

Getting beyond the climate crunch: Re-thinking rights, risks & responsibilities



THE CRUNCH

It is now uncontroversial to state that the world faces a climate crunch. Whether it is the chasm between the scale of required action identified by climate science and current political commitments, the stalemate in global negotiations, the low price of carbon, or rising levels of public scepticism about the issue, there is a strong sense of malaise surrounding climate politics today.

The “crunch” has been variously attributed to problems in the design of climate policy (especially the Kyoto Protocol), the failure to appropriately price the externalities of carbon, and deficits in public understanding of the problem.¹ In response, research and policy communities have sought to enhance existing institutions, identify alternative governance mechanisms, reconfigure carbon markets, and provide more and better information to the public.

Each of these conventional approaches has some merit, but our research² suggests that the climate crunch runs deeper. It results from responses that allocate risk, attribute responsibility, and confer rights. We suggest that current ways of doing this often misread the agency different social actors have to respond and overlook the ways in which the drivers of climate change are embodied in social structures. They are also often disempowering in terms of engagement and understanding of climate change and limited in terms of what can legitimately be discussed and acted upon.

This briefing provides new insights into how and why risks, rights and responsibilities are at the heart of the climate crunch, and offers new directions for thinking and action that can provide a basis for moving beyond the current impasse.

In this briefing, six of the UK's leading academics explain why we need a new approach to overcome climate policy inaction – the climate crunch.

RECOGNISING RISK

Climate change has long been recognised as a matter of significant environmental risk. Yet it also produces political, economic and social risks which need to be included in the conversation about appropriate responses. The UK's 'climate-gate' affair in later 2009 served to reinforce a sceptical discourse that significant uncertainty persists over whether climate change is happening. Unsurprisingly, this reinforced calls for more and better evidence to inform decision-making.

However, this science-led approach to reducing uncertainty may serve to deepen public disengagement. Instead there is a need to make the broad case that decision-making should proceed even in the face of uncertainty. The overwhelming conclusion of the scientific majority is that climate change poses a significant threat. Engaging the public requires an open dialogue as to how we respond to these risks, and the questions of rights and responsibility they raise.

BEYOND NUDGING CONSUMERS

There has also been increasing emphasis on giving individuals responsibility for dealing with climate change by taking personal action to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Yet our research shows that people in the UK still ascribe the role of responding to external actors whom they perceive to have greater power, responsibility and capacity to act.

As a result neither publics nor politicians are willing to respond to radical calls for action. It is often then tempting for policy-makers to fall back on approaching individuals as ‘consumers’ and seek to ‘nudge’ them into new forms of behaviour. The result is a ‘governance trap’ in which both the governing and the governed seek action from the other but none is forthcoming. Ascribing responsibility to individuals who often do not have agency is not only ineffective, but may alienate people from the political process while masking the systemic and structural nature of the problem.

If individuals, firms, cities and other actors are to be held responsible then there must be genuine opportunities available for them to construct and pursue low carbon ways of life. In trying to reduce their carbon footprint, consumers may have limited, or no knowledge or control over the production processes and polluting technologies employed at different stages in global supply chains.

Rather than seeking to brush away public concerns about the scale of the challenge and their efficacy in addressing it, we suggest policy-makers need to address concerns by showing strong leadership and consistency in being prepared to take radical, if sometimes uncomfortable, action to address climate change. This could include rethinking urban planning, promoting lower carbon transport, energy and industrial infrastructures as well as discontinuing support for fossil fuels through divesting government investments and pension funds from fossil-fuel companies.

THE GOVERNANCE TRAP

Surveys indicate that the majority of people in the UK believe that climate change is too big a problem for individuals to tackle and that responsibility lies with national governments.³ Despite this, governments have typically avoided the political risks of taking long-term action by placing responsibility back onto individuals, communities and firms.



RE-THINKING RESPONSIBILITIES

It is usually assumed that responsibility for action can readily be allocated to discrete agents and that the capacity to act can be produced through the right mix of information and incentives.

Yet the assumptions about which agents are being allocated responsibility, and on what basis, remain questionable. For the most part it has been nation-states, firms, and individual households who have been regarded as the agents to whom responsibility should be attributed. Yet the ways in which institutions, infrastructures, and past and present policy measures enable and constrain future patterns of consumption and demand is routinely overlooked, and consequently unchallenged.

Rather than being a result of individualised decisions, greenhouse gas emissions are systematically associated with the practices and routines of everyday life – from cooking to travelling. When these issues are ignored, attributions of responsibility reproduce an individualising logic that fails to account for the radical differences within and between nation-states, firms, cities or households.

Opening up discussions about the different means by which the same ultimate ends of warmth and welfare, freedom and mobility and economic and energy security might be achieved, brings into focus issues of risk, responsibility and rights associated with different trajectories that are more or less carbon intensive, for example. Such an approach also focuses the discussion on the social ends of technologies and services rather than their intrinsic value.

Globally, attempts to allocate responsibility have also served to create a misleading picture based only on the production of GHG emissions, rather than on where they are consumed in embodied products. This potentially displaces responsibility in unjust ways and raises a real challenge about how to allocate responsibility differently, across systems and boundaries.

WHAT'S OFF LIMITS?

Responses to climate change have been framed not only by the risks involved, but by that which cannot be put at risk. This includes conventional thinking about economic growth, patterns of consumption and meeting rising energy demand (rather than reducing it). At present, the failure to question how and why some aspects of social and economic life remain off limits serves to exacerbate the climate crunch. One discourse of maximising energy supply, of needing to 'keep the lights on', runs alongside another of energy conservation, in which the public are encouraged to 'switch off' unnecessary lighting.⁴

But there is a need to have a bigger debate which conventions, ways of life and expectations society is prepared to challenge in order to respond to climate change. Presumed rights to certain indoor temperatures, limitless car use or imported food on the part of richer consumers have huge implications for the rights of other poorer people to have access to food and energy themselves or to merely live.

The debate about responsibilities needs to reflect the highly integrated but hugely uneven nature of the global economy. It is inappropriate to simply assume that the status quo should be the baseline when thinking about future patterns of consumption and practice. This implies creating space for debating alternative conceptions of the 'good life', prosperity and economic development, so that a renewed sense of what it might be possible to achieve in relation to climate change can be established.

This applies not only to activities which contribute to climate change, but also to some of the measures proposed as remedies, such as the use of biofuels, which can also have adverse effects on food security and land rights in poorer regions of the world.⁵

GOVERNING CLEAN DEVELOPMENT

Those communities most affected by having to host projects are often not even aware of the consultations or the projects they are set up to discuss, resulting in allegations of dispossession, violence and even human rights abuses which bodies like the Clean Development Mechanism's Executive Board then have to address. The rush to act and get projects approved in the name of emissions reductions can result in negative social impacts if proper procedures are not respected.⁶



MAKING RIGHTS REAL

‘Rights talk’ runs through all aspects of climate policy, whether it is about the right to development in the climate negotiations or the impacts of climate change on basic human rights, such as access to water. This debate tends to be dominated by aggregate approaches that treat countries as undifferentiated units, and ignores substantial differences within each state in terms of income, capacity and responsibility for harm.

Designing policy and societal responses that tackle climate change in ways which can take such differences into account and, at a minimum, do not exacerbate or entrench existing inequalities and injustices such as energy poverty or food insecurity, presents an enormous challenge.

Central to meeting this challenge is the protection of procedural rights – rights to information, consultation and democratic inclusion in the decision-making process. In the context of decisions about carbon offset projects, for example, lack of procedural justice has a negative impact on distributional justice.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Addressing these fundamental issues is critical for they underpin the ways in which current policy responses are being designed – building specific forms of risk, responsibility and rights into our response to climate change over the long term. If climate policy is not fair, or not seen to be fair, the “climate crunch” will persist.

None of these issues will be easily resolved, certainly not in the short term. But we need an open and honest conversation about the assumptions and trade-offs being made when responsibilities are ascribed to address climate change, assumptions are made about risk and who bears it, particular entitlements to rights are implied, and implicit justifications for rights violations are made. At the heart of this challenge is how to adjudicate these trade-offs. The way this is currently being done is intensifying the climate crunch.

Rather than seek to present politically acceptable and straightforward solutions to the dilemmas that arise from the climate crunch, we have pointed to key tensions which need to be addressed to move forward. This briefing is intended to spark a series of reflections and conversations about the climate crunch: how has it arisen, and how might it be overcome.

Drawing attention to the way in which current approaches to risk, responsibility and rights are exacerbating the climate crunch gives rise to some critical types of dilemma that may provide a starting point for this debate:

- How can the policy community best respond to a reframing of climate change science around risk without downplaying uncertainties?
- How can the 'governance trap' be overcome whereby governments place responsibility on citizens and 'markets' while citizens place responsibility on the State?
- Can we move beyond methods of attributing responsibility to individual agents which reflect the ways in which unsustainable, high carbon ways of life are shaped and reproduced?
- Can governments empower citizens to live low-carbon lifestyles through institutional design and alternative infrastructures?
- Can climate policy be improved by enhancing citizen participation in deliberations about acceptable levels of climate risk, the attribution of responsibility for emission reductions and about how to manage the trade-offs and establish the priorities that should govern a transition to a lower carbon society?

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- 3 Spence, A., Venables, D., Pidgeon, N., Poortinga, W. and Demski, C. (2010). *Public Perceptions of Climate Change and Energy Futures in Britain: Summary Findings of a Survey Conducted in January-March 2010*. Technical Report (Understanding Risk Working Paper 10-01). Cardiff: School of Psychology.
- 4 See for example 'The Conversation' <http://theconversation.com/all-this-talk-about-lights-hides-bigger-energy-challenges-19861>
- 5 Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2011) *Bio-fuels: Ethical Issues* London: Nuffield Council on Bioethics. www.nuffieldbioethics.org/biofuels-0
- 6 www.clean-development.com

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