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Are Environmental Offsets Indulgences?

Douadia Bougherara^{*}, Sandrine Costa[†], Mario Teisl^{*}

Abstract: Environmental offsetting is a concept whereby a company can offset its environmental impacts by paying for another party to reduce its environmental impacts. Offsets are designed for greenhouse gases emissions (carbon) and biodiversity. Though the concept is new in the debate, it relies on the idea common to environmental economists of flexibility and cost efficiency where the firms that have the lowest pollution abatement costs reduce more pollution than firms that have high abatement costs. Even if the offsetting concept makes sense from an economic point of view, the public may oppose it on several grounds. It may be for moral reasons (the polluter must pay), for equity reasons (the victims of the local pollution cannot escape pollution), or for economic reasons (preference for a local public good jointly produced with the global one, or in a dynamic model, incentive for polluters to pollute less in the future). These multiple motivations make difficult eliciting preferences of consumers for products where producers used offsets. Therefore, we use stated choice to elicit these preferences for a good produced using offsets while controlling for attributes such as level and location of joint local public good (water pollution). We find that although consumers are willing to pay for a reduction in GHG emissions, they oppose offsets even when controlling for the level of joint local public good. An investigation of the reasons consumers are against offsets is that the original victims of the pollution still suffer and it is not acceptable to pay someone else to avoid reducing one’s own pollution (indulgences argument).

Key words: Offsets; Willingness to pay; Stated choice;

JEL: Q53 (Valuation of Environmental Effects); Q54 (Climate; Natural Disasters; Global Warming) ; Q58 (Government Policy)

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1. Introduction

Offsetting enables any party (firms, organizations, individuals) to offset the environmental impacts of its activities by financing a project that helps reducing its global impact on the environment. When the party’s greenhouse gases emissions are exactly offset, the activity of the party is said to be carbon neutral. From an economic point of view, it makes sense to reduce the global environmental impacts in a cost-effective way. Environmental offsets are available for greenhouse gases emissions but also for biodiversity

But offsetting is criticized. For example, a website (<http://www.cheatneutral.com/>) offers in a satiric way to compensate infidelity by paying people that engage to be faithful. The point is that offsetting allows getting away from the consequences of harming the environment with a clear conscience. A similar argument is made by G. Monbiot: “Just as in the 15th and 16th centuries you could sleep with your sister and kill and lie without fear of eternal damnation, today you can live exactly as you please as long as you give your ducats to one of the companies selling indulgences.” (The Guardian, October 18th 2006). We can classify the arguments of opponents to offsetting into three categories. Opposition may be for moral reasons (the polluter must pay), for equity reasons (the victims of the local pollution cannot escape pollution), or for economic reasons (preference for a local public good jointly produced with the global one, or in a dynamic model, incentive for polluters to pollute less in the future). The aim of our paper is to elicit consumers’ willingness to pay for a good where the producer used offsetting, and to elicit the reasons behind consumers’ preferences. We design a stated choice survey with the following attributes: the production process (reduction of producer’s own environmental impacts *vs.* offsetting), the resulting level of local and global environmental protection (water pollution and GHG emissions), and the location where the good was produced which determines the location of the local environmental impacts. We collected data from 2,145 consumers from two regions in France. We find that although consumers are willing to pay for a reduction in GHG emissions, they oppose offsets when controlling for the level of joint local public good. An investigation of the reasons consumers are against offsets is that the original victims of the pollution still suffer and it is not acceptable to pay someone else to avoid reducing one’s own pollution (indulgences argument).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the rationales for using offsets as a policy tool. In section 3, we present the stated choice survey design. Results are presented in section 4. Section 5 discusses results and concludes.

2. Rationales for using offsets as a policy tool

The first rationale for the use of offsets is economic. Offsets offer flexibility and cost-efficiency by enabling firms to reduce a global pollution where it is cost-effective. Offsetting is an alternative to adopting an environmentally-friendly technology to produce an impure public good (a bundle of a private good and an environmental good). As long as there is no jointness between the private good and the environmental good, offsetting is preferable if it is cost-effective. As stated by Besley and Ghatak (2007, note 11) “when the impure public good is simply a bundled version of the private good and the public good (i.e., there are no technological advantages), then introducing green markets will not affect the level of provision of the public good, which will remain at the private voluntary contributions equilibrium level.” But what if there is jointness? Then, offsetting may not be cost-effective. There may be gains in producing the impure public good using a green technology than offsetting (Kotchen, 2006). Thus, if consumers are against offsets, it may be because they perceive the green technology to be more cost-effective than offsetting, for example because of jointness.

There may be other rationales for consumers preferring green technology instead of offsetting. Consumers may oppose offsets because of the polluter pay principle. Out of this reason people may have two rationales for thinking that there should be a production change rather than just a purchase of offsets (Baron, 2006).

First, consumers may think that people should clean up their own waste instead of buying their way out (indulgence argument). As stated by Baron (2006), *“A powerful intuition is that people should clean up their own waste. If you cause a problem, you own it. [...] Baron et al. (1993) found that subjects preferred to have companies clean up their own hazardous waste, even if the waste threatened no one, rather than spend the same amount of money cleaning up the much more dangerous waste of a defunct company. Ordinarily, it is easiest for people to undo their own harm, but this principle may be applied even when no such justification is available.”* The debate on offsets is clearly focused on that issue where producers should not buy their way out by paying for indulgences.

Second, consumers may favor production change because it deters firms from causing harm. *“Another justification of the polluter-pays principle is that, when enforced, it deters people from causing harm. But the deterrent effect of this principle is absent when people do not know what they are causing, or when alternatives are too costly.”* (Baron, 2006). With this

argument, we move away from the static framework and consider firms behavior in the long term.

3. Stated choice survey design

3.1. Choice of product and attributes and experimental design

We consider an application to milk produced in two regions in France: Bretagne (Western France) and Picardie (Northern France). We chose milk for two reasons. First, milk is a relatively homogenous product and the several versions will only vary in the attributes of interest (production process). Second, milk production implies cattle breeding, which is the first contributor to GHG emissions of agriculture in France (the agricultural sector as a whole contributes to 20% of GHG emissions in France¹). We chose two contrasted regions in France. Bretagne is intensive cattle breeding farming whereas Picardie is extensive cattle breeding farming and crop production. Bretagne is a big contributor (6.9 for CH₄ and 5.3 for N₂O) and Picardie a smaller contributor (1.1 for CH₄ and 2.5 for N₂O). Bretagne and Picardie belong to two separate hydrological basins. Efforts to enhance water quality in one region have no effect on water quality in the other region. Water quality is then a local public good in each region.

The aim of the survey is to elicit consumers' preferences for milk produced in a farm with intensive or extensive process (using a green technology or offsets), emitting varying levels of GHG, and producing varying levels of a local public good (water quality). Table 1 gives a description of the attributes used in the stated choice survey (including the price).

¹ This relatively high figure is due to the fact that France has a relatively low level of GHG emissions for the energetic sector (nuclear energy).

Attribute	Description	#modes	Modes
TECH	Type of technology used	3	No reduction of #cows Reduction of #cows using a green technology Reduction of #cows using offsetting
LOC_POLLUTION	Location of pollution	2	Bretagne Picardie
IMPROVE_WATER_QUALITY	Improvement in water quality	3	+0% +40% +60%
REDUCE_GHG_EMISSIONS	Reduction in GHG emissions	3	-0% -40% -60%
PRICE	Price of the good	3	+10% +20% +40%

Table 1: Attributes used in stated choice survey

Table 2 presents an example of a choice set. In this example, the two alternatives to the usual milk are produced in two different regions. But because of the use of offsets in the first alternative to the usual milk, water pollution is improved in Picardie for both alternatives.

<u>Your usual milk</u>	<u>Milk produced in Picardie</u>	<u>Milk produced in Bretagne</u>
Produced with the usual number of cows per hectare. The farmer pays no one to reduce pollution.	Produced with a reduced number of cows per hectare. The farmer pays no one to reduce pollution.	Produced with the usual number of cows per hectare. The farmer pays a farmer in Picardie to reduce pollution.
No improvement in water quality	40% improvement in water quality in Picardie	20% improvement in water quality in Picardie
No reduction in GHG emissions	40% reduction in GHG emissions	60% reduction in GHG emissions
Usual price	Usual price + 20 %	Usual price + 40%

Table 2: Example of a choice set

3.2. Sample selection

We used an Internet survey. A lot of studies do compare web surveys to mail surveys. Response rate is the result which is the most commonly studied for this comparison. Some authors find the response rate to be lower in web surveys (Shih, Fan, 2007; Meckel et al, 2005; Fan, Yan, 2010) whereas others observe higher response rates with web surveys (Olsen, 2009; Fleming, bowden, 2009). However, sampling procedures, reminder strategy and survey

scope differ a lot between these studies, explaining these contrasted results. As highlighted by Farrell and Petersen (2010), internet users are not perfectly representative of overall population of a country. For instance, in France, internet users are younger and are characterized by a higher income and a higher education than the average of French population². However, as stated by Farrell and Petersen, it only implies that results have to be analysed taking care of this potential representativity limit. Two authors do compare web survey to mail survey in the field of non-market goods valuation, one studies the willingness to pay for environmental protection (Olsen, 2009), the other estimates recreation value through transport cost method (Fleming, Bowden, 2009). In these two papers, internet survey gives the same result as mail survey, even when web sample and mail sample do differ in their socio-economic characteristics.

45000 e-mails were randomly sent in the two regions of interest (Bretagne and Picardie). There were 1,393 responses with only 497 persons (30% from Bretagne, 70% from Picardie) who completed all the survey.

4. Results

4.1. Econometric model

In random utility theory, consumer i chooses among several alternatives the alternative that yields the greatest utility. The probability of selecting an alternative increases as the utility associated with it increases. The individual consumer's utility level associated with the choice of an alternative c in the set of alternatives j writes:

$$U_{cji} = V_{cji} + e_{cji} \quad (1)$$

where V_{cji} is a deterministic component and e_{cji} is a stochastic component.

Say consumer i prefers alternative c in the set of alternatives j . The consumer chooses the alternative c that brings him the highest utility U_{cji} .

$$U_{cji} = \text{Max} \{ U_{1ji}, U_{2ji}, U_{3ji} \} \quad c = 1, 2, 3; j = 1, \dots, J; i = 1, \dots, N \quad (2)$$

In random utility models, the utility function is linear (i) with the level a_{kcj} of attribute k of alternative c in set j , (ii) with the payment vehicle ρ_{jc} (price of good) of alternative c in set j .

² Bigot, R., Croutte, P., 2009, La diffusion des technologies de l'information dans la société française, Nov 2009, CREDOC (http://www.arcep.fr/uploads/tx_gspublication/etude-credoc-2009-111209.pdf).

$$U_{cji} \equiv \alpha_i + \sum_{k=1}^5 \beta_{ki} a_{kcj} - \beta_{\rho i} \rho_{cj} + e_{cji} \quad (3)$$

Individual parameters β_{ki} and $\beta_{\rho i}$ are associated to attributes k and price of good ρ of the different alternative goods. They are assumed to depend neither on the set of alternatives j nor on the alternative c . The error terms, e_{cji} , are independent and identically distributed, and follow a Gumbel law (0, 1).

In the choice modeling, consumer i chooses alternative 1 in the set j if and only if:

$$U_{1ji} - U_{cji} > 0 \quad \text{with } c = 2, 3$$

Therefore, only utility level differences enter in individual observed choices.

$$U_{1ji} - U_{cji} = \sum_{k=1}^5 \beta_{ki} (a_{k1j} - a_{kcj}) + \beta_{\rho i} (\rho_{1j} - \rho_{cj}) + e_{1ji} - e_{cji}$$

In this case, the probability that consumer i chooses product 1 in the set of products j is given by:

$$P\left[y_{ji} = 1 / \beta_{ki}, \beta_{\rho i}, a_{kcj} \right] = P\left[U_{1ji} > U_{3ji}, U_{1ji} > U_{2ji} / \beta_{ki}, \beta_{\rho i}, a_{kcj} \right]$$

To simplify, we assume individual preferences are homogenous:

$$\beta_{ki} = \bar{\beta}_k \quad \text{and} \quad \beta_{\rho i} = \bar{\beta}_\rho$$

The specification of this probability is then:

$$P\left[y_{cji} = 1 / a_{ji}, \rho_{cj}; \bar{\beta}_k, \bar{\beta}_\rho \right] = \frac{\exp\left[\sum_k \bar{\beta}_k a_{kcj} - \bar{\beta}_\rho \rho_{cj} \right]}{\sum_c \exp\left[\sum_k \bar{\beta}_k a_{kcj} - \bar{\beta}_\rho \rho_{cj} \right]} = \frac{\exp[u_{cj}]}{\sum_c \exp[u]}$$

This is the expression of an alternative choice probability in a conditional or multinomial logit model (McFadden, 1981). When the consumer chooses a product, we consider the consumer compares the utility the “reference alternative” (standard production process, no offset) brings him with the two other alternatives’ utility. He then chooses the product with the highest utility. Therefore, the estimation of the model allows to identify significant attributes in

consumers' preferences and to observe their effect on the probability consumers choose an alternative different from the reference one.

Parameter $\bar{\beta}_k$ is the positive or negative utility variation (utility units) attached to attribute k by comparing attribute k level with the reference alternative.

4.2. Results

Table 1 presents the parameter estimates of the conditional Logit. All parameters are statistically significant except for location of pollution. Consumers care for extensification of cattle breeding (significant and positive parameter) and for a reduction in greenhouse gases emissions (significant and positive parameter). The parameter estimate for the use of offsets is significant and negative. Consumers are against offsets in line with the indulgence argument. This result is independent of the level of joint local public good. The stated choice survey enables to control for local public good effects such as water pollution. The parameter estimate for water pollution is significant and positive.

	Parameter estimate (standard error)
LOC_POLLUTION	-0.010 (0.067)
OFFSET	-0.269 ^b (0.123)
REDUCE#COWS	0.271 ^b (0.116)
IMPROVE_WATER_QUALITY	0.017 ^a (0.002)
REDUCE_GHG_EMISSIONS	0.005 ^a (0.001)
PRICE	-0.026 ^a (0.003)
Number of observations	2,145

^a 1% significance, ^b 5% significance, ^c 10% significance

Table 1: Parameter estimates of the conditional Logit model

5. Discussion and conclusion

We find that the parameter estimate for the use of offsets is significant and negative.

Consumers are against offsets in line with the indulgence argument. Several variables in the questionnaire allow us to investigate the reasons behind their choices.

From the descriptive statistics, we find that the most likely reasons people are WTP to reduce the number of cows is it reduces water pollution and improves animal welfare - improving the landscape is not very important. We also find that the most likely reasons people are against offsets is that the original victims of the pollution still suffer and it is not acceptable to pay someone else to avoid reducing one’s own pollution (indulgences argument).

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