

ONLINE HIGH-LEVEL POLICY INSIGHT – 24 November 2020

Changing citizen behaviour to tackle climate change

Event Report

The Mediterranean region is one of the hottest regions on earth, with the UN predicting average temperature rises of between 1 and 2 degrees Celsius by 2030-2050. In the region, fighting climate change is an essential part of the global effort to keep temperatures down. According to pollsters Ipsos, a majority of Southern Mediterranean region citizens believe the main responsibility for tackling climate change lies with “society”. And given that two thirds of the region’s citizens are under 35, Friends of Europe and the Anna Lindh Foundation held an online conversation on 24 November to gain insights and advice from young people on ‘Changing citizens’ behaviour to tackle climate change’.

The participants were optimistic that small tweaks to how we live our lives can help to save the planet, and that young people can serve as positive examples for others. But there was also a strong focus on getting teachers, social media influencers, governments and tech companies on board to help fund the effort and spread the word. The upshot? Make sustainable choices cooler, cheaper and easier, and the rest will follow.

IN A HOT SPOT

“The impact of climate change in the region is observed to be harsher, actually, than in most other regions of the world,” said **the Anna Lindh Foundation’s Executive Director, Nabil Al-Sharif**, who warned that the forced displacement of people fleeing extreme weather events will also cause “conflict and destabilisation in the Mediterranean”.

Add to all that the pressure from the Covid-19 pandemic and there is a very real risk that the region will get left behind - particularly as the US is set to re-join the Paris climate accord and the EU is pressing ahead with its own Green Deal.

Darko Suljicic, based in Zagreb, Croatia, told the debate that he was worried about governments rolling back climate policies in order to funnel more money into pandemic recovery. He said that individuals and households can’t be left on the hook for climate change. “I’m afraid that Covid-19 will also reverse some progress that was made in tackling climate change,” he said. “It’s good to have individual activism, but we have to have national and international policies.”

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

The science is stark. The evidence is there. So why hasn’t it forced a climate revolution? When teenage activist Greta Thunberg began her weekly school strike for climate back in 2018, nobody could have predicted how far it would go. Her iconic ‘You have stolen my dreams’ -speech ignited last year’s UN climate summit. By doing that, she was “communicating a descriptive social norm” which serves as a powerful positive example for other people, said **Hendrik Bruns**, a **policy analyst at the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre**.

Mr Bruns says there are simple and practical ways to influence more sustainable behaviour: for instance, energy labels on white goods and consumption comparisons on electricity bills. He says there is a wealth of behavioural science that shows people do change their consumption habits if it's available to them. "We need to make green behaviour as easy as possible," he said.

Speaking from Agadir, Morocco, **Khadija Amahal, a Young Mediterranean Voices delegate**, agreed. "We can have a significant impact on our small community. And then that impact will be contagious and will be transmitted to other people. As long as we do our best."

But progress on changing our habits has been relatively slow, even within the EU. While public-led campaigns have pressured the EU to introduce legislation on plastic straws and plastic shopping bags, **Garrette E. Clark at the UN's Environment Programme (UNEP)** says the "infrastructure" is not yet there to enable a climate conscious message to spread fast enough. "When people get up in the morning, they don't think about resource flows, they don't think about water, they don't think about energy. They don't think about the harming the environment - but they don't think about helping it either," said Ms Clark.

"We have to recast the evidence and the messaging and engage strategically with those who are affecting behaviour change," she says. And given that 2-3 billion new urban consumers will be coming online in the next few years, she says that means getting social media influencers on board. "When Beyoncé talked about going vegetarian, that did so much more than saying everybody should be doing protein swaps and eating less meat," Ms Clark said.

GETTING THINGS DONE

The challenge can seem enormous, and individual actions insignificant. But with households directly responsible for up to 75% of all global greenhouse gas emissions, the case for making changes at home is strong. For **Darya Yegorina, the founder and CEO of CleverBooks** and 2020 European Young Leader, the key is to target school-age children, teaching them the basics about pollution and recycling while they're young. Her company uses augmented reality, or what she calls "digital textbooks" to teach kids, which she says are readily available and much less harmful for the environment than paper books.

"The technology is out there, but we're not using it, she says. "We are not pursuing the change until we face the big problem, which is the climate issue." She points to innovative countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, who are using augmented reality and digital textbooks, despite patchy WIFI and a lack of devices. "Especially in the EU, we have the education on the climate, we have the education on sustainability, but how deep it goes, how deep it touches?"

Ahmed Yassin, Young Mediterranean Voices delegate and founder of the Alexandria-based 'Banlastic Egypt' project, didn't wait around for governments or businesses to take charge. His company, founded in 2018, sells biodegradable household items and organises beach clean-ups, with the ultimate aim of reducing or banning plastic use across the country. "My generation [...] we didn't waste time speaking about the problem, we leaped into action," he said.

The European Commission's Hendrik Bruns says people like Ahmed and Khadija are key to the EU's new Climate Pact, which is due to be published this year. The aim is to get a new generation of climate

ambassadors on board to model the kinds of social “norms” that influence behaviour. The pact will create a website to connect companies, schools, politicians and activists, where they can learn from each other and encourage climate action.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main recommendations made by participants in the 24 November discussion, ‘Changing citizens’ behaviour to tackle climate change’.

1. Intercultural Dialogue as a source of transformation and knowledge to address climate change

Citizens must be empowered to engage in intercultural dialogue in order to exploit the potential of cultural diversity to stimulate sustainable development through creativity and innovation and thus generate a better quality of life. Recent advances in communications technology can be employed to facilitate dialogue. Collaborative mechanisms should be developed to facilitate intercultural dialogue to improve the quality and efficiency of adaptation, mitigation and resilience practices to the benefit of all. The purpose is to create a mosaic of successful adaptation approaches for climate change and sustainability for the Mediterranean.

2. Model sustainable behaviour

This is about inspiration rather than legislation: activists like Greta Thunberg, social media influencers and online forums such as World Merit and Young Med Voices can be just as effective as tax policy or hard law in making people change their behaviour. “People are social creatures. We don’t want to be different too much from others,” according to Hendrik Bruns of the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre.

3. Make it easy to go green

Energy labels on washing machines, consumption scores on electricity bills (with smiley faces if yours is lower than your neighbour’s) or carbon footprint indicators are proven to change consumer behaviour. These are ‘no brainer’ options that often save people money. “People are increasingly searching for healthier, less stressful and more sustainable lives,” said the UNEP’s Garrette E. Clark. “Can we make sustainable living the default option?”

4. Get governments/international agencies on board

Making green choices the ‘default option’ will be impossible unless governments and international aid agencies are singing from the sustainability hymn sheet. For instance, over a third of the EU’s €672 billion recovery fund is dedicated to the “green transition”. And a large number of citizens in MENA countries (32%) see government as second in line (after “society”) in the fight against climate change, according to a July 2020 Ipsos poll.

5. Education, education, education - and technology

Getting people when they’re young means you create a new generation of conscious consumers. “We need to go back to basics. We are all humans and we are led by example,” said CleverBooks founder and CEO Darya Yegorina, whose augmented reality textbooks are a low-carbon option that are used in classrooms across Egypt and Tunisia, even though the WIFI is patchy.

6. Big business needs to make a big change

The Guardian revealed last year that 20 fossil fuel companies can be directly linked to more than a third of all GHG emissions in the modern era. Without ensuring that large companies have a “green bottom line”, there is little hope for a substantial long-term reduction in emissions.