



Shifting norms and values for transitions to net zero¹

Nick Brooks, Garama 3C Ltd | November 2020

This Insight looks at decision-maker and citizen norms, values, worldviews and ideologies in the context of climate change.

KEY MESSAGES

- The issue of underlying values has not been well explored in thinking about or evaluating climate transformations or innovation.
- Public and senior decision makers' values, ideologies and worldviews, determine behaviour and policy approaches. To drive change we need to learn how to challenge underlying values in ways that bring people together without alienating social groups.
- Different parts of the European Union (EU) have different decarbonisation needs and priorities, so different approaches to challenging norms and values are required.
- There are ways to challenge norms and values through social innovation that could help move past the current deadlock. These include engaging new agents of change, activating pro-environmental norms and building new networks to promote pro-mitigation ideologies.

Introduction

Between 1990 and 2018, the EU reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 23 per cent. In December 2019, the European Council endorsed an objective of net zero emissions by 2050, and the European Commission published a communication outlining a European Green Deal to meet this objective. Achieving net zero global emissions by around 2050 is essential if the world is to deliver on the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5–2 °C above the pre-industrial period.

Delivering net zero by 2050 cannot be achieved solely through incremental changes based on smooth, technology-driven transitions to clean energy production. Governments, industry, business and the public will all need to make difficult choices around energy production and consumption, infrastructural investments, land use, transport, emissions-intensive consumption and economic policy to deliver net zero within the EU and globally.

For example, existing carbon-intensive infrastructure will need to be retrofitted or retired before the end of its natural life, and planned expansion of carbon-intensive infrastructure will need to be abandoned. Fossil fuel subsidies will need to be removed. Large investments will be required to develop and scale up new energy sources, industrial processes, and carbon removal technologies, and to enable change in land use.

Constraints on key resources for manufacturing renewable infrastructure mean that the total decarbonisation of energy systems and industrial infrastructure will be extremely challenging. Even if possible, it will not reduce emissions deeply or rapidly enough to deliver net zero targets. Achieving the necessary societal transformations to deliver net zero will require additional near-term changes in behaviour.

What does transformation for net zero look like in the EU?

High CO₂ emissions in individual EU member states result from a combination of factors. These include large populations, large economies, a high dependence on non-renewable energy sources, a high proportion of GDP derived from manufacturing, and high consumption levels associated with affluence and high per capita GDP. High dependence on fossil fuels—particularly coal—is a major factor in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Germany and Greece.

In these countries, rapid transitions in energy systems, involving qualitative policy shifts away from fossil fuel infrastructure towards renewables, can drastically reduce emissions.

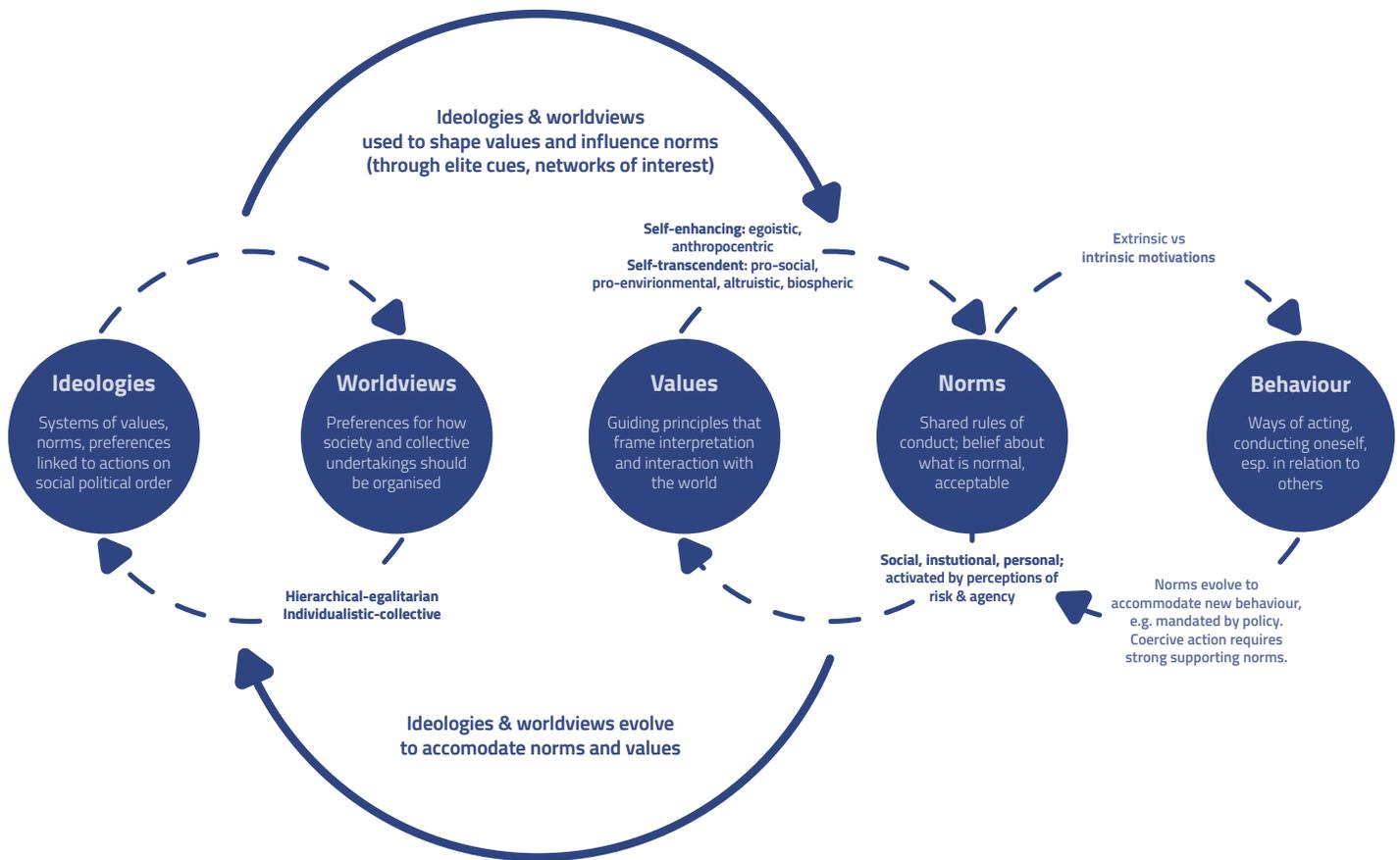
Large populations and economies are the major factors behind high total emissions in Western Europe. In these countries, continued transitions to renewables will deliver further reductions in emissions. However, countries will need to accelerate and complement this with other measures, including developing renewable energy from waves and tides, hydrogen-based and other new fuels, low or zero carbon industrial processes, sustainable bioenergy, and carbon capture and storage. Countries will need to further improve their energy efficiency, and make significant changes in land use required for afforestation, ecosystem rehabilitation, and the production of sustainable biofuels.

This will require shifts in policy and investment, and thus in the behaviour of senior decision makers and the institutional environments that frame and constrain their decision making. Changes in consumer behaviour to address emissions from household consumption are particularly urgent in the areas of surface transport, aviation, heating and diet. Such changes will ultimately be required across the EU, including in countries where initial large reductions can be made through shifts from fossil fuels to renewables.

In summary, transformation for net zero in the EU will require systemic changes driven by government policy together with high-impact shifts in consumer behaviours and choices. In turn, this will require changes in behaviour by both the public and senior decision makers in government, industry and business.

At all levels of society, decision making will need to move beyond the current norms that enable emissions-intensive behaviour and inhibit the behavioural and policy changes necessary for deep and rapid decarbonisation. Achieving the necessary transformations for net zero will mean challenging these norms and the values, worldviews and ideologies that underpin them, which often go unexamined or unnoticed in climate change mitigation discussions.

Figure 1. The relationships between norms, values, worldviews and ideologies in the context of climate change



The importance of norms, values, worldviews and ideologies

There are complex relationships between norms, values, worldviews and ideologies in the context of climate change. These offer different entry points for engagement with individuals, institutions and wider society.

For example, emissions-intensive personal behaviour is associated with norms related to consumerism, which include personal and wider societal acceptance of high reliance on private vehicles, frequent flying and high meat and dairy consumption. Such norms can be linked with values of self-interest and self-enhancement, which have been associated with lower levels of concern about the climate and lower support for climate change mitigation.

These values are compatible with hierarchical and individualistic worldviews, which are in turn associated with lower perceived risks and impacts of climate change compared to those with more egalitarian and communitarian worldviews.

Among senior decision makers in government, business and industry, norms associated with high emissions include prioritising economic growth over environmental sustainability, using analytical frameworks that cannot incorporate large risks associated with non-linear changes, externalising environmental and climate change costs, and favouring market mechanisms and technological approaches to deliver emissions reductions.

Rooted in worldviews based on faith in material abundance, future prosperity and science and technology these norms are framed by ideologies that emphasise deregulation and unrestricted economic growth. They are also embedded in anthropocentric worldviews, which see human beings as existing outside and 'above' the natural environment.

These worldviews and ideologies are predicated on a belief in progress, which frames human history as a narrative of advancement through successive stages of evolutionary development. This belief has its roots in widely refuted narratives about the development of prehistoric societies that are at the heart of ideas about modernity, which in turn shape political discourse and economic policy. Free market ideology blends narratives of progress with ideas related to evolutionary theory, arguing that market competition is the most efficient way of driving economic development and thus improving the 'public good'.

In English-speaking countries, political polarisation around climate change is closely related to the acceptance or rejection of free market ideology. This has been fostered by vested interests who have shifted their focus from climate science to climate policy as the science becomes more difficult to dispute. While this strong link between climate scepticism and political conservatism is not universal, some degree of political polarisation is apparent in the EU, particularly in Western Europe.

The rise of right-wing populism in Europe could increase polarisation around climate change and place climate policy increasingly at risk. Right-wing populist parties tend to oppose climate and energy transition policies, multilateralism and international cooperation. In Eastern and Central Europe, environmental issues and climate change have not yet been widely politicised. However, this could change if fossil fuel interests in these countries mobilise to oppose climate action. Political polarisation could also deepen in Western Europe, as more stringent and costly measures are required to deliver net zero and vested interests mobilise to oppose strong climate policies.

Shifting social norms for rapid and deep decarbonisation

Changes in social norms among public and senior decision makers will be critical for achieving net zero goals. Shifting social norms can be addressed through social innovation, which seeks to identify and implement new ways of driving social change, based on new combinations of practices in specific social contexts, that are not driven principally by profit.

Social innovation for net zero transitions needs to move beyond fashionable framings based on market mechanisms, corporate self-regulation and social enterprise. It must seek to drive systemic social change by supporting social movements and communities to reclaim a central role in shaping the future, based on principles of justice, equity and human rights.

There are two main approaches to changing social norms. The first is seeking to directly change people's beliefs and values to directly change, thus shifting a population's view of what is acceptable and expected. The other is appealing to people's intrinsic values to enable the 'activation' of their pro-social and pro-environmental norms, thus propagating and reinforcing these norms more widely throughout society.

Shifting social norms directly: This approach involves challenging existing beliefs and values, along with the worldviews in which they are embedded, and the ideologies that frame them. This means offering alternative ideologies and worldviews to frame and support new values. Current norms that facilitate emissions-intensive policies and behaviours have been deliberately shaped through decades of concerted action by networks of vested interests that have promoted free market ideology and opposed climate change mitigation on the basis of free market principles.

Establishing counter networks is one way to directly change values and norms. These networks can develop and promote pro-mitigation narratives, worldviews and principles, and offer alternatives to dominant political and economic ideologies. For example, they might promote a 'degrowth' agenda in wealthy industrialised countries while allowing room for growth in poorer countries. They can also offer ecocentric rather than anthropocentric worldviews, or mechanisms for internalising the environmental and climate costs of economic activities.

Mirroring the strategy of free market thinktanks and networks, these counter networks would seek to place champions of these alternative models in government and promote their values through various media. Social innovation will play a role in identifying ways to grow these new networks and help them influence policy agendas and public opinion.

Developing narratives that make specific high-emissions behaviours less socially acceptable is another way to directly shift social norms. For example, the 'flight shame' phenomenon has been credited with reducing the number of flights people take, motivated by their realisation of the

emissions costs of flying (and, critically, generally not being shamed by others).

Where previous changes in norms around activities such as smoking were promoted through policy interventions acting in tandem with sustained public information and advocacy campaigns, this apparent trend in behaviour around flying has had no such official support. The rapid trend towards veganism and reduced meat consumption—supported by official guidance on healthy eating but also driven by environmental and animal welfare concerns—falls somewhere between these two extremes.

Social innovation for climate change mitigation can learn from these examples and apply this learning to develop narratives and change norms around other emissions-intensive behaviours. As well as seeking to change norms from the bottom up, it can use advocacy around policy shifts that will accelerate changes in relevant norms.

Activating pro-mitigation norms: Appealing to extrinsic values associated with, for example, the financial benefits of pro-mitigation behaviour, could backfire and instead reinforce existing (economic) framings of climate change that tend to block more significant action. In contrast, appealing to intrinsic pro-social and pro-environmental values—such as altruism, community involvement and concern for the environment—are more likely to galvanise the meaningful and large-scale actions and changes required to deliver net zero.

Personal, intrinsic norms that favour pro-mitigation behaviour are activated when people perceive that important values are threatened and believe they have the power to reduce or remove the threat. Social innovation to activate intrinsic norms therefore needs to explore ways to demonstrate the threats posed by climate change and provide people with a means of addressing these threats through feasible behavioural changes, consumer choices, local action, community involvement, political action or other means.

Engagement with climate change increases, and political polarisation can decrease, when it is framed as an issue that is locally relevant. Social innovation might therefore encompass local-level campaigns to disseminate information on climate extremes and related hazards, their impacts and their links with climate change—either in real time or soon after extreme events.

This information could also be linked explicitly to pro-mitigation action—for example, through apps that allow people to base their purchasing or voting choices on the

mitigation performance of individual companies, products, political parties or politicians.

Where there are barriers to positive behaviour change—for example, where inadequate or prohibitively expensive public transport reinforces private vehicle use—or to adaptive responses to worsening climate risks, social innovation could support citizen lobbying of local or national governments to remove these issues.

These actions would be designed to demonstrate locally relevant climate change risks to values or things of value, and to provide people with agency to address these through mitigation (and adaptation).

Supporting agents of change

Some individuals and groups—including certain elites, faith leaders and children—are particularly effective at influencing or activating norms. They should therefore be priority targets for social innovation campaigns that aim to shift and/or activate personal norms until a critical mass is reached. This can then trigger a tipping point in wider social or institutional norms.

Political and other elites can help shape the norms, values and worldviews of their respective constituencies. Social innovation therefore might seek to engage members of elite groups who are sympathetic to the net zero agenda and amplify their voices. Another approach might be to engage, persuade and recruit individuals who are neutral or even hostile to net zero.

Faith leaders can promote values and norms based on environmental stewardship as opposed to dominion over nature, both of which are incorporated in religious, particularly monotheistic, traditions. Social innovation can explore how best to align climate mitigation with different faith traditions and reach faith communities.

Children are particularly successful in overcoming socio-ideological barriers to concern over climate change in their parents. This effect is strongest between daughters and politically conservative male parents. Therefore, empowering children—especially girls—to communicate with adults about climate change is a potentially powerful lever for social innovation around climate mitigation.

Where the role of elites is predominantly to shape and change norms, values and worldviews, faith leaders can both change and activate them, depending on how norms and values relating to dominion and stewardship are distributed in their communities. Children will most

likely be able to activate parental norms relating to concern for their welfare and shift these towards more pro-environmental positions based on their desire for a sustainable future.

Many other actors can also be agents of change within any given community and institution. Senior decision makers in government, industry and business have the potential to drive changes through policy and management decisions. But while they might be engaged on an individual level, they do not operate in a vacuum. They are constrained by the norms and values of the institutions in which they work. Social innovation therefore needs to try and change institutional values through advocacy and public and consumer pressure.

Conclusions

As well as grappling with how to change norms and values that are hostile to deep and rapid decarbonisation, social innovation needs to activate norms that are inherently pro-mitigation and identify key agents of change. Enhancing the agency of the public and senior decision

makers, and empowering them to make pro-mitigation decisions, will be critical to the success of the net zero agenda.

As Europe and the world seek to recover from the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic through massive economic stimulus packages, social innovation must grasp the opportunities to drive shifts in narratives, norms and values in societies that have experienced the shortcomings of previously dominant ideologies and worldviews, and are ready for change.

Endnotes

1. Available at climate-kic.org/insights

Climate Innovation Insights Series 5 investigates the role of innovation in achieving transformational change in our societies. Aimed at policymakers and practitioners, it provides fresh perspectives and early lessons on how to generate genuinely transformative change, and what it looks like in practice. See the full collection of *Climate Innovation Insights* at climate-kic.org/insights.

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Series editor

Dr Susannah Fisher, EIT Climate-KIC,
communitydesk@climate-kic.org

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