

CapGlobalCarbon: A global response to a global problem

John Jopling argues that a radical addition is needed to the international system for curbing carbon emissions.

The current international system for addressing climate change – set up in 1992 via the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC) – relies on negotiation between national governments to reach agreements for reducing carbon emissions. It has never worked effectively, and global carbon emissions have continued to rise. With governments pursuing a narrow, short-term economic agenda – strongly encouraged by vast corporations – this is unlikely to change as we move towards the next major climate conference in Paris in late 2015.

If the existing institutional arrangements cannot be relied upon to achieve the level of emission reductions indicated by climate science, we need a back-up plan. The remedy proposed here was developed by members of the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability (Feasta), based in Ireland.¹ It would be an add-on, started and developed outside the existing process, but designed to work in close cooperation with the players within that process, namely the producers and users of fossil fuels, including national governments. It uses the scheme commonly known as ‘cap and share’.²

CapGlobalCarbon: the main features

The main features of the new arrangement would include: a mechanism for controlling carbon emissions; clear institutional structures; and a method for the fair distribution of funds.

The key to controlling carbon emissions would be a limit on the total global extraction of fossil fuels from the ground – an ‘upstream’ cap. This cap would be reduced year on year, based on climate science. It would be implemented via a global licence scheme, under which a licence would be required to bring fossil fuels onto the market anywhere in the world. There would be a free market for licences – they would be issued by auction and then traded.

A new institution would be needed to establish and operate the scheme, acting on behalf of humanity – a ‘global climate commons trust’. This would cooperate with national governments whose role it would be to police the scheme within their respective jurisdictions by banning the exploitation of fuels not covered by a licence.

Funds generated by the annual auction of the licences would be used for the benefit of people equally, so that those living a low carbon lifestyle would benefit.

Making it happen

It is clear that such a scheme is very unlikely to emerge from the UN FCCC process. Comparable proposals by Peter Barnes and others,³ by Oliver Tickell⁴ and most recently by Mutsuyoshi Nishimura⁵ have not been taken up. The initiative will have to come from the public through grassroots/ civil society organisations.

Is this realistic? I believe it is, if two key conditions are met: a shared purpose;⁶ and shared principles/ values.

The shared purpose would be the achievement of the necessary emissions reductions to avoid catastrophic climate change, in ways that benefits those in poverty. The shared principles/ values would include equality, respect, cooperation, participatory democracy, transparency, accountability and the rule of law. All processes would be clear and enforceable through the courts.

We can learn from and build on well-used models, for example, the concept of public resources, i.e. ‘commons’, and cooperatives. The atmosphere is a common resource that requires cooperative management.⁷

Some broader concepts are important too. These include: human society viewed as a subsystem of the natural ‘Gaian’ environmental system;⁸ the world seen not as a collection of nation-states but as a single global human society;⁹ power seen not as domination but as a facility to “enable things to happen”;¹⁰ and the ‘great transition’ – the realisation that nothing less than transformation of economics and politics will do.¹¹ Could the climate crisis be an opportunity to add momentum to the movements for fundamental social change?

Who will be the main players in our new arrangement? I think young people and women – neglected by the present system – will take a leading role. For example, young people are at the forefront of harnessing real-time communications technology and open-source software systems, such as Linux

and Wikipedia, which open up numerous positive possibilities when many people contribute cooperatively.

I believe it can be done. The cap and share proposals, coupled with some of the ethical, institutional and economic changes that I have outlined, offer an alternative that can be developed within the mainstream market economy and in cooperation with sympathetic governments and entrepreneurs. It will not need mass support initially. We can build that as we go along. If necessary, legal actions can be taken against fossil fuel corporations as well as governments to enforce compliance with the scheme.¹²

If you are interested in helping Feasta promote this initiative more widely, please contact John Jopling at <johnj@thevillage.ie>

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