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Equal Deeds, Different Needs

Need, Accountability, and Resource Availability in Third-Party Distribution Decisions

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1. Introduction

Recently, the eyes of the world have turned to Russia and Ukraine. And to the global oil and gas market. In the wake of the war, prices have surged, and joint European action has been proclaimed, with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stating that “[w]e must become independent from Russian oil, coal and gas. We simply cannot rely on a supplier who explicitly threatens us. We need to act now to mitigate the impact of rising energy prices, diversify our gas supply for next winter and accelerate the clean energy transition” (European Commission 2022, par. 3). With or without secured supplies, the next winter is coming. And some people suddenly find themselves wondering: “What would I do if I couldn’t afford heating during winter?”

In the vignette study presented below, we look at two hypothetical persons, both short on money and in need of heating material. In this situation, they get the opportunity to chop their own firewood. Both manage to chop an equal amount of wood. Our subjects’ task, then, is to redistribute this wood among both persons in a way they deem to be most just. They can give each person exactly what they have chopped, resulting in an equal share. But: While both persons have chopped equally much, there are factors present that might lead subjects to distribute the wood unequally, nevertheless. For example, both persons can differ in their kinds of needs (i.e., they can need the firewood for different purposes), which may seem to be differently important: Should a person who needs the wood to survive get more than a person who needs the wood to make art in their studio? And if one person needs more than the other, should it make a difference