

THEME 01

Sustainable by default

SUSTAINABILITY

SOCIAL EQUALITY

SOCIO-CULTURAL
CHANGE

In the West, the discourse on sustainability is causing a rift between proponents of sustainable policies and lifestyles and those who fear that overly demanding environmental norms will have too much of an impact on their welfare and wellbeing. The problem here is that many climate-related measures invoke higher costs on an individual level (e.g. increasing consumption tax) or on a societal level (e.g. subsidies for clean solutions) and tend to hit lower-income families the hardest, even though their ecological footprint is already quite modest. This raises the question how sustainability can be promoted without increasing social inequality.

Our observations

- The [Yellow vest](#) movement in France started as a protest against higher fuel taxes, meant to discourage people from driving too much and stimulate them to switch to other modes of transportation. Populist parties tap into the feelings of discontent that motivate these kinds of protestors and a rejection of (all too aggressive) sustainability policies is an important ingredient of their success.
- Consumption taxes, e.g. on [fuels](#), energy, [food](#) or [airplane](#) tickets, are an oft-proposed means of changing consumer behavior, but almost inevitably hit low-income families the hardest. Many subsidies for eco-friendly solutions (e.g. electric vehicles or solar panels) end up with the most affluent households as they can more easily afford the remaining costs and are more apt at dealing with the administrative burden of such subsidy schemes.
- A recent [study](#) in the Netherlands showed that citizens with an above-average income are responsible for some 25% more GHG emissions than people with a below-average income. The same, albeit to a lesser extent, is true for the highly educated (vs the less educated), men (vs women) and right-wing and Christian voters (i.e. VVD and CDA) (vs left-wing voters).
- The greatest differences are found in [food and transportation](#), while differences for categories such as living and clothing are much smaller. Most of all, high-earners and the highly educated drive (14.000 km vs 9.000km) and fly more (i.e. 9.2 hours/year versus 2.4 hrs/yr). The same study also showed that this group feels guiltier about this and argues that flying should be made more expensive (although they hardly pay for carbon offset schemes). Furthermore, they eat about as much meat, even though they, more often, claim to be part of the growing group of "[flexitarians](#)".
- The popular (moral) debate over sustainability tends to focus on means of consumption; the type of car one drives, the brand of clothing one wears or the specific foodstuffs one eats. However, more important, in many cases, is the act of consumption itself and the routines and structures in which it is embedded. In the case of travelling, for instance, the distance covered is generally more important than the mode (or type of vehicle) one chooses. That is, planes are (roughly 2-3 times) more polluting than cars on a per kilometer basis, but the real "problem" is that they enable us to travel farther more easily and cheaply.
- Although mostly focused on air pollution, the recently announced plans to rid [Amsterdam](#) of gas cars by 2030 was met with strong [resistance](#) from (national) populist parties who argue that many citizens cannot afford to switch to electric mobility and that these plans would make personal mobility something for the rich only.

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Connecting the dots

Two of the world's most pressing problems, climate change and (global) inequality, are deeply intertwined. Rising temperatures and extreme weather events will hit developing economies the hardest and, as long as economic growth is coupled with increasing energy use, raising the standard of living in those countries will almost certainly come with increasing greenhouse gas emissions. On a smaller scale, something similar is true for developed economies where higher-income groups are responsible for most emissions and are better able to deal with the possible effects of climate change (e.g. by relocating to higher grounds), while those in the lower-income brackets have a smaller ecological footprint and will be hit hardest by most climate-related policies.

This, however, is not merely a practical or economic problem. It also represents a moral challenge. As we noted before, sustainability has become somewhat of a [secular religion](#) for many (highly educated) people in the West and not abiding by its rules equals immoral behavior. It is thus tempting to look down on people who drive old and polluting cars, eat low-cost non-organic food or simply pick the cheapest energy provider. However, on the whole, the most vocal proponents of sustainable policies and lifestyles do not necessarily lead the most sustainable lives themselves. Others, who are less outspoken or even critical of the sustainability discourse, may very well have far smaller ecological footprints as they, typically, have less to spend on carbon-intensive practices (e.g. driving a gas-guzzling car, but only for short trips). They, in other words, are likely to lead a more sustainable lifestyle by default and it would be unjust to put the burden of preventing climate change solely on them.

As it stands, the societal fault line between environmentalists and their critics needs to be mended before any meaningful environmental policies can be implemented. This probably requires the highly educated and well-earning parts of society to acknowledge the fact they are the biggest polluters and that simply making things more expensive or

providing subsidies for green technology will not make for a sustainable and just future. In a practical sense, this first and foremost implies that any environmental consumption-related taxes, or rising costs of energy, would have to be compensated by lower income taxes for lower incomes. And, similarly, subsidies for green technology should be available and attainable for lower-income households as well. While such subsidies are mostly part of sustainable policy mixes already, much societal unrest still centers around subsidies for the "rich"; for solar panels and electric vehicles. Apparently, much more can be done to create opportunities for lower-income households to reap the benefits of such subsidies as well (e.g. shared EVs in low-income neighborhoods). And, more attention could be paid to the ways in which local (or national) subsidies also result in local jobs. While it is still [unclear](#) whether it has had the desired effect, the German Energiewende, just like the U.S. [Green New Deal](#), was always presented as a tool for job creation as well as for reaching environmental goals. More interesting, perhaps, is the question what society can learn from the sustainable-by-default lifestyles of lower-income families. As we have noted before, consumer behavior is rooted in practices that are shaped by various structural and cultural forces and these may be changed to induce more sustainable behavior. A simple example would be to stimulate people to live closer to their places of work and, as such, reduce their commuting distance. Culturally, there may be something to gain from a different perspective on holidays. Currently, there's quite a lot of talk about "flying shame", but this is merely an afterthought that does not really alter people's behavior. A more profound shift in the practice of vacationing (and international business alike) would be needed to prevent people from flying all over the world. Such a shift would probably have to include a growing (re-)appreciation of nearby holiday destinations (i.e. a "staycation") and possibly prioritizing company (i.e. friends and family) over destination.

Implications

- **Digital technology and the sensor-based economy will enable more fine-grained tax systems that take into account the specific conditions of consumption and enable more consideration of one's income level. On a more speculative note, future technology could be used to assess whether some act of consumption qualifies as "necessary" (e.g. whether someone "has" to travel somewhere). Obviously, the latter would entail quite a bit of interference with our personal lives and would currently be deemed unacceptable, but norms may shift in the future (e.g. towards acceptance of carbon budgets per individual).**
- **The perceived need for more aggressive consumption taxes could prove a lever for a more progressive tax system as a whole; under the pressure of environmental goals, societal change could thus accelerate.**
- **Practices that are sustainable-by-default (e.g. staycations or wearing second-hand clothes) could see rising popularity and facilitate the elimination of the social stigma of poverty.**