Climate change and sustainable consumption: What do the public think is fair?

Beliefs about fairness can be powerful drivers of pro-social behaviour. This project explored people's sense of fairness about sustainable consumption and climate change to see if this could build support for behaviour change and sustainability policies.

Key points

- Current behaviour-change strategies tend to focus on the choices individuals make in isolation and often seek to appeal solely to financial self-interest. This could be a missed opportunity to appeal to other motives that could be more effective in changing behaviour.

- Most project participants had an intuitive notion of excessive consumption – for example, drawing distinctions between 'necessary' and 'wasteful' behaviours, or between 'necessary' and 'luxury' behaviours.

- The most important factor in triggering people's sense of fairness was the notion of resource scarcity – in this case, limitations in the earth's capacity to absorb carbon dioxide (CO_2) while avoiding dangerous climate change. Most participants tended to feel excessive consumption and unequal consumption were problems in the context of resource scarcity, but not otherwise.

- It was often a focus on the behaviour of others that brought this fairness dimension to life. In particular, participants wanted to prevent unfair free-riding – where some people would avoid reducing their CO_2 emissions to sustainable levels whilst others were dutifully trying to do so.

- While no-one especially liked the idea of regulation in itself, there was a strong feeling that if households were going to make efforts or sacrifices to reduce consumption then everyone should be required to do so.

- This has implications for policy: while 'nudging' techniques might influence individual behaviour it can be hard to sustain cooperation when others are seen to be free-riding. Encouraging behaviour change or building support for sustainable consumption measures could be more effective if people understand the broader social issues and see the behavioural requirements as necessary and legitimate.

The research
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Background and objectives

Climate change and sustainable consumption involve huge issues of justice and fairness. Despite this, prevailing approaches to motivating sustainable consumption both by government and non-governmental organisations rarely talk about these issues of justice and fairness – indeed, they often actively avoid them. Instead, the dominant approach is to address behaviour within a 'consumer' paradigm. The result is that current behaviour-change strategies tend to be quite 'individualised', often focusing on the choices individuals make in isolation, and they seek to appeal primarily to self-interested concerns, such as financial self-interest.

But focusing solely on self-interested motives precludes the opportunity to appeal to other motives that may be more effective. Indeed, this reluctance to talk about fairness in behaviour-change strategies could be considered surprising given a variety of evidence suggesting beliefs about fairness can be powerful drivers of pro-social behaviours. There are numerous areas of life where citizens routinely comply with cooperative schemes that require them to bear burdens or make sacrifices – such as obeying laws, paying taxes and (in some countries) doing national military service – and where they are even willing to have such cooperation enforced. Evidence suggests that people are cooperating in these contexts not because they enjoy it, but because they recognise the collective benefits achieved through the scheme (or the harms avoided) and because they think it is *fair* to cooperate (and unfair to free ride).

This evidence suggests that encouraging people to look at sustainable consumption and climate change in terms of fairness could help build public support for behaviour change and sustainability policies. This is what the authors set out to investigate in the project.

Fairness can drive support for sustainable consumption – but only if people understand the social context of behaviour

The research found that most participants did naturally look at consumption and emissions in normative terms when presented with information about the social and environmental context of consumption – though many of them preferred the language of 'responsible' and 'irresponsible' to 'fair' and 'unfair'. Most participants had an intuitive notion of *excessive* consumption (for example, drawing distinctions between 'necessary' and 'wasteful' behaviours, or between 'necessary' and 'luxury' behaviours), and most participants viewed both excessive consumption and widely unequal levels of consumption as problems.

> People who are on higher incomes and are polluting are acting socially irresponsibly and therefore in a sense being unfair to their fellow citizens
> (Male, Glasgow)

In addition to information about emissions from personal consumption and information about the impacts of climate change, the key bit of information that seemed to trigger these fairness instincts was a notion of *resource scarcity* (in this context, limitations in the earth's capacity to absorb CO_2 while avoiding dangerous climate change). Participants tended to feel excessive consumption and unequal consumption were problems in the context of resource scarcity, but not otherwise. This makes sense as it is the notion of scarcity that allows people to understand an environmental resource as a *rival* good, and to connect personal behaviour (over-consumption) with harmful social consequences (resource depletion). Indeed, for some of our participants, the idea of scarcity led explicitly to a notion of 'fair shares' of resources.

> If you give everybody ten pounds' worth [of emissions] each, or whatever, and it's up to them how they use it, that's better than me going off and using everybody else's ten pounds' worth…It isn't fair – just because I'm rich and I can afford to, like, leave my telly on for a week – well, nicking your share of it doesn't seem fair
> (Female, Coventry)

A concern with others' behaviour

Crucially, it was often a focus on the behaviour of others that brought this fairness dimension to life for participants. When the earth's absorptive capacity for CO_2 was seen as scarce, participants generally viewed excessive CO_2 emissions as 'free-riding' – and they often expressed concern about the prospect of other people free-riding.

> I think for self-gratification I'd be happy to know I've done my bit, but I'd be dead annoyed to know that my next door neighbour didn't try
> (Male, Central London)

So the groups suggest that a desire to 'crack down' on what is perceived to be free-riding and unfair consumption by others can be a powerful source of support for sustainability policies and for behaviour change. This was reflected in the fact that participants supported compulsion over voluntarism in many scenarios. While there was no particular desire among our participants to change their behaviour, and while no-one especially liked the idea of regulation in itself, there was nevertheless a strong feeling that if households were going to have to make sacrifices in order to reduce consumption, then everyone should be required to do so. This has implications for policy: while 'nudging' techniques might be effective at influencing individual behaviour, evidence suggests it is hard to sustain cooperation when others are seen to be free-riding.

> Everyone's main concern is that it has got be one rule, it has got to be one rule for everybody
> (Female, Coventry)

The basis of these views about fairness

In this context, participants viewed free-riding as unfair or wrong for several different reasons. One was an issue of causing environmental harm: over-consumption made it more likely we would suffer dangerous climate change. A second reason was an unequal distribution of burdens: if we did reduce our carbon emissions to avoid dangerous climate change, then over-consumption by some would mean others would have to reduce their consumption even further to compensate. A further issue was that people viewed free-riding as disrespectful, quite aside from the inequities or harms it caused.

However, while participants viewed the potential impacts of dangerous climate change as very bad and serious, there were two key factors that reduced the role these impacts played in participants' reasoning about fairness. First, participants found it hard to 'relate' to information about the most severe potential climate impacts: they reported a sense of 'detachment' due to the large-scale nature, temporal distance, complex causes and uncertainty of these impacts. Second, the difficulties of enforcing collective action internationally made it hard for participants to view the challenge of sustainable consumption in a global context in the same way as more standard dilemmas involving the consumption of 'common-pool resources' within a domestic community.

For this reason, it tended to be less notions of environmental harm that motivated support for sustainable consumption than the idea of an unequal distribution of burdens – specifically, the unfairness of widely unequal consumption in the context of collective efforts to reduce emissions. Importantly, this could be considered simply within a domestic context: if the UK Government had committed to reduce carbon emissions as part of some international framework, then participants wanted to ensure that the burden of reducing household emissions would be fairly shared _within_ the UK. This suggests that the problems of coordinating and enforcing international action need not be a barrier to public support for behaviour change and sustainability policies.

This was seen strongly in participants' justification of compulsion: while some justified compulsion in terms of preventing climate change, for most it was driven by a desire to prevent unfair free-riding. And while the former reason was susceptible to concerns about enforcing international action on climate change ("we can't stop climate change unless America and China take part too"), the latter could be applied purely within a UK context ("if the Government is getting me to change my behaviour, they should be doing that across society").

A concern with progressivity

Participants saw the progressivity of policies to reduce consumption as key to ensuring fairness. They believed that everyone should be subject to the same requirements, but that the greatest burden for reducing consumption should fall either on those with the greatest ability to reduce their consumption (high consumers with lots of non-essential consumption) or on those with the greatest ability to pay for reductions in their consumption (high-income households). Here, taxation was rejected by many participants as unfair as they felt it would impose a greater proportionate burden on those with lower incomes. They also felt that those on high incomes would simply be able to accommodate the extra costs without changing behaviour.

> I think it's unfair on pensioners and students because they're not in a position to pay. If you're on low income you haven't got the ability to make a choice, which is different to if you've got the money and you decide
> (Female, Barnet)

Participants were also sensitive to the fact that some households had specific requirements that should be accommodated within any framework to reduce consumption – for example, those with medical conditions requiring high energy use or those with large families. They were also sensitive to households' capability to adjust their behaviours; many participants commented that low-income or disadvantaged households would face particular barriers to behaviour change.

Well, the thing is, richer people can afford to have treble glazing. Poorer people, who have those landlords, I mean, forget it – they're not going to put treble glazing in any windows. My landlord isn't going to, so your heat loss is so much more and it's hugely poorer people who are going to be living in those sorts of conditions
(Female, Central London)

While it seems that, in some circumstances, non-participation by some will be seen as free-riding and undermine cooperative instincts, it also seems that people are prepared to recognise a range of legitimate exceptions for those facing disadvantage or other barriers to behaviour change.

Conclusion

There is an important lesson here about linking the argument for behaviour change to the actual reasons why we want to prevent climate change. Government approaches to behaviour change often bypass these concerns and are generally aimed at addressing people as consumers and appealing to self-interest. However, these focus groups show that fairness issues can be an important factor in building support for action.

It should be noted that, despite the strong support expressed for behaviour change and environmental policies during the focus groups, there was no great *desire* to change behaviour among participants – certainly no sense that people would enjoy having to make lifestyle changes. This is not inconsistent, but testament to an important distinction: that between liking a policy on the one hand and supporting a policy because you think it is necessary and legitimate on the other. The way in which the UK and many other countries have created widespread public acceptance of, and compliance with, frameworks like tax systems and speed limits is not by trying to make paying tax or driving slower to seem attractive, but by ensuring people understand the broader social issues at stake and see the behavioural requirements as necessary and legitimate. Similarly, attempts by government, industry and NGOs to encourage behaviour change, or to build support for measures to ensure sustainable consumption, may well be more effective if they seek to generate a sense of public legitimacy.

Well, I wouldn't like doing it. I would have to make changes that I wouldn't like, but I feel that it's necessary and it seems fair to me
(Female, Glasgow)

About the project

The research comprised:

- an analysis of fairness and obligation in the consumption of common-pool resources, along with a brief literature review of public attitudes and behaviour in such contexts;
- eight three-hour deliberative focus groups, undertaken between November 2010 and February 2011 in six locations around the UK. Participants were aged between 18 and 70, split equally between male and female, and drawn from the full range of socio-economic groups; hardened climate sceptics and committed green activists were filtered out to ensure we were working with those most relevant to the project objectives.

Further information

This Findings is part of a programme of work on Climate change and social justice.
See www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/climate-change-and-social-justice

The full report, **Climate change and sustainable consumption: What do the public think is fair?**, by Tim Horton and Natan Doron, is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk. For more information, please contact Natan Doron, Senior Researcher, The Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London, SW1H 9BN (e-mail: natan.doron@fabian-society.org.uk) or the JRF project manager Josh Stott (e-mail: josh.stott@jrf.org.uk).

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