Private Governance Responses to Climate Change: The Case of Global Civil Aviation

Flying accounted for over a billion metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO_2e) emissions in 2022. This represents 2% of the total global emissions for that year and was greater than the national emissions of all but seven nations. People in countries with the highest historical emissions disproportionately produce airline emissions, further exacerbating climate inequalities.

Aviation emissions, however, are among the most difficult to address. Since much of the aviation industry operates internationally, governments are ill-equipped to govern industry emissions, and countries' interest in promoting the tourism industry often undermines intergovernmental organizations' efforts to abate aviation emissions. Existing initiatives like the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA) produced by intergovernmental agencies are crucial steps forward, but are modest in their impact.

In *Private Governance Responses to Climate Change: The Case of Global Civil Aviation*, Professor Michael Vandenbergh and Daniel J. Metzger argue that "[r]ather than depending on the coercive power or resources of any nation, group of nations, or subnational government, private initiatives can harness the support for climate mitigation among investors, lenders, retail and corporate customers, employees, managers, and others." They find that governmental solutions like CORSIA and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) suffer from fundamental limitations on their enforcement powers that threaten their ability to meaningfully govern aviation decarbonization. Meanwhile, more substantive public measures like a carbon tax are likely to stagnate in political gridlock.

Vandenbergh and Metzger clarify that Private Climate Governance (PCG) is not a "first-best option," and that it is unlikely to achieve all the decarbonization the aviation sector needs. They agree that regulation is a central piece of greening aviation; however, since climate change is a time-sensitive issue, the industry must act swiftly even without public governance.

In lieu of such oversight, the authors point to several avenues for PCG to make a meaningful difference. Improving efficiency and developing new, low-carbon technologies are both promising options. Both interventions are in the interest of the airlines themselves, which could limit pushback. Other private stakeholders have important roles to play as well. Lenders can impose environmental requirements, airline booking services can highlight more sustainable options, and third-party certifiers can ensure the quality of carbon credits that airlines purchase. Throughout the aviation supply chain, there are

levers that private actors can pull to make marginal but meaningful differences. Likewise, consumers and consumer-facing companies can spread information on how travelers can get from A to B in the most sustainable manner. For example, Google Flights' Travel Impact Model allows customers to compare flights based on emissions; eco-conscious consumers may prefer lower-carbon options which can change airline behaviors as they adapt to changing demands.

Vandenbergh and Metzger conclude by noting that models project further growth in air travel over the coming decades. This growth does not necessarily have to entail growing emissions, though. PCG can play an important role in mitigating aviation emissions while climate policy trudges its way through legislatures around the world.