European Research Area

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

GILDED

GILDED: Governance, Infrastructure, Lifestyle Dynamics and Energy Demand: European Post-Carbon Communities

Ongoing project

SUMMARY

Objectives of the research

Individuals and households impact on CO2 emissions directly through product and service demands. This research identifies how people in Eastern and Western Europe make sense of energy policies and climate change in relation to their own energy consumption.

Scientific approach / methodology

This policy brief is based on preliminary analysis of qualitative (empirical) research undertaken in a city, its functionally associated rural areas, and a contrasting location in each of five countries across Europe (UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary and the Czech Republic). Over 200 interviews were conducted with a wide range of citizens.

New knowledge and/or European added value

Rather than assuming that climate change and links between energy use and CO2 emissions are well known and accepted by the general public, our research provides in-depth insights into public understanding of energy issues and their own behaviour in the context of global change. In some respects, public understanding seems to be fundamentally different from what is often assumed in policy papers and research articles.

Key messages for policy-makers, businesses, trade unions and civil society actors

Key messages are to policy-makers and civil society actors working to reduce household energy consumption: climate change and energy consumption are viewed as global issues, requiring a clear response primarily at government level. Individuals do not believe their personal actions can impact on climate change if no societal change takes place at the same time, although energy consumption in general is believed to be linked to climate change.

Objectives of the research

GILDED addresses socio-economic, cultural and political influences on individual and household energy consumption, in order to develop policy recommendations to shape a « post-carbon » society. Findings presented here address the following questions:

- How do people make sense of climate change in relation to energy consumption, and their own behaviour in this context?
- Do sustainability and energy security matter to people?
- What do people think should be done about these issues?

Scientific approach / methodology

GILDED takes a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, focusing on field research but also including literature reviews, agent-based modeling and theoretical work. Findings presented in this policy brief are based on the **preliminary analysis** of **qualitative research**.

The data for this policy brief are drawn from five study countries. In each country, qualitative interviews were conducted in a city, its functionally associated rural area, and a contrasting location: Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, and Edinburgh (Scotland); Assen, Assen Municipality, and Amsterdam (the Netherlands); Potsdam and Potsdam-Mittelmark, and Kassel (Germany); Debrecen and Hajdú-Bihar (Hungary); České Budějovice and Budějoviceshire, and Prague (the Czech Republic). This resulted in approximately 45 interviews per country, and over 200 interviews in total.

Interviews were undertaken from June – August 2009. Interview respondents were selected on the basis of diversity of life situation, in order to achieve a highly varied sample. Interviews were generally conducted at respondents' homes, ranging in length from 20 to 60 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured and followed a question guide developed jointly by the team, which addressed the research questions (above). Major themes emerging from each case study were identified by each research team, and circulated to other partners. An on-line discussion was held to discuss these themes, and identify similarities and differences between respondent countries. It is on these preliminary findings that this policy brief is based. Further analysis is underway.

New knowledge and European added value

There is a multitude of studies on public understandings of and concern about climate change in industrialised countries (for an overview see Dietz, Dan & Shwom 2007). The majority of these, typically quantitative studies coincide in the following conclusions:

- The general public tends to have a scientifically inaccurate understanding of climate change, confusing it with other phenomena such as the hole in the ozone layer.
- Concern about climate change is usually ambivalent: while worries about climate change are, albeit vague, often widespread, concerns over social issues are often far stronger.
-

A frequent conclusion is thus that the public needs to be educated. However, the standard 'information deficit' model of citizens, which assumes that the gap between knowledge and behaviour can be filled with ever more detailed information, is well documented as being both simplistic and inaccurate (e.g., Buijs et al. 2008).

On the other hand, many policy instruments and awareness campaigns (as well as research projects) implicitly assume that climate change is now a shared concern, and that, due to the strong presence of climate-related issues in the media, there is a shared understanding of the physical principles of climate change.

There is obviously a great need to clarify the current public views on and understanding of climate change, if policies are to be successful. The component of 'GILDED' research presented here thus set out to better understand how the general public conceptualises climate change, with a special focus on the role of household energy use and carbon emissions. In contrast to many previous studies:

- We chose a qualitative approach that does not take this shared understanding as a given, and allows respondents to describe their views in their own terms.
- We used an interview guideline that avoided the assumption of ubiquitous worry over climate change and any leading questions.
- We conducted our interviews in sites in five very different European countries, and in both Eastern and Western Europe.
- Our interviews specifically addressed people's views on their own behaviour in terms of energy consumption. Respondents were thus implicitly asked to describe how their own behaviours – and those of others - impacted on climate change.

Our study focused on 'social representations' – a form of practical knowledge which helps individuals to make sense of scientific or political terms such as climate change in relation to their own experience, values and knowledge. Understanding how individuals 'socially represent' climate change and energy consumption is an important precondition for successful policy design and implementation.

We found that many respondents defined climate change very differently from how it is generally portrayed in the media. This means that campaigns that build on presumed knowledge of the public (e.g. using concepts such as "carbon footprint") are likely to fail, as citizens might not be able to relate to these concepts as intended.

In addition, while many respondents where not overly concerned about climate change as such, they often expressed great worry over the generally unsustainable way of living in their countries, including their own lifestyles. Many expressed a perceived need for societal change, as the resource use (and resource waste) going on at the current rate was not considered viable long term.

However, this should not simply lead to the conclusion that what is needed is 'more information'. For additional information to be useful, the context in which it is provided needs to be understood to a greater extent. If people find it easier to relate to concepts like sustainability and energy efficiency than climate change, then it is important that any campaigns designed to engage the public in reducing CO2 emissions build on this fact.

Our findings demonstrated broad similarities in the social representation of energy and consumption and climate change across the five case study countries (UK, Czech Republic, Hungary, the Netherlands and Germany) and thus across Eastern and Western Europe. Findings are also similar across urban and rural locations. This suggests that these findings reflect social representations which are European, rather than country specific.

References

Buijs, A. E., Fischer, A., Rink, D. & Young, J. C. (2008): Looking beyond superficial knowledge gaps: Understanding public representations of biodiversity. *International Journal of Biodiversity Science and Management, 4,* 65-80.

Dietz, T., Dan, A., and R. Shwom, 2007. Support for Climate Change Policy: Social Psychological and Social Structural Influences. Rural Sociology 72(2), 185-214.

Key messages for policy-makers, businesses, trade unions and civil society actors

Preliminary findings from this study suggest the following:

When respondents from across Europe think about climate change, they often do so as part of wider thinking about the environment. As a result, climate change and energy consumption are often considered as part of a suite of issues including water and air pollution and waste management. This is portrayed in Figure One. Darker shading indicates stronger public concern.

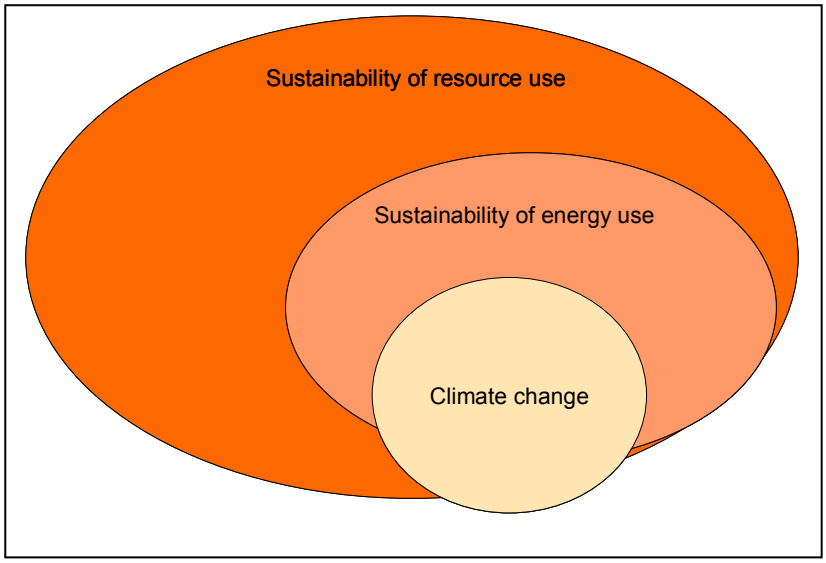

Figure One: Public Conceptualisation of Climate Change as an Issue of (un)Sustainable Resource Use.

Respondents from across Europe might not always have an accurate scientific conception of climate change, but interpret climate change as one phenomenon within a wider problem of sustainable resource use. Although respondents have heard about climate change through the media, their discussion focuses on what they have personally observed, such as extreme or unusual weather events. Some did not agree that climate change was human-induced. However, **respondents widely coincided in their beliefs that societal resource use needs to be more sustainable.**

The overall findings from the qualitative work suggest that **the link between climate change and individual household energy consumption is indirect in the minds of most respondents**. Figure Two demonstrates the key issues and relationships in how respondents view climate change, energy consumption, and how they think it should be addressed. These issues are then elaborated in the subsequent text.

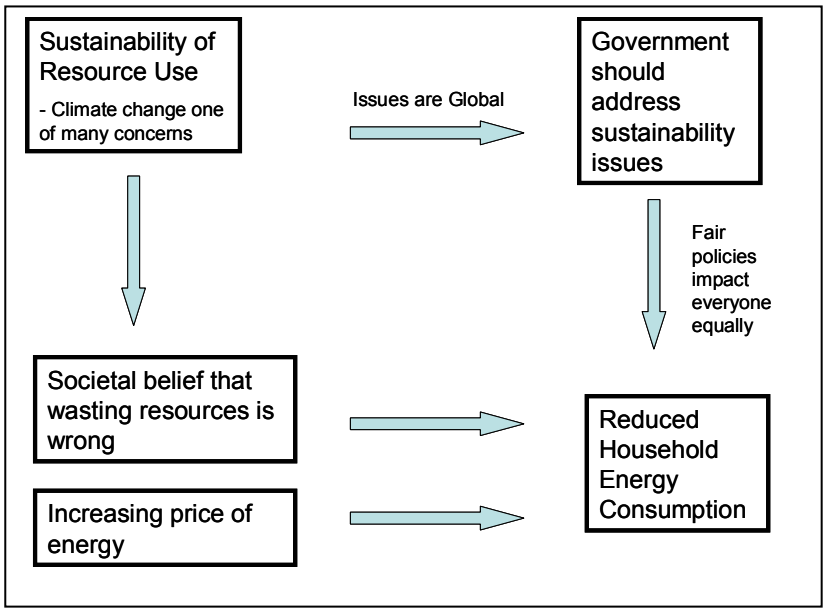

Figure Two: Mind Map of Issues Impacting on Household Energy Use.

Respondents from across Europe view climate change as a global issue. As a result, they believe that **governments (regional, national and European) have the most important role to play in addressing the climate change issue**.

Respondents from across Europe feel powerless in the face of climate change. This reflects a belief that changing the behaviour of a single individual or household will not be effective in addressing a global issue such as climate change, and in many cases, that 'other' people or industries use more energy than they should. Respondents thus largely view their own actions as inconsequential in light of the decisions made by others.

Respondents expressed an urgent need for a clear message and plan from governments about how climate change and energy consumption issues are being addressed. Although there is a preference for economic and practical incentives, many respondents were in favour of top-down action to curb energy use, so that it is 'fair' - impacting on all citizens equally, eliminating the 'free rider effect' associated with voluntary actions.

Views on the links between energy consumption and climate change diverged. A number of our respondents did not see direct links between energy use and climate change, or were not worried about the consequences of climate change. For some, this was because they believed that climate change

problems would occur in the distant future and therefore not directly affect them. Others indicated that the government should do more in terms of education about energy consumption, and promotion of renewable energy.

Respondents from across Europe believe it is important to reduce energy consumption. This reflects both a general belief that it is wrong to waste resources, and the financial cost of energy consumption to households. Both respondents who believed climate change was caused by human action and those who did not, coincided in their view that our lifestyles were inherently unsustainable.

Reducing costs was the most common motive given for taking actions to reduce energy consumption at the household level. Equally, higher costs were a frequent argument why energy-intensive behaviours were not performed. This suggests that **households should not have to increase their costs in order to reduce their energy consumption.**

Respondents from four of the case study sites (in the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) were not concerned about energy security. The exception to this was the Scottish case study, which was set in a regional economy which is highly dependent on the oil industry. The concern about energy security in Aberdeen city and shire (UK) may thus be location specific. There was some concern among respondents generally that energy would become more expensive.

Wealthy people are believed to consume the most energy, because they can afford it. However, there is some evidence that renewable energy generated at the home (e.g. solar panels) are becoming a valued cultural symbol.

Rural/urban differences in energy consumption appear to have more to do with the limitations of existing infrastructure (e.g. sources of energy available) and individual household wealth, than lifestyle-specific patterns.

	PROJECT IDENTITY
Coordinator	Nick Gotts, Macaulay Land Use Research Institute
Consortium	Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research Magyar Tudomanyos Akademia Politikai Tudomanyok Intezete University of Groningen Ustav Systemove Biologie a Ekologie av cr Verejna Vyzkumna Instituce
Duration	December 2008 – November 2011 (36)
Funding Scheme	Theme 8 Socio-economic sciences and Humanities Collaborative Project, Small or medium scale focused research project
Budget	EC contribution: €1426647.00
Website	www.gildedeu.org
Further reading	Dietz, T., Dan, A., and R. Shwom, 2007. Support for Climate Change Policy: Social Psychological and Social Structural Influences. Rural Sociology 72(2), 185-214. Buijs, A. E., Fischer, A., Rink, D. & Young, J. C. (2008): Looking beyond superficial knowledge gaps: Understanding public representations of biodiversity. *International Journal of Biodiversity Science and Management, 4,* 65-80.
Related websites	
For more information	n.gotts@macaulay.ac.uk l.sutherland@macaulay.ac.uk