

Environmental Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prof Deborah Oughton

COMEST

Norwegian University of Life
Sciences



Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Commission mondiale
d'éthique des connaissances
scientifiques et des technologies
(COMEST)

World Commission on
the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge
(COMEST)

COMEST Work and Publications

Technology

- Ethics of Robotics 2017
- Ethics of Artificial Intelligence 2020
- Ethical Implications of the Internet of Things 2021
- UNESCO Statement on Ethical Principles related to AI (forthcoming)

Environment

- Climate Change Ethics (2010-2015) -> UNESCO Declaration of Ethical Principles in Relation to Climate Change 2017
- Water Ethics: Oceans, Freshwater and Coastal Areas 2018
- Land-Use Ethics forthcoming 2021

COVID-19 Pandemic Ethical Issues

UNESCO International Commission on Bioethics (ICB) and the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST)

April 2020: Statement on COVID-19: ethical considerations from a global perspective

+ Follow-up statements



“ At a time of uncertainty, when societies across the globe take rapid and radical measures against the pandemic, I am concerned about potential threats to human rights, privacy and ethical standards, especially towards the most vulnerable. This crisis calls for the best in humanity with ethical principles as our compass. ”

— UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azoulay.

<https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-experts-urge-collective-responsibility-protect-vulnerable-persons-global-battle-against>

Land-Use Ethics 2021: A broader recognition of the ethics associated with land use



- Appreciation of the interdependency of humankind and the environment ... move from a purely anthropocentric view to one that encompasses a more eco-centric ethic perspective.
- Sustainability needs to address more than physical and economic considerations, recognise societal and cultural impacts, and acknowledge the dilemmas that can arise from interactions between sustainable development goals.
- Different perspectives from environmental ethics, land ethics, and development ethics can inform the debate on land use.

DECLARATION OF
ETHICAL PRINCIPLES
IN RELATION TO
CLIMATE CHANGE
(2017)

ADOPTED ON 13 NOVEMBER 2017

Background

Building on the

COMEST Report on Water
Ethics (2018)

UNESCO Declaration on
Ethical Principles in relation
to Climate Change (2017)

The Ethics of Land Use

PART I: INTRODUCTION

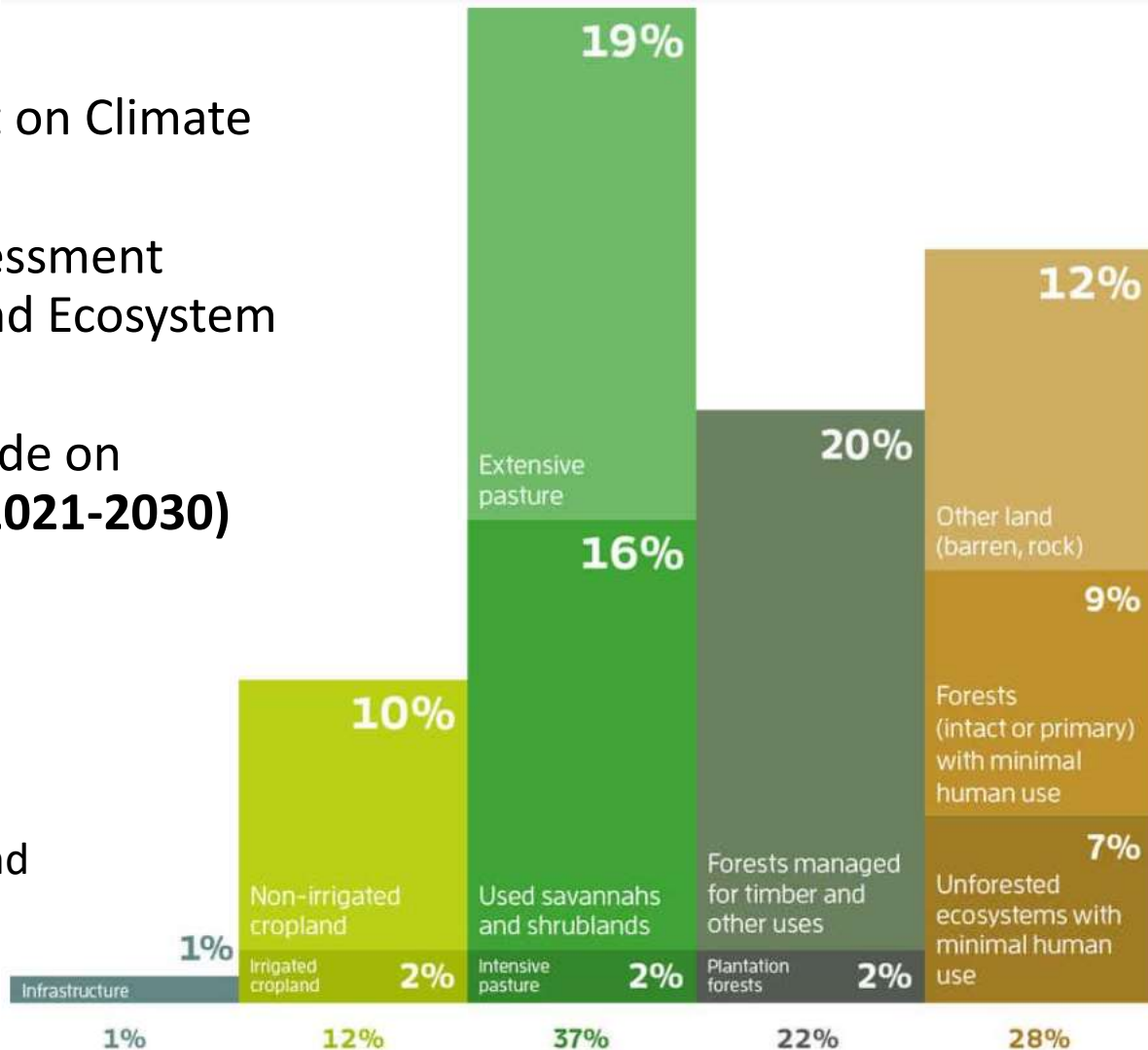
- Sustainable landscapes –
Introduction to challenges
- PART II CASE STUDIES
- PART III ETHICAL FRAMEWORK and
ETHICAL PRINCIPLES
- PART IV: RECOMENDATIONS

COVID-19 CASE STUDY

Introduction and Emerging issues

- **IPCC 2019** Special Report on Climate Change and Land
- **IPBES 2019** – Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
- The United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (**2021-2030**)

Proportion of earth's ice free land surface under human use (New Scientist 2021, after IPCC 2019)



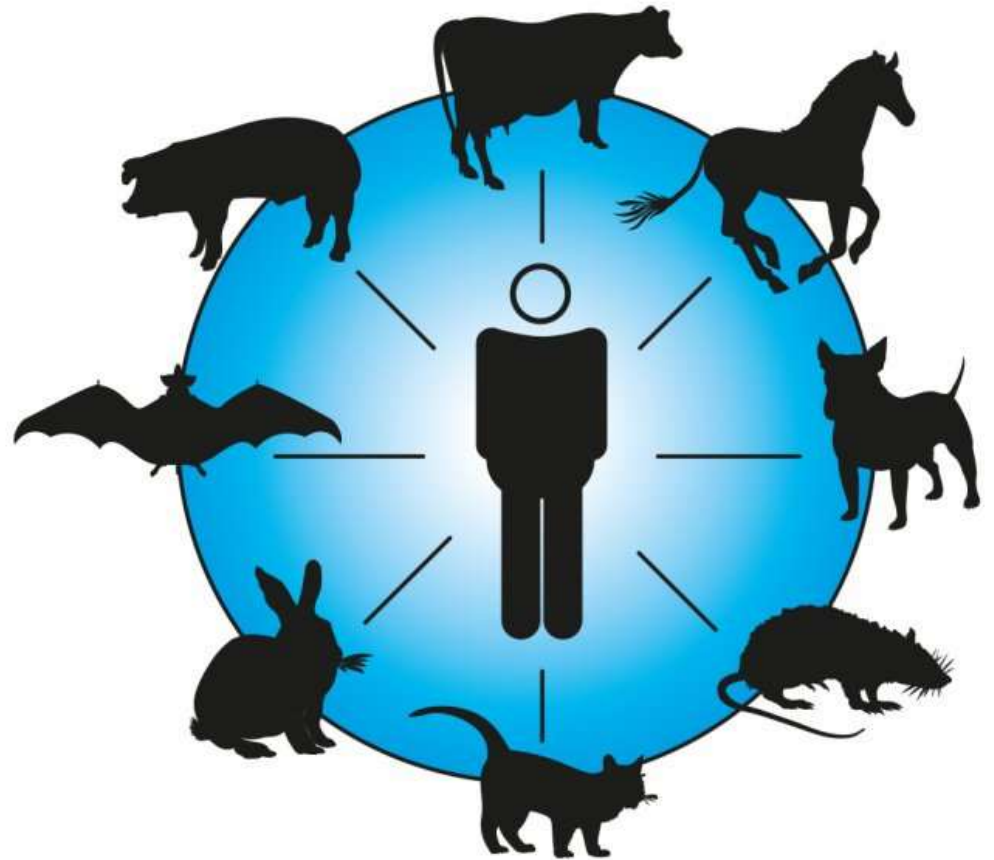
UN Sustainable Development Goals: Interactions and Commonalities



Zoonoses

65% of all infectious diseases in humans

75% of emerging diseases



UNEP Frontiers report
2016

(<http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/>)



Interdependency and interconnecteness of humans and nature

- Deforestation
- Climate change
- Habitat loss
- Intensive agriculture

- Complex interactions between society, economy, environment
- Scientific uncertainty
- Mitigation and technological «Solutions»



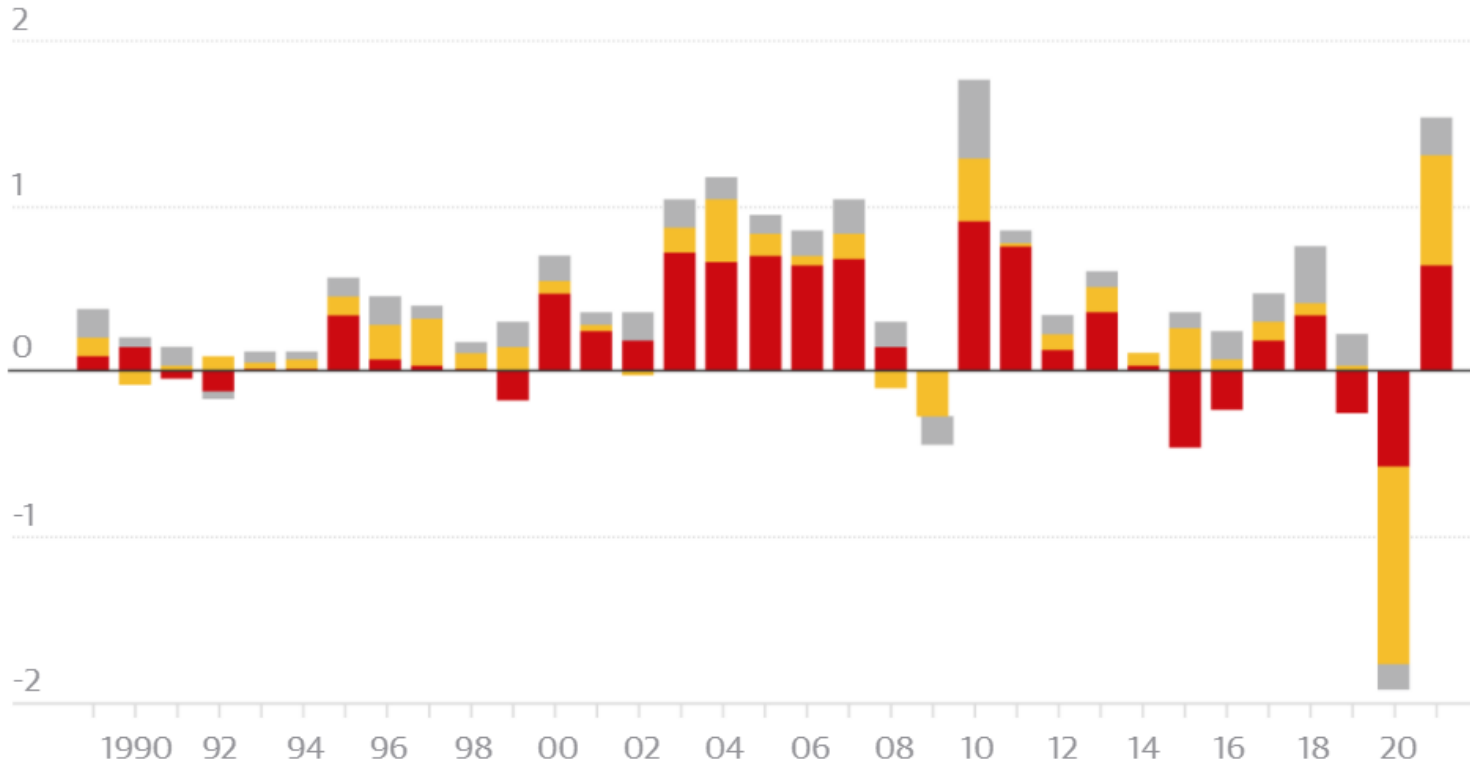
Environmental Benefits

- Reduced global carbon emissions
- Reduced travel
- Reduced air pollution (reduced deaths and asthma)
- Short term

Predicted change in global Carbon Emissions IEA 2021

Change in CO₂ emissions by fuel, gigatonnes of CO₂

● Coal ● Oil ● Gas



Guardian graphic. Source: IEA

Environmental Costs

- Delays in climate action
- Loss of tourism – illegal hunting, resource exploitation, ..)
- Reduced guardianship, rangers
- Increased plastic waste

- EEA 2021

(Photos: Getty Images)





COVID -19 Similar ethical challenges to other land use case studies

Global – regional - local
Developing and developed countries
Scientific uncertainty (and other types of uncertainty)

Cross Cutting Issues
Climate change, biodiversity,





A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

(Aldo Leopold)

Ethical Framework

- Environmental ethics
- Land ethics (“the land ethic”)
- Developmental Ethics



Developmental Ethics

Development is more than economic growth

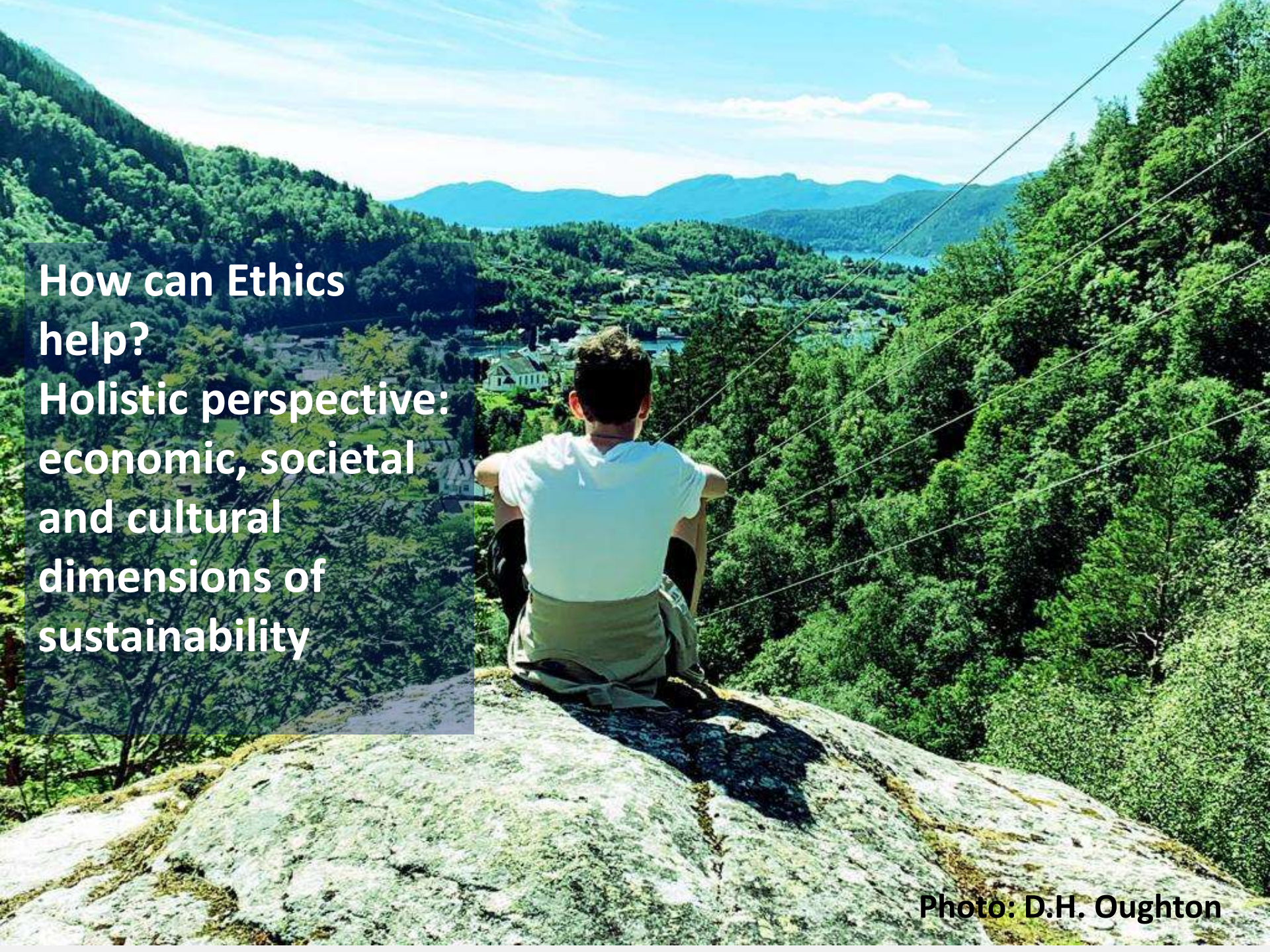
Human flourishing

Importance of indigenous values and perspectives

Ethical Principles for Land-use

- III.2.1. Human Dignity and Human Rights
- III.2.2. Solidarity and Interdependency
- III.2.3. Environmental Justice and Land Use
- III.2.4. Sustainability
- III.2.5. Prevention of Harm
- III.2.6. Scientifically-Informed Decision Making and Research Integrity
- III.2.7. Diversity – Biological and Cultural
- III.2.8. Gender Equity



A person is sitting on a large, light-colored rock outcrop, looking out over a lush green valley. In the distance, a town with several buildings is visible, surrounded by dense forest. The background features rolling mountains under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. Several thin cables or wires run diagonally across the right side of the image. The overall scene is bright and scenic, suggesting a high-altitude or mountainous location.

**How can Ethics
help?**

**Holistic perspective:
economic, societal
and cultural
dimensions of
sustainability**

Photo: D.H. Oughton

PART IV: RECOMMEND- ATIONS

- IV.1 Governance

*International cooperation,
integrated landscape
management, ...*

- IV.2 Scientific Knowledge,
Research and Education
Integrity

*Open science, indigenous
knowledge, education*

- IV.3 Participation and
Inclusiveness

*Gender, vulnerable and
indigenous communities,
capacity building*

Thank You!

- World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST)

<https://en.unesco.org/themes/ethics-science-and-technology/comest>