

Move the goalposts effect

Narcis Eduard Mitu¹

¹ University of Craiova

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The 'Move the goalposts effect' is a phenomenon in which an actor alters the conditions or criteria of a situation or activity during its course, to their advantage and to the detriment of other participants. This effect bears similarity to 'problem externalization' in the sense that it involves the transfer of difficulty or a problem to other parties or domains, to no longer be directly addressed or dealt with by those responsible. Thus, the 'move the goalposts effect' can be viewed as a form of problem externalization, wherein an actor changes the rules or criteria during the course of an activity to gain an advantage or to evade responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Through this subtle alteration of conditions, the actor may bolster their position or complicate matters for other participants, without directly assuming responsibility for the changes made. This effect can create distortions in economic processes and relationships, affecting their fairness and efficiency.

Example: As the European Union (EU) implements increasingly stringent regulations aimed at reducing carbon emissions to meet its environmental objectives, a phenomenon has emerged whereby industries and corporations within the EU are beginning to relocate their production facilities and operations to countries with less stringent environmental regulations, notably China. This trend is further compounded by the growing presence of an increasing quantity of products manufactured in China on the EU market. This shift in production activities results in a transfer of carbon emissions from the EU to China, contributing to a reduction in emissions within EU countries and an increase in emissions in China. The 'move the goalposts effect' in this scenario is driven by a combination of factors, including the lack of strict environmental regulations in China, its reluctance to fully comply with existing environmental agreements, the existing trade deficit between the EU and China, etc. Industries within the EU, facing pressure to reduce costs and comply with increasingly strict regulations regarding carbon emissions, are relocating their operations to China to benefit from lower costs and less stringent regulations. This enables these industries to maintain competitiveness in the European market, but also contributes to the transfer of carbon emissions to China. Additionally, the increasing presence of products manufactured in China in the EU market exacerbates this phenomenon, as European consumers face a growing availability and accessibility of these products, fuelling demand and the transfer of production activities to China. Therefore, while the EU may record nominal reductions in domestic emissions, global emissions remain largely unchanged, with China experiencing a disproportionate increase in emissions due to the influx of relocated industries. This example illustrates how the 'Move the goalposts effect' can undermine efforts to combat climate change on a global scale, both through the transfer of emissions to other countries and through the increased consumption of high-carbon footprint products imported from outside the EU.

