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"EU climate action: Engaging families for sustainable change"

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Foreword

The urgency of addressing climate change demands a multifaceted approach that combines legislative initiatives with incentives and empowerment at the household level. From the perspective of sustainability, legislative frameworks like the European Green Deal provide essential guidance and an enabling environment, but true transformation requires active engagement with citizens and their communities, including families.

The green transition has ignited a significant shift in consumer behaviour towards sustainability, driven by increasing awareness of climate change and environmental degradation. Families, as the fundamental units of societies, play a crucial role in championing this new culture of sustainability. By providing support, resources, and opportunities for meaningful participation, families can serve as catalysts for driving positive environmental change within their communities and beyond. Despite widespread social support for climate actions and specific programs to fund the green transition, families have not been adequately targeted, highlighting a notable gap in EU climate policy. Urgent attention is needed to ensure that families – especially families in vulnerable situation – receive the necessary support to address the financial burden of climate-related challenges, thereby preventing further exacerbation of existing inequalities and poverty.

EU climate goals and policies for climate resilience

Europe stands out as the fastest-warming region globally, experiencing double the average global warming since the 1980s¹. This alarming trend has led to an increase in extreme weather events such as heatwaves, droughts, and wildfires, which are becoming more frequent and destructive. Consequently, preparing for the unavoidable consequences of climate change has become a pressing task.

Climate adaptation includes measures such as building flood-barriers, creating early-warning systems for storms, preparing for new health risks, and making sure our buildings and infrastructure can withstand and recover from extreme weather events. More generally, it involves planning for uncertainty and risk. Given the diverse challenges faced across different regions in Europe, solutions must be localized, tailored, and inclusive of all stakeholders.

¹ <https://community.wmo.int/en/news/wmos-state-climate-europe-report-2022-urges-immediate-action-europes-climate-crisis>

Recognizing climate change as one of the principal threats to young and future generations, the European Union (EU) has prioritized climate action on its regulatory agenda. All EU institutions and leaders have acknowledged the urgency of responding to this emergency and strengthening the EU's resilience.

In pursuit of these objectives, the European Commission launched the European Green Deal² as a cornerstone of its ambitions for the current decade. This ambitious initiative aims to position Europe as "the world's first climate-neutral continent³". The Green Deal serves as a comprehensive roadmap, outlining actions to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 while enhancing the competitiveness of European industry and ensuring a just transition for affected regions and populations.

The achievements of the "green transition" thus far extend beyond macro-level outcomes to directly influence consumer behaviours and household dynamics. One notable advancement has been the EU's commitment to promoting a circular economy through legislative measures that empower consumers and prioritize sustainability.

For instance, a new legislation grants consumers the right to repair⁴ common household appliances, even after the warranty period ends. The legislation aims to promote repair over disposal by ensuring that consumers have easier access to convenient and affordable repair services, where electronics and ICT products are a priority sector.

Additionally, the transition to renewable energy sources has tangible benefits for households across Europe. A significant milestone in Europe's renewable energy transition is that wind and solar power generated 22.3% of the European Union's electricity in 2022, surpassing fossil gas for the first time.⁵ As renewable energy technologies become more accessible and widespread, households have the opportunity to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, lower energy costs, and contribute to the decarbonization of the economy.

Moreover, the green transition has sparked a shift in consumer attitudes towards sustainability. Increasing awareness of climate change and environmental degradation has prompted many families to adopt eco-friendly practices in their daily lives. Whether it's through energy conservation, waste reduction, or sustainable purchasing choices, as consumers and as agents of change they are increasingly aligning their behaviours with the principles of environmental conservation promoted by the EU's current climate policies.

Despite these achievements, challenges persist in ensuring widespread adoption of sustainable practices among households. Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that integrates policy incentives, educational initiatives, and business engagement. **Moreover, it calls for empowering families, the fundamental units of our societies, to champion a new culture of sustainability. By providing support, resources, and opportunities for meaningful participation, families can serve as catalysts for driving positive environmental change within their communities and beyond.**

² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

³ Climate neutrality refers to the idea of achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by reducing and balancing those emissions so they are equal (or less than) the emissions that get removed through the planet's natural absorption.

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1794

⁵ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/renewable-energy-electricity-record-europe/>

Citizen support for climate action

Even in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on citizens, climate change remains among the top three concerns of Europeans. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey conducted by the European Commission in 2023⁶, an overwhelming majority of Europeans support decisive action to combat the climate crisis and make Europe the first climate-neutral continent.

European citizens identify climate change as the third most serious problem facing the world after poverty, hunger and lack of drinking water, and armed conflicts.

A quarter of Europeans identified the interlinked climate, environmental and pollution crises as their primary concern. Furthermore, 93% of EU citizens view climate change as a significant problem, while 77% consider it to be a very serious issue.

The survey reveals robust support for ambitious climate targets, with 88% of respondents – and at least 70% in each Member State – advocating for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to a minimum and offsetting remaining emissions to achieve a climate-neutral EU economy by 2050.

Furthermore, Europeans recognize the manifold benefits of transitioning to a greener economy. A significant majority (75%) acknowledge that proactive measures to address climate change will drive innovation and enhance the competitiveness of EU businesses. Moreover, **a vast majority of respondents (93%) have taken concrete actions to combat climate change in their personal lives, most notably by reducing and recycling waste (70%) and cutting down on consumption of disposable items whenever possible (53%).**

However, amidst this broad support for environmental protection, reconciling economic concerns, national disparities, and ensuring a just transition are pivotal for the successful implementation of climate policies. Despite the general consensus on the importance of climate action, many Europeans grapple with the financial implications of the green transition.

The decision-making process surrounding climate change policies is complex and raises ethical considerations, particularly concerning intergenerational justice. Balancing immediate needs with long-term sustainability requires careful deliberation: should we invest in solutions that might not personally benefit ourselves but will help future generations reach net zero – or should money be spent to ensure everyone right now has the best possible quality of life?

Some of these choices people make may be influenced by gender and family status. Women tend to exhibit greater concern for the wellbeing of future generations and are more likely to bear the costs of pricey climate mitigation policies.⁷ The transition to parenthood is an opportune time to form new and more sustainable habits and to consider the needs of the next generation and the world they will inherit.⁸

The transition to a climate-neutral society is both an urgent challenge and an opportunity to build a better future for all. All parts of society, economic sectors and levels of administration play an important role. However, local communities⁹ emerge as pivotal actors in the fight with climate change. Their

⁶ https://climate.ec.europa.eu/citizens/citizen-support-climate-action_en

⁷ <https://theconversation.com/women-favour-climate-actions-that-benefit-future-generations-more-than-men-new-study-224455>

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/does-having-children-make-us-care-more-about-the-environment-89875>

⁹ <http://www.ready4netzero.eu/en/local-climate-neutrality-strategies>

proximity to citizens enables them to offer tailored solutions that are both environmentally sound and socially friendly.

Challenges faced by families and households in Europe

Adaptive capacity is a key component of climate change risks, and it also affects the effectiveness of adaptation. For many households in Europe, the financial implications of climate change could be overwhelming, potentially exacerbating existing concerns about change. As the impact of climate change becomes increasingly apparent, it has become evident that specific budgets and support systems must include a contingency to address the consequences of such change. It is equally evident that continuous demand on these support systems will become unsustainable unless the behaviour of all people begins to change. Those vulnerable populations affected by poverty, in particular, will find it challenging to implement the necessary changes in their behaviour given the limited resources available to them.

The European Economic and Social Committee commissioned a study on “*The cost of climate change on households and families in the EU*”.¹⁰ The study defines climate change costs as including changes in income sources as well as variations in expenditure patterns that may be related to specific poverty issues. The findings indicate a North-South gradient in terms of climate change impacts and adaptation. Health, food, and electricity expenditure increase in Southern EU, while falling or remaining constant in Northern (and Eastern) EU. The contraction in labour income is most pronounced in the Southern regions of the EU, while the negative impact on monetary income (labour income, asset/investment remuneration and social transfers) affects nearly all EU countries, with the exception of the Eastern regions.

A review of specific cases reveals that, for instance, climate-induced health expenditure of EU households exhibits the greatest increase among all expenditure types, rising by 0.3% and 6.2% under moderate and severe warming, respectively. Furthermore, climate change is projected to result in an increase in average household food expenditure in the majority of EU countries. In contrast, energy expenditure is anticipated to decline slightly across the EU, ranging from 0.5% to 1% across climate change scenarios. The decline is observed in the majority of EU Member States, with the exception of those in the northernmost regions of Europe. This is largely attributed to a reduction in gas expenditure by 14% (19%) observed across all EU countries under the moderate (severe) climate change scenario. While this reduction in energy expenditure is beneficial, it is offset by an increase in electricity bills.

It is also important to note that only half of EU households in the study sample rely on insurance to protect their dwellings from multiple hazards. Furthermore, this kind of private adaptation would be intensified mainly under severe climate change impacts. At the EU level, insurance expenditure is projected to increase due to severe climate change impacts.

The overall contraction in income will limit the capacity of families to cope with the residual costs of climate change and to adapt, without increasing their risk of falling below the poverty line. Given the interconnectivity between agriculture, energy, and health, which will all face significant challenges, there is a risk of compounding adverse outcomes for households.

¹⁰ <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/cost-climate-change-households-and-families-eu#downloads>

It can be concluded that the next crucial step in the green transition is to prioritize support for vulnerable households. **Urgent attention must be given to the design and distribution of social transfer systems to ensure that those most affected by climate change are adequately supported. Without targeted interventions, the financial burden of climate-related challenges may further exacerbate existing inequalities and push vulnerable families deeper into poverty.**

Birthplace of sustainability is family

In addition to the implementation of policy frameworks for environmental sustainability, the establishment of dedicated support systems for ecological investments and the provision of financial incentives for those negatively affected by the green transition, coupled with the general social approval of these objectives, it is of the utmost importance that citizens assume ownership of the change. For this to happen, a greater number of leaders must emerge within their own communities, thereby instilling confidence in others to follow suit in establishing a culture of sustainability. This grassroots approach is essential for fostering widespread engagement and commitment to environmental stewardship, complementing institutional efforts and policy initiatives aimed at addressing climate change.

This chapter examines the potential of the family unit as a catalyst for sustainable development. This is done in the spirit of the Civil Society Declaration¹¹, which states that we need to develop strategies to address the impact of climate change on families and to better understand the active role of families in sustainable practices. The National Association of Large Families in Hungary (NOE)¹² fully supports this view and can provide some illustrative examples. The association has demonstrated a strong commitment to aligning its activities with its statutes since its foundation. From the 1980s onwards, member families of NOE have participated in environmental protection programmes aimed at preserving our planet as an inheritance for our children and all forthcoming generations. In 2021, NOE hosted the X. European Large Families Conference, with the motto "*The birthplace of sustainability is family*", which underscored the pivotal role of families in fostering a sustainable future. In advance of the Conference, a survey¹³ was conducted by the Maria Kopp Institute for Demography and Families in collaboration with NOE and its European partner organisation, the European Large Families Confederation (ELFAC) in eleven European countries.

This survey shows that both European and Hungarian families are interested and involved in environmental protection, with this interest being primarily driven by the desire to ensure a healthy future for their children. However, this interest is more pronounced in the case of large families, with large families showing a higher level of interest in environmental protection than other family types. Not only are they interested in environmental protection, but they also strive to live in an environmentally conscious way. The more children a family has, the more they see it as their responsibility to protect the environment.

¹¹ <https://familyperspective.org/2023/02/23/civil-society-declaration-30th-anniversary-of-the-international-year-of-the-family/>

¹² One of the largest family associations in Europe, with 16,000 member families and 200 local branches in and around Hungary. It represents large families, defined as those who have or intend to have three or more children. The association is scheduled to celebrate its 35th anniversary in 2024.

¹³ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jEDnCPqQatUUPm9L6ZFDWfpSzcYUeCNT/view>

Another national representative survey¹⁴ of attitudes conducted by the Maria Kopp Institute confirmed that Hungarian families with children pay more attention to environmental protection than those without children. Analysis of the survey results revealed the image of three distinct groups, namely those who are committed to environmental protection (57.9%), those who are interested in it (28.6%) and those who are not interested (13.5%). The results show that 65.1 per cent of families with children are actively involved in environmental protection, compared to 41.6 per cent of adults without children.

These examples confirm that the family unit, by shaping the attitudes, behaviours and aspirations of its members, acts as a conduit for intergenerational knowledge transfer, fostering a sense of responsibility, respect for the environment and the importance of community engagement. As families adopt sustainable practices and a mindful approach to consumption and resource management, they contribute to the broader societal shift towards sustainability.

Role of children, youth and families as active agents in advancing positive change

Change of behaviour is undeniably challenging in any context and necessitates effective communication among all stakeholders. While young people expect proper living conditions and an outlook for a positive future in terms of professional and family life, they are also willing to contribute to the positive development and resilience of their communities and countries. They are often agents of change and drivers of economic, social, and environmental progress.

For example, young people and children often play a pivotal role in influencing their parents' perspectives, advocating for new ideas, addressing social issues, and prioritizing health concerns. It's not difficult to envision family discussions where children and youth inspire their parents to pursue character goals aligned with their values, be it personal development or shared family objectives aimed at community engagement.

Fortunately, communities worldwide are increasingly acknowledging the significance of engaging with younger generations, listening to their voices, and involving them in decision-making processes. This inclusivity is vital not only for nurturing a sense of belonging and empowerment among youth but also for fostering a sustainable future, recognizing that today's youth are tomorrow's leaders. The European Union is at the forefront of supporting young people in assuming this leadership role, primarily through education and training. For instance, the EU's youth programmes, such as Erasmus+ youth participation projects¹⁵, aim to equip young individuals with essential citizenship skills, empowering them to actively participate in climate action and policymaking processes.

Moreover, the EU allocates specific funding to support green innovation and investment in circular economy enterprises, including those that are youth-driven¹⁶. These targeted funding possibilities encourage young people to channel their creativity and entrepreneurial spirit towards sustainable solutions that address environmental challenges. By providing financial resources and opportunities for youth-led initiatives, the EU not only cultivates a culture of innovation and sustainability but also amplifies the impact of young changemakers in shaping a more resilient and eco-conscious future.

¹⁴ <https://www.koppmariaintezet.hu/en/allarticles/397-press-release-families-with-children-pay-more-attention-to-environmental-protection>

¹⁵ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/youth-participation>

¹⁶ <https://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform/en/financing-circular-economy>

Despite the significant political focus of the EU on sustainability, including widespread social support for climate actions and specific programs to fund the green transition, families have not been among the primary target groups. The potential of a family-centred approach to sustainability has been largely neglected, with limited representation in general awareness-raising efforts and the formulation of beneficiaries for available funding. This aspect highlights a notable gap in EU climate policy that warrants attention and reconsideration.

It's crucial to recognise families as 'prosumers' - not only in terms of their ability to consume and produce energy, for example by adopting technologies such as solar panels for household energy production, but also in terms of their social and cultural wealth. Families are the primary nurturers of future generations, safeguarding our human heritage. By embracing this dual role of families as consumers and producers, we can foster a more sustainable and inclusive society for generations to come.

Recommendations:

1. Recognize and actively involve youth and families and their organisations as key agents in shaping a sustainable future through meaningful engagement and participation in decision-making processes.
2. Embrace the dual role of families as both consumers and producers to foster a more sustainable and inclusive society for present and future generations.
3. Ensure targeted support for families, particularly those in vulnerable situations, to address the financial challenges posed by climate change impacts.
4. Expand tax incentives for green technologies, products, and services to incentivize their adoption and promote sustainable consumption practices among households.
5. Advocate for policies that promote product longevity and sustainability, such as implementing longer warranties and the right to repair for items like computers, cars, and household appliances, encouraging durability and reducing waste.

Budapest, 10th May, 2024.