



## Broader behavioural focus needed to mitigate climate change

**Policy efforts have focused** on modifying individual behaviour as one strategy to address climate change. However, this has been met with limited success and a new UK study suggests that policies to encourage behaviour change need to operate on multiple levels and that there is a need for greater co-ordination between individuals, governments, businesses and communities.

**To achieve targets for reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions**, policymakers have tended to embrace a bottom-up approach that tackles patterns of individual consumption and lifestyles. This approach is supported by research, such as the figure that 40% of carbon emissions are attributable to household and transport behaviour.

There is little evidence that policies to promote behaviour change are affecting consumption trends and carbon emissions in the UK. There are various explanations for this, for example, problems with connecting climate change tangibly to individuals, capturing the complexity of human behaviour with environmental targets and defining what motivates consumption patterns. To investigate this further the study convened a series of 12 focus groups with members of the public to explore how people relate to their own power to tackle climate change through household energy use and purchasing, the use of domestic appliances and transport habits.

The findings were grouped around several core themes. Convenience was considered an important factor in decisions around domestic energy use and purchases where certain appliances and products were almost 'non-negotiable', particularly domestic appliances. Similarly, a private car was often considered a necessity. Comfort was another lifestyle priority, particularly in relation to heating, where participants were prepared to pay higher energy bills rather than compromise heating temperatures. Income level did not influence these decisions. There was a general perception that public transport services need to be significantly improved to encourage greater use.

Knowledge and information emerged as a theme in the research; public understanding of environmental issues was generally thought to have improved following the implementation of energy efficiency ratings, educational programmes and government information campaigns. However, it was acknowledged that 'knowledge' does not always translate into action and that this may be influenced by a lack of trust in information or the scientific evidence of climate change.

Many participants felt that while businesses could take a more proactive role alongside individuals, the main onus for change should be on the Government. As such, there needs to be a 'joined-up' approach amongst political institutions, businesses and consumers. However, although participants highlighted the Government's responsibility, there was a reluctance to accept regulations to mitigate climate change that penalise people, particularly on transport. In general, technological change was favoured as a solution rather than individual behaviour change, although some suggested a combination would be the way to enable a more sustainable future.

Although the findings from the focus groups are not completely new, they provide interesting insights. The researchers suggest that policy cannot assume the rationality of individuals and that behaviour change must be considered in a context of wider, structural changes such as giving local communities greater power with which to develop more collective responses to energy and climate issues. Policies also need to include businesses and the government at both local and national levels.

**Source:** Fudge, S. & Peters, M. (2011) Behaviour Change in the UK Climate Debate: An assessment of Responsibility, Agency and Political Dimensions. *Sustainability*. 3:789-808.

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