

# COP27: How measuring attitudes to climate change could speed up the global response

November 11 2022, by Kevin Morrell

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Fires and heat waves in [Europe](#), North America Australia, Asia and the U.K. brought devastation to many in 2022. But as well as harming lives and land, they may also have destroyed any lingering doubts that human actions have dramatically affected the climate.

Questions do remain though about what got us into this mess—and what (if anything) can get us out.

One thing often blamed for the climate crisis is [capitalism](#). And it is true that an increasingly globalized marketplace has fuelled production and consumption patterns that have [accelerated environmental damage](#).

This has led some campaigners to demand total systems change as they argue that current economic frameworks cannot be the source of the necessary solutions.

But is it accurate to hold [capitalism](#) so utterly responsible? It's a broad term after all, with different versions in different countries where there are varying relationships between the state and the market.

Blaming something as abstract as capitalism can also leave us feeling hopeless and underplay [personal responsibility](#). It also glosses over the roles of influential groups [within the capitalist economic system](#), boards of directors or shareholders for example, many of whom are deeply concerned about the climate emergency.

So perhaps "capitalism" is just a convenient dirty word—a quick answer to a complex problem.

An alternative approach might be to look at the impact of a common but flawed social process known as "commensuration." This is when we take two things that are inherently different and compare them using a common metric.

For example, if the price of an apple is 30p and the price of an orange is 15p, we would typically say one apple is worth two oranges. As the old saying reminds us, on one level you cannot compare apples and oranges because they are essentially different things. But it is convenient to

transform them both so they fit a common measure—in this case, cost.

But this kind of simplification—where we treat different things as somehow alike—is more fundamental than putting a price on things so we can exchange them. It is an essential part of [navigating a complex, ambiguous world](#). It happens every time we make a trade-off decision. These could be personal, like whether to spend money by switching on the heating or shopping for food, or they could be political, like whether a government increases taxes to invest in wind energy or nuclear power.

But when it comes to the climate emergency, commensuration is failing us in two key ways. The first is obvious, the second is more subtle.

The first failure is that for far too long, the natural world has been treated as invisible when we produce and consume things. Billions of human trade-offs, whether in [global trade](#), [government policies](#), or in the minds of shoppers, commuters and voters, have taken the environment for granted, treating it as something "out there," rather than a necessary feature of the decision-making process. (Initiatives such as [carbon markets](#) are a way of trying to correct this by putting the environment back on the balance sheet).

## Measured thinking

The second failure comes from the fact that while we have many common metrics for things like [greenhouse gases](#) and emissions, we don't have an agreed way of measuring and comparing our own attitudes to climate change. And this is a crucial gap, because any effective response to the emergency will need major changes in individual mindsets and collective cultures.

In ongoing research at Cranfield University we have developed what we call a [cultural "audit"](#) to provide different measures of these kinds of

attitudes. Our approach combines large-scale surveys with in-depth interviews and analysis of organizational documents.

The audit involves a thorough analysis of the culture of an organization focusing on attitudes to climate change. In the same way that accountants carry out audits to report on the financial workings of a company, a cultural audit assesses attitudes. Even the best laid plans to tackle climate change will fail unless they take culture into account.

Focusing our attention on attitudes towards [climate change](#) could help us take a valuable step back from potentially deadlocked ideological debates. If we could agree on how to apply measures of culture and attitudes we could still drive dramatic changes in human behavior.

Those measures could then provide vital information for regulators, investors, prospective employees and consumers. They could be the basis for tax incentives, competition and resource allocation.

Backed by legislation, they could underpin licensing agreements or a system of fines, or be central to urgent global agreements in the same way that emissions levels are at the moment. Perhaps then, even if capitalism did cause this mess, a different approach to capitalism could get us out.

**More information:** Kevin Morrell et al, Aristotle in the Anthropocene: The comparative benefits of Aristotelian virtue ethics over Utilitarianism and deontology, *The Anthropocene Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/20530196221105093](https://doi.org/10.1177/20530196221105093)

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