

The UN must take on geoengineering governance

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Geoengineering is an ineffective and irresponsible approach to the challenges posed by climate change. Its risks and potential impacts are global and extend far beyond the climate discussion. All of the proposed technologies carry large-scale risks for biodiversity, ecosystems, food security, human rights, health and democracy. It creates new threats to peace and security at the national, regional and global scales, both through the unintended but foreseeable exacerbation of underlying conflicts and through the potential for weaponization of geoengineering technologies. And it would further entrench our dependence on a fossil fuel economy precisely at a moment when the IPCC and UNFCCC have indicated that the era of fossil fuels must end. Any serious assessment of CDR and SRM testing or deployment must include a comprehensive examination of these potential impacts—intended and unintended, known and unknown.

Despite both acute and long-term risks, research and development of these earth-changing technologies is well underway. Geoengineering and its specific approaches, such as Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR) and Solar Radiation Management (SRM), are clearly not just an issue of scientific inquiry – they are being promoted and pushed onto the political agenda through research, government subsidies, and incentivizing legislation. Political support for both CDR and SRM is growing in particular in some high-emission oil-producing countries like the US and Saudi Arabia.

It is in this dangerous context that the UN must take action and address the question of geoengineering governance. The IPCC has expertise to contribute to assessing the impact of geoengineering technologies on atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations and radiative forcing. The potential environmental, social and security impacts of these technologies raise governance questions the IPCC is neither equipped nor tasked to fully address. A comprehensive assessment of the risks, potential impacts and political implications require the involvement of all relevant UN bodies, international fora, experts and knowledge holders, as well as those potentially affected by geoengineering experimentation and deployment, in particular Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and youth. The UN is the only appropriate forum to address global governance for geoengineering and it must do so with both urgency and prudence, starting here at UNEA4.

For people and communities around the world who oppose geoengineering, however, planned and ongoing outdoor experimentation and pilot projects are effectively paving the road to deployment without their consent and without adequately considering its human rights, environmental and social impacts and inherent political risks.

Therefore, governance at the UN must build on earlier decisions of UN bodies, in particular the moratorium by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the ban on ocean fertilization and other regulation for marine geoengineering under the London Protocol/London Convention.

The Precautionary Principle provides guidance for dealing with the great uncertainties, risks and potential impacts of these emerging technologies and for anticipating and preventing future harm and damage.

Geoengineering technologies will create new and significant risks for global ecosystems and communities worldwide while doing little to address the underlying causes of climate change. Their research and deployment should not receive public subsidies and outdoor experimentation in these technologies should be prohibited. Accordingly, the simplest, most appropriate and most effective approach to governance of geoengineering technologies is to adopt and extend the moratoria already adopted by other competent international bodies.