

From burden- to effort-sharing: Negotiating emission reduction targets in the European Community

This paper addresses the theme of “equity between nations and regions” from a European perspective, by analyzing the concept of burden sharing and its implementation in European climate policy. In international climate policy as much as in the EU multi-level system of governance, the question how to distribute emission reduction efforts among parties (or member states in the latter case) is a crucial precondition for successful and ambitious climate policy. As in the global climate arena, burden sharing requires policy-makers to strike a balance between prescribing emission abatement where it is most cost-effective, while taking account of largely diverging national circumstances and social and economic development objectives.

With the accession of 12 new member states, these questions have only become more salient in the EU, to the degree that one may consider the European Community as a microcosm which may anticipate some of the future global debates on climate policy. As Lacasta et al. (2006) state, the EU might even “become a testing ground for policy development and negotiation challenges of increasingly complex and differentiated future global climate developments.” In this vein, how EU policy-makers have addressed questions related to burden-sharing may yield valuable lessons also for the broader evolution of the global climate regime.

The EU has gone through one decision-making process with regard to burden-sharing already: negotiations in the 1990 led to the 1998 burden-sharing agreement, which translated the EU’s joint Kyoto target in emission reduction commitments for its member states and which has been celebrated as one of the key successes of the EU in climate policy to date. Currently, the question of ‘EU effort sharing’ beyond 2012 is on the negotiations table in Brussels. As part of its ‘climate policy package’, the EU Commission published a draft decision in early 2008, outlining an approach and proposing emission reduction targets for Member states in order to implement the unilateral EU objective of a 20 percent (or 30 percent in case of an international agreement) emission cut by 2020. Negotiations on the Commission’s effort-sharing proposal are still ongoing, and adoption of the whole legislative package is planned for January 2009.

This paper has two objectives:

- a) It analyses and compares the key dynamics and outcomes of decision-making on burden-sharing in the 1990s with the ongoing effort-sharing negotiations, based on literature review and a series of interviews with policy-makers and experts.
- b) The paper further seeks to assess how policy-makers have dealt with the equity vs. efficiency trade-off in the context of burden-sharing, drawing on a meta-analysis of 262 evaluations of climate policy at the EU level and six member states.

Although final results of the study are still pending (as is political agreement on effort-sharing), preliminary conclusions point to the following: The basic dynamics of the negotiations, opposing wealthier and poorer member states in the EU, have not changed much between the 1990s and today, whereas key actors have to some extent: the newly acceded countries have taken over the role of the ‘cohesion countries’ in the 1990s, which themselves ‘graduated’ into taking over more responsibility as middle income countries. The European Commission has markedly increased its agenda-setting capacity in an enlarged Community, providing evidence to Europeanisation tendencies in climate policy. The grounding of member state targets in economic models has in both cases increased their acceptability, although final decisions are still most likely taken in a negotiations setting. Finally, while the 1998 agreement embraced both efficiency and equity considerations, the pending effort-sharing proposal is exclusively based on equity criteria, with efficiency being a major driver of other parts of the proposed climate package.