Mobilizing Individual Responsibility through Personal Carbon Budgeting

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The challenge

Objectives

“The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. Accordingly, the developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change” (Article 3, Principle 1).

Constraint

“The ultimate objective of this Convention and any related legal instruments that the Conference of the Parties may adopt is to achieve, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Convention, stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner” (Article 2).

—UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992)

—Henry Shue, “Human Rights, Climate Change, and the Trillionth Ton”
National carbon budgeting

Common burden-sharing principles for international mitigation

1. **Polluter-pays**: parties that have emitted more in the (recent) past must now incur larger burdens in reducing future global emissions
2. **Capacity-based**: parties that are most able to reduce their emissions without causing harm and/or excess expense should do so
3. **Beneficiary-pays**: parties that have benefitted from past patterns of equal access to ecosystem services should now do more to protect them

conceived as resource-sharing, burden-sharing

– CBDR: developing countries must be allowed to grow their emissions; developed must do more
Budgets and “taking responsibility”

• States thus *take* responsibility for their role
  – “Taking responsibility implies paying for the emission reductions – it is less relevant whether the emission reductions occur within a particular national territory” (Hepburn & Stern 2008).
  – allows for emissions trading among states

• Involves assignments of *remedial liability*

Involves criteria by which parties are “picked out, either individually or along with others, as having a responsibility towards the deprived or suffering party that is not shared equally among all agents.”

—David Miller, “Distributing Responsibilities” (2001)
Implementing national budgets

• Targets passed along in “two-stage approach” with “guidelines that are agreed internally”\(^1\)
  – allows for autonomy in compliance with budgets

• Domestic policy issue: How should remedial liability be assigned *within* states?
  – attend to the distribution of costs among sub-state actors in design of national mitigation policies
  – should reflect defensible principles where possible

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Two senses of responsibility

• Sub-state agents (e.g. persons) should *take* responsibility for their role in national budgets
  – mimicking duties if no policy in place (Cripps, 2013)
  – remedial principles can be applied across scales, as basis for national or subnational burden-sharing

• Responsibility also norm-based motive for taking remedial action (e.g. *to act responsibly*), which can be inculcated, mobilized with information

• Q: Can both be mobilized in implementation of domestic carbon abatement efforts?
Personal carbon trading (PCT)

• PCT schemes allocate carbon emission rights to personal use by allocating emissions from home energy use and/or personal transport; 3) allow for trading between persons; and 4) allocate from declining budgets.

• Efficiency logic follows that for states, firms

• Additional benefits: carbon perception and social norms inculcate, enable responsibility.
Why try this?

- More readily designed to reflect normative criteria, compared to alternative mechanisms
- Unlike carbon tax, allows carbon budgeting
- More equitable than tax or upstream rationing
- Empowering effects of carbon trading

“Only when consumers have the salient information when they are making a decision, can they take it into account. PCT would add to this visibility by attaching carbon ‘costs’ to every purchase of motor fuel, plane tickets and payment of household energy bills.”

Domestic mitigation policy criteria

• Mechanism should reflect some defensible basis for differentiating remedial liability
  – burden should be greater for some than others
• Should not reduce CO$_2$ access to ability-to-pay
  – full commodification extends existing inequality
  – free basic entitlement or compensation of poor
• Should provide incentives for desirable actions
• Should encourage social cooperation in task
PCT vs. alternative pricing schemes

• Main (pricing) alternatives: tax, upstream ETS
  – both pass along mitigation costs to consumers
  – both allocate carbon access by ability-to-pay
  – both more vulnerable to three objections to CO₂ trading than PCT (i.e. is irresponsible, unfair, bad)
  – all three incentivize desirable behavior

• PCT unique in using personal carbon budgets
  – carbon visibility, consumption-based accounting
Why not? 1: evades responsibilities

• Claim: Trading option allows some to avoid contributing toward a cooperative scheme by paying others to do it for them, undermining the sense of collective purpose involved.

• Reply: can also pay in CO$_2$ tax or upstream ETS (which lack cap); collapses into equity objection

Carbon abatement may be a case “where political actors address a particular pressing problem by creating a ‘solidaristic’ scheme in which everyone is charged to perform a specific shared task as a civic responsibility... Now if we have such a solidaristic scheme in operation it then appears morally problematic to allow some to buy an exemption.”

Why not? 2: privileges affluence

- Aldred (2012): “Carbon trading extends the domain of distribution of goods based on willingness to pay (and ability to pay) in the market” so that “extreme inequality of access” is “spread to more goods”

- Reply: grants per capita entitlement; regressivity and “carbon colonialism” not issue in downstream ETS

“The corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets have been signal features of the neoliberal project. Its primary aim has been to open up new fields for capital accumulation in domains formerly regarded off-limits to the calculus of profitability.”

—David Harvey, “Political and Economic Dimensions of Free Trade” (2007)
Why not? 3: implied right to pollute

• Claim: By granting entitlements to pollute, PCT gives implicit permission to cause harm; loses expressive value of prohibition (e.g. fine).

• Reply: all pricing schemes involve a fee; norm regarding excess expressed by individual cap

“The distinction between a fine and a fee for despoiling the environment is not one we should give up too easily. Suppose there were a $100 fine for throwing a beer can into the Grand Canyon, and a wealthy hiker decided to pay $100 for the convenience. Would there be nothing wrong in his treating the fine as if it were simply an expensive dumping charge?”

Why? Mobilizing responsibility

• Epistemic, motivational benefits of visible CO$_2$
  
  – transparent data “create a perceptual and cognitive framework enabling individuals to integrate understanding across emissions from different activities, and in the context of energy use as it occurs” that is “crucial for behavioral change” (Parag & Strickland 2010)

  – norm transformation and attribution of efforts; “increases when people are aware of problems resulting from their energy use, feel responsible for it, and feel morally obliged to do their bit to help solve these problems”
Why? Mobilizing responsibility

- PCT fosters a sense of common purpose, rather than privatizing or depoliticizing CO$_2$ abatement

“First, the fixed quantity makes it obvious that high consumption by one person leaves less for everyone else. Your carbon consumption – that is, the extent to which you depend on fossil fuels – becomes my business: I have an incentive to influence your behaviour to our mutual advantage: lower demand means lower prices... Secondly, the big structural changes – including a substantial localization of the energy system – that will be needed to achieve deep reductions in dependency on fossil fuels will not by any means be simply a function of individual effort. This is not a negative programme in which individuals are persuaded to reduce energy use (by the use of sanctions such as taxes), but a positive and collective – even exhilarating – incentive to restructure and rebuild the political economy on different principles.”