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EFPA CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY ASKS

Insights from Psychological Science

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EFPA's Climate Change Policy Asks: Insights from Psychological Science

Two main areas related to the climate crisis are the focus of psychologists. One is the need to address the mental health and well-being impacts on people that result from climate change. The other, particularly relevant for European policy advocacy in the field, is to harness the scientific knowledge and skills of psychology to improve adaptation to the increasing effects of climate change that are now irreversible; and to enhance engagement at individual, community, organisational and wider societal levels in efforts to mitigate climate change.

Human thinking, emotions and behaviour can be studied from different angles and novel and distinct insights thereby obtained. Climate change is a rapidly growing area of academic study and practice in psychology. Research therefore produces new understandings and consequently practice interventions continue to evolve. Psychology therefore has much to offer as humanity continues to work to address the challenges in this field.

Climate related challenges and responses unfold within a diverse European context, where countries differ significantly not only in their climatic conditions but in their socioeconomic conditions, resources, and capacities to meet climate goals. Such differences shape both the psychological impacts of climate change and the feasibility and fairness of proposed solutions, requiring policy approaches that are context and culturally sensitive, and inclusive.

To this end, the science of psychology and psychologists' work in the field make an invaluable contribution to sustainable and fulfilling lifestyles; collective and community level action either adapting now or driving societal transformation; understanding the emotional dimension; provision of mental health support; accountable engagement of organisations; and advocacy and effective communication.

EFPA's policy asks in relation to tackling the climate crisis contribute the scientific evidence base and professional practice of psychology to measures that can enable European society both to adapt to irreversible changes and to adopt measures that can mitigate further negative impact.

1. Starting Point: Sustainability as a New Base

Main Message: Well-being and fulfilment are not dependent solely on material wealth, sustainable lifestyles can provide even greater fulfilment; but transitioning requires cultural and psychological shifts.

Policy Asks:

- 1.1. Embed sustainable well-being in public communications and education campaigns.
- 1.2. Support programmes that measure the impacts of different lifestyle patterns on wellbeing and happiness, and how they impact on sustainability.
- 1.3. Integrate psychological insights into policies promoting sustainability, health and well-being.

2. The Importance of Collective Efficacy: Making a Difference Together

Main Message: Collective and community level action achieves more than individuals acting alone, whether adapting to climate change effects now or driving necessary societal transformation; these are collective and community tasks, the success of which can be enhanced by a shared sense of belonging and collective efficacy.

Policy Asks:

- 2.1. Implement local policies that reduce structural barriers to sustainable behaviour (e.g., transport, energy).
- 2.2. Incorporate the climate justice principles of fairness in community initiatives to ensure access and participation.
- 2.3. Provide incentives for community pro-environmental action that harness shared values, norms and identities; and explicitly address the phenomenon of people underestimating other people's environmental concern which reduces their own individual willingness to participate.
- 2.4. Include metrics in policy frameworks that measure community level environmental action, not just individual behaviour.

Encourage collaboration across community groups, businesses and local / national authorities, to foster a shared sense of responsibility and participation in collective action at the socio-political level to achieve change.

3. Emotions as Important Drivers

Main Message: Both positive and negative emotions play an important role in initiating and sustaining pro-environmental behaviours and actions; cognitive attitudes and values are not the only factor. Nevertheless, fear-based messaging alone is insufficient and may lead to disengagement, paralysis or polarisation.

Policy Asks:

- 3.1. Design public awareness campaigns that harness emotional motivation for pro environmental behaviours in a purposeful and scientifically informed way.
- 3.2. Foster a sense of hope, competence and efficacy in addressing the problem when negative emotions (anger, fear or worry) are evoked.
- 3.3. Fund research into affective drivers of sustainable behaviour for policy-informed interventions.

4. Mental Health and Resilience in the Climate Crisis

Main Message: Climate change impacts mental health both directly (e.g., heat stress) and indirectly (consequences of natural disasters, economic and socio-political pressures) irrespective of those people's political position on the issue. Communities and societies as a whole need to be supported to build resilience, adapting to function effectively in the face of the impacts of climate change. This has double benefits; sense of community and sense of efficacy contribute to both sustained engagement in mitigation efforts and mental health and well-being.

Policy Asks:

- 4.1. Integrate climate-related mental health support into public health planning and policies and monitor psychological health and well-being as part of climate impact assessments.
- 4.2. Strengthen targeted psychosocial support and protection mechanisms for populations disproportionately affected by climate impacts.
- 4.3. Target the changes that individuals need to make, ensuring the desired individual behaviours are realistic, fair, and possible for people to fulfil, so as not to create resistance.
- 4.4. Promote community resilience programmes that strengthen collective coping to improve adaptation and act preventatively for more effective mitigation.
- 4.5. Support policies that reduce structural inequalities and improve access to safe housing, green spaces, healthcare and social protection.
- 4.6. Provide improved access to psychological support services to help people manage the mental health impacts of climate change (both the immediate stress and trauma resulting from the existential threat of extreme events, and long term emotional distress from the psychological impact of environmental degradation and resulting anticipatory anxiety and moral concern).

5. Pro-Environmental Behaviour in an Organisational Context

Main Message: Organisations can significantly shape sustainable behaviour both within the organisation and among the wider public through social responsibility policies, culture, and transparent reporting. Employee environmental engagement is stronger when there is organisational commitment to sustainable values.

Policy Asks:

- 5.1. Encourage public, educational, social and commercial organisations to offer pro-environmental solutions to their customers and to implement them within their own operations.
- 5.2. Promote employee engagement programmes that embed environmental responsibility in workplace culture.
- 5.3. Promote the design and implementation of new technologies and systems, and support employees and local communities in the transition, through socially and culturally appropriate solutions.
- 5.4. Develop and require trustworthy accountability frameworks to prevent greenwashing, that include both measurable emissions reporting and assessment of positive environmental contributions (ecological handprint).

6. Advocating Change: Psychological Strategies for Shaping Effective Climate Policy

Main Message: Psychology can inform systemic and political action, empower communities and guide sustainable policy design.

Policy Asks:

- 6.1. Include psychologists in policy advisory bodies for climate strategy and to help build community empowerment, trust in institutions, realistic hope, and active participation in pro-environmental initiatives.
- 6.2. Only propose changes that are both science-based and high impact behaviours and create the conditions for them to be both politically and economically viable.
- 6.3. Integrate the human cognitive, emotional, motivational and behavioural insights of psychology into a wide range of educational programmes (not just those on sustainability) across the range of educational institutions, especially schools, and all levels of education.
- 6.4. Foster collaboration between scientists, policymakers, civil society organisations and communities to strengthen socially sustainable climate action.
- 6.5. Focus communications on motivating actions that have genuine, not just simulated, real world impact.