Breaking habits for a green world

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Breaking habits for a green world

We separate our waste, take shorter showers and there has been an increase in roof-mounted solar panels. Climate psychologist at TU Delft Gerdien de Vries, sees that in the Netherlands we are trying to put our greenest foot forward. Yet according to her, we find it difficult to live wholly sustainably. “Particularly in the area of sustainable consumerism we have a long way to go. We continue to use unsustainable packaging, our meat consumption has risen once more and we are still happy to book flights to go on holiday. Our choices may sometimes be led by financial considerations, but most of all we find it difficult to break habits.”

Green behaviour

As a climate psychologist, De Vries studies climate-related issues – such as the energy transition and reducing carbon emissions – from a behavioural perspective. “We know that the climate is changing because of human behaviour, so we could also have a positive effect on climate change, through green behaviour. for example. This is not just behaviour by ordinary citizens, but also governmental bodies, politicians, businesses, science and the media. These factors also influence each other: journalists can initiate a social debate, the government can direct behaviour through policy and citizens in turn can influence the political agenda. I find the interaction between all these players fascinating, particularly as this is a topic that affects us all. Many sustainability dilemmas are familiar; I too am a typical Dutch person who struggles with making conscious choices.”

From knowledge to application

De Vries obtained her PhD at Leiden University as a psychologist in the field of climate and energy. For her doctoral thesis, she investigated how the framing of climate policy influences support for sustainability measures and green behaviour. “I wanted to translate this knowledge into practical applications, such as in policy. The question always asked of research at TU Delft is: What can we do with it? This approach really appeals to me, which is why I decided to send an open job application in 2015.” She was offered a job and is presently working as a researcher and assistant professor.
Bringing disciplines together

In Delft, De Vries brings her own specialisation together with other research disciplines such as technology, policy, management and communication in order to bring about the most effective possible transition to a greener world. “Besides a psychological angle, behavioural change also has technological, financial and administrative aspects. If you want to make the energy supply green, it not only has to be technically and financially feasible, you must also have the support of politicians and citizens. If citizens are not enthusiastic about carbon storage or geothermal energy, or if they want a solution that will be very expensive, the chance of success is small. TU Delft has broad expertise in areas such as civil engineering, technology, policy and management and mathematical modelling, to which I am adding psychology.”

TPM Energy Transition Lab

The recently established TPM Energy Transition Lab, which is led by De Vries, is one of the places where different disciplines come together. “The TPM Lab is an experimental lab for ‘risky research’. Research may be risky if it is innovative or outside the box, or if there are too many uncertainties surrounding it. In the lab we are conducting research into green behaviour in the long term, for example, and that is hard to predict. It is difficult for us to imagine what our lives will look like in twenty years’ time, and we don’t know what changes await us. In the lab we are trying to assign the right values to the future, using mathematical modelling among other things, with the aim of developing new methods and tools for an effective and fair energy transition.”

Human behaviour patterns

To study long-term green behaviour, the researchers can draw on their knowledge about short-term behaviour, says De Vries. “Human behaviour shows many corresponding patterns. Take our actions for example: they are not always in line with what we want to do, because a change is less comfortable or costs a lot of money. And besides this, we are sensitive to our surroundings. We
don't want to be seen as holier-than-thou if other people are not prepared to change too. Furthermore, we often reward good behaviour with other bad habits, such as continuing to fly because we eat less meat, while we shouldn't really be flying or eating meat. But that's just the way our brain works.”

**Sharing knowledge and insight**

‘De Vries shares the behavioural insights that she garners as a climate psychologist on the government platform [Behavioural Insights Network Netherlands](https://www.behaviouralinsightsnetwork.nl) and the international [IEA Energy Sector Behavioural Insights Platform](https://www.iea-behaviouralinsights.org). De Vries: “The government can help its citizens to change their behaviour, but sometimes a scheme can be so complicated that people just give up. Take the subsidy scheme for solar panels, for example. By automatically filling in some details the way it’s done on tax forms, for example details on energy consumption, you make it easier and less time-consuming to apply for a subsidy. This kind of gentle encouragement in the right direction is known as nudging, although what works in one situation will not necessarily work elsewhere. But sharing knowledge enables us to learn from each other.”

**Green nudges with no hassle**

According to De Vries, the Dutch government has got much better at nudging in recent years. “A website like [‘Iedereen doet wat’](https://www.iedereendoetwat.nl) (‘Everyone does their bit’) gives achievable tips, such as radiator reflectors to reduce heat loss, or using a shower timer. You shouldn't overwhelm people with measures but help them in the right direction step by step without too much hassle. That hassle is something I also experience sometimes. For example under the TU Delft mobility programme I could buy an e-bike as alternative for using a car, but registering, picking up the bike and working out where to park it was so complicated that I gave up. Governments and organisations need to be aware of all the hassles and remove unnecessary obstacles.”

**Personal struggles**

To take topics such as climate and energy out of academia and into real life, De Vries makes [blogs](https://www.natuurwetenschap.nl) and [vlogs](https://www.youtube.com) about her own experiences and dilemmas. “The great thing about my work is that I am both researcher and study subject. I may be a climate psychologist, but I'm also a ‘typical Dutch person’. I try to make conscious choices, but I don't always succeed. I fly less, and I eat less meat, but at the end of a cold day with plenty of setbacks, there's nothing I want more than to take a good hot shower. And I want to continue to meet my colleagues at international conferences, so I can't see that I will stop flying completely. But it helps enormously if you can recognise your own choice and behaviour patterns. Then your standards adapt automatically.”