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Behavioural Change and Sustainability

EDITORIAL

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Tackling climate change requires vast changes across technology, markets, and legislation on national and international fronts. However, it also requires a range of individual and household behavioural changes. The distinction between systemic- and individual-level changes is often presented as a binary one, despite most efforts to tackle climate change involving interactions between people and institutions. For example, policies that increase the relative cost of emissions, such as carbon pricing, are designed both to push companies to invest in new technologies and to encourage individuals to change their behaviour. Understanding this interaction between the individual and the institution in the context of climate change is key for behavioural scientists trying to achieve large-scale-systemic change.

The papers in this special issue developed from a symposium held at LSE in November 2025 as part of the new Global School of Sustainability (GSoS) work programme. They bring together perspectives from researchers across behavioural science, economics, psychology, law, social policy, and food systems research. One theme that emerges across the articles is that a focus on incremental individual and household change is insufficient to address climate change's fundamental issues. Systemic change is needed. But any model of systemic change needs to take into account human behaviour, including motivation and perceptions about what is considered the 'right' course of action. Behavioural science has most to offer when it is connected to the substance of policy and to the institutions that design and deliver it.

Delaney and Alexander's opening article shows that governments and international organisations are increasingly turning to behavioural units to help shape climate policy. Despite this, there is not yet a coherent model maximising behavioural science's potential. They propose four principles for stronger institutional practice, namely: clear definition of a behavioural unit's role; embeddedness within policy processes; connectedness between research and delivery; and capacity to engage multiple stakeholders. Their article also raises questions about trust, democratic legitimacy, and the fair allocation of responsibility for change.

This article is followed by Robinson's examination of issues of behavioural and systemic change in the agri-food sector, which accounts for approximately 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Progress in this sector has lagged behind other sectors, in part because it is much harder for technology and clean energy to drive agri-food's emissions reductions. Her article focuses on food waste and livestock emissions, particularly in higher-income countries. On the question of waste, Robinson shows that while most people may have no issue with the idea of reducing food waste, considerable behaviour change is needed to compensate for the scarcity of technological solutions. Behavioural change must also contribute to reductions in livestock

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emissions, but here, the solution is complicated by the fact that it must come at least in part through a reduction in meat consumption – something which affects consumers, farmers, and many others along the supply chain. Understanding barriers to change in these sectors requires context-rich understanding across multiple arenas. Robinson argues for a country-specific shared vision of the future of food and farming, supported by a mix of regulation, prices and behavioural measures, and explicit attention to the groups that may lose from change.

Beiser-McGrath also highlights the importance of context-rich understanding of how people perceive the costs and benefits of different technologies. They argue that people are less driven by the ways in which policies are framed and presented, and more by how they perceive the policies to be effective, and how the material costs and benefits are distributed. Communication is still very important but must be seen in the context of the economic and policy design aspects of the specific technologies and policies involved, with citizens particularly preoccupied with a policy's fairness. While traditional behavioural factors such as adoption frictions matter, they also must be seen alongside wider political aspects of support grounded in perceptions of equity.

From here, Gleibs looks at climate leadership and group processes. She advances a social psychological model of leadership that shows how leaders can build shared identity, collective efficacy, and ultimately establish sustainable practices through the creation and maintenance of collective sustainability norms. For Gleibs, community-level change is best facilitated through inclusive leadership that crafts a collective identity with a shared interest in countering climate change. Local mobilisation is not enough, however, but must be connected to wider coordination, and climate narratives need to take into account differences in vulnerability, resources and responsibility. Effective leadership in sustainability must be grounded in evidence on the distributional impacts of climate policies and the capacities of different groups to absorb changes.

How climate policies impact different groups is taken into account by Laffan and Krekel, who place subjective well-being at the heart of climate and sustainability policy design, appraisal, implementation and evaluation. In their account, human emotions such as pride, guilt, hope, fear and anger influence both private behaviours and public support, and do so through a variety of mechanisms. Through measuring emotional responses and experiences, not only can the design and communication of interventions be improved, but the broader impacts of the policies can be evaluated. Life satisfaction and novel well-being measures can help assess effects in practice and compare social value. These measures can extend beyond traditional policy tools, which is particularly important as sustainable policies may produce benefits that conventional appraisal misses, or costs that aggregate environmental measures conceal. Attention to well-being can therefore potentially identify policies that are more acceptable and meaningful to people and provide more valuable outcomes, without treating acceptability as a substitute for environmental effectiveness.

Gozlugol turns to the corporation and questions whether changing directors' duties from shareholder value to stakeholder value, as some nations have done, will solve environmental and social harms. The appeal of doing so is clear, but examples from stakeholder-oriented systems show that broader formal duties do not guarantee sustainable conduct. In Gozlugol's account, the effect of implementing these duties may be to increase managerial discretion without ensuring that social costs are addressed. He argues that a potentially more dependable route is to make firms bear those costs through regulation, taxation, and litigation. This argument reinforces a wider theme of the issue that there are strong interactions between norms of conduct and legal institutions, and that it is important to understand them.

In the final paper, Krpan offers a radical idea of transformative behavioural change. While acknowledging the challenges of such revolutionary changes, which would require a wholesale reorientation of society's values and functions, Krpan argues for the potential of small, committed groups modelling the required behaviours. He puts forward key ideas for how concepts such as degrowth, psychological self-sufficiency, and technologically enabled sufficiency could form the basis for radical tipping points in the relationship between individuals and the environment. His paper provides a strong foundation for thinking through the limitations of current models of behavioural change within climate policy and forces us to think about what more radical ideas would look like and the extent to which they could drive more transformative change.

Taken together, the papers offer new directions in how legal, political, economic, psychological, and behavioural aspects of climate policy interconnect, and how a better understanding of these interconnections can contribute to accelerating the transition to net zero. There are many potentially fruitful areas of incremental change in climate policy, and their effects can become exponentially greater through their cross-fertilisation. Alongside this, time and space must be devoted to understanding how larger-scale transformative change might occur through combinations of leadership, norm building, incentive design, law, and behaviourally informed technological progress.

Several practical implications follow. Behavioural analysis in climate change settings needs to account for decisions made across a broad range of contexts, including within households, organisations, communities and political coalitions. Regardless of how interventions are made, their evaluation should better reflect the scale of the intended outcome and the conditions of implementation, including a range of psychological and political factors. One clear route for improving public policy is to build pragmatic behavioural frameworks into institutional climate change capacities that allow for better understanding and response to these factors.

The pace and sequencing of change also matters, as does who is being affected. Governments need to provide credible transition paths for workers, regions and lower-income households facing concentrated costs. Careful decisions about compensation, infrastructure, participation and enforcement, accompanied by clear explanation, can help sustain support throughout the transition. As noted across several of the articles, we need to understand more about the role of public perception and leadership in driving the success of these policies. Policy frameworks that do not pre-empt and address large-scale perceptions of unfairness can create public backlash in ways that play out differently across cultural and national contexts.

This suggests a broad agenda for behavioural and social scientists working on climate change. Behavioural researchers working on climate policy should continue to study factors affecting individual decisions, but the field should also examine how this interacts with the behaviour of policymakers, firms, leaders and organised groups. It should be involved throughout the policy development and implementation processes, rather than just be seen as an input to evaluating projects ex post. Not only should the field evaluate behavioural outcomes, but distributional and well-being effects alongside, and public deliberation and ethical scrutiny should be treated as part of good policy. No single discipline represented in this issue offers a complete route to sustainability. Together, however, they show why behavioural analysis belongs within the design of systemic change. Climate policy alters the conditions in which people act, and it is more likely to be effective if conducted with sufficient understanding of citizen behaviour, trust and collective capacity for those changes to endure. We hope the papers in this issue provide stimulating key examples of directions in this regard.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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