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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Brown, Donald A.
Publisher	Rock Ethics Institute, The Pennsylvania State University
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-14 22:11:51
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/175542

Ethical Failures of National GHG Emissions Reduction Proposals Approaching Copenhagen

By DONALD A BROWN on August 16, 2009 3:11 AM| 9 Comments

Editor's Note: *This is the second in a series of posts that examine ethical issues that nations need to be guided by as they engage in climate change negotiations in December in Copenhagen, Denmark at the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP-15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The last post looked at these issues over a year before the Copenhagen COP. http://climateethics.org/?p=50. This and following posts will examine in more detail some of the issues written about in the earlier post in light of developments in the last year. This post examines ethical issues entailed by the need of nations to agree to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction targets. Subsequent posts will examine ethical issues that are also important part of the negotiating agenda in Copenhagen, including adaptation funding issues, reducing GHG emissions from deforestation, and technical transfer issues, among others.*

I. Introduction

The nations of the world will reconvene in December, 2009 to negotiate a replacement to the Kyoto Protocol which expires by its own terms in 2012. This post examines the willingness of nations to commit to GHG atmospheric concentration goals and national GHG reduction targets in these negotiations compared to their ethical obligations in light of positions nations have taken as they approach Copenhagen. First, this post examines the features of human-induced climate change that calls for classifying the issues to be negotiated in Copenhagen as ethical problems. Next, the post looks at ethical guidance that nations should consider in regard to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions targets, an issue of huge significance on the Copenhagen agenda. The post then looks at the position of some governments on emission reduction targets in light of these ethical obligations.

As the world approaches the Copenhagen negotiations, some nations appear to act as if GHG emissions reduction commitments are a matter of national interest alone and not responses to international ethical duties and obligations. For this reason, this post reviews why nations must see GHG emissions reductions commitments as a response to ethical obligations and how current positions are ethically problematic. As of late July, 2009, the major negotiating players are as follows:

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G8	The G8 leaders have agreed that rich nations should cut emissions by 80% by 2050, while the world overall should reduce them 50% by 2050. They said they had agreed to try to limit global warming to just 2C (3.6F) above pre-industrial levels. The G8 leaders have not agreed to short-term emissions targets.
European Union	The EU has promised a 20% cut in emissions of greenhouse gases by 2020, compared with 1990 levels. It has said that the target will be increased to 30% if there is a satisfactory international agreement.
United States	President Barack Obama is backing a law, the Waxman-Markey bill, which passed the US House of Representatives but not the Senate. This bill would set a target to cut emissions by 17% by 2020 and 83% by 2050 compared to 2005 levels. The US Senate might block the proposals or reduce the targets
Japan	Japan has set a target for cutting emissions by 15% by 2020 but the baseline for this reduction is 2005, not 1990. This makes a significant difference because emissions were 6% higher in 2005 than they were in 1990.
Australia	The Australian government says it will cut emissions by 5 - 25% by 2020 compared to 2000 levels depending on what other countries agree, and by 60% by 2050. It is also planning to introduce an emissions trading scheme but it faces opposition in the Australian Senate.
China	China has set domestic targets for energy efficiency and use of renewable energy but nothing specifically on emissions. It may introduce an "emission intensity" target, i.e. the level of emissions for each unit of economic output. But that has not happened yet
India	India has not set targets to cut emissions.
Brazil	Brazil has not set targets to cut emissions. It is probable that any new deal negotiated at the United Nations climate change conference in December will place obligations on China, India and Brazil. These will probably take the form of limits on the future growth of emissions and, in the longer term, cuts in emissions.

Source: BBC News (2009)

II. Why GHG Emissions Reductions Commitments Must Be Understood To Be Responses to Ethical Obligations?

As we shall see later in this post, as the world approaches the Copenhagen negotiations, many legislators and policy-makers are acting as if they have no ethical duties to reduce GHG emissions. Yet climate change raises several civilization challenging ethical questions that create duties and responsibilities for GHG emitters. The features of climate change that strongly call for its classification as an ethical matter include the fact that harms and benefits of climate change are separated by time and space, the impacts of climate change are potentially catastrophic to the most vulnerable, and existing governments need to be motivated by a sense of ethical responsibility to go beyond their traditional focus on national interest.

A. The Separation Of Causes, Impacts, Harms And Benefits.

Some global environmental problems including climate change are caused by people in one part of the world but are most harshly experienced by others separated from those causing the problem by great space and time. Climate change is a strong example of this phenomenon. This is so because, as we shall see, we now know from climate change science that people consuming a large amount of fossil fuel derived energy in some developed countries are already contributing to death and sickness in Africa, South Asia, and threatening residents of small island states in the Pacific. In addition, those most vulnerable to climate change are often least responsible for causing this problem and are among the poorest people in the world. These facts alone create undeniable ethical obligations. Although, as we shall see, different ethical theories may lead to different conclusions about human responsibilities to protect plants, animals, and ecosystems, most ethical systems strongly prohibit people from killing other people, adversely affecting their health, or destroying their resource base necessary to sustains life.

Although there is an undeniable ethical responsibility entailed by the fact that the greatest victims of climate change are not the parties causing the problem, several implications for ethical reasoning also follow directly from this separation of distance, time, cause and effect among those causing climate change and its victims.

First, our intuitive sense of ethical responsibility for harms that we cause others is harder to

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trigger when those who will be harmed by our action are people we will not ever know and are from a different culture. Yet ethics nevertheless requires people to refrain from harming others even if the victims are separated from those causing the problem in time and space.

Because the harms that some are causing others are being experienced in parts of the world that are uniquely vulnerable to global environmental change but is unknown to the people causing the problem, those causing the harms not only don't know some of the people they are harming but have no idea where the worst harms caused by their actions are located. For instance, a village vulnerable so climate change impacts may be at risk because of unique local geographical features such as where the village is located in relation to upstream steep topographical slopes while being in a parts of the world where more intense storms are predicted. Yet very few people around the world know where these places are. And so those causing climate change are causing great harm to others who are not only unknown to them but whose vulnerability is not reasonably foreseeable to them. For this reason, climate change creates a challenge to those responsible for climate change to visualize the harm that they are creating and the associated responsibility that follows because they are causing harm. Yet ethics unequivocally requires that those harming others stop the behavior causing great harm.

A nation may not also not use cost-benefit analysis that looks only at global totals of costs and benefits when harms and benefits are as asymmetrical as they are in the case of climate change (Brown, 2008a)

Unless the people causing climate change have internalized their ethical responsibilities to reduce the threat of climate change in a general sense, they are not likely to feel that they have ethical obligations triggered by pictures of human suffering around the world because it is difficult to see the links between their behavior and the actual human suffering they are causing. Yet the ethical duty remains to cease behavior that is likely contributing to great harm to life, health, and the resource base of present and future people, not to mention plants, animals, and ecological systems. For this reason, citizens around the world need to be encouraged to see climate change as triggering ethical duties and the world needs political leaders who will explain to their citizens that GHG emissions reduction commitments should be based upon duties not simply national economic self interest alone.

B. Climate Changes Impacts Are Catastrophic to Some.

The second reason why climate change emissions levels must be understood as triggering ethical obligations stems from the fact that current and projected GHG emissions levels are likely to cause catastrophic harms to many of those most vulnerable. Climate change, for instance, directly threatens human life and health and resources to sustain life as well as species of plants, animals and ecosystems around the world. The harms include deaths from disease, droughts, floods, heat and intense storms, and damage to homes and villages from rising oceans and intense storms, social conflict caused by diminishing natural resources, sickness from a variety of diseases, the inability to rely upon traditional sources of food, the destruction of water supplies, and the inability to live where one has lived to sustain life. In addition, the very existence of some small island nations is threatened by climate change induced sea-level rise.

In fact, there is growing evidence that climate change is already causing great harm to large numbers of people around the world while threatening hundreds of millions of others in the very near future. For instance, a recent report found that human-induced climate change is already responsible for 300,000 deaths a year and is now affecting 300 million people around the world. (Global Humanitarian Forum, 2009). This report also projects that increasingly severe heat waves, floods, storms and forest fires will be responsible for as many as 500,000 deaths a year by 2030, making it the "greatest humanitarian challenge the world faces." According to this report, current economic losses due to climate change today amount to more than $125 billion a year - more than the all present world aid. By 2030, the report says, climate change could cost $600 billion a year. Because climate change impacts are likely to be catastrophic for some and ethical responsibilities are often proportional to the amount of harm caused by behavior, reducing GHG emissions creates strong ethical duties.

C. The Governments Don't Match The Scale Of Global Environmental Problems.

Governments usually have authority to protect their citizens from life-threatening dangers caused by other citizens. But at the global level, no governments exist whose jurisdiction matches the scale of some global environmental problems. And so, although nations have jurisdiction over activities within their boundaries coupled to some responsibilities to their citizens to protect them from great harm, they have no responsibility to those outside their boarders in the absence of international law prohibiting behavior that harms others. And so, if no international law exists preventing climate change causing emissions (a fact not completely true as we will see from the below discussion of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), an appeal to ethical responsibility is necessary to get nations to abide by their ethical obligations to reduce GHG emissions from their territories. Because nations often assume that in international negotiations they should pursue national interest, not global responsibility, if climate change creates international ethical obligations there is a need for leaders to acknowledge the ethical duties of their nations. Yet, climates change is almost exclusively discussed in terms of national self-interest. Rarely have national leaders discussed national climate change policies in terms of obligations and duties.

III. Ethical Issues Entailed by the Need of Nations to Agree on Atmospheric GHG Emissions Stabilization Levels and National GHG Emissions Reductions Targets

Proposals Approaching Copenhagen: We need a

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A. The Relationship Between Global Atmospheric GHG Concentration Goals and National Emissions Reductions Targets.

One of the issues on the Copenhagen agenda is long-term GHG atmospheric concentration stabilization goals. The severity of damages caused to humans and ecological systems by human-induced climate change depends on the magnitude of the temperature change. The amount of temperature increase that will be experienced is dependent on the GHG atmospheric concentration levels. The concentration of GHGs in the atmosphere will depend on the collective action of GHG emitters around the world. And so no national policy on GHG emissions levels makes any sense unless it is understood to be at least implicitly a position on atmospheric GHG stabilization levels. Yet, this fact often escapes public comment when proposed national GHG emissions targets are under discussion.

Often public discussion of national GHG emissions reductions targets takes place as if setting national targets is a matter of national interest alone. Yet, nations have already agreed to take coordinated action to prevent dangerous climate change, a promise that entails looking to global consequences not national interest in developing national climate change policy. Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, nations agreed that:

The ultimate objective of this Convention…… 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. (UNFCCC. 1992 at Art 2)

> The nations also agree to:
> [P]rotect 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 and the adverse effects thereof. (UNFCCC. 1992 at Art 3)

And so governments have agreed to take steps to prevent "dangerous" climate change on the basis of "equity" and "common but differentiated responsibilities." Despite these commitments, there is a growing consensus in the scientific community that world is running out of time to prevent "dangerous" climate change, that is time to keep atmospheric concentrations of GHG below safe levels.

Many scientists, for instance, have urged that the international community should stabilize CO2 in the atmosphere at 450 ppm to give some hope of avoiding a 2°C human-induced increase in global climate temperature, a level that is widely regarded as "dangerous." (For a good discussion of dangerous climate change, see, Baer and Athansiou (2008)) Yet, stabilizing at 450 ppm of CO2 equivalent will require aggressive and rapid government responses.

The conclusion that the world should limit additional warming to 2°C has been derived from work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which found that the probability of many dangerous climate change impacts increases significantly above 2°C warming.

Although the 2°C dangerous warming threshold was derived from IPCC 's work, the IPCC never defined dangerous climate change as 2°C, and in fact quite appropriately concluded that what is "dangerous" is an ethical issue, not a scientific question, because what is dangerous depends on where one is in the world and how vulnerable one is to climate change impacts. Some parts of the world, for instance, are already very vulnerable to small increases in ocean levels or increases in droughts that would be caused by very small increases in global temperatures. In fact, IPCC has concluded that some people in some parts of the world are already experiencing adverse impacts of climate change and therefore, for them, climate change is already dangerous.

Further complicating the problem of limiting climate change to non-dangerous levels is created by scientific uncertainty about how much warming can be expected with different GHG atmospheric concentration stabilization levels. generally referred to in climate change science literature as scientific uncertainty about "climate sensitivity." (For a good discussion about where to draw the line on acceptable climate change, see, Baer and Athansiou, 2008) Because of scientific uncertainty about climate sensitivity, even low levels of GHG concentration such as 450 ppm CO2 would pose a significant threat that the 2°C level will be exceeded.

The fact that the world is running out time to prevent atmospheric concentrations from exceeding these low levels without hard-to-imagine global limits on greenhouse gas emissions is the basis for great and growing concern in the scientific community about climate change. For this reason, many scientists argue that preventing dangerous climate change is a civilization challenging problem of highest urgency.

Fueling the already heightened sense of urgency is a recent paper by Jim Hansen and seven other authors that concluded that additional warming should be limited to 1°C warming and to do this existing atmospheric concentrations of CO2 must not only not be allowed to rise the small amount to 450 ppm of carbon equivalent but must be reduced from existing levels of 385 ppm to 350 ppm CO2. (Hansen et al 2008) According to this paper, the world has likely already shot past the level of atmospheric concentrations that will lead to dangerous climate change. If this view is accepted, the world has already used up all of the assimilative capacity of the atmosphere and biosphere that has been available to buffer against dangerous climate change.

Given that, a strong ethical argument can be made that no nation may now deny that it has an immediate duty to restrict its emissions to its fair share of safe global emissions even though low emitting nations may have strong arguments that they are not currently exceeding their fair share

of safe global emissions and therefore they need not agree to reduce their emissions at this time. (Brown, 2009b) That is, all nations have immediate climate change prevention responsibilities even though low emitting developing nations may be able to make compelling ethical arguments that their current levels of emissions do not violate their global responsibilities.

What is each nation's fair share of safe global emissions is classic problem of distributive justice and restorative justice. Distributive justice is a branch of ethics that examines how benefits and burdens of human activities should be fairly distributed. Climate change is a problem of distributive justice because nations must now decide on how to allocate emissions' targets among them to achieve an acceptable global atmospheric target.

Restorative justice is a branch of ethics that examines how responsibilities should ethically be assigned to those already causing harm. Because climate change emissions are already causing harm and future emissions limitations are needed to prevent future harm, climate change is a problem that requires thinking through what justice requires as a matter both distributive and restorative justice. Because nations should follow principles of both distributive and restorative justice in allocating emissions targets among nations, nations should explain how their proposed emissions commitments in Copenhagen negotiations comport with these ethical considerations. Identifying distributive and restorative justice issues entailed by the need to allocate GHG emissions levels among nations does not necessarily lead to agreement about what ethics requires. This is so because ethical theories often differ about what ethics requires. One may, for instance appeal to rights- based or Rawlsian theories of distributive justice just to name a few, to guide ethical conclusions. Yet these theories may reach different conclusions about what ethics requires under the same facts. Therefore, ethical issue spotting does not necessarily lead to ethical consensus.

However, for some human problems there is an overlapping consensus among ethical theories about what ethics requires even though foundational ethical theories differ. An overlapping consensus occurs when varying ethical theories lead to the same ethical conclusion. For other human problems, although there is no overlapping consensus about what ethics requires, most ethical theories would agree that relevant existing behaviors are ethically problematic. That is, ethical criticism of the status quo is possible even if there is no overlapping consensus on what ethics requires. And so, identification of ethical issues may lead to: (1) conflict about what ethics requires, (2) overlapping consensus about what ethics requires, and, (3) overlapping consensus that a proposed or existing activity is ethically problematic despite no consensus on what ethics requires.

As we have seen, to adequately address issues of equity in allocating GHG targets among nations, proponents of allocations proposals should be guided by principles of distributive and restorative justice. Traditional distributive justice demands that benefits and burdens of public policy be distributed according to concepts of equality, modified only by morally relevant considerations of, for example, need or merit.

Distributive justice does not always require completely equal distributions, yet distributive justice puts the burden on those who want to be treated differently from others to show that the basis for being treated differently is based on morally relevant criteria. For this reason, as a matter of distributive justice, those who propose a formula for defining "equity" that is not based upon giving all people equal rights to use the atmosphere have the burden of demonstrating that differences in treatment are based on merit, deservedness, or other morally relevant criteria. Self-interest would not satisfy distributive justice criteria.

In sum, the second minimum ethical criteria that must be met by all Copenhagen proposals is the requirement that proposals must be consistent with what "equity" and "justice" demands of them. It is beyond the scope of this post to examine all of the issues raised by competing theories of distributive and restorative justice that are relevant to national emissions targets. However, what can be said at this time is that all nations have a duty to reduce their emissions to their fair share of non-dangerous global emissions and that fairness must be guided by principles of distributive and restorative justice. It also can be said that some nations approach to national emissions obligations are ethically problematic even though there may be no consensus among ethicists what emissions reduction commitments are required. Moreover, since distributive justice requires that those who argue for an unequal share of the burdens and benefits of climate change policies base their argument on morally relevant criteria, a strong case can be made that nations that believe that they are entitled to special treatment in regard to their GHG allocations have the burden of proof of demonstrating why their positions are ethically justified. For this reason, we conclude that national reporting under the UNFCCC and nations making proposals on second commitment period frameworks on GHG emissions reductions targets demonstrate how their climate change policies satisfy obligations to avoid dangerous climate change and are consistent with principles of distributive and restorative justice.

Since many nations enter climate change negotiations as if national interest rather than global responsibility is an adequate basis for national climate change policy, it would constitute a major change in how climate change negotiations are conducted if each nation were required to demonstrate how their national climate change policies or proposals for future climate regimes fulfill their global ethical responsibility to prevent dangerous climate change and their equitable share of global emissions. Yet many national climate change policy justifications and many proposals for second commitment period climate change regimes fail to explain how they are an element in a global climate change strategy that will prevent catastrophic climate change. (For a discussion of national proposals on reducing the threat of climate change, see, Brown 2009c)

If what is "dangerous" climate change is an ethical question, second commitment period proposals discussed at Copenhagen must not only explain how quantitatively their implementation will put the world on a emissions reductions glide path to avoid dangerous climate change but also defend a view of what ethical considerations have led proponents to determine what level is "dangerous." Given that a case can be made that current levels atmospheric GHG concentrations are already harming or putting people and ecosystems at risk, it will be difficult to make an ethically acceptable case why atmospheric GHG concentration targets higher than current levels are justified unless consent is given by those who are already vulnerable to levels of warming already being experienced. Yet many policy makers often assume that atmospheric concen. However, such elevated GHG gas atmospheric concentrations are not likely to be ethically legitimate policy options particularly if those most vulnerable to climate change impacts have not consented to be put at risk

For this reason, ethical considerations dictate that post-Kyoto proposals that would allow atmospheric concentrations to rise above existing levels be subject to rigorous ethical scrutiny, an examination that would look at proposed increased GHG atmospheric targets from both a procedural and distributive justice standpoint. If what is "dangerous" is a matter of ethics as well as science, proponents of higher atmospheric GHG concentrations should be required to be transparent in their ethical analysis of what is dangerous that allows them to conclude that higher levels are ethically acceptable and not "dangerous" and that those who are threatened by high GHG concentrations agree to the proposed levels.

For these reasons, each national climate change policy proposal and each post-Kyoto regime proposal must be understood to be implicitly a proposal on: (1) how to avoid dangerous climate change to others, and, (2) an ethical justification on what constitutes a "dangerous" level of atmospheric GHG concentrations, (3) and how their proposal is consistent with just distributions. And so all post-Kyoto regime proposals must, at a minimum, prescribe global emissions reductions targets that will put the world on a glide path to avoid dangerous climate change and therefore will stabilize GHG concentrations in the atmosphere at safe levels. These are minimum ethical requirements of all post-Kyoto regime proposals.

IV. Ethical Analysis of Specific National GHG Emission Targets Proposals

The analysis above leads to the following ethical conclusions about the proposals of nations as we approach Copenhagen in regard to GHG emissions targets identified above: (See chart above for commitments)

A. Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change.

As we have seen, a strong case can be made that if the goal of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is to prevent dangerous climate change, then nations have a duty to reduce their emissions as quickly a possible to the lowest possible level. The G8 has agreed to try and prevent warming of more than 2°C, but as a matter of ethics an argument can be made that even this amount of warming is ethically problematic because current temperatures are already dangerous for some vulnerable people around the world. Moreover, while acknowledging that the world overall should reduce them 80% by 2050, there appears to be no explanation from the G8 how this commitment leads to avoiding dangerous climate change or whether it is equitable. It is not clear, for instance, that the 80% reduction goal is 80% by all countries, what GHG atmospheric stabilizations concentration level this will achieve, and why this stabilization level will avoid dangerous climate change. All assumptions linking emissions reductions commitments to avoiding dangerous climate change should be explicit so that they can be evaluated by the international community.

The EU proposal to cut emissions by 20% by 2020, compared with 1990, also could be seen to be not stringent enough to meet obligations to prevent dangerous climate change while the US Waxman-Markey law's 17 % reduction by 2020, Japan's 15% reduction, and Australian 5 to 25% are even less defensible in regard to ethical duties to prevent dangerous climate change. Although extraordinarily rapid reductions amounts in years after the second commitment period could reduce the threat of dangerous climate change, proposed commitments of the US, Japan, and Australia for the second commitment period need to be evaluated in terms of what they are willing to do after the second commitment period and what these countries positions are on avoiding dangerous climate change.

It would appear that the G8, EU and particularly the US, Japanese, and Australian positions approaching Copenhagen are based upon national economic interest while avoiding ethical obligations. In fact if one follows the debate about the Waxman-Markey bill that passed the US House of Representatives which is the basis of the US 17% reduction commitment identified above, it is clear that the economic interest of some, not ethical obligations to prevent dangerous climate change, has been the major motivation for the 17% figure. (A later post will examine Waxman-Markey from an ethical perspective in more detail.)

Although the developing countries of China, Brazil, and India may be able to argue as a matter of equity that they have no duty to reduce their GHG emissions immediately, as a matter of ethics they and all developing countries for that matter have a duty to reduce emissions to their fair share of safe global emissions. Before agreeing that developing nations should have no legal obligations to reduce their GHG emissions at this time, developing nations should be asked to explain when they would be ethically obligated to reduce emissions. In other words, developing countries should be asked to describe what is an ethically supportable pathway to avoid dangerous climate change and in so doing define what is ethically dangerous. This is important because some developing countries are much more vulnerable to dangerous climate change and

those most vulnerable have a right to evaluate the positions of any country putting them at risk.

B. Reductions Levels Based Upon "Equity."

It would appear that the positions of the G8, EU, US, Japan, and Australia identified above represent positions of what they are willing to do at the present time without regard to what equity requires at this time or in the near future. There have been several proposals discussed in the international community about second commitment period frameworks that would expressly incorporate equity into future GHG emissions reductions pathways. Two such frameworks are known as "Contraction and Convergence" (C&C, 2009) and "Greenhouse Development Rights"(GDR, 2009) frameworks. So far, all major GHG emitting nations have refused to be bound by C&C or GDR or any other comprehensive equitable frameworks despite the fact that equity has been agreed by all nations to be a yardstick to measure the acceptability of their commitments. Because principles of distributive justice require that nations who want to diverge from equal rights to use the atmosphere as a sink justify their positions on ethically relevant grounds, the G8, the EU, US, Japan and Australia should be required to justify how their positions are consistent with what restorative and distributive justice requires of them.

It is clear that climate change policies that do not distribute the burdens of reducing the threat of climate change equitably will exacerbate existing injustices between rich and poor around the world. Since the international order can be seen to be already characterized by great differences between rich and poor and because climate change impacts most harshly threaten many of the Earth's poorest people, climate change policies that do not satisfy principles of distributive and restorative justice will increase global inequities. In other words, only an ethically supportable climate change regime can prevent enlarging existing injustices.

V. Conclusions

Most nations approaching Copenhagen appear to be avoiding their ethical obligations. They appear to believe that narrow national economic interest is a valid consideration for their climate change positions, but ethics would require them to act in accordance with duties and responsibilities, not self-interest alone. The international press following lead-up to Copenhagen has mostly failed to emphasize these issues and in so doing implicitly confirmed the idea that national interest alone is an adequate basis for national climate change policy. Yet for practical reasons, a strong case can be made that citizens around the world need to turn up the volume on the ethical dimensions of national climate change policies. Because they have already agreed to do this, each nation making a proposal for the second commitment period should be required to explain how their positions lead to the world avoiding dangerous climate change and are consistent with equity.

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9 COMMENTS

Teresa Flores | August 16, 2009 4:26 AM | Reply

I agree with mostly of what is written in this article, however I believe you should also be aware that carbon trading is not the solution, and to date did not lead to reduce emissions. While in the climate negotiations the countries are looking for their own short term economic interests, the lobby of some big corporations, trading companies and BINGOs are just looking to make money out of the climate change. Meanwhile truly committed environmental organizations have no voice in these negotiations. It is not compatible the proffit making mentality with the well being of the planet.
Kind regards

Earl Killian | August 16, 2009 9:04 PM | Reply

We need a proposal that all sides will have a hard time rejecting because its fairness will be obvious. Right now there is no such thing on the table.

Here is one first stab at such a thing. The first world countries wouldn't like it, but could they claim it was unfair?

Right now we emit around 8 Gt (gigatonnes) of carbon each year. In 2050 the number needs to be less than 1.6 Gt, so we're talking about reductions of 0.16 Gt per year if emissions follow a linear line. Take the world's year 2008 population of 6.7 billion. Divide the 8 Gt by 6.7 billion, and you get 1.2 tonnes per person per year. That becomes the 2010 quota. Each year, each person's quota gets reduced by 0.024 Gt. People that don't use their quota can sell it to those who want to emit more. Thus the first world will be making payments to the third world, which helps lift them out of poverty. The money goes to people, not to governments. Quotas don't increase with population, because that rewards something very negative. Indeed, when you have your first child, your quota passes to your child (you need to buy emission rights after that).

I don't see how China or India could legitimately complain about this scheme.

US emissions are about 2 Gt total, or about 6.6 tonnes per person. We would need to initially buy 6.6-1.2=5.4 tonnes of quota per person per year. China's emissions are 1.6 tonnes per person, so they would have to buy 0.4 tonnes of quota per person per year, but a lot of this would be bought by China's export industries; individual Chinese would probably be net sellers.

One question is whether governments would force their citizens to hand over their quotas to the government. That would not be good, IMO.

Paulina | August 17, 2009 11:40 AM | Reply

Thanks so much for laying out this framework.

The following point may seem tangential in this context, but until it is resolved, I don't see how the conversation on national targets can really get going.

The US goal is not 17% below 2005 levels in 2020, no matter how many times this is repeated in the media (including one E+C Committee press release, May 21). How the media report on bills is, critically, part of what we need ethical standards for.

As I noted in a comment on your earlier post, the "US goal" in #ACES (Waxman-Markey), ie, the national goal including both domestic and non-domestic reductions, is either 20% below 2005 levels (the "economywide goal", sec. 702) or 30% below 2005 levels in 2020 (see sec. 704), depending on whether the additional emissions reductions from the funding for reduced rainforest deforestation are included in the national goal.

How national goals should be quantified, what role the blueprint for how to reach a goal claimed in legislation should have in comparing national goals, how commitment metrics can be made commensurable, how to account for historical emissions in the context of assessing goals going forward, what role ethics needs to and should play in all of this--all these questions need to be resolved.

But this resolution cannot start by uncritically claiming that the US goal is 17% below 2005 levels in 2020. I appreciate your note that you will look in more detail at #ACES.

Additional comments:
Note that we never say that the *EU* "goal" is 21% below 2005 levels by 2020, but that *is* the trading cap for the EU ETS sectors. The EU ETS trading cap only covers about 40% of EU emissions, so the risk of mistaking it for the EU goal is small.

The US #ACES trading cap instead covers 85% of emissions (or sources amounting to 85% in 2005). This fact probably contributes to the conflation of the trading cap with the US goal. Further, in the March 31 Discussion Draft, the economy-wide goal (section 702) and the trading cap had the same figure, 20% below 2005 levels in 2020. This presumably added to

the confusion. But only the trading cap figure got weakened following the release of the discussion draft. The section 702 goal stayed the same, 20% below 2005 levels by 2020. So, the target for the non-trading-cap-covered-sectors was in effect made stronger. Perhaps the inaccurate May 21 press release bears the greatest responsibility for the widespread confusion. But, again, the US goal in #ACES is either 20% or 30% below 2005 levels, in 2020, as per above. Not 17%.

Ken Johnson | August 17, 2009 4:14 PM | Reply

"... a strong case can be made that if the goal of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is to prevent dangerous climate change, then nations have a duty to reduce their emissions as quickly a possible to the lowest possible level."
Dr. Brown: What does ethical analysis say about a regulatory doctrine that accepts no responsibility for reducing GHG emissions below predetermined target levels, even when science provides no evidence that the targets would suffice to avert catastrophic climate change, and even if the cost of significant further reductions is far below the initial expectation levels upon which the targets were based?
(I hope you will address this question in your forthcoming post examining Waxman-Markey from and ethical perspective.)

Aubrey Meyer | September 2, 2009 6:09 AM | Reply

Ken Johnson's question to Don Brown [as in the comment above] is a sharp one, deserves an answer and I know Don is fully capable of giving one.

That said, it seems to me after twenty years of that question being rigorously avoided at the UNFCCC and beyond, that the 'ethics' dimension of this climate trap holds us all in a stand-off formation, that makes it less and less possible to be 'rational' [numerate]. We need this first and to be 'ethical' - or perhaps collectively self-interested in an intelligent way - as a function of that.

That means doing the maths.

This Report [below] says today that: Big companies are seriously off the mark in carbon emissions reduction: - http://www.smartplanet.com/business/blog/business-brains/report-big-companies-seriously-off-the-mark-in-carbon-emissions-reduction/1886/

Ain't that the truth. But its not only the big companies that aren't doing the math.

The UK Government now has a climate-act [legislation] which is based on analysis which hasn't done the math either. It says the act is based on Contraction and Convergence [C&C - right principle] but they apply it chaotically and at the wrong rates. When we do the maths, getting to grips with the right principle [C&C] at the right rates [about twice as fast as stated] begins to look like this: - http://www.tangentfilms.com/GCIEAC.pdf

Ken - Next to this Waxman Markey comes well short. However, its not so much that it fails the ethics-test, as being being a prescription for doing too little too late i.e. its not intelligently self-interested. Byrd Hagel was better - it was C&C and we nearly got it in Kyoto: - http://www.gci.org.uk/temp/COP3_Transcript.pdf

Donald Brown | September 5, 2009 5:59 PM | Reply

Ken: The post that on the Scottish moral leadership was not meant to convey the idea that current Scottish commitments are consistent with its moral obligations but rather that compared to the debate in the US, the Scottish debate is noteworthy because it acknowledged obligations and responsibilities not just economic interests. If we can get all countries, or at least the big players, to acknowledge ethical duties than we have a fighting chance of getting to a just global solution. But as long as nations say I only have to do what is in my economic interest (to be contrasted with perhaps elightened self interest, we cant have a meaningful international discussion about what justice require of them

To my friend Aubrey, I disagree that you can argue from numbers without appealing to ethical acceptability, you cant go from "is: to "ought". In fact even Contraction and Convergence is completely off the table unless you can argue that it is a just solution or approaches a just solution. The notion that we dont need to bring ethics into the conversation from the very beginning is to allow any crazy global solution to qualify for consideration yet only just solutions have a fighting chance of becoming global solutions. In fact the only way I know of knocking out the crazy proposals that continue to plague the climate change debate it to show why some of them satisfy no reasonable interpreatation of what justice requires.

Donald A. Brown, Assistant Professor, Environmental Ethics, Science, and Law. Penn State Univeristy.

Jack Wilson | July 15, 2010 9:17 AM | Reply

Although Copenhagen was a failure, humanity has no choice but to treat it like a first step. The scientific imperative of stemming, stopping and reversing climate change is unquestioned except by a few flat earthers. The saddest irony is that the United States could have brought so much more tangible to the table, things that are achievable in the short term and technologically feasible: black carbon reductions both in the U.S. and the developing world,

methane reductions that spur natural gas recapture, and full implementation of the existing Clean Air Act (e.g., mobile sources, stationary sources and national ambient air quality standards). Why didn't the Obama administration do this? Because in the current political game of "hot potato," it has cynically bought into the fiction that "we need Congress to pass comprehensive legislation." That we need more from Congress than its constitutional duty to authorize funding is false despite the mainstream media's pre-occupation with "cap and trade.". The reality is that we already have the Clean Air Act (and other laws such as the Clean Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act) that possess ample authority to reduce greenhouse pollutants, stem ocean acidification and steer federal money toward truly renewable energy purposes. All of this can be done now. Immediately. Today. But our elected political leaders seem much more comfortable in talking than doing. The only way to avoid the lowest common denominator of two year election cycles is much more straight-forward action by the White House and its agencies.

Trance | August 26, 2010 8:10 PM | Reply

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DONALD A BROWN replied to comment from Trance | August 26, 2010 9:40 PM | Reply

The proposal would be one way of allocating responsibility among nations that would meet minimum justice conditions. This is very similar to an approach to allocation referred to by the name of contraction and convergence, a method of allocating national targets that eventually converge on a per capita allocation

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