Moving the climate debate forward: Re-thinking rights, risks and responsibilities

What changes could help reinvigorate climate politics?

There seems today a strong sense of malaise surrounding climate politics, created by the gap between the scale of required action identified by climate science and the adequacy of societal and political commitments. It is important to consider anew how rights, risks and responsibilities are framed in climate change debates because of the ways in which they are exacerbating a situation of stalemate.

What is the current situation?

Research indicates that:
— Public concern about the seriousness of climate change is declining.
— Responsibility for emission reductions continues to be attributed to individuals, communities and organisations without sufficient regard to the systematic practices and routines of everyday life.
— Whilst the state assigns at least some responsibility for mitigating climate change to individuals, individuals in their turn look to the state and large institutions to make systematic changes. This is resulting in stalemate.
— Schemes for climate change mitigation and adaptation can fail to protect the interests of the least powerful; if projects are put in place without proper consultation procedures being observed, then benefits meant to accrue to local communities may be captured by groups with greater wealth or political power.
— Scientific certainty is growing but is being met with political stalemate and delay, so that opportunities for maintaining the two degree limit through international climate negotiations are at risk.
— Questions about who has the right to a high carbon lifestyle are rarely considered.

What are the risks of delaying action?

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identified several climate impact risks for Europe. The longer the delay in mitigating emissions, the greater the economic and socio-political consequences are likely to be, including:
— Reduced labour productivity and crop production owing to extreme heat events. For example, increasing temperatures are likely to reduce the number of hours people can work outside.
— Rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and peak river discharges leading to flood damage and population displacements in river basins and coastal zones.
— Reduced availability of water from river abstraction and from groundwater resources, combined with increased demand for irrigation, energy and industry and domestic use.
— An undermining of the ability of the state to protect its citizens from harm, leading to social disaffection and unrest (eg during the UK winter floods of 2013-2014, communities and their representatives publicly directed anger at the government agencies for their perceived failure to take appropriate action).

What is getting in the way of taking action?

Clear and unambiguous signals are required that convey governments' sustained commitment to addressing climate change:

— Responsibility for emission reductions is often placed back onto individuals, communities and firms. Individuals are often not in a position to make the profound changes needed while firms and other organisations seek clear messages from government that policy will support their decarbonisation efforts over the long term.
— Attributing emissions to countries where materials are produced rather than where they are consumed can displace greater responsibility for emission reductions onto nations often least able to afford to make those changes.
— Political choices about acceptable levels of climate risk have not been subject to public debate.
— Mechanisms for global emission reductions that are already in place, such as the Clean Development Mechanism which allows trading of emission credits between developing and industrialised countries, suffer from poor oversight and regulation. As a result these schemes sometimes fail to deliver emission cuts and can entrench or deepen existing inequalities within host communities.
— Policy has historically focused on changing public attitudes and behaviour within existing institutional norms and expectations eg reproducing rather than challenging the spread of air conditioning to maintain a universal "normal" indoor temperature.

What issues are not being discussed?

Since the financial crisis of 2008 there is a greater reluctance to have debates about climate change that impinge upon social and economic issues. Some areas are not being addressed, including:

— Whether we can continue to increase production and consumption; instead questions are framed around whether we can "afford" to mitigate climate change.
— Whether policies should continue to meet rather than limit increasing demands for energy.
— Whether wealthier consumers should be entitled to maintain particular lifestyles, for example around car use, high indoor temperatures and access to a wide variety of imported food.
— Whether there should be some movement towards consumption-based accounting which would both ensure nations and consumers take responsibility for their emissions rather than outsourcing production emissions overseas and help develop understanding of emissions embedded in alternative supply chain options.

How does the debate need to change direction?

Public debate needs to:

— Address how the current policy and emission counting framework often displaces risk, or impacts upon the rights of groups or communities.
— Develop a more inclusive and democratic process of deliberation regarding the trade-offs between economic growth and climate harm.
— Consider how house building, road building, town planning and building design can change to support more sustainable ways of life.

What are the implications for decision makers?

Decision makers need to move beyond a situation of stalemate where the onus is placed on consumers and markets to take action, while individuals expect governments to take action:

— Decision making must be transparent and procedural rights - rights to information, consultation and democratic inclusion in the decision-making process - must be recognised and upheld.

— International policy deliberations should aim to take into account income differentials within as well as between nations.

— Clarity is required about individual rights in a carbon constrained world – whether people have a right to a certain level of emissions or a right to access the resources needed for adequate participation in society.

— Carbon trading schemes must be subject to effective governance to ensure they do not displace responsibility and associated risks for emission reductions onto the less powerful.

— Policy makers and decision makers in local government, public sector organisations, business and industry have to take responsibility for changing the socio-technical systems that are locking people into high carbon lifestyles.

— More accessible information about risks and uncertainties in projections needs to be available so that public have a proper understanding of the risks posed by business as usual.

Further information

Useful resources:

Capstick, S., Whitmarsh, L., Poortinga, W., Pidgeon, N. and Upham, P. (November 2014, in press) International trends in public perceptions of climate change over the past quarter century. Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change

IPCC, (2014): Summary for policymakers. In: Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 1-32 Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA

Mathur, V., Afionis, S., Paavola, J., Dougill, A. and Stringer, L. (2014). Experiences of host communities with carbon market projects: towards multi-level climate justice. Climate Policy Vol 14, Issue 1, 42-62 http://goo.gl/Dal5Bz

Newell, P. and A. Bumpus (2012). The Global Political Ecology of the Clean Development Mechanism, Global Environmental Politics, Vol 12 No.4, 49-67 http://goo.gl/xoESWz

Shaw, C (2013) Choosing a dangerous limit for climate change: Public representations of the decision-making process. Global Environmental Change. Vol 23, Issue 2 563-571 http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/09593780/23/2

Shove, E (2012) Written evidence on research into behaviour change given by Professor Elizabeth Shove to the Science and Technology Select Committee http://goo.gl/5ZXV5K

Spence, A., Venables, D., Pidgeon, N., Poortinga, W. and Demski, C. (2010) Public perceptions of climate change and energy futures in Britain. Understanding risk working paper. http://psych.cf.ac.uk/understandingrisk/docs/final_report.pdf

Turner, K. (2012) PAP and CAP: how to count carbon with a focus on the UK nation, regions and intra and international trade. Conference paper. http://goo.gl/SAr3S9

Getting beyond the climate crunch: rethinking rights, risks and responsibilities. LWEC briefing paper http://goo.gl/0f2sfd

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