacceptable actions based on established values and ethics. Consciously evaluating policy against the proposed table, whether it is on the macro political scale or the micro-organizational scale, or somewhere between the two, allows full picture of potential short-and-long term impact to large-scale issues like climate change to be identified.

Only by understanding the dilemmas that the world is facing today in terms of climate change, as well as using key ethical theories to evaluate the impact that policy can have on the micro and macro levels, will allow for the development of sustainable climate policies. It is the development of ethically sustainable policies that are cognizant of environmental impact that will create a more sustainable climate future for people today and for generations to come.

References

Arnett, R. C., McManus, L, Fritz, J. (2018). Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference. KendallHunt. Retrieved from https://in.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/23226_book_item_23226.pdf

Christians, C. G. (2013). Ethical foundations and perspectives. In C. G. Christians, M. Fackler, K. B. Richardson, P. J. Kreshel, & R. H. Woods (Eds.), Media ethics Pearson new international edition: Cases and moral reasoning (pp. 1-22). Pearson Higher Ed. Ethical Foundations and Perspectives

Dietz, S., Hepburn, C., & Stern, N. (January 2008). Economics, Ethics and Climate Change. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1090572

Johnson, C. E. Meeting the ethical challenges of leadership: Casting light or shadow (4th ed.). Retrieved from https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/39590_Chapter7.pdf

Johnson, C. E. (2019) Organizational Ethics: A Practical Approach. Sage.,

Méjean, A., Pottier, A., Fleurbaey, M., & Zuber, S. (2020). Catastrophic climate change, population ethics and intergenerational equity. Climatic Change, 163(2), 873–890. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02899-9

Mike, B. (2014). Footprints in the sand: Edgar Schein. Organizational Dynamics, 43, 321-328

Muller, B. (2006). Adaption Funding and the World Bank Investment Framework Initiative. Retrieved from https://tinyurl.com/y677nqcd