Purchasing power versus resource quotas: 
Fairness and the climate crisis


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Abstract:
When it comes to distribution of resources, the ruling principle in today’s world is purchasing power. With strong purchasing power you have practically unlimited access to resources. This paper explores this distributional principle in light of the climate crisis. The atmosphere’s sink capacity is here perceived as a limited resource to be distributed among more than seven billion world citizens, and the question asked is whether Norwegians, who have strong purchasing power compared to the rest of the world, are willing to take another distributional principle – resource quotas – into consideration when faced with the climate crisis. The method employed to explore this question was structured qualitative interviews with grassroots politicians. The interviews were staged as dialogues on consumption and distribution in today’s world, and the interviewees were asked to choose between different answers to moral dilemmas. Some answers were in favour of the right to exercise unlimited purchasing power, while other answers implied adherence to resource quotas as distributional principle if the resource in question is limited. The analysis of the interview material shows that all interviewees share some moral principles. These principles can be viewed as a shared grounded ethic which deserves to be named “the fairness ethic”. The fairness ethic might be seen as a sociological version of Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, and it goes as follows: “Act as you find it fair to expect relevant others to act in an equivalent situation.” The fairness ethic requires answers to three questions: “What is the situation?”; “Who are relevant others in this kind of situation?” and “What is it fair to expect from relevant others in this kind of situation?” The interviewees had different combinations of answers to these three questions. The research design also allowed exploration of whether changes in the perception of the situation and/or a changed view on whom to regard as relevant others lead to changes in the perception of fairness. It turned out that when interviewees were asked to perceive the climate crisis as real and to perceive all world citizens as relevant others, they arrived at a shared perception of fairness which implies a propensity to share the atmosphere’s sink capacity quite equally between all world citizens. The paper concludes that there seems to be an until now untapped potential for overlapping consensus on per capita distribution of CO₂ quotas among Norwegian grassroots politicians from the entire political spectrum.

Key words: Moral sociology, distributional justice, climate crisis, CO₂ quotas
Introduction

In its recent White Paper on Norwegian climate policy the Norwegian government states that “In accordance with the government’s political platform, Soria Moria II, the government has the long-term goal that every human on Earth shall be assigned an equal right to emit greenhouse gases” (Meld. St. 21 (2011–2012):46, my translation). This paper explores the potential for popular support for this per capita approach to distribution of emission quotas. And it concludes with a policy suggestion which might enhance such support.

In The Global Deal: Climate Change and the Creation of a New Era of Progress and Prosperity (Stern 2009), Nicholas Stern invites the reader to reflect on the pros and cons of strong action now:

What mistake is more dangerous? If science is wrong and the risk of large temperature increases turns out to be low but we have made cuts in emissions, then we benefit because we will have a world that is more energy-efficient, with new and cleaner technologies, and is more biodiverse as a result of protecting the forests. There would be a loss in terms of the resources spent to achieve this which, had we known the risks of climate change were overstated, might have been better used elsewhere. These might be net costs, but they would be very far from being disastrous.

If, on the other hand, the science is right but we have refused to act, then where are we when we realise we have made a mistake? We will have continued to emit for thirty or forty years and stocks [of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere] will have reached levels where the risks of dangerous climate change are extremely high. It will be vastly expensive – or quite conceivably impossible – to back ourselves out of the situation.

It would be grossly imprudent to act on the assumption that the science is wrong even if the probability of it being right were fairly low. And if we add to that common-sense argument the reasonable assumption that there is a high probability that the science is right, then the argument for strong action is overwhelming. (Stern 2009:35)

The strong action that Stern strongly recommends includes building of trust between rich and poor countries, and to build such trust, questions of global equity and fairness must always be part of the discussions and negotiations.

Today the global CO₂ emissions are approximately 7 tonnes per annum per capita (Meld. St. 21 (2011–2012):39). To protect the world from the risks of dangerous climate change the average emissions for a world citizen must not exceed 2 tonnes of CO₂ per annum by the year 2050 (Stern 2009:80). And the sooner the world reaches this level of per capita emissions the better.
A good solution would be to assign emission quotas corresponding to 2 tonnes of CO\textsubscript{2} per annum to all world citizens and put very high taxes (or rather fines) on emissions that exceed the quotas. The quotas could be tradable, but rich consumers could not expect to be able to buy other people’s quotas because most people will need most of their quotas to live the lives they would like to live. This would be an effective and equitable way to approach the climate challenge, but it seems utopian. Despite the utopian glow I think it is important that political leaders and their expert advisers start to talk about this solution – which is in accordance with the long-term goal of the Norwegian government – because this simple solution gives a clear view of the big picture.

My research suggests that people like to discuss the big political picture. In my interview study I talked to grassroots politicians, but different small-talk situations have taught me that this interest in discussing the big picture of fairness and the climate crisis is not limited to politicians. Anne Bregnballe’s study of “lay people and professionals in dialogue on development and environmental policy” confirms my anecdotal findings about lay people. She found that lay people who were involved in a pilot project on how households can contribute to sustainable development lost interest in the project because of lack of dialogue about the big picture (Bregnballe 2005). Bregnballe called her study Enlightenment as hindrance. Ingerid Straume comments that Bregnballe’s findings show that the narrow views of authorities largely reduced this pilot project in sustainable development to the delivery of information about waste management and environmental purchasing (Straume 2005).

Delivery of information about climate change is important, but governmental information strategies need to be supplemented by dialogue strategies. My suggestion is that dialogues on climate change should be based on four pillars:

1. The atmosphere as a sink or reservoir with limited capacity
2. Emission quotas of maximum 2 tonnes per capita as the sustainable solution
3. Debates on purchasing power versus resource quotas
4. Treating the consumers as moral citizens

When it comes to distribution of resources, the ruling principle in today’s world is purchasing power. With strong purchasing power you have practically unlimited access to resources. Are Norwegian consumers willing to refrain from this privilege for moral reasons? Political leaders and their expert advisers seem to fear that this is not the case. They seem to lack trust
in the moral and dialogical potentials of Norwegian citizens. With this paper and my doctoral thesis I hope to contribute to building such trust in Norwegian citizens as moral beings.

In my research I make use of the concepts “narrative resource” and “normative resource”. A person’s reservoir of narrative resources makes it possible to understand multiple ways to make sense of the world. A person’s reservoir of normative resources decides what that person finds to be fair. Normative resources are a specific kind of narrative resources. My research findings give information on potentials for consensus on action to curb and reduce global CO$_2$ emissions and how to communicate to activate the narrative and normative resources necessary to achieve such consensus.

Method

The method employed to explore Norwegians’ attitudes to fairness and climate change, was structured qualitative interviews with grassroots politicians. The interviews were staged as dialogues on consumption and distribution in today’s world, and the interviewees were asked to choose between different answers to moral dilemmas. Some answers were in favour of the right to exercise unlimited purchasing power, while other answers implied adherence to resource quotas as distributional principle if the resource in question is limited.

The interviewees were picked from 16 electoral lists for the 2001 parliamentary election and the final group of interviewees consisted of 13 women and 15 men from 15 different electoral lists. None of the interviewees were members of parliament. 14 interviewees represented the 7 parties that are represented in the present Norwegian parliament. The aim was to have one man and one woman from each of the 16 lists, but there was also a time frame set for the whole interview process. The one list that is not represented in the interview material is a protest list with little political significance. The interviews were conducted in 2002.

The dialogue design was developed with inspiration from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The main research tool was a questionnaire with 24 dilemmas or

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1 It is beyond the scope of this paper to treat the turn to narrative approaches in social science. I will thus restrain myself to stating that making sense through narratives is part of the human condition and also constitutes a fruitful research strategy (Abbott 2002, Bates et al. 1998, Czarniawska 2004, Feldman et al. 2004)

2 The interviews were conducted as part of the doctoral project “Norwegians in the global house” with funding from the Norwegian Research Council. I was close to finishing my doctoral thesis in 2004, but then I had to put my research aside due to illness. Now I have got a new chance to finish my doctoral thesis, and fortunately my interview material has gained from the break and seems to be more relevant today than it was in 2004. The interviews dealt with resource quotas in general, but I have chosen to narrow the scope and focus primarily on CO$_2$ quotas.

challenges (formulated as a choice between two statements) which taken together cover many aspects of “consumption and distribution in today’s world”.

When designing questionnaires for quantitative studies one has to take into consideration that most people will unconsciously read much more meaning and intentions into a questionnaire than the researcher can ever imagine. In quantitative studies respondents’ unintended over-interpretation often leads to uncertainty about how to interpret the data (Foddy 1994:52). By using a questionnaire to frame qualitative interviews this tendency to over-interpretation becomes a strength instead of a problem. When designing the questionnaire for this study, respondents’ general tendency to read a questionnaire as a coherent narrative was thus treated as a resource to be utilized.

The questionnaire is divided into three main sections. The first section of questions (question 1–7) creates a framework for the conversation by introducing different issues and potential worries. The aim of this section is to establish a partly overlapping understanding of today’s global challenges. Everyone does not worry about everything, but everyone worries about something. Hence, everybody might have an interest in finding common solutions that attend to the concerns of all in the population. The main challenges introduced in this section are: the poverty crisis; environmental problems; terrorism; over-population; migration pressure; materialistic value systems; and the climate crisis.

The second section of questions (question 8–17) introduces and explains one particular potential solution to the problems that were identified in the first section of questions. The questions revolve around principles of distributional justice and suggest global regimes of resource quotas as a principle to be added to the current use of purchasing power as the ruling distributional principle in the world market.

The third section of questions (question 18–24) is aimed at a closer exploration of different narrative resources on causes, effects and responsibilities. The themes from the first section are repeated, but this time the aim is not only to face some worries, problems and challenges. In this final section it is also important to map ownership to different problems and potential solutions. Mapping of ownership means identifying winners and losers in today’s situation and finding out who is affected by different problems and solutions and who has the power to advance changes. This focus contributes to greater awareness on how different solutions might protect or harm the interests of different groups, and the interviewees easily became involved in a search for win-win solutions.

In the interpretation of the interview material much inspiration can be found in the literature on biographic research and ethnographic fieldwork (i.e. Gullestad 1996,
Haugestad: Purchasing power versus resource quotas

Chamberlayne et al. 2000, Emerson et al. 1995). The interpretations just have to be adjusted to the constructive aim of the dialogue design. When doing research on a person’s or a society’s past and present the researcher must be careful not to impose anything which is foreign to the case in question. The aim is to manage to take the other’s perspective as far as possible. The dialogue design is also about taking the other’s perspective, but another characteristic of this design is the creation of a specific space for dialogue – a meeting place between the narrative and normative resources of the researcher (expressed through the questionnaire and follow-up questions) and those of the interviewees. In this meeting place the narrative and normative resources of both researcher and interviewee become clearer than before. The role of the researcher in this design is thus very far away from “the detached observer”, but this ideal is usually abandoned as unachievable and unwanted in biographic and ethnographic research as well (Wengraf 2000:144, Emerson et al. 1995:3).

The meaning that is created through the dialogue between researcher and interviewee is shared meaning, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to report on how this meaning was created. The interview can be viewed as a sequence of events in the life of the interviewee. To handle these events the interviewee makes use of available narrative and normative resources – both those resources accumulated through the interviewee’s lived history, and the resources that are made available through the questionnaire. Hence, the main difference between this design and most biographic and ethnographic research is that the interviewees are exposed to distinct events and are offered a given set of narrative and normative resources through a questionnaire. In this way the design creates a conversational space which in some respects is equal across all interviews. This facilitates comparisons between the interviews. In other respects, however, the interviews differ enormously. On the one hand this has to do with the different narrative and normative resources which the interviewees bring into the interview setting, but on the other hand it is also a product of the researcher’s agenda. The researcher’s agenda is to map a broad spectrum of narrative and normative resources, and this means that to each new interview the researcher brings with her the information gathered in previous interviews. The researcher can thus choose to go quickly through narrative and normative resources which have already been explored in earlier interviews, while new such resources can be explored more thoroughly. In this way 28 two-to-three hour interviews have provided an extraordinarily rich material on available narrative and normative resources and how these resources are utilized.

Towards the end of each conversation the interviewee and the researcher talked about the interview itself. Under such circumstances a positive account of the interview does of
course not tell much about how much importance the interviewee attaches to the issues in question. Both researcher and interviewee have invested time and energy in the conversation and both parties would probably regard a negative account as an offence. Despite of this it still seems to be worth mentioning that all interviewees found the conversation interesting and challenging. And the tape recordings from the interviews show that this is not just something they say of politeness. The interviews are full of the interviewees’ own anecdotes about relevant issues – triggered by the dilemmas presented in the questionnaire. Several interviewees said that this was a kind of conversation that one should have more often. This positive evaluation of the conversations contradicts the quite common belief that most people do not care about global issues. Of course, the people recruited from electoral lists might be likely to be more concerned about global distributional justice than the average Norwegian, but this is balanced by the fact that nationalists are significantly overrepresented among the interviewees because of a number of nationalist protest parties.

Several of the statements in the questionnaire are mixed statements. If someone somewhat agree with a mixed statement, he or she can either agree with one part of the statement and not the other or somewhat agree with both parts. In survey studies mixed statements thus make the results difficult to interpret. This interpretational problem does not occur in this study because in the dialogue design the questionnaire questions function as starting points for dialogues where the interviewees make clear why they agree or disagree with certain statements and parts of statements. In the dialogues the interviewees could also make it clear if they fully disagreed with one of the statements or both of them even though this was not included in the seven response alternatives. The response alternatives were:

- Fully agree with A
- Somewhat agree with A
- Fully agree with B
- Somewhat agree with B
- Agree with neither A nor B
- Don’t have any opinion on the issue
- Don’t know enough about the issue

This bias is not unproblematic. Perhaps the questionnaire used in this study is too much aimed at mapping potentials for consensus and thus indirectly suppressing some opinions. This aspect of the present design is thoroughly discussed in my doctoral thesis (Haugestad, forthcoming) and I conclude that instead of the response alternative “Agree with neither A nor B” new versions of the dialogue design should have the response alternatives “Fully disagree with A”, “Somewhat agree with A”, “Fully disagree with B” and “Somewhat agree with B”. This would further contribute to the opening up of the conversational space, and the increased number of response alternatives can easily be dealt with by using two columns – one for statement A and one for statement B – and placing the non-substantial answers below the two columns. I do however also conclude that the bias in the questionnaire used in this study is compensated for through the dialogues.
The interviewees were told to put as many crosses as they needed to express their opinions. They could thus for instance give substantial answers and then add that they didn’t know enough about the issue.

**Results**

The analysis of the interview material showed that all interviewees share some moral principles. These principles can be viewed as a shared grounded ethic which deserves to be named “the fairness ethic”. The fairness ethic might be seen as a sociological version of Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, and it goes as follows: “Act as you find it fair to expect relevant others to act in an equivalent situation.”⁵ The fairness ethic requires answers to three questions: “What is the situation?”, “Who are relevant others in this kind of situation?” and “What is it fair to expect from relevant others in this kind of situation?” The interviewees had different combinations of answers to these three questions.

The research design facilitated exploration of whether changes in the perception of the situation and/or a changed view on whom to regard as relevant others lead to changes in the perception of fairness. It turned out that when interviewees were asked to perceive the climate crisis as real and to perceive all world citizens as relevant others, they arrived at a shared perception of fairness which implies a propensity to share the atmosphere’s sink capacity quite equally between all world citizens, as expressed in the responses to question 15 below.

The main usage of the questionnaire was to create a space for dialogue. Thus the ways the interviewees reasoned when making up their minds about the dilemmas are more important to me than where they chose to put their crosses. The crosses do however also give interesting information about the potential for consensus. Below I render the quantitative results for the eight dilemmas in the questionnaire that are most relevant for the questions at stake in this paper. I have underlined the answers that I later comment on. The numbers refer to where the questions are placed in the questionnaire. In addition to some comments to the quantitative results I will render some brief examples of the qualitative results from the dialogues.

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⁵ I have formulated the fairness ethic in a way that probably makes it sound like a normative ethic. I do however view the fairness ethic as a descriptive ethic. This is something that I will explore thoroughly in my doctoral thesis (Haugestad, forthcoming).
5. CLIMATE CHANGE

Two people have just watched a TV program about climate change. Both are worried about the increase in extreme weather conditions, but they have different views on how the world community should react. To what degree do you agree with A and/or B?

A says: It has not been proven that the changes in climate have anything to do with CO₂ emissions from human activity. As long as this isn't proven, it is not necessary to put limits on emissions.

B says: The day we become convinced that there is a connection between CO₂ emissions and climate change it might be too late to do anything to prevent dramatic changes in climate. Therefore we better start to put limits on CO₂ emissions now. If later experience shows that we were wrong we can just increase the emissions again.

None fully agrees with A
1 somewhat agrees with A
22 fully agree with B
1 somewhat agrees with B
3 somewhat agree with A and somewhat agree with B
1 doesn't want to relate to the question

Comments:

The B statement on climate change is formulated as an insurance statement. When formulated this way – without a clear stance on whether anthropogenic climate change is proven or not – there seems to be a potential for consensus on political action to put limits on CO₂ emissions now.

10. DRIVING

To what degree do you agree with A and/or B?

A says: Everybody has the right to use a car as much as he/she can afford.

B says: It's unfair that rich people can use unlimited amounts of petrol and drive their cars as much as they want when pollution and other disadvantages related to motor traffic affect everybody.

4 fully agree with A
1 somewhat agrees with A
10 fully agree with B
3 fully agree with B and somewhat agree with A
5 somewhat agree with B
1 fully agrees with both A and B
2 somewhat agree with A and somewhat agree with B
2 agree with neither A nor B
Comments:
Indirectly the question on driving refers to the choice between purchasing power and resource quotas as distributional principle. Given that the B statement is quite elaborated and activates normative resources related to fairness and the polluter pays principle it is important that four interviewees still fully agree with statement A and the unlimited right to exercise purchasing power. I will add that I believe it would have been possible to reach a consensus on the B statement through further dialogue with those who almost by instinct agreed with the A statement. I base this belief on the existence of the fairness ethic. Those who fully agreed with the A statement responded as individual consumers without responsibilities towards other world citizens. If a dialogue partner could bring them to activate other narrative and normative resources they would probably agree that the B statement also makes sense.

11. A TAX ON OVERCONSUMPTION
Two people discuss a proposal to impose a tax on overconsumption related to CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels in Norway. The proposal implies that all Norwegians will get a “fuel quota” corresponding to 150 liters of fuel per year per person. Use of the quota will be registered when purchasing fuel and purchasing domestic air tickets. When a family or individual has used the whole quota they will have to start paying a tax on overconsumption – approximately 3 cents per liter. The suggestion also implies that the tax revenue will be used to fight poverty in the world’s poorest countries. These countries have themselves a very low level of CO₂ emissions per person. In this way a tax on overconsumption can contribute to improve the living conditions of the “underconsumers” whose CO₂ emissions are far below the global average. Today the average CO₂ emissions for people living in Norway are more than twice as much as the global average.

In view of this information, to what degree do you agree with A and/or B?

A says: We already have more than enough taxes.

B says: I believe a tax on overconsumption is a fair and appropriate way to achieve two things in one operation. We can achieve both a reduction in individuals’ CO₂ emissions and improved conditions for poor people.

5 fully agree with A
2 fully agree with A and somewhat agree with B
1 somewhat agrees with A
7 fully agree with B
1 fully agrees with B and somewhat agrees with A
3 somewhat agree with B
2 somewhat agree with B but add that they don’t know enough about the issue
1 fully agrees with both A and B
2 somewhat agree with both A and B
1 somewhat agrees with both A and B but adds that he doesn’t know enough about the issue
3 agree with neither A nor B
Comments:
The most interesting answer to this question was given by “Eric”. He first answered that he fully agreed with the A statement – that we already have more than enough taxes. But later in the dialogue he realised that a tax on overconsumption is more in line with his values, and he returned to this question and put his cross differently. This does not mean that Eric changed his mind. The thought experiments activated his own normative resources and he became more aware of the normative consequences of his way of thinking.

12. AIR TRAFFIC
To what degree do you agree with A and/or B?

A says: Everybody has the right to travel by air as much as he/she can afford.

B says: It’s unfair that rich people can travel by air as much as they want – and with that have unlimited access to emission of gases that are damaging to the climate balance.

7 fully agree with A
1 fully agrees with A (on one condition) and somewhat agrees with B
3 somewhat agree with A
6 fully agree with B
1 fully agrees with B and somewhat agrees with A
4 somewhat agree with B
2 fully agree with A and fully agree with B
3 somewhat agree with A and somewhat agree with B
1 agree with neither A nor B

Comments:
The answers to the question on air traffic show the same pattern as the answers to the question on driving. Seven interviewees fully agree with the A statement and thus the unlimited right to exercise purchasing power. Freedom to travel by air is probably one of the freedoms that Norwegian consumers are least willing to sacrifice (Rees 2012:15), but when this freedom is related to damaging the climate balance many interviewees agree that it is not fair to exercise purchasing power in this way.

13. “YOUR RESOURCE QUOTA”
Two people discuss different systems of labelling that among other things might tell if a product is environment-friendly. They talk about the possibilities of having a system of labelling that tells how much of a world citizen’s daily per capita quota of basic resources that have been used to produce a certain product. Basic resources include grain/land, energy and clean water. To what degree do you agree with A and/or B?
A says: If there was a system of labelling concerning use of resource quotas I would like to try to adjust my use of resources to “my quota” of basic resources, and I would like to pay a tax on overconsumption if I were to use more than my resource quota.

B says: Resource quotas and taxes on overconsumption would only mean a lot of extra bureaucracy.

6 fully agree with A
3 fully agree with A and somewhat agree with B
1 somewhat agrees with A
1 somewhat agrees with A but adds that he doesn’t know enough about the issue
4 fully agree with B
2 fully agree with B and somewhat agree with A
2 somewhat agree with B
8 somewhat agree with A and somewhat agree with B
1 agrees with neither A nor B

Comments:
At first “Ulf” was skeptical to this suggestion and feared the bureaucratic consequences. But on the other hand he was intrigued by the possibility that adjusting your consumption to your resource quota could become a kind of game. In Norwegian we say “Det kan gå sport i det”, and that is what Ulf said. This expression means that something can be turned into a game and it is often used when something boring can be turned into something fun or challenging.

14. CHANGES IN CONSUMPTION PATTERNS
Two people discuss whether it makes sense to try to adjust their level of consumption so that they don’t use more than their “quota” of the world’s resources. To what degree do you agree with A and/or B?

A says: It doesn’t make sense to “make sacrifices” to save resources when such saving is not a part of a common, united effort.

B says: It might be meaningful for individuals to try to adjust to one’s quota of the world’s resources even though other people don’t do it.

6 fully agree with A
1 fully agrees with A and somewhat agrees with B
2 somewhat agree with A
8 fully agree with B
5 fully agree with B and somewhat agree with A
1 somewhat agrees with B
2 fully agree with both A and B
2 somewhat agree with both A and B
1 agrees with neither A nor B
Comments:
This question evokes the free rider problem and the need to see the big picture. 15 interviewees fully agree that it might be meaningful for individuals to try to adjust to one’s quota of the world’s resources even though other people don’t do it. This shows that if political leaders make efforts to present a system of individual CO₂ quotas as part of the big picture of a “global deal” (Stern 2009) such a system will probably become popular among the majority of citizens.

15. DISTRIBUTION OF QUOTAS
Two people discuss the proper solution if there were to be limits set concerning the amount of fossil fuels (oil, gas, and coal) a country might use. To what degree do you agree with A and/or B?

A says: Countries that depend on fossil fuels to keep their economy going must be allowed to use more than countries that are not yet dependent on fossil fuels.

B says: Combustion of fossil fuels releases climate gases to our common atmosphere. No one has any more right to the atmosphere than other people and emission rights should therefore be equally distributed among all world citizens. Those who have emissions above the global average should pay a tax on overconsumption.

1 fully agrees with A but adds that he doesn’t know enough about the issue
13 fully agree with B
1 fully agrees with B but adds that she doesn’t know enough about the issue
3 fully agree with B and somewhat agree with A
3 somewhat agree with B
3 somewhat agree with A and somewhat agree with B
2 agree with neither A nor B
1 doesn’t know enough about the issue
1 doesn’t want to relate to the issue

Comments:
23 interviewees fully or somewhat agree that those who have emissions above the global average should pay a tax on overconsumption. The 5 interviewees who do not agree have different reasons for this. Two of them say that they do not know enough about the issue. My findings show a surprisingly big potential for consensus on a tax on overconsumption.

6 The B statement is a complex statement, but the dialogues showed that none of those who somewhat agreed with B were completely negative towards a tax on overconsumption.
16. TAX ON OVERCONSUMPTION

Two people discuss the relationship between the rich and the poor and the concept of a “tax on overconsumption” on resource consumption that exceeds average resource consumption for all world citizens. To what degree do you agree with A and/or B?

A says: I wish that it were a simple way to get a general view of my own “overconsumption” of fossil fuels. Then I would happily pay a “tax on overconsumption” if I knew that the tax revenue would be used to the benefit of the world’s poor people.

B says: There are already far too many taxes and the poor countries have themselves to blame for their current situation.

12 fully agree with A
1 fully agrees with A and somewhat agrees with B
7 somewhat agree with A
2 fully agree with B
3 somewhat agree with B
3 somewhat agree with A and somewhat agree with B

Comments:

23 interviewees fully or somewhat agree with the A statement which says that it would be nice to be able to easily map one’s own “overconsumption” of fossil fuels and to use this information to pay a “tax on overconsumption” where the tax revenue is used to the benefit of the world’s poor people.

Discussion

The questions that activated well-known normative resources (i.e. resistance against more taxes and more bureaucracy) show the classic division between the right and the left. On the other hand the questions that presented new normative resources (sharing the atmosphere and per capita distribution of emission quotas) reveal a potential for consensus on global regimes of resource quotas. This might be viewed as a shallow disagreement versus a deep consensus. It seems like the dialogue design almost forced the interviewees to respond globally responsibly. This force can to some degree be attributed to the authority of the researcher, but this factor was balanced by the fact that interviewees were people on electoral lists. It became clear from many statements during the interviews that the interviewees were eager to represent the views of their political parties properly and did not feel that they should please
the researcher through agreement. I believe that the force of the dialogue design should be attributed to the force of the good argument and the grounded fairness ethic.

**Conclusion**

My interview study has revealed a potential for overlapping consensus on per capita distribution of CO$_2$ quotas among Norwegian grassroots politicians from the entire political spectrum. How can this potential be activated in the public? One way to bring a topic high up on the political agenda is to suggest a new tax. My policy suggestion is not exactly a tax, but the introduction of a system of individual climate quotas. Each Norwegian could be assigned a free emission quota of 2 tonnes CO$_2$ per annum. People with higher emissions than this level would have to buy quotas. In the debate that would necessarily follow such a suggestion, political leaders could activate multiple narrative and normative resources, and this paper has presented some ideas about how such resources might be activated and utilized. The aim of this suggestion is primarily to catalyse debate and dialogue. Such debate and dialogue are vital to the democratic change towards a low-carbon society.

**References**


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7 The line of argument in the questionnaire is heavily inspired by John Rawls’ concept of justice as fairness (Rawls 1999, 2001) and Jon Elster’s introduction to game theory (Elster 1989).

8 I refrain from specifying how this quota system could be put into practise. Crals et al. 2004 show some ways to solve the practical problems connected to personal CO$_2$ quotas.


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