

The Role of Human Rights in Considering Climate Engineering Research

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How do we ensure decision-making processes around climate engineering research are inclusive and transparent? How should we understand and anticipate the potential social and economic impact of this research? What mechanisms will ensure accountability for impacts and provide protection and remedies for those affected? How do we frame these questions in the first place?

This paper will make an argument that human rights have a role to play by providing a concrete legal foundation and valuable framing mechanism to understand the procedural, distributive and consequential concerns associated with CE. This includes both procedural and substantive protections accorded under human rights law. The paper will further argue that human rights offer unique tools to highlight the impact of CE research, and potential deployment of CE technologies, on vulnerable and marginalized groups.

The paper will also explore the limitations of a human rights approach, acknowledging that different people will suffer different kinds of human rights violations because of policy decisions on both climate change and CE. As a result, we are not likely to be in the position of choosing between a policy that violates human rights and one that does not. Rather, we may find ourselves in the position of violating human rights no matter what we do. We therefore ask, what principles and institutions ought to guide the distribution of burdens and costs? And, when balancing interests, how should we weigh historical responsibility for climate change impacts and how much should we prioritize economic development for the global poor?

Human rights offer a more robust normative framework for considering the procedural, distributive and consequential concerns associated with CE than what currently exists. They provide a legal and normative baseline for the conversation, but their limitations leave the door open for a role for moral and political philosophy in the conversation.