



COMETS
CNRS Ethics Committee

OPINION n°2011-23

« ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE »

Approved at the plenary session of 30 june 2011



I. SUMMARY

Research on climate developed in the last 40 years or so to a new level thanks to the introduction of general models of circulation of the atmosphere and its interactions with environment on earth. Since some of these models have potentially a major impact on populations, the question was taken up at the United Nations level. This led to the creation of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a structure at the interface with the scientific community. In the context of hot and very publicized debates on the IPCC work, the President of CNRS asked the CNRS Ethics Committee (COMETS) to prepare a statement on ethical aspects of these debates, their interpretations and their impact in the public domain.

To prepare this discussion the COMETS chose to analyze under which conditions can function exchanges among the three groups of actors researchers, citizens and media. The statement considers ethical conditions that have to be satisfied in order that the controversy on climatic issues be developed in a useful way. This requires that these exchanges take place in « forums » of different formats: scientific forums (journals, specialized conferences), public forums (involving elected official or commissioned reports), forums for open debates (public enquiries, gallups), and general forums (blogs, open). In such a scheme the IPCC has a special role.

The recommendations proposed at the end of the statement deal with several issues: how scientific research can take care of complexity that generates uncertainty; the necessary trust between scientists without which no interdisciplinary work can be built in depth; the rules of deontology and the value that must be given to expertise, and has to supersede the belonging to institutions; the growing role given to public debate in non reliable media; the place of debates between scientists on questions involving contacts with political institutions; and the indispensable plurality of of teams working on sensible issues.

