



# Changing our ways?

Behaviour change and the climate crisis

## Executive summary

**Can we change the way we live to address the climate crisis?** It is increasingly clear that alongside shifts in policy, service provision and technological innovation, far-reaching changes in lifestyles are also required if we are to avoid dangerous levels of global heating. After a long period of neglect, sustainable behaviour change is now rising up the climate policy agenda. The most recent IPCC and UNEP Emissions Gap reports have begun to devote more attention to the role of behaviour change in reaching ambitious climate goals, and governments increasingly view it as a necessary element of their climate change strategies.

Yet despite a growing academic literature, which brings different approaches to bear from economics, sociology, psychology, science and technology studies and politics, there has been less attention to the question of **scalability**: key points of leverage and traction that bring about shifts of the scale (as well as speed) now required to tackle the climate emergency.

This was the challenge put before the **Cambridge Sustainability Commission on Scaling Behaviour Change**, an expert panel of 31 individuals from a variety of disciplines, and a network of practitioners, involved in different ways in sustainable behaviour change: to review what we know from academic literature and experience in the field about scaling behaviour change and to suggest ways forward in terms of future intervention points and concrete next steps.



Photo credit:  
Markus Spiske,  
Nürnberg, Germany.

## 1. Individual and systems change go hand in hand

It is clear we need both **individual and systemic change**, and the key challenge is to ensure that they reinforce one another. By thinking more holistically about 'behaviour', we can move the debate beyond the dominant focus on individual and household decisions. There are many unspoken assumptions about what 'behaviour' is, often reduced to small-scale consumer actions. But personal action can also be linked to other forms of collective action, social and political influence, and engagement with the wider world. This shift in approach allows for a more empowering view of personal agency that is better equipped to drive social and economic change.

In order to achieve the required scale and depth of change within a decade, we need to intervene at all points within an **ecosystem of transformation** that extends from rewiring the economy via changes to work, income and infrastructure, and shifting patterns of supply and demand, through to protecting and expanding spaces of social and citizen innovation. This implies key roles for different actors and approaches equal to the scale of the challenge we face by pursuing multiple routes to change simultaneously.

## 2. One planet living: towards 'strong' sustainability

Parameters need to be set in line with the Earth's ecological limits, and a shift encouraged from thinking beyond producing and consuming more efficiently to embracing ideas of wellbeing and **sufficiency**. Who decides which limits are set and how, requires important innovations in governance to deepen participation and representation, and ensure broad social ownership and acceptance of transition processes.

Issues of rationing, allowances and quotas increasingly arise when discussing the need to scale behaviour change in line with 1.5 degree trajectories to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. Active citizen engagement around these limits and how they can be fairly enforced is key to their acceptance. Public engagement also needs to be driven by anticipated gains in wellbeing from a shorter working week, avoiding unnecessary travel, and adopting healthier diets, for example.

This means addressing the sources of over-consumption by revisiting deep-seated ideas about growth and taking a more integrated approach to

wellbeing. But it also requires a more sophisticated understanding of the social and cultural drivers of over-consumption: addressing advertising and the media's role in the normalisation and reification of high consumption behaviours. To do this, **'choice editing'** needs to take place whereby governments, businesses and those with direct control over production restrict the availability of high carbon products and services. Undoing unsustainable behaviours is a whole lot harder than preventing unsustainable products from coming to market in the first place.

## 3. Just Transitions

To be effective and socially accepted, shifts in behaviour need to address social and economic justice and, at the very least, not further entrench existing inequalities. Placing economic justice at the heart of efforts to scale behaviour change has the advantage of reducing the inequality between the so-called **polluter elite** and the poorest groups in society who lack access to affordable energy, housing, transport and food. There are important racial, class and gender dimensions to access and responsibility, which all interventions need to explicitly address. This will be a prerequisite to broadening the conversation about behaviour change beyond silos of privilege and spheres of voluntarism among those already committed to environmental action.

Infrastructures, income, location and social status have a huge bearing on peoples' ability to modify behaviours around transport, energy, housing and food. Key intervention points lie in creating enabling environments that facilitate, incentivise and lock-in more sustainable behaviours among broad sections of society. Examples include improving low-cost electric transport provision and insulating homes to address energy poverty and reduce emissions. In a global context, **'lifestyle leapfrogging'** can support the adoption of more sustainable pathways, avoiding unsustainable lock-in in the first place. From affordable public transport to green tariffs for renewable energy, enormous power resides in governments, corporations and cities to chart new pathways, and communicate clearly the need for change - and hold themselves accountable for delivering it.

Consumption pathways in one part of the world also have implications for other parts of the world because of the interconnected nature of the global economy and the uneven patterns of extraction and exchange that predominate in trade and production. A global perspective on which types

of consumption can be sustained (and by whom) is key to ensure that the social and environmental costs of sustainability transitions in richer parts of the world are not merely passed on to poorer ones, entrenching historical and contemporary inequalities around uneven access to resources and disproportionate exposure to harm. This requires an effort to **decolonise consumption and production** since unsustainable consumption by elites the world over is only possible because of racialised, gendered and class-based modes of extraction, appropriation and exchange organised around 'cheapness', which fuels unsustainable consumption for wealthier groups while passing social and environmental costs onto the rest of society.

#### 4. Governing change: enabling a power shift

Though there is a tendency to talk in terms of 'nudges' and 'tools' for behaviour change, the challenge is more profound and deeply political. There needs to be a shift of power away from those actors and interests that control the unsustainable economy we have, the institutions that govern it - in which citizens are often poorly represented - and the societies and cultures built around the wasteful use of resources, which leave us on course for climate chaos. Transformational change will only be possible if incumbent power is rolled back, new political spaces are created, and representation is enhanced for those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, who have the greatest stake in effectively tackling the issue.

This requires important **innovations in governance** to deepen participation and representation, and ensure broad social ownership of transition processes, such as citizens' assemblies, to foster dialogue and engagement about the complex trade-offs involved in getting to a zero-carbon economy. The recent report of the UK Climate Assembly, for example, proposed a series of progressive measures targeting carbon-intensive behaviours, such as frequent flyer taxes, support for dietary shifts and bans on SUVs.<sup>1</sup> It also calls for measures to address the bankrolling of politics through controls on party donations and directorships, as well as closing the revolving doors that operate between politicians and corporations, so that democracies are fit for purpose in tackling the climate crisis.<sup>2</sup>

#### 5. Transforming society by 'deep' scaling change

At a deeper level, there is a huge amount of work to do in nurturing values and culturing practices of care and community, whereby human needs can be met in sustainable and less materialistic ways, guided by attempts to imagine alternative ways of being that reposition today's economy as abnormal, impermanent and unsustainable. Connecting these intervention points through **cycles of reciprocity** is vital whereby leadership by individuals, communities and cities is matched by government leadership that opens up space for further bottom-up experimentation and demands from social movements.

We also need to **re-think scale**. Dominant approaches to scaling emphasise numbers and roll-out in a generic and socially un-differentiated way. This serves to de-contextualise the nature of change and obscures where the predominant responsibility and agency for action lies, as well as overlooks important differences in what works and where. Conventional framings often emphasise size and reach, and then fall into the scalar trap: the misconception that what works in one place will necessarily work elsewhere, or that small changes can be automatically and unproblematically scaled. What is to be scaled, how and by whom are key yet neglected questions, but need to be a central part of strategies going forward. Many approaches imply **shallow scaling**: mainstreaming without disrupting key trends around consumption and production, work and growth.

We suggest that **deeper scaling** needs to be transformative: from the individual to the systemic level - and back again - geared towards addressing the root causes of our predicament. Because 'shallow' and 'deep' scaling will, in practice, operate concurrently within and across societies over time, **spiral scaling** seeks to enhance the feedbacks between the two: moving from a linear understanding of scaling, towards multiple transformations across diverse contexts in an upward-moving, 'spiral of sustainability'. This involves value shifts and culturing transformation, as well as concerted efforts to 'scale back' existing, unsustainable ways of doing things and incumbent control over systems, infrastructures, finance and production.

1 Citizen Assembly UK. (2020). *The Path to Net Zero: Climate Assembly UK Full Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.climateassembly.uk/report/>

2 Newell, P. and A. Martin (2020). *The role of the state in the politics of disruption & acceleration* London: Climate KIC.

## 6. Focusing on behaviour change 'hotspots'

In the context of climate change, immediate challenges for behaviour change are reducing the lifestyle emissions of the polluter elite and concentrating attention on **hotspots** such as aviation, food and housing. The carbon emissions of the average European diet are around 1,070kg CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per year, but the consumption of meat, eggs and dairy make up 83% of those GHG emissions, indicating the vast scope for more sustainable food practices. For aviation, recent research estimates that between 2 and 4% of the global population flew internationally in 2018, while just 1% of the world's population was responsible for 50% of CO<sub>2</sub> from commercial aviation. For gains to be protected and scale to be achieved, enabling

environments need to support change across society as a whole in a way which recognises the uneven agency people have in meeting their basic needs.

Change will of course be achieved in different ways in different places. There is **no one theory of change** - or behaviour change - that applies to all settings. The capacity and view of the appropriate role of government, the market and civil society varies hugely around the world. This should make us wary of blanket and universal policy prescriptions for behaviour change. There are also important differences by sector. People have more control over dietary choices, for example, than how they get to work or how their homes are heated and cooled. Yet even with food, there are also deep cultural, identity-based, and religious practices and sensitivities at play that need to be engaged with.

### Moving forward

The debate on behaviour change needs to move on. We need an **account of the role of behaviour change that is more political and social**, that brings questions of power and social justice to the fore in order to appreciate how questions of responsibility and agency are unevenly distributed within and between societies. This leads to a more **holistic understanding of behaviour**, as just one node within an ecosystem of transformation that bridges the individual and systemic.

It is clear that **social mobilisation** is crucial to pressuring governments and businesses to show leadership and accountability for major decisions that lock-in carbon-intensive behaviours. Examples include the divestment movement and community energy programmes, as well as pressure for pedestrianisation and car-free cities, and against airport expansion. Many alternative economies have been built from the bottom-up through proactive design, as well reactively in the context of crisis, as we have seen in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Harnessing this social innovation and

mobilisation towards the goal of scaling behaviour change is vital to the success of collective efforts.

Rather than generalizing accounts of the need for behaviour change by all individuals, we have emphasised the role of behaviour change among businesses, cities and states, and of particular influential and high-consuming social groups within societies. We have highlighted key 'hotspots' of behaviour in the realms of travel, diet and housing that need to be given priority. We have also emphasised questions of governance, social mobilisation and the processes of collective steering necessary to facilitate large scale change across a diversity of actors, sectors and regions, in place of the dominant emphasis on individuals and households. The goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change cannot be achieved without radical changes to lifestyles and shifts in behaviour, especially among the wealthiest members of society, and on the part not just of individuals, but all actors in society.