

### The Moral Dimension of Climate Change and Sustainable Development

We affirm that the human engagement with the natural world can and needs to be profoundly positive and creative and that harmony with nature—along with respect for human dignity and the common good—is a foundational key to sustainable human development.

Assisted by modern science, we can today recognize the incessantly dynamic inter-relations among all natural systems and forms of life, including human life. At the same time, the overwhelming scientific consensus makes clear that the collective impact of human behavior is profoundly altering the earth's ecosystem and, in turn, imperiling the intricate web of life supported by it. If we continue to derive our energy from high-carbon sources, current predictions strongly suggest that temperatures will rise by more than the 2 degree Celsius outer limit of safety, with potentially catastrophic implications for human life, and for the biodiversity on which it depends.

This, in turn, sets a profound moral challenge with three interlocking dimensions:

First, many ancient and modern forms of moral argumentation revolve around the reality of self-contradiction. In this case, we are using high-carbon energy to advance human flourishing. And yet the very use of high-carbon energy threatens to vastly alter the intricate web of life that supports the possibility of human existence. In the starkest moral terms, do we have the right to impose collective suicide and a related wider biocide? We answer “No.” Rather, we are morally obliged to advance human development in harmony with nature so that development can be “sustained” by the natural systems upon which it depends.

Second, climate change is having a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable people. Large-scale natural disasters cause economic insecurity, displacement, and hinder sustainable development. Climate change is largely being driven by the unsustainable activities of about 15 percent of the world's population, while it is the world's poorest three billion who are most at risk from its effects. This is morally unacceptable because it fails to honor the inherent human dignity of those most vulnerable to climate change. In addition, the intricate web of life upon which all human life depends must be understood as a “common good.” Since all depend within it, it is morally unacceptable for the few to abuse and destroy it. Rather, we believe that sustainable human development must honor human dignity and protect the common good.

Third, there is a direct relationship between “capacity” and moral obligation. Diverse religious and moral traditions agree that the greater the capacity to address a grave threat, the greater the responsibility to do so. While all people have a responsibility to limit climate change, those most able to do so—particularly those whose well-being is secure and whose lifestyles often include the abundant waste of energy—have the greatest responsibility to act. This is true of individuals and states alike. The countries that produce the most CO<sub>2</sub>, as well as those with the greatest wealth and the greatest potential to decarbonize their energy production are morally obliged to take the lead in climate protection. This must include standing in solidarity with developing countries, including by sharing technology and providing needed financial resources.

Climate change cannot be curbed by just a few states. All countries must commit urgently to the deep decarbonization of their energy systems, shifting from high-carbon energy (coal, oil and natural gas) to low-carbon energy (such as wind, solar and hydro power). To do this, the human family needs a radical commitment to organize and deploy the best of its energy, creativity and skill, and to engage in unprecedented forms of sustained global cooperation. Scientific institutes, businesses, governments, religious communities—indeed all sectors of society—will need to unite to form a concerted and sustained effort. Collectively, we have the capacity to address climate change and this capacity is a measure of our moral responsibility to act.

Advancing sustainable development—notwithstanding its profound technical requirements—is a fundamental moral responsibility that religious groups and all men and women of good will must embrace. It is no longer acceptable to measure progress simply by GDP growth and the accumulation of resources. Instead, our yardstick must be not only wealth creation, but social inclusion and protection of the environment. We must transform the prevailing myopic and materialistic mindset. We must replace self-centered egoism with an ethos of fraternity and solidarity that encompasses all: the poor, the excluded, children, victims of human trafficking and modern slavery, and future generations on a single earth that supports a dynamic and interconnected web of life.

This will require the cultivation of new public virtues that orient the entire human family to summon the will to confront climate change. Old habits of waste, complacency, overly prolonged indecision and the unwillingness to work together must be replaced with new habits of conservation, innovation, decision to act boldly and a willingness to work in a global partnership. The world's diverse religious traditions can and must make clear that these climate-sensitive virtues must be chosen intentionally as values to be accepted, cultivated and duly celebrated by the global community. If the cultivation of these virtues is integral to religions in our day, it is also central to both our survival and flourishing.

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