

When does the implementation of international environmental obligations become a problem?

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Project description

Sometimes decisions taken solve an environmental problem create new environmental problems. Examples of this phenomenon, known as ‘environmental problem shifting’, are plentiful. These include the production of biofuels damaging local ecosystems, the conservation of invasive species harming native species, and the use of HFCs for the ozone layer exacerbating climate change.

Some of these problem shifts are encouraged by international environmental treaties, including the Paris Agreement. Yet we know little about when and why environmental problem shifting occurs in global environmental governance, what its effects are, and what can be done about it.

Among the key sources of information is a type of document called ‘national reports’. These are what governments periodically submit to international environmental treaties to report on their implementation. National reports provide a wealth of information on national policies and measures, as well as the challenges and opportunities governments face in their implementation.

Your role as a Bright Minds Assistant will be to take the initial steps necessary to build a database of national reports. This would involve locating hundreds of national reports from various treaty websites and compiling them in a systemic a systematic and accessible form. In the process you would also carry out some analysis to develop a typology of national reports by identifying common features.

The groundwork done here could form the basis of your Master’s thesis project. There are a number of research questions to explore about the types of implementation measures that lead to problem shifts, the causal mechanisms, the nature and extent of their impacts, and existing and potential responses to these problem shifts. Empirically, your thesis could focus specifically on one treaty or a small group of treaties implemented by one government, for example, to better understand the trade-offs in the water-energy-food nexus. Possible methods to use here include discourse analysis, network analysis, descriptive statistics, and interviews.

Job requirements

We are looking for a highly motivated and talented student from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. A strong interest in the topic of environmental problem shifting is a must, along with an affinity to an interdisciplinary approach to research at the interface between earth system governance and earth system science. Some experience with the above-mentioned methods is desired. This assistantship is suited to a systems thinker with attention to detail.

This Bright Minds Assistantship will be part of the research project PROBLEMSHIFTING (problemshifting.org) funded by the European Research Council.