

WHO'LL PAY TO SAVE THE PLANET?

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"I live on benefits. What can I do about climate change?" The comment comes from Germany, but it was echoed across the continent during an unprecedented listening exercise commissioned by a philanthropic consortium led by the King Baudouin Foundation. The aim: to sound out Europe's most disadvantaged citizens on the challenges of weaning our economies off coal, oil and gas to protect the planet and develop recommendations for fairer energy transition policies.

The remark underscores the challenge facing governments that are committed to raising vast sums to move toward renewable energies while substantial sections of society can already barely afford to heat their homes or maintain mobility, not least since fuel price inflation has rocketed in the wake of the war in Ukraine.

More than 900 vulnerable people took part in focus groups across nine EU countries as part of the KBF-led project, Fair Energy Transition for All, or FETA.¹

Hearing directly of their hopes, fears and difficulties has provided the foundation for policy recommendations which aim to ensure that Europe's drive to cut carbon secures broad social backing.

¹ For the purposes of this project, the term 'vulnerable people' refers to those groups who are socially or economically disadvantaged and whose interests are often not sufficiently represented in political debates. This includes unemployed people, low income earners, single parents, young people or elderly citizens as well as workers threatened with the loss of their jobs due to increasing regulations on energy-intensive industries. These groups tend to suffer the negative effects of environmental policies far more than others and are excluded from most of the benefits.

The high-profile setback for the French government's climate strategy prompted the search for a new approach. Indeed, the *"Gilets Jaunes"* ('yellow vest') protests erupted in France in 2018 over an increase in fuel duty. The tax was meant to help reduce emissions, but it caused hardship for people on tight budgets – and in the end the protesters forced the government to abandon it. Coming up with climate-saving measures that can avoid a grass-roots backlash as it happened in France is precisely the goal of FETA. The focus group findings pave the way for EU and national policy recommendations due this fall in November.² The survey confirmed some expectations, but also highlighted vital nuances.

DEMAND FOR FAIRNESS

The survey finds out very few profiles of 'climate sceptics' during the focus groups. Most vulnerable people believe that the climate is changing and that something needs to be done.

The focus groups also revealed some willingness to take a little more economic pain, especially if it fairly benefits all – notably future generations. Many are already cutting energy use – albeit mainly for reasons of personal economy than global ecology.

Yet, against a background of widening inequalities in Europe, participants from the Netherlands, to Spain, to Bulgaria, voiced a profound mistrust of politicians. Many felt their modest consumerism meant that others – big business or wealthier compatriots – should bear costs, not themselves: *"Why should I, when all those big firms are polluting the environment without paying a penny?"* said the German welfare claimant quoted above.

The policy experts must take account of differences across groups and countries: habits of frugality among the old, for example, and enthusiasm for technological fixes among the young; or Poles' post-communist determination to retain personal choice contrasted with a preference among the Danes for more collective measures.

To be factored in, too, are obstacles to change such as rented accommodation, that limits incentives to

² To get more information, please consult: www.fair-energy-transition.eu.



insulate homes or a lack of alternatives in rural areas to private cars and heavy agricultural machinery. Taking aim at urbanites' new embrace of the bicycle,

one Spanish farmer fumed: "You can't run a tractor on pedal-power."

UNHEARD VOICES

At the initiative of the King Baudouin Foundation and with the support of five other philanthropic institutions - the Open Society European Policy Institute/OSF, the Mercator Stiftung, IKEA Foundation, the Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt and the Fondazione Cariplo - focus groups were held over the past year in Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland.

FETA experts distilled focus group responders into six broad personae³ :

The Truster

Aida, 35,
wants a state-led transition:
"If the government helped people change their old appliances for more energy-efficient ones, then we could go a long way. But nobody wants to pay for it, so..."



Simple Life

Arlette, 70,
worries she'll have to use new technology: *"We should get back to the simple life we lived before. One can live simply and be happy. Learn from the past without nostalgia."*



The People Person

Nora, 40,
says the transition must bring communities together:
"If even one person is left behind, it's not fair."



The Threatened

Zofia, 46,
worries about affording care for her family: *"Industry, technology, more cars... We buy more things, so there is more waste. Always something new, always something different. It's a disease of humanity."*



The Powerless

Osman, 28,
a recent immigrant, says transition is for the rich: *"We're very much outsiders: it's hard to rent a home or find work. They give us crumbs, but they don't give us the resources to be autonomous."*



The Next Generation

Ayoub, 37,
cares about his children's future:
"Saving energy is a good thing, but I don't want to limit my kids by cooking less or telling them to take a cold shower."



³ Names and quotes are created to represent a variety of responses.