This report summarises the outcomes from a two-day event on June 8 and 9 2016 that was organised by FEASTA: the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability, Cultivate and Trócaire [1].

The event's purpose was to provide a briefing on CapGlobalCarbon (CGC) [2], set it in the context of the commons, divestment and social justice, and generate ideas about how to implement it as part of a broader citizens' movement for a fair and sustainable transition from fossil fuels.

www.feasta.org
www.capglobalcarbon.org
The context for CapGlobalCarbon

Safety: John Sharry began by briefly describing the dangers that climate change presents, referring to Mark Lynas’ book Six Degrees - Our Future on a Hotter Planet. We are having to deal with cataclysmic change and to work through a grieving process that can include phases of intense anger, denial and despair.

However, there is also a possibility for concrete action. Sharry emphasised that such action could bring about many other benefits including energy independence and improved health.

Justice: Cliona Sharkey of Trócaire pointed out that climate change does not affect everyone equally. 9 out of 10 climate events impact developing countries. The scale of the problem is such that Trócaire and other agencies cannot fix it alone. CGC would provide a global framework to ensure that climate action has teeth and also aid in building cooperation between different initiatives: ‘divestment and CGC can help bring down some of the silos’.

The Commons: Anne Ryan then introduced a concept which could prove very useful in framing the climate crisis: the commons. She explained that the commons is the wealth or resources inherited from nature or created by people together in society, and managed collectively. It is a new form of an old narrative, which includes the longstanding Irish tradition of Coimín, and which ensures that safe limits are adhered to on the use of resources. Extensive research has been undertaken on different types of commons by Elinor Olstrom and others.

Essentially CGC is a proposal to manage carbon emissions as a commons. Ryan commented that "the entitlement [to produce carbon emissions] needs to be evenly divided out among the population of the globe, instead of concentrated in the hands of fossil fuel companies, as it is currently."
How CapGlobalCarbon would work

A short conversation session followed, with a focus on participants’ concerns about climate and their hopes for having those concerns addressed. Erik-Jan Van Oosten and Caroline Whyte then provided a briefing on CapGlobalCarbon.

Under CGC, permits would be sold by auction each year to fossil fuel companies, allowing them to produce a limited amount of fossil fuel. So there would be a binding cap on fossil fuel production. The amount of permits available would decline every year, eventually reaching zero.

Revenue from the permits would be distributed among the population on a per-capita basis, reflecting the commons-based philosophy behind CGC. If carefully implemented, this could provide some much-needed cash to individuals and communities. It would also ensure that those who have access to fossil fuels compensate those who do not, thus providing a step towards justice.

The sales of permits and distribution of the revenue would need to be handled by a neutral, independent body. The CGC team suggest setting up a Global Climate Commons Trust to undertake this task.

Van Oosten commented that "the climate movement is campaign-oriented and often focusses on single environmental issues (clean water, protection of an animal species, anti-fracking, etc.). There is a shared view of how we’d like the world to look like: safe, green, clean, peaceful and in harmony with nature. What is missing is a shared strategy of how to get there. A proposal such as CapGlobalCarbon can be a significant part of that shared strategy as it does two things that are highly important to the climate: 1. make sure that the fossil fuels that need to stay in the ground, stay there. 2. Give every person the possibility to get ready for (and be part of) the change by giving a fair and equal share of the revenue."

Benefits

Caroline Whyte then described some of the potential benefits of CGC. These include the fact that fossil fuel production, rather than consumption, would be capped. This 'upstream' cap would be far easier to enforce and monitor than a cap on consumption, and would guarantee that emissions are reduced and eventually eliminated, in contrast to existing emissions reduction schemes. So it could satisfy the science of climate change (insofar as this is possible, given that we are working with possibilities rather than certainties).

The cap would also send a clear signal to investors, creating a strong incentive for them to shift to renewables.

Another important benefit, already mentioned by Anne Ryan, is that CGC would probably result in substantial financial transfers to developing countries by right and without strings, as compensation for rich countries’ disproportionate use of fossil fuels. This could help liberate developing countries from dependence on grants and loans from rich-country-dominated institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and allow them to develop in ways appropriate to local conditions. In addition to the obvious ethical justification, the programme is likely to be popular as it will benefit a majority of people financially.
Implementation

The CGC team is currently exploring a carrot-and-stick approach to implementing CGC. The carrot would be a labelling programme[3]. Fossil fuel companies would be encouraged to sign up to a precursor of CGC that would require them to undertake to buy production permits, allow independent monitors to ensure that only permit-backed fossil fuel was being produced, and gradually shift to other economic activity in line with a reducing number of permits, so that by 2050 at the latest their fossil fuel production would be down to zero. This would entail a complete change in their identity.

If they observed these conditions, they would be allowed to label their fuel - while production was still happening - as compliant with CGC. The revenue from the sale of the permits would be distributed as a precursor of the share in CGC.

The stick would be legal action. Companies who refused labelling could be brought to court in order to enforce production cuts. Recent climate-based court victories achieved in the Netherlands, Oregon and elsewhere could act as models for this approach.

Clarifying the mechanics of CGC

These presentations were followed by a question-and-answer session that focussed on clarifying the mechanics of CGC. An important point raised was that while the cap would certainly guarantee a reduction in emissions, the share (of revenue from the emissions permits) could not guarantee justice. This is partly because it could not provide a dependable income to beneficiaries, since its value would depend on the value of emissions permits at market. Additionally, it would eventually be eliminated altogether when fossil fuel production is completely phased out.

Techniques such as establishing a floor price for the permits when they are sold at auction could help to ensure that there was a viable price for fossil fuel extraction. But ultimately it must be acknowledged that we cannot be certain - even though it seems likely - that CGC would reduce poverty and inequality. There is a chance that the carbon market will simply collapse, at which point there would be no more share money available.

CGC could however be used as a springboard for longer-term commons-based wealth distribution programmes, such as revenue from a land value tax. Moreover, along with this practical justification, there is also a moral basis for distributing the share: those who are responsible for pollution would be obliged to pay compensation under CGC, and the compensation would be distributed to everyone who is affected by the pollution.
Ways to promote CGC

Following the briefing, participants broke into groups of four or five and discussed the following questions:

1. Given the urgency of the situation, how might we progress CGC?
2. How might we implement a mechanism like Cap Global Carbon?
3. How might we align with other initiatives and movements and work together?

The answers collected from these conversations are grouped into categories below. They also include reflections from Day 2, which revisited the same questions.

One point made that seems appropriate to begin with is that we do not have the time to build a big social movement from the bottom up. Instead we need to influence - or ‘infiltrate’ in the best possible way - different groups or movements that could help establish CGC. It is important to look beyond the usual environmental groups and broaden the focus.

Further down we will detail the many suggestions made about potential partners.

Precedents for CGC

The event speakers mentioned several precedents which are already examined on the CGC website: the International Red Cross, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines [4], the global commons movement [5] and the social transfer movement in the Global South [7].

Many other precedents were suggested by participants. It was suggested that we draw inspiration from the anti-slavery, anti-apartheid and boycott Shell campaigns and how they succeeded.

Organisations to research include the League of Nations, the Green Cross, Pacifist movements, the Suffragette movement, Civil Rights and the Yes campaign (which was involved in the gay marriage referendum in Ireland). Lessons can also be learned from existing global institutions, such as the Catholic Church.

On a legal level, the bans on CFCs and asbestos were mentioned as possible precedents, as was the anti-tobacco movement. It was pointed out that the tobacco industry, like the fossil fuels industry, is a large lobby group but a science-based campaign has succeeded in banning smoking in the workplace.

The drink-driving campaign is another example of a policy choice that is bringing about good results.
Potential partner organisations

One group advised us to “aim at all levels, from the Pope (who in his document Laudato Si made it clear that he considers the atmosphere to be a commons) to grassroots”. Another advised starting locally and building outwards from that, focussing first on the Irish context. Public participation policy networks could be used in this regard.

We were also advised to target governments and international organisations, including the Green Party. Perhaps a left-Green alliance could be formed around CGC, providing a way to revitalise a broken Labour Party.

Trócaire, the Irish development NGO is a potential partner, as it is currently campaigning strongly for divestment, drawing attention to the role played by fossil-fuel companies in carbon emissions and encouraging key institutions to divest[8]. Lorna Gold of Trócaire mentioned that the divestment movement is also winning over defectors from within the oil industry. Such individuals could make potential partners for CGC.

Other potential partners mentioned include the wider divestment movement (including the university divestment movement), religious movements and social justice movements, campaigns such as the anti-TTIP movement, AVAAZ, 350.org, Uplift, Medicins sans Frontieres, the Global 21 network, the Green Campus movement, Green Flag schools, Friends of the Earth Ireland, the Irish Environmental Network, the Cork Environmental Forum, the Climate Gatherings, Stop Climate Chaos, Cultivate, the Degrowth movement, the transition towns movement, students, youth, and respected figures such as the Pope, Mary Robinson, Bill McKibben and Desmond Tutu. Some of these, such as Avaaz and 350.org, have already been approached but might show more interest in CGC if it was reframed.

Others were suggested as partners with whom we might find common cause, although we have addressed them heretofore: trades unions such as ICTU, along with the GAA, the Irish Defense Forces, working class movements (eg right 2 change and water charge protestors), migrants, small farmers, meteorologists, banks, credit unions, Engineers Ireland, Chambers Ireland and the Irish Farmers’ Association.

A different sort of partnership could be built with poorer countries, whose citizens stand to gain the most financially from the programme. Another suggestion was that a group of ‘powerful (non-oil) countries’ be encouraged to support CGC. The United Nations was mentioned as well; perhaps CGC could be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals process.

It was pointed out that generally speaking, the natural allies of CGC and a just transition process are all those who are promoting just, low-carbon options for living.
Challenges that CGC faces

A general challenge to any action on climate that was mentioned by Cliona Sharkey during her presentation was the 'invisibility' of climate change, particularly in the Western media, who only seem to notice it when it reaches crisis [9]. Another challenge mentioned is the relationship between food production and fossil fuels. Any policy that cuts fossil fuel use would need to be accompanied by measures to ensure that food production can transition away from its current dependence on fossil inputs.

With regard to CGC itself, there seems to be some confusion about the relationship between CGC and other climate campaigns. Some people seem to assume that CGC is essentially the same as divestment or keep it in the ground, or alternatively, that the three movements compete with each other and cannot function effectively together. One participant commented that 'given the choice between focussing on CGC and focussing on keeping it in the ground, she would choose keeping it in the ground as it's more immediate'. However we would argue that the two campaigns deserve equal emphasis; CGC is actually a necessary complement to keep it in the ground as it would ensure that fossil fuel production was cut back in a way that supports justice, and it would also help to prevent the economy from crashing due to the abrupt, unplanned closure of fossil fuel plants [10].

It will also be a challenge to keep CGC non-governmental and non-corporate. We need to ensure that governments and corporations do not gain control of it. This ties in with a fourth challenge mentioned: the need to carefully organise the Trust that would manage the fossil fuel permit auctions and the dividend/share. For example, the method for appointing trustees would need to be worked out in detail.

A related challenge is the fact that many existing governments (including EU) climate initiatives are essentially greenwash; they make grandiose claims about climate action but do not actually achieve meaningful emissions reductions. We need to clarify the differences between CGC and these initiatives, showing that it will achieve real results rather than being yet another attempt to increase corporate profits while doing little or nothing to prevent climate change.

It was also pointed out that we will need to anticipate legal challenges. This was not explored in detail, but it seems clear that organisations such as the WTO could be enlisted to attack CGC on the basis that environmental regulation interferes with corporations' ability to make profits.
Helpful attitudes

We were advised to personalise the issue and appeal to people's sense of what is right and beautiful. Rather than trying to "sell" CGC, as though it were a product, it would be better to focus on solidarity, our responsibility as a species and our capacity to reach solutions that are both elegant and efficient. One attitude mentioned that might be helpful in this regard was the view that our earth is shared with other species and that our common home is a sacred place.

It would also be helpful to find ways to credibly reassure people that they won't be worse off. CGC is part of building a better world, so it can be framed as an opportunity: "CGC is a positive vision and it is do-able". The relationship between CGC and the wider economy could also be teased out more: "CGC can help a controlled economic contraction that is necessary to get to a low-carbon state of affairs". There is a carbon bubble which could burst at any time, and CGC could help build resilience in preparation for this possibility. The role played by insurance prices could be emphasised too.

We were also told to highlight the fact that the atmosphere is a resource essential to life, which we cannot do without, and that continuing with business as usual is in fact highly dangerous.

One commentator suggested selling the idea of capping production, "and the logistics can follow from that". There is a concern, however, that this would satisfy only those who are primarily alarmed about climate, and not those who have other pressing issues to worry about, such as paying their bills in the short term. The justice element needs to be emphasised as well the science.

It was suggested that we inform people about the concept of scarcity rent, but we find a way to express it in different language, such as commons language – e.g. "Commoners get paid for the fossil-fuel companies' use of our commons". Additionally, it was remarked that the language of the commons does not appeal to all and may need to be augmented. For example, the language of stewardship of the earth may appeal to religious groups; the labour movement can relate to language that refers to capitalist displacement of community property and resources.

We were advised to connect local efforts (for example, for better public transport) to the larger idea. For example, there is discussion at the moment about building a tram network in Galway. This could be justified both as a solution to climate change and as making Galway a more pleasant place to live, improving quality of life.

One participant suggested that we "take a lesson from the grandparents who appealed for a Yes vote in the marriage equality referendum". CGC would help to build a better future for younger generations, by pushing for a low-carbon infrastructure for the time when we no longer have fossil fuels (and also making the world a fairer place).

Another more general piece of advice was that we should publicise CGC carefully and in a context-dependent way, reflecting the values of the audience: 'Nothing about us without us'. So the message needs to be localised for different groups. As one participant put it, "diversify the story, diversify the team". For example, groups such as Trócaire which support divestment can be drawn into supporting CGC by emphasising that CGC is an instrument to support divestment.

Finally, it was suggested that we emphasise that the global population is one, building global citizenship awareness and "people power".
Helpful tools

We were advised to make full use of social media, the community radio stations and local papers.

Translators could be very helpful in getting the message out in countries outside Ireland, the venue for this event.

A one-stop website could function as a communication platform that would show all the connections between CGC and other movements. At the moment there are too many small disparate groups, without influence.
Potential actions

One participant mentioned the international petroleum week that is held by oil industry insiders in London each January/February. Perhaps CGC could have representation there. This could dovetail with another suggestion made: we could ask one fossil fuel company to act as a champion, implementing the labelling programme (see page 4).

The ESB (Irish Electricity Service Board) could be targeted, with CGC presented as a way for them to decarbonise.

CapGlobalCarbon could invite Trócaire to meet to discuss working together; CGC is a tool for divestment, which Trócaire campaigns for.

Mobilising people to support CGC could be helped along by creating local chapters of CGC.

Apart from these concrete actions, there is clearly plenty of research that can be done into the precedents mentioned by participants, and plenty of scope for work on building partnerships (see page 6). It was recommended that we look at valuesandframes.org explore ways to frame CGC to attract other groups.

We were advised to start setting up the global trust at the same time as campaigning to spread the message about CGC. In order for establish the trust, CGC would need to have enough credibility to attract trustees who are widely respected.

It was also suggested that we hold a colloquium with one message at the end.
Conclusion

It is clear that many new ideas were generated as a result of this event, and there was a strong focus on the practical which is very welcome. While challenges were acknowledged and discussed, emphasis was placed on the potential for CGC to build partnerships with a wide variety of organisations and promote its message. There are a great many possible next steps which now need to be explored, preferably in the near future.

We very much appreciate the time and effort made by participants to come to the event and their constructive questions and comments. I would also personally like to thank the organisers and other speakers for their contribution to a highly stimulating and informative exchange.

Note: At present, the CapGlobalCarbon campaign is managed on a voluntary basis by a small group of Feasta climate group members based in Ireland, the UK, the Netherlands, the USA and France[11], including Feasta co-founder John Jopling. We would be very interested in hearing from anyone who would like to help us further the project, especially those with ideas for publicising CGC and possible leads on funding. Please contact info@capglobalcarbon.org.

Other points made

One participant wondered why we need a new organisation (the Trust). Does nothing already exist that could function as the stakeholder trust? This could be explored.

Another participant mentioned that in order not to ‘break’ the economy with carbon-divestment, there is a need for a parallel investment in low-carbon and just projects. It is relevant to note with respect to this that any new projects implemented under CGC would be likely to be low-carbon in any case as there would be a binding cap on fossil fuel production, leading to its eventual elimination. A clear signal would be sent to investors. Additionally, finance for these investments would be generated by the share, which could be pooled by individuals to pay for larger projects.

Several participants asked if there was a way that CGC could be implemented locally. Perhaps there could be parallels with the Fair Trade movement. The proposed labelling programme described on page 4 is a type of pilot scheme for the cap in CGC. Perhaps this could be adopted by municipalities or regions, who could opt to buy only labelled fossil fuel (i.e., fossil fuel which is gradually being phased out) or renewable energy. As described on the CGC website, divestment groups could also opt to buy only labelled fuel [10].

One participant described CGC as “both literally and figuratively a power shift”.

Once the idea of CGC is out there, it could take off. One participant commented that if we "attract people to the idea they will write songs and slogans". As with the anti-nuclear movement, musicians and other artists could get involved.
1. The first session took place at the Carmelite Centre in Dublin, while the second session was a full-day event at the WeCreate workspace in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, County Tipperary.
2. See page 3 for an explanation of CapGlobalCarbon. For more detail, please see the CGC website at http://www.capglobalcarbon.org
7. To this I would add the fact that most people are simply too busy struggling with day-to-day challenges to be able to focus on climate change. An approach like CGC would help tackle this problem by providing financial assistance to those in need of it.