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## **Is the Princeton proposal practical?**

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Developed at the Princeton Environmental Institute, the 'Princeton proposal' addresses a particularly difficult problem of our age; that of negotiating an equitable and practical framework with which to reduce humankind's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The following discussion focuses on practicality and is based on previous climate negotiations as well as the proposal's political implications, omissions, and administrative demands.

### Negotiating common but differentiated responsibilities in a dynamic world

In the lexicon of the UNFCCC, the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities is usually applied to the nation states that share the climate problem, but contribute and are affected by it in different ways. The principle establishes a global climate commitment and commits observing industrialised countries to emission cuts. Participants in the Kyoto Protocol were divided into two groups of countries, those immediately obliged to cut emissions and those not. Facilitating measures, such as the Emissions Trading and the Clean Development Mechanism, were created to keep the parties engaged with the process.<sup>1</sup> Insufficient buy-in from key industrial countries, namely the US, limited the achievements of the first phase of global climate action.

Initially, many established industrialised governments feared loss of competitiveness, advantage, and prosperity, which they perceived to come with staunch emission reductions. Since the early 1990s, the shape of the global economy has changed with significant industrial growth outside OECD countries. For example, China's annual national emissions exceed those of the US. Such economic reconfiguration, and fear of further political change, adds weight to the perception that Kyoto is simplistic, unfair, and against industrialised national interests. Yet China, and to a lesser extent India, have lifted massive amounts of their populations out of poverty. Their current emissions per capita are still significantly lower than their OECD counterparts.

Thus, the aims of economic advancement and environmental sustainability conflict quite politically at the international scale. With leadership change in the US bringing support to climate change mitigation, hopes are high that the carbon reduction burden may be shared more equitably and that global climate action may accomplish more.

### Rescaling the picture of carbon emissions, from nations to citizens

The Princeton Proposal addresses the Kyoto impasse with a focus on the emission profiles of individuals living within nations. It distinguishes the consumption of the poor in industrialised countries

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<sup>1</sup> Babiker, M.H., Jacoby, H.D., et al., 2002, 'The evolution of a climate regime: Kyoto to Marrakech and beyond', *Environmental Science and Policy*, 5(3): 195-206.



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and the wealthy from the developing countries from 'average' per capita emissions on the national scale.

Building on estimates of income and carbon emissions within nations, the authors suggest a carbon ceiling of 10 tCO<sub>2</sub> per year per individual in 2030. Fairness and social justice are introduced through a 'rights-based' approach and the idea of a 1 tCO<sub>2</sub>/yr carbon floor for the poorest third of global citizens. An emissions floor is innovative and recognises the perversity of expecting carbon reduction from those in poverty, yet the height and coverage of this emissions floor appears arbitrary.

The authors of the proposal recognise the preliminary nature of their framework. They point out that it simply requires agreement on a) a global emissions target and b) national business as usual emissions data to function. Yet, this very virtue of simplicity is lost as soon as the global carbon culture unfolding around us is observed.

Reducing the scale of responsibility from the nation to the individual opens up a great many options. Unfortunately, it neglects the social nature of individual acts of consumption. Power generation decisions are not made at the consumer level, neither are those which shape infrastructural development. A 'rights-based' approach works best where individuals can be completely separated from each other and judged fully responsible for their decisions.

## The data problem

Policy focussed academic studies are necessarily light on practical details. For what they lack in practical details, they make up for in statistical ones. Statistics can become more powerful than they deserve to be, when used to frame complex non-linear futures and inform present decisions. The particular data used by the Princeton Proposal, for example, is vulnerable to follow-through errors and biases originating from supporting datasets from the Development and Energy industries.

A broader problem with large-scale goals is that they are prescribed without particular and real-world context informing them. Decision-makers are more comfortable with simple, certain quantitative information, but this can easily mislead them. Whether they are Millennium Development Goals in development work or national league tables in the education system, the real world becomes filtered and 'washed out' by easy to make, plentiful, statistical data.

## Exclusions

The Princeton Proposal's exclusion of history, land-use, and trade are major barriers to practically differentiating and sharing responsibility for climate change. In the context of a negotiated agreement, exclusions are essentially political.

Firstly, ignoring the history of carbon emissions further directs responsibility away from established powers towards newly industrialising powers (China and India) and future powers. The second exclusion of land-use is also unfortunate because forestry is high on the post-Kyoto negotiation



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agenda. When combined with industrial output, it places significant pressure on countries (like Indonesia) with significant forests still intact.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, bringing trade into the carbon account would affect the economic interests of countries most heavily embedded into the global economic system. In practice, the carbon embedded in trade could be accounted for in a similar way as the 'virtual water' embedded in imports and exports of food.<sup>3</sup>

## High technocratic demands

Practical decarbonisation is social, institutional and values-based. The carbon accounting regime required by the Princeton Proposal makes considerable demands of political-administrative structures across the globe. This begs the question of whether they can or should handle the administrative burden.

In emerging economies institutions have difficulty raising tax revenues or supplying basic human needs. In industrialised societies on the other hand, companies and wealthy individuals spend millions minimising if not avoiding tax. Assets and facilities are regularly shifted across legal domains at great expense, against the public interest.

Needless to say, carbon policing will be a challenge to every government and society that agrees to it. Arguably, emissions trading and the relocation of manufacturing away from OECD countries already constitute carbon mitigation evasion.

## Evaluation

The Princeton Proposal is an incremental adaptation on the theme of 'common but differential responsibilities'. It expresses the need to approach each country according to a more fine grained understanding of its citizens and their carbon profiles. Maybe it will simply buy hesitancy and time for those who will use it as a negotiating tool. One direction the Proposal could take would be in addressing the global culture of consumption a little more directly. The idea's practicality depends to a large degree on those who feel it speaks to their interests and act.

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<sup>2</sup> Eliasch, et al., 2009, *The Eliasch Review - Climate Change: Financing Global Forests*.  
[http://www.occ.gov.uk/activities/eliasch/Full\\_report\\_eliasch\\_review\(1\).pdf](http://www.occ.gov.uk/activities/eliasch/Full_report_eliasch_review(1).pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Allan, T. 1997, 'Virtual water: a long term solution for water short Middle Eastern economies', Paper presented at the 1997 British Association Festival of Science Roger Stevens Lecture Theatre, University of Leeds, Water and Development Session, 9 September 1997.



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## **About Climatico**

Climatico is a network of researchers and experts providing independent analysis of climate change policy. We cover national and international policy and negotiations focusing on policy developments in the G20 countries.

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