

# Accelerating the Implementation of Action on Climate Change in Cities

March 24 – 25, 2025

## Background

The coming years are critical for global action to address climate change and the need to accelerate implementation across every area of society is more urgent than ever. But despite strong indications of widespread public support for action, exactly how, when, and by whom action is implemented is becoming increasingly contentious and even divisive. This divergence in what is considered the right course of action presents moral and ethical conflicts that are delaying timely implementation.

Building awareness, understanding, and capacity to better consider ethical dimensions affecting design and implementation can be crucial to deliver action on climate change with the speed, impact, and sustainability now required. Cities are a key implementation locus for global efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change. To do this effectively, actors must navigate diverse communities with different ethical frameworks and perspectives. Innovative approaches that help build capacity to identify and work with the ethical dimensions of implementing action on climate change in cities could be globally transformative.

In a delivery context facing multiple interacting crises and the intensifying headwinds of disinformation, polarization, and populist politics, new and innovative approaches are now urgently needed to help conceive, design, and deliver implementation that can better navigate an ethical landscape of diverse and conflicting ethical frameworks. Stronger awareness, understanding, and capacity to better consider ethical dimensions influencing implementation—to find convergence in values or bridge ethical divides—will therefore be crucial to deliver action on climate change with increased impact, speed, and sustainability.

**ETHICS  
ACCELERATOR**

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International Affairs

In March 2025, Carnegie Council convened an [Ethics Accelerator](#) workshop with a diverse group of expert participants including specialists in applied ethics and those working to catalyze the implementation of climate action in cities. Throughout the two-day workshop, participants explored potential intervention points for novel activities, tools, or collaborations within their practical experience to strengthen capacity for accelerating the implementation of action on climate change in cities.

Ethics Accelerator workshops are convened under Chatham House rule and this note presents a high-level summary of key insights and takeaways from the workshop. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the meeting participants, or of the Council, its trustees, staff, or consultants.

## DAY 1

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# Ethics and Climate Action – Challenges and Opportunities

To start the conversation, Carnegie Council President Joel Rosenthal provided a brief background on the Council's founding. In 1914, an old order was ending and a new was emerging. Andrew Carnegie recognized this and as a philanthropist was willing to invest resources to [forge a path](#) toward international peace and cooperation. In the present day, the Council takes a pragmatic view of ethics and acts as a convening space to better understand competing values and interests.

Participants were challenged to think about the following questions: How do we find shared values? What role can ethics play in narrative setting to generate agreement and action? How do we use ethics to analyze trade-offs in a rigorous way to unlock cooperation and accelerate climate action?



# A Brief History of Ethics and Climate

One participant then provided a brief history of [climate ethics](#), including:

- Climate ethics is a well-established field with an academic foundation and discourse.
- Climate ethics is often categorized as a form of applied ethics.
- Taking climate ethics seriously has practical benefits for organizations and embedding it into operations improves transparency, agency, and accountability.
- Climate ethics is inherently multidimensional.
- Climate ethics can be characterized by convergence and widespread agreement on ethical issues, including the disproportionate impact of climate change on vulnerable communities and negative impact on biodiversity.

This participant then cautioned the group against common fallacies including:

- Beware of climate change exceptionalism and how that translates into narratives, rationales, and unintended exclusions, rather than fostering inclusion of the “many.”
- The Napkin Fallacy: Climate ethicists often demand that what we want to say in ethics should be able to be communicated on the back of a napkin (i.e. simplified). This approach is often too limiting and unrealistic.
- The One Value Fallacy: It is rarely the case that only one ethical value is at stake in decision-making contexts. Applied ethics can help to systematically evaluate competing values and thus climate ethics benefits from this method of thinking.
- Trade-offs are often perceived as a limiting concept but can also be an opportunity to explore the creative application of ethics.





## Applied Ethics to Accelerate Climate Change

The workshop Chair then introduced the theory of change being explored through the workshop, namely: *Catalyzing better consideration of ethical dimensions affecting design and delivery of climate action implementation will enhance its speed, impact, and sustainability*, noting the specific focus of this workshop was to explore potential new ways to unblock and enhance implementation of climate action in cities through the use of applied ethics.

The Chair emphasized the implementation gap between climate commitments and action, noting that despite the many commitments by countries, organizations, cities, communities, and individuals across the planet, these commitments are not translating into action at the necessary scale and pace. New or adjusted approaches are now needed. Applied ethics offers a new set of skills and knowledge that could help those designing and implementing climate action approach the task in new—more effective—ways. Cities are a great place to start, as they are a key locus of both sources and impacts of climate change and home to populations of diverse socio-demographics, cultures, faiths, and ideologies resulting in diverse ethical frameworks.

The goals of the workshop were then defined as sharing wisdom and learning between participants, developing a common understanding of the role that applied ethics can play in enhancing climate action implementation, and identifying new ideas and approaches to implementation situated within the context of cities.

## Identifying Opportunities for Potential Intervention Points

Two participants presented case examples of the implementing of action on climate change from their own work, highlighting where or when applied ethics could have (or already had) enhanced implementation. The first case concerned the implementation of a transport emissions reduction policy in a major city. The second case concerned the application of locally led adaptation principles to deliver climate adaptation.

After these presentations, the group reflected on potential intervention points for applied ethics and some of the challenges that might be presented in operationalization.

One participant commented on the idea that the climate movement has been placed within a morality discourse, but that framing has not delivered change at the pace at which climate action is needed.

Another participant pointed out that some stakeholders believe that the lack of climate action is due to ethics-framing; other stakeholders disagreed and blamed framing that relies on acting out of self-interest.

Following the initial presentations by participants, which explored the intersection of their work and applied ethics, the Chair encouraged presentation of further case examples from other participants. One participant highlighted the ethical dilemmas presented in the transition to new (low emissions) energy sources and the transition risks posed to different labor groups. Another focused on methods for interfacing with local communities to more effectively build climate resilience. The discussion touched on topics such as the distinction between “work” and “a job,” the exact meanings of the terms “cost” and “benefit” or “cons” and pros,” and how ethical responsibilities can change depending on how these are defined. This, in turn, can affect the receptiveness of communities to climate resilience work.

Prior to closing the discussions, the Chair offered the group a call-to-action to prepare for continued conversation on the second day of the workshop: Think about the intervention points for ethics that have been surfaced throughout Day 1 and consider how applied ethics might be used in those areas. On Day 2, the focus for the conversation will be less on “where” and “what,” and more on “how.”





## DAY 2

# Pathways for Operationalization

Following introductory remarks, a participant with decades of experience as an applied ethicist in individual organizational and institutional contexts offered a summary of issues explored in Day 1. Drawing on the discussion and cases explored, this participant highlighted some potential strategies for how applied ethics could be utilized to accelerate climate action. These included:

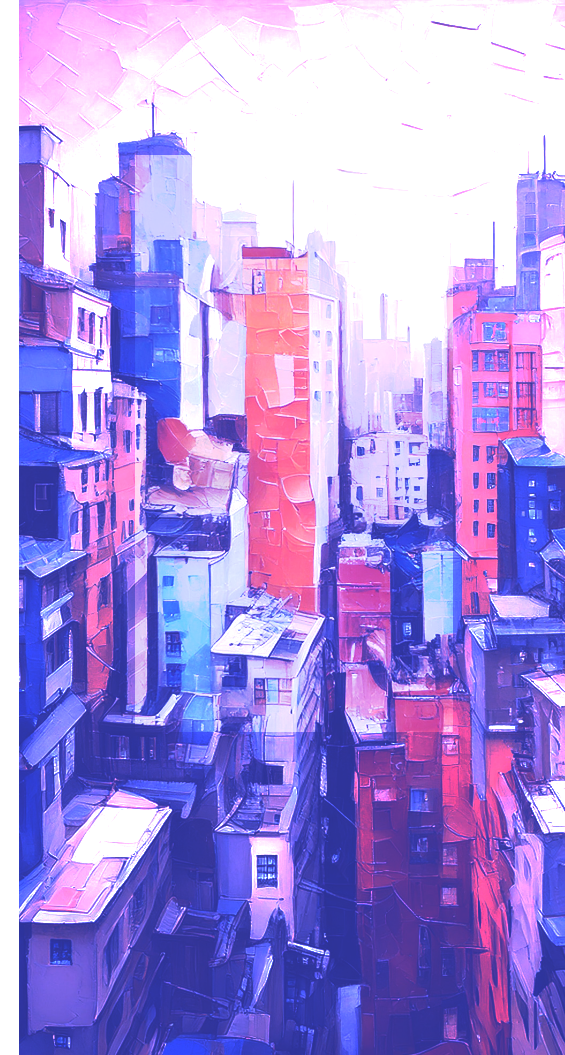
### Attitudes

- » **Valuing small decisions:** Small decisions matter. Emphasizing that even within the context of climate change, a small change, when made by a large number of people, can have an outsized impact. The biggest challenge is not that we are powerless, but the belief that we are powerless.
- » **Taking critics seriously:** Accelerating the implementation of climate action in cities will require leaning into the principle of charity and honing active listening skills across contexts. These skills can be effectively driven by empathy and concern for others. One needs to cultivate the skill of being able to ‘reframe’ another person’s arguments and concerns to the point that they ‘hear’ their own voice being echoed. Only then will most people stop trying to defend their position and instead be open to more productive engagement.
- » **Speaking to an existing truth:** Many advocates unwittingly fall into the trap of trying to “inject” their message into the minds of their audience. Driven by their sense of urgency (or passion) each failed attempt prompts an even more forceful intervention. A far better strategy is to find the means by which to speak to an existing truth already held in mind (or heart) by those with whom you seek to engage.
- » **Prioritizing middle-ground solutions:** There’s a tendency for actors in many contexts to either strive for perfection or think they must choose between two polar opposites while overlooking creative solutions in the middle ground. How can we ensure middle-ground solutions are made available to climate actors?

## Actions

- » **Building trust:** Address the loss of trust in institutions, as well as perceptions of hypocrisy and lack of belief that costs and benefits will be evenly distributed.
- » **Building ethical literacy:** There are many ways to answer the question, “What ought one to do?” You can analyze by the consequences of an action, or the obligations or duties you believe an actor has, or what the action implies about a person’s character or values. There is no “one best way,” but understanding and utilizing these as decision-making tools can be helpful. Furthermore, advocates need to be able to frame their arguments using the multiple “languages of ethics” that are being accorded validity within their ethically diverse audience.
- » **Finding common language:** The same values often have different expressions in different cultures. Friendship is expressed differently in one country/group than in another and such that at first interaction the reactions to such expressions may even counter the intent e.g. (Hug and gift)
- » **Sitting on the same side of the table as the others involved:** Practice the ability to sit on the same side of the table and applying the above from the other perspective in a trustful manner will enhance the chances to engage and find a middle-ground solution.
- » **Grafting onto local rootstock:** Scaling the adoption of any community program requires connecting the program to local culture(s), practice(s), needs, and concerns. Climate action is no different. An attentive gaze must be given to the value systems, histories, and cultures of the (local) groups that the program will impact to be able to find opportunities to connect their ways with a program; finding common language is linked to this.
- » **Facilitating a just and orderly transition:** Change is disruptive and systemic change even more so, therefore ensuring that transitions are orderly, and that they distribute costs and benefits fairly can help ensure acceptability and more comprehensive buy-in to the transition.

In response to this summary, participants engaged in discussion ranging from how power asymmetries between actors create challenges for implementing such strategies to whether these strategies are best deployed using top-down or bottom-up approaches. One framing idea that resonated with the group centered around communicating the importance of climate action through observing the effect that inaction will have on a community’s way of life. Rather than grounding the justification of climate action in economic or virtues-based arguments, it could be beneficial to make clear what is at stake in terms of the day-to-day activities, social relationships, cultural traditions, and employment opportunities that could be altered by climate change impacts. Many participants agreed that, to ensure wide uptake, it would be important that applied ethics be understood as an “enabler” rather than a “burden” (e.g. something with demonstrable utility rather than an additional step to take with negligible perceived benefits for delivery).





## Collaborations for Operationalization

In the culminating session of the workshop, participants were prompted to consider activities, tools, or collaborations—based on the discussions over the two days—that could make use of applied ethics strategies to accelerate the implementation of climate action in cities. Some of the ideas that were introduced and discussed included:

- Integrate applied ethics training into climate and city government leadership programs
- Embed ethics into the risk management decision-making infrastructure within cities
- Embed basic courses on applied ethics in environment, urban, etc. basic study programs
- Build ethics into polling and research when evaluating climate action programs in cities
- Pilot some “Ethicist-in-Residence” programs in cities where an applied ethicist provides input to the design, rollout, and communication of implementation activities
- Develop an ethics-based decision-making framework for cities that can be used or injected in their ongoing and future processes considering climate action implementation design and execution
- Introduce a structured, logical, comparative system by which to evaluate competing proposals for global climate institutional reform
- Develop a tool to support mapping ethical frameworks as a complement to the Principles for Local Adaptation
- Once available, effectively communicate the successes of climate action projects around the world that built on the theory of change and offer recommendations for how they could be adapted to other cities and contexts

## Next Steps

Following the workshop, Carnegie Council Senior Fellows will be following up with participants to learn more about what resonated with them and how their organizations might collaborate to carry the work forward. This work is part of Carnegie Council’s plan to build a *Climate Ethics Lab* to address many of the challenges brought up during the workshop. The Council are also developing a resource for policymakers, climate action facilitators, and NGOs around how applied ethics can inform and accelerate climate action implementation based on the actionable strategies offered by participants throughout the workshop.