

A conversation with Clive Hamilton on December 16, 2013

Participants

- Clive Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics, Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Charles Sturt University and the University of Melbourne
- Alexander Berger, Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Clive Hamilton in the conversation.

Summary

Clive Hamilton is Professor of Public Ethics at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, a joint center of Charles Sturt University and the University of Melbourne. He is the author of *Earthmasters: The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering*.

GiveWell spoke to Clive Hamilton as part of its investigation of geoengineering research and governance as a charitable cause. Conversation topics included the debate over funding solar radiation management (SRM) research, governance issues around SRM research, and the history of scientific views on SRM research. SRM is one possible type of geoengineering intervention.

Debate over funding solar radiation management research

Some advocates of funding SRM research argue that it is important to be prepared for potential extreme climate change scenarios even though they may be improbable. Others argue it should complement mitigation policies.

Critics argue that funding SRM research would create a moral hazard for governments because the potential existence of SRM technology may reduce government efforts to curb emissions and to prevent climate change in the near term. In *Earthmasters*, Professor Hamilton draws an analogy to research on carbon capture and storage (CCS). Both the conservative party and the Australian Labor Party advocated for research on CCS and then used the research funding as evidence of commitment to climate change issues reducing their commitments to directly reduce emissions. It is possible that the parties would have found another justification for not reducing emissions if they had not funded CCS research, but it is also possible that their ability to use CCS research funding as political cover may have delayed progress on reducing emissions for 10 years (since the research has not panned out as the advocates had claimed). However, compared to SRM, CCS was a relatively uncontroversial technology; funding SRM research would likely be less effective as political cover because it is deeply controversial.

Another argument against funding SRM research is that the field seems likely to attract funding from people that support climate change denial or resist policies designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Funders that acknowledge the severity of climate change may not want to fund the same types of projects as climate denialists or free market conservatives.

A final argument against funding SRM research is that, once the field begins to grow, interest groups

may promote SRM research as an alternative to reducing emissions, which would make progress toward cutting emissions harder and eventual use of SRM difficult to avoid.

Overall, Professor Hamilton is not opposed to further research on SRM, but he believes that it is very important that research be done in a transparent and publicly accountable fashion.

Governance issues around SRM research

For philanthropists interested in funding SRM research, the highest priority should be to support better governance around SRM research to reduce the chances of a powerful pro-geoengineering constituency emerging.. Currently, there is not significant philanthropic support in this area. This is likely to be significantly more helpful than support for technical research like modeling or outdoor experiments.

Convening prominent international processes focused on geoengineering governance is necessary to push regulation and oversight initiatives forward. SRM research seems to be gaining wider attention globally, which may increase interest in such a convening. For example, SRM research was mentioned in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group I report and is likely to receive substantial discussion in the Working Group II and Working Group III reports. If SRM research receives substantial discussion in the IPCC reports, it seems likely that SRM governance will be discussed at a United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change session of the Conference of the Parties shortly afterward. Additionally, journalists are more likely to write about geoengineering if it is discussed in the IPCC reports. Some countries in the Global South, anxious about the growing prominence of geoengineering, have already begun to consider international regulation of SRM research.

There is a considerable amount of academic research on geoengineering governance, but there has not been significant progress on building governance structures around geoengineering research. Further research and conferences on geoengineering governance will be necessary for the creation of governance structures, but tracking progress towards the development of such structures is difficult.

History of scientific views on SRM research

For many years, the consensus among scientists was to avoid discussion of SRM research in order to avoid raising its prominence as a potential intervention. Then, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen brought SRM to prominence in 2006 with an essay in the journal *Climate Change* that argued that SRM might be necessary to avoid catastrophic warming. Some scientists are now reluctant to speak out against further SRM research because of the scientific norm that more knowledge is always a good thing. In general, continental European scientists are more skeptical of SRM research than American or British scientists.

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