



Transcript of the podcast 'All change please!': How do we get society on board with climate policy?

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Introduction

Mandy Schossig:

Hello everyone, great to have you with us for this last episode of our 'All change please!' podcast for this year. To end the season, we've chosen a topic that affects us all. Today, we want to take a look at ourselves from a social perspective and see how motivated we are for climate protection and sustainable action as a whole. As we record this episode today, there was an election in the USA about a week ago. And I have to admit, I was surprised by the outcome. I was definitely shocked, because climate protection seems to be playing an increasingly minor role in the USA.

And, of course, you ask yourself: Why is that the case? And in Germany as well? A general election in February has been announced here. The months ahead will show how important the issue is for people. And to be honest, I'm already a little worried. Have people realised that we need climate protection to survive on this planet?

And why is there so much resistance when it comes to climate protection measures? What drives people? These are the kinds of questions we want to discuss and clarify today. I'm Mandy Schossig, Head of the Communications Department at Oeko-Institut, and I'm joined once again by Hannah Oldenburg, our Social Media Expert and the editor of our podcast. Hello Hannah!

Hannah Oldenburg:

Hi Mandy! It's nice to be back. Yes, I was also shocked by the election results, to be honest, not to mention the collapse of Germany's coalition government. I have to say, as an optimist, I was probably hoping for a different result right up to the end. But it's all the more important that we look ahead, that we look at why society seems to be so divided and how we can ensure that climate protection can be seen as a positive. Because that's certainly not possible without political actors taking action. But I think we'll get to that in a moment.

Mandy Schossig:

Yes, definitely. I've invited Dirk Arne Heyen to answer our many questions on this topic. Dirk is a Senior Researcher in the Environmental Law and Governance Division and is sitting here in the studio with us today because, like us, he works in our Berlin office. Dirk is a political scientist who researches and advises on social aspects of environmental and climate policy, among other things. Hello Dirk, nice to have you here!

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Hello Mandy, hello Hannah! It's nice to be here.

Hannah Oldenburg:

Hello Dirk! Not many colleagues have taken the stage at a science slam in the past to explain complex topics like climate policy. But you've done it a few times now. Tell us briefly about your past slamming career.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

The science slams are about presenting a scientific topic to a broad, non-scientific audience in ten minutes in a way that is as entertaining and funny as possible. I did that for a while in 2019/2020 with a topic that isn't super popular to begin with – namely sufficiency, that is climate-friendly

behaviour such as flying less, eating less meat and why we need these sufficiency measures and policy instruments for them.

I think bringing that across in an entertaining and funny way worked quite well. Whoever wants to can find [videos on YouTube](#). But you also have to say, as I said, I was active in 2019/2020 – a time that was a bit of a heyday for the climate protection movement and the big Fridays for Future demos. And yes, who knows if I were to do the science slam again today, would the audience reactions be a bit different than back then?

Mandy Schossig:

We hope not. Luckily, we have more than ten minutes today to tackle this topic. One more question: We have many colleagues, who we've already interviewed, who have a niche topic and very niche expert knowledge, while you often take a broad view of climate protection and society in your research. Can you tell us what you do as a political scientist at Oeko-Institut?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, that's a fair question, because most of my colleagues studied the natural sciences or technical environmental protection. When I came to the institute, I thought: Okay, as a political scientist, I'm the one who deals with policy instruments. But then I quickly realised that my colleagues were also very familiar with policy instruments in their respective subject areas. And that's how I ended up dealing with cross-cutting political and social issues such as: How does social change work, what framework conditions are needed for sustainable consumption? What are social justice issues? What about the acceptance of climate and environmental policy?

Mandy Schossig:

Exciting topics. And one of them is also on our minds today. Before we delve deeper into it, let's get everyone on board with a brief overview of today's topic.

Sound clip: brief subject overview

We are all needed on the path to a climate-friendly and therefore liveable future. It's not just the economy that needs to produce sustainably and make more durable products available; politicians also need to implement measures and create important framework conditions. But consumers also need to adapt to changes. For climate protection to succeed in all areas of life, all stakeholders and actors need to get on board. According to a recent study, two thirds of German citizens are concerned about the possible consequences of climate change. The majority expect that their way of life will be forced to change as a result. But what about the willingness for climate protection in society, if your own house is to be renovated to make it more energy-efficient or the car park in front of your door is to be replaced with bicycle parking spaces, resistance can crystallise. Why is that the case? What stands in the way of acceptance in society? How do we achieve acceptance and motivation for climate protection in order to advance the transformation in all necessary areas?

Hannah Oldenburg:

Okay, here are some more questions we want to clarify today. We have just heard that a majority of Germans are concerned about the consequences of climate change. They are probably also concerned about the costs of change. Can you bring us up to date there? What's the mood like in Germany right now? How do we as a society view climate protection?

How society views climate protection

Dirk Arne Heyen:

The answers depend a little on how you ask the questions. If you ask about priorities, then climate protection has lost its place in the list of priorities. There was a time when it was the number one issue. If you asked: What's the most important problem that politicians should address? If you ask that question now, it tends to be other issues such as migration, war, peace or the economy and jobs. But it's still one of the top four priorities that people name. And if you ask specifically about climate change and climate protection, how important is it to people? Then you realise that it's still very important to a large majority of people. At the beginning of the year, for example, there was a study published by the Ebert Foundation, which asked how important the issue of climate change is to people. You could answer on a scale of 0 to 10, from 'not at all important' to 'super important'. And almost two thirds of people gave it a score of 8, 9 or 10.

So it's really important to people. In that sense, it is still an important topic, but it has slipped down the list of priorities, it has to be said.

Mandy Schossig:

Would you say these figures also show that the issue has socially "arrived"? At least one political party in Germany is always saying that climate change doesn't really exist and that we don't need to do anything about it.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, I think the figures show that the vast majority of the population really do think the issue is important. The issue has been recognised and people see a need for action, especially in politics and business, but also from themselves. However, we also see that general approval of climate protection does not necessarily mean approval of specific climate policy measures. And we also see a certain degree of polarisation. This has increased recently when it comes to the question of whether people are moving too fast or too slow when it comes to climate protection.

Hannah Oldenburg:

I'm sure we'll come back to the subject of polarisation in a moment. I'd still be interested in this question: If it's recognised that climate protection measures are needed, do people also feel jointly responsible for the climate crisis?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, but not primarily. They see the economy and politics as primarily responsible. However, the confidence in politicians to actually find solutions has declined in recent years. You don't see yourself as being primarily responsible, but you also see yourself as being responsible for doing more or at least as much as before.

Polarisation in society

Mandy Schossig:

You've already used the keyword 'polarisation'. What do we mean by polarisation when it comes to debates about climate and environmental protection?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Polarisation initially means that there are opposing attitudes, in terms of content and along certain socio-structural characteristics, between different income groups or according to level of education. If that's the case, the conflict effect also increases. And we have what is called affective polarisation. What is my attitude towards people who think differently?

If you ask people about climate protection in general, polarisation is rather low. This is also shown by the [Trigger Point Study by Steffen Mau](#) and others. But if you ask more specific questions or formulate the questions differently, it's also different. Is climate protection moving too quickly or too slowly? Is the German government putting too much or too little effort into it? We can see that one third of people say that things are going too slowly for them. But a quarter of people also say it's going too fast. And that's an example of polarisation.

What worries me more is the keyword 'affective polarisation'. There was a study by TU Dresden published last year that showed that climate protection is one of the most polarised topics in this regard. People have relatively strongly negative, even emotionally-charged attitudes towards people with other positions.

Mandy Schossig:

And what exactly are the issues when it comes to climate protection? You've already said that it's seen as happening too quickly, too slowly. What are the trigger points?

Trigger points for climate issues

Dirk Arne Heyen:

A few years ago, climate protection was the central issue, especially in the electricity sector, with the energy transition and the increasing generation of green electricity. That didn't affect people so directly because electricity was still coming out of the socket. And now climate protection is also increasingly being addressed in areas that affect people's everyday lives.

It's also said that climate protection has arrived on people's plates and in their basements, i.e. in their boiler rooms and in the transport sector. And this is where different interests and sometimes different values and identities clash. And such topics are then prone to polarised debates.

Hannah Oldenburg:

The data in the trigger point study by Steffen Mau that you mentioned was collected in 2021. Since then, there may even have been a few more crises. And now you've just said that there is this polarisation. Do you think that if the study were conducted again today, it would be even worse or how would you assess it?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

You can't say it's any worse, because the study at the time found that the polarisation is not as great as it is publicly perceived, that there is a relatively broad consensus in society when it comes to climate protection. In my opinion, however, that was also due to the questions being asked and the rather general statements on climate protection that were requested. I believe that the data would have been a little different even back then if the questions had been about whether it was happening

too quickly, too slowly or if they had focused on specific measures. I actually believe that if you asked the same questions again today, you would see a bit more polarisation on such aspects.

Mandy Schossig:

Okay, then we now have a good finding. We would like to take another look behind the scenes and look at the causes of this polarisation. What leads to it? What are the fears or concerns behind it? What would you say?

Causes of polarisation

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Firstly, the point I just made that climate protection has a greater impact on people's everyday lives, is more tangible and requires changes in habits. I think that makes us vulnerable. These are aspects that are susceptible to defence reactions or resistance. And I mean the crises of recent years, even if not directly. Even if many of the crises are not directly related to climate protection, they are favourable framework conditions that reinforce people's concerns and make them cling to preserving what they are used to. And in the area of climate protection, people don't need or want major changes or great uncertainty. I believe that people's willingness and enthusiasm for change has suffered as a result.

Hannah Oldenburg:

So, are there fears behind it?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, I believe that general concerns about the future have increased and that the framework conditions for climate protection are making it more difficult. And then there are also very specific concerns that directly affect climate protection. The issue of affordability was already by far the main concern of people in studies before the war in Ukraine and the energy price crisis. And that's intensified since then. Now, in recent weeks and months, the issue of economic development and jobs has been added to this.

Mandy Schossig:

Yes, we would like to look at one topic again as an example. A lot has already been said about it, but let's break it down a little more. In this context of trigger points, let's talk about the German heating law: what went wrong there? Why has the issue been so polarising?

The example of the German heating law

Dirk Arne Heyen:

I don't think we could have predicted the enormous extent of the media debate, but we could have been better prepared. And we could have expected that something like the Building Energy Act [known colloquially as the Heating Act], which affects one's immediate surroundings and a basic need of people, the need for warmth, would have a certain potential for resistance if we wanted to tackle it with quite clear requirements and also larger investments. Some of the figures circulating

were abstruse. But so as not to be misunderstood we need something like the Heating Act, we need to get away from oil and gas heating. But I think we should have prepared better strategically.

Mandy Schossig:

Would you say that the trigger point was a lack of information or a lack of preparation in terms of time? What was the decisive factor that led to this outcry? Apart from the fact that there was definitely also a media campaign led by opponents of this law.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Exactly. If you relate this to these trigger points, we can see that the law affects things, namely oil and gas heating systems, which were the norm for decades and, with the heat pump, promotes a technology that makes total sense but was largely unknown to the population. And this at a time when, on the one hand, the war in Ukraine and the energy price crisis were arguments in favour of a greater dependence on Russian gas, but on the other hand, there was a time of very sharp rises in energy prices and generally high inflation. And when you come up with a measure that requires certain investments, you could have done a lot better.

Mandy Schossig:

And what precisely? That's always the big question, which is much easier to answer in hindsight. But what could have been done better?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, a bit too late now, but for the next heating law or something similar. For this lack of information, the heat pump as an unknown technology: in this case, there needed to be an information campaign conducted in advance of the draft legislation. There are many information campaigns where I sometimes wonder what the purpose is. But in this case, it really would have been appropriate. And above all, six months earlier, in the summer of 2022, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy ran a major information campaign on saving energy. That was 80 million for energy saving. And that was all about saving energy, so the heat pump really could have been included.

We also needed to hear concrete figures, examples of calculations, positive examples from people's everyday lives. Where do heat pumps also work in old buildings? In the Scandinavian countries, heat pumps are already standard, even though winters are colder there than in Germany, how can you calculate how quickly they amortise in different types of buildings? Figures would have been needed to provide the serious media with figures to counter the sometimes abstruse figures used in the counter-campaign.

And what was fatal in hindsight is that this draft bill, which set out the requirements, was circulated – OK, it was leaked, that wasn't planned – but perhaps the coalition could have taken it into account, as we had in the past, so to speak. This draft bill should not have been allowed to circulate without being able to talk about the funding framework, i.e. the funding conditions, which should be as socially differentiated as possible.

Hannah Oldenburg:

Well, we've already talked a few times about what consumers need to do and that we need them for climate protection. We need these big levers above all, we need changes in industry and instruments

like emissions trading. Do we even need the individual people? Or aren't these big instruments enough, which achieve much more?

We need all stakeholders and various measures

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes and no. Above all, we need these major instruments such as emissions trading as framework conditions that affect the major economic stakeholders. But all stakeholders are ultimately needed in climate protection. Both production and consumption are responsible for the CO₂ emissions that we have and that cause climate change. We have these major instruments like emissions trading. In the relevant areas of the energy sector and energy-intensive industry, we have achieved relatively large emission savings in recent years in areas that are still a problem. These tend to be the transport and building sectors. And that's where economic players are also needed, such as the housing industry or the automotive industry in terms of the transition to green propulsion systems, but it's also the consumers' decisions that count here, whether they renovate their buildings, what heating they buy and how they get around.

That's why all stakeholders are needed and we also need all types of measures, not just the measures that are straightforward, such as more advice, more information, financial support, which are usually met with great approval, but we also need so-called push measures. We need price incentives and regulatory requirements that set certain framework conditions for citizens.

Mandy Schossig:

Yes, and with regard to these price instruments specifically, does that mean that prices for certain things rise to make them less attractive because they are harmful to the climate? And this may then affect us directly because things become more expensive. Is that a good idea? You've just said that they don't meet with much approval. So why do we need them anyway? I'm thinking of the general election in Germany and the election campaign. Okay, that's a special situation, but why do we need them anyway?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

If it were up to some political stakeholders, then we would only rely on price instruments. The conservative political parties in particular are putting a lot of faith in the carbon price. That, in turn, would also be problematic.

Consumer research shows that information alone does not bring about sufficient changes in behaviour or investments in climate-friendly technologies. And if we assume that we cannot achieve this with financial support alone and that we may not be able to afford it in terms of public spending, then we also need price signals. They signal the following: OK, CO₂ is becoming more expensive and there is a clear financial incentive and financial incentives tend to work well. Then we also need such measures.

But ultimately it depends on the combination of measures. It is also clear that simply increasing the carbon price or making such things more expensive is not enough. For both effective climate protection and social acceptance, we need a mix of measures that combines such pricing instruments or regulatory law with measures that affect economic players, with supporting measures, with advice, with financial support, also with measures that strengthen people's options for action,

that make the relevant infrastructure more attractive, that expand local transport. That's also clear when we look at carbon pricing. We need to pay more attention to the social structure.

Hannah Oldenburg:

Well, that's a good link back to our initial question. Now we have the instrument mix. We know that we need all kinds of instruments. We need not only industry, but also individual consumers for successful climate protection. The only question now is: how do we shape this climate policy so that everyone really gets on board? How do we gain acceptance and motivation for sustainable action?

Acceptance factors for climate policy measures

Dirk Arne Heyen:

There are various starting points. With a colleague, I recently provided a summary of social science acceptance research on what is known about factors influencing the social approval of individual climate policy measures. And we have clustered these factors into three points.

One is the design of measures. The second is the communication of measures. And then there are a few aspects of the approach of political stakeholders. My central point is probably the design, and here the afore-mentioned mix of measures is a key point. Studies also show that such packages of measures, in which price and regulatory instruments are embedded in promotional measures, meet with greater approval than individual push measures. The studies also show that people's assessment of the fairness of individual climate policy measures is a key factor in their overall approval of the instrument.

Mandy Schossig:

Then let's stick with these points. We'll go through the three factors you mentioned. What does social organisation precisely mean? What needs to happen so that there isn't so much resistance?

Social aspects

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, that's a good question. And it's not possible to give a general answer to what social justice is, because people can have different ideas about justice. But what we do know is that the issue of affordability is of central importance to people. And if you then dig deeper and ask: OK, what distribution of costs and benefits is fair for people? Is it fair if it is distributed equally for everyone? Or is it distributed strictly according to the polluter pays principle, i.e. whomever pollutes, pays? Or is it decided according to the ability to pay or the other way round, i.e. people's need for financial support? Then you don't get the same answer from everyone.

But people tend to attach more importance to this aspect of meeting financial needs. So, what support do people need to cope with rising prices, for example, or to behave in a climate-friendly way? And it's clear that certain population groups, for example low-income households, need more support than was previously the case.

Hannah Oldenburg:

How do you determine that? Who is considered a low-income household? Where do you draw the line and then apply this social stratification?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Households are usually divided into different income targets, i.e. income groups. The lowest ten percent of earners and the highest ten percent and so on. I don't think there is a fixed boundary here. Rather, you have to determine which groups are subsidised or possibly subsidised in different proportions depending on the measure. When subsidising the replacement of heating systems, there is a so-called 'income bonus' for everyone with a household income of less than 40,000 Euro. This means that there is a 30 percent basic subsidy for everyone. And then there is a further 30 percent extra subsidy for households below this income limit of 40,000 Euro. If you look at the subsidy programme for replacing heating systems in Austria, things are done a little differently. The funding is focused on the 30 percent with the lowest income. Only they receive a subsidy, but the subsidy is larger – in some cases, up to 100 percent in the lowest income group.

Mandy Schossig:

And are there other factors besides income that play a role?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

If you think about larger investments, such as renovating a building, replacing the heating system or buying an electric car, they are of course things not paid for from current income, but rather from savings or possibly inherited assets. Thus, assets are also a relevant category, at least for these larger investments. The problem here is that the data on people's assets is not as good as the data on income since the wealth tax was suspended. Getting that data involves bureaucratic effort; and the question of controllability is relevant.

The question of whether someone lives in the city or in the country can also, of course, be relevant. Especially in the transport sector. The extent to which you are dependent on a car, and here again we have the case in Austria, where there is already a kind of climate money, namely the so-called 'climate bonus'. In addition to the basic amount, which is the same for everyone, there is also a component that depends on how well the region or municipality is connected to local public transport.

Hannah Oldenburg:

You've just mentioned transport. Can you give a few more examples? In what areas of life do we need climate protection measures that also have this social dimension? Where is this particularly important?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

I think it is particularly important where people's basic needs are affected, i.e. energy, heat, food and transport – to work, to the doctor, to the shops.

Mandy Schossig:

OK, in all these topics you've just mentioned: housing, transport and so on: what is not yet social? What would you say are the sticking points that can be addressed?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

In principle, these are all instruments that make energy more expensive, especially electricity and heat, and therefore also the carbon price. That's what I said about price signals: they're basically correct and important, but without accompanying measures they place a proportionately greater burden on households in lower income groups. This means that these households spend a larger proportion of their income on energy, food or housing. And if you then make energy more expensive, for example, it affects these income groups more.

This means that accompanying measures are needed to prevent this. However, we have to realise that the accompanying measures or financial support measures we have to date are not particularly socially-orientated. This is also true of many environmentally-harmful subsidies that we should reform for environmental reasons, like the tax benefits for company cars.

Unfortunately, this also applies to many climate policy support measures, from the promotion of renewable energies to the promotion of solar storage and charging stations for electric cars, i.e. private charging stations for electric cars or building refurbishment. In all of these measures in recent years, households with above-average incomes have benefited because they have the money they need to make these investments. To a certain extent, it was also understandable that this was done in the first instance because we wanted to create a certain momentum and subsidise the people who are also willing to be subsidised. But now we have a situation in which we want everyone to get involved in climate protection and in which we have carbon pricing that affects everyone. And that's why we now have to pay more attention to a socially orientated design of instruments.

Hannah Oldenburg:

OK, so we need to tackle that again and reallocate the funds. Is there also a positive example where something is already going well that we can use as a guide?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, I mentioned the example of the 30 percent income-based bonus for replacing heating systems. To date, however, that only applies to replacing heating systems. In principle, something like that would also be needed for building refurbishment. Or, to take an example outside the building sector: France has a very exciting measure in its transport sector. It's called social leasing from the buyer's premium for electric cars. It was abolished just under a year ago but is now being discussed again. We have a situation in Germany in which high-income households in particular have bought an electric car, possibly even a second car. The instrument has largely bypassed low-income households to date.

And what France has now done is to offer low-income households that commute to work by car the opportunity to lease electric cars at a monthly leasing rate that is subsidised by the government, which has a climate component, namely a dedicated subsidy for small climate-friendly cars.

Mandy Schossig:

Yes, it's good that you give this example, because I've been wondering all along: replacing heating systems, the buyer's premium – these are all measures for people with more income or more assets. How can we win over the people for whom money is tight at the end of the month? And they understandably have concerns other than climate protection. Are there a few more ideas for which we can say: OK, we can also target these people in particular?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, we are probably talking about households or people who are primarily concerned with financial aspects. What do they have left over at the end of the month, how much does a climate policy measure cost? And in this sense, ultimately only the financial argument counts for them, the monetary effect, so to speak. You can't come up with other benefits of climate protection measures such as cleaner air in the street by your house, even if it is relevant. We have to support these population groups more and, if possible, not just through compensation. Along the lines of: now energy prices are rising, we'll give you more money so that you can offset this and still pay for it. That may be necessary in the short term, especially in the event of price shocks, but then not much is gained in terms of energy consumption.

That's why we must first and foremost take measures to tackle the structural causes of people being trapped in what we call a 'carbon lock-in'.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

The unrenovated buildings, the old oil heating system, the old car that people need because there's no public transport. In other words, measures that reduce energy consumption and energy costs and therefore have both climate policy and socio-political benefits.

Mandy Schossig:

In other words, these are measures that do not directly affect people, but work on a completely different level.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

We need appropriate infrastructures. Wherever possible, we need municipal heating networks that will be operated without giving rise to CO₂ emissions in the future. We need well-developed local public transport. But we also need funding programmes that focus specifically on social housing. And we also need support programmes that target individual car owners and homeowners to enable them to make the investments that will get them out of this carbon lock-in.

Hannah Oldenburg:

Okay, then I have another question about a fairly well-known instrument, the climate premium (*Klimageld*). Everyone has probably heard of it. Is this the saviour when it comes to socially responsible climate protection and acceptance?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

The climate premium is certainly a building block, but the expectations placed on it in areas of politics and civil society in terms of the social compatibility and acceptance of climate protection are too high and I don't think it can fulfil them. To explain it again: the idea behind the climate premium is that we use the revenue from carbon pricing and redistribute it to the population. That's what was discussed most of the time. We give the same amount back to everyone. This means that people who bring about fewer CO₂ emissions are ultimately better off than without carbon pricing and climate premium and those who bring about more CO₂ emissions due to higher energy consumption are worse off.

And now it's the case that households in the lower income groups tend to have lower CO₂ emissions and would therefore benefit on average from the climate premium. However, this does not change the fact that there are also households that have high CO₂ emissions because they live in poorly insulated buildings or have an old oil heating system or both or they're dependent on their old car

with a combustion engine and cannot afford a new one, and that ultimately the climate premium is not enough to compensate for the additional costs of rising carbon prices.

This means that further measures are needed in addition to the climate premium. The latter helps to cover the rising everyday costs of the electricity bill. But the climate premium does not help with major investments such as building refurbishment.

Hannah Oldenburg:

OK, we've now talked a lot about the design and the various support measures and how this needs to be organised socially. The second factor you mentioned is communication. How should climate measures be communicated in the best possible way so that we gain acceptance in society?

The communication of climate protection measures

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Two things are important here. Firstly, as we have already discussed with the German Heating Act, information needs to be provided at an early stage and be easy to understand. And if the measures affect people's everyday lives, the information needs to be practical. We need examples of households that already have a heat pump. We need sample calculations for various standard building situations. It needs real positive examples – whether from people who already have a heat pump or positive examples in which such instruments are already working abroad and in which the heat pump is standard. This makes us less susceptible to fake news and disinformation from the relevant players.

And in connection with this, the benefits beyond climate protection also need to be highlighted. These can be monetary effects, i.e. long-term savings. They can also be health aspects, quality of life aspects. It then depends on which field of action or measure we are talking about and which concerns and priorities are present in the social debate.

Mandy Schossig:

And who is responsible for this communication? Who communicates and who is believed?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

We can see that trust in politics has declined in recent years. That makes it all the more important that communication is carried out by a broad alliance of players. What do I mean by that? To give you an example: four years ago, there was an alliance for a general speed limit on German motorways. The alliance consisted of environmental associations, the North Rhine-Westphalia police union and a traffic accident assistance association. These are actors that appeal to other population groups, have a different credibility than political actors or environmental organisations, and are possibly more trusted. Alliances of climate policy actors with trade unions, social organisations, tenants' associations or tradespeople.

Mandy Schossig:

A little fun fact: a colleague told me last week that people seem to place more trust in professional groups that wear uniforms. I found that really interesting. Did you know that?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes. However, there are no surveys relating to climate protection: what stakeholder groups are trusted the most? I think the fire service is in first place by default.

Mandy Schossig:

Fire brigade, police, doctors who are on board for climate protection.

Hannah Oldenburg:

The next campaign, then, needs to be with doctors.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Also a great example of the health consequences of climate change. I believe that there is still potential in the medical associations.

Hannah Oldenburg:

So, we know that it also depends on who is communicating. What about timing? Can we learn something from that? I'm thinking of our example of the Heating Act. We learnt that early communication and information would have been important. Are there any suggestions as to how or when it would be best to communicate such upcoming changes?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Of course, there are more favourable and less favourable framework conditions for making climate policy proposals. Some studies show that with favourable framework conditions, climate protection can be a major priority and a major topic of consensus, as it was in 2019 at the height of Fridays for Future. That was a favourable time. The following year saw the judgement of Germany's Federal Constitutional Court. As a result, CO₂ pricing was introduced. There are favourable framework conditions, but you can't choose the framework conditions. Germany's coalition government had to deal with the framework conditions it had and it would probably not have been an option to significantly postpone the Heating Act. The pressure to act is too great for that. But if the framework conditions are not the most favourable, you have to be all the more prepared for such media debates.

Mandy Schossig:

And the laws don't just pop out of the ground. You already know that you want to deal with it and then you should start early and say: 'Okay, we're starting the legislative process now, but then we'll also start preventive communication now'. That all sounds well and good, but there's always a legacy that we have. Many people are already annoyed by certain terms. If you just say the word 'vegan' or 'cargo bike' in a debate, people's ears close and nobody wants to listen. Should we then avoid such words?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

That's a difficult question. Of course, you can try to avoid using terms that have very negative connotations for certain social groups. And the examples cited do indeed seem to be among them now. I mean, if there are alternative terms, then by all means use them. Or with certain milieus, you can use different terms or different arguments as to why this is attractive. But there probably won't be suitable alternative terms in every case. Can you try to think of them? I think in this case it's important to improve the image of the object, regardless of the term, by not showing a family of four transporting their two children when you show pictures of the cargo bike, but by showing the craftsman who is now using it to transport their tools and park it in the parking space.

Mandy Schossig:

To be honest, it seems to me that the people who are annoyed are particularly loud. Their opinions are then picked up by the media. But the vast majority who agree with climate protection and for whom it is important, you don't hear them at all. How do you view this phenomenon of such a loud minority?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

The phenomenon definitely exists. To give you an example: as far as a general speed limit on motorways is concerned, we've seen a 60 percent approval rating for the speed limit in all surveys in recent years. But in the debate, you might think that there's not much support for it. If you ask people how high they think the approval rating is, they underestimate it. There is a specific survey on this from two years ago in the social sustainability barometer. People were asked: 'How high do you think approval of the speed limit is?'. They stated 40 percent on average. The same group of respondents were actually 60 percent in favour of a speed limit. They clearly underestimated it, and that's relevant insofar as people's perception of whether a measure is acceptable in the neighbourhood, in society, has an impact on their own approval.

A keyword here is 'social norms'. If people assume that something is unpopular, they tend to reject a measure. If they don't have a strong opinion of their own, so to speak, and if they have the information that something meets with majority approval, they also tend to vote in favour of it. I don't want to call for manipulated figures at all. If it's clear, though, as with the example of the speed limit, that there is majority support for the measure in all surveys, you definitely have to actively communicate that as a climate policy actor.

The approach of political actors

Hannah Oldenburg:

So why don't we implement it? That's another question and we can't answer it at this point. But perhaps we can finally come to another point that is important as the third factor of these acceptance factors that you mentioned. It was about the behaviour of political actors. Explain briefly what you mean by that.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

We've already discussed this to some extent. I would add alliance-building to this point, i.e. gaining actors outside the bubble of climate protection as allies. This also includes involving citizens and important stakeholders, such as the tradespeople in the Heating Act, even if you can't win them over as allies, at least involving them, listening to their views and expertise and taking them into account.

What we still mean by this is that you want to introduce policies as new policy measures, that you test them on a trial basis, for a limited period of time, perhaps also for a limited area, before introducing them permanently. Studies show that approval of climate policy measures for push measures, for example regulatory measures, is significantly higher after their introduction than before.

Mandy Schossig:

There's the example of Ghent, where the mayor made the city centre car-free. Beforehand, he received endless hate mail, then they pushed it through relatively quickly and afterwards there was a great deal of approval. Everyone was delighted. Is that what you mean?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Exactly. So, I'm not sure whether in the case of Ghent, when the measure began with the first pedestrian zones, whether it was said from the outset: 'Okay, we're only going to do it for six months.' But it is the case that this car-free city centre zone that exists in Ghent was gradually expanded and there was a lot of protest at the beginning and now a lot of approval.

Another example that was originally conceived as a temporary test phase: in Stockholm, when the congestion charge was introduced a few years ago, there was a test phase limited to a few months. And during this test phase, approval rose by 18 percent, I believe. And in the course of this test phase, approval among the city's population rose by 18 percent, I believe, so that in the referendum that was held after the test phase, a surprising majority voted in favour of the congestion charge.

Hannah Oldenburg:

You also have a new project that has just launched called 'Building blocks of motivating and socially just environmental policy'. We thought that might fit in well here. What exactly are you examining? Why don't you tell us about it briefly?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

At Oeko-Institut, we've already conducted a lot of research on the social design of policy instruments, including how existing or potential measures affect different income groups. What we want to do a bit differently in this project is to incorporate the perspective of the citizens themselves to a greater extent. To ask citizens what motivates them to act in a climate-friendly way. What policy options, support measures and requirements do they consider fair or unfair and for what reasons? That's why we want to conduct focus groups with different population groups.

Mandy Schossig:

The special thing about the project is that it is a donation project of Oeko-Institut. This means that we are doing it without an external client; rather, we're calling for donations that this project can use directly for its work. Can it still be supported in that way?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

Yes, you can still support it. We launched the appeal for donations at the end of October 2024. [The appeal is still ongoing; you can find the information and also the link to donate on our homepage.](#)

Outlook and conclusion

Hannah Oldenburg:

Excellent, let's link it in the show notes. Sounds like a very useful project. Talking to people to people and finding out their needs.

So, we've reached the end of our episode. And Dirk, it's time to ask you our well-known 'Chancellor question,' which is now more meaningful than ever. So, Dirk: what would you do as the German Chancellor to make people really want to protect the climate again?

Dirk Arne Heyen:

With reference to what we discussed, I believe that it's really crucial we stagger the financial support measures more socially than before so that all population groups can really benefit from them and expand their options for action. And to mention another specific measure: we mentioned the speed limit, the general speed limit on motorways, which I would also introduce because it's so obvious that it makes sense in terms of climate policy and improves road safety. It can be introduced at short notice and is effective. It costs almost nothing and would please any finance minister. It has received majority approval in all surveys in recent years. And if there are still concerns among the coalition partners, then we'll carry out a six-month test phase and look at the effect.

Mandy Schossig:

Okay, then that's a direct appeal to the next German Chancellor. Thank you very much Dirk. I found that very inspiring and motivating. Thank you!

Hannah Oldenburg:

Yes, thank you, Dirk! Nice that you were here.

Dirk Arne Heyen:

It was nice to be here.

Hannah Oldenburg:

And with that, we say goodbye to you for this year. We'll be back on social media in December with some nice outtakes and best-offs from our season. Take a look at that and we'll see you again next year with a new season. And don't worry, we still have plenty of topics for you that we need to tackle for sustainable transformation.

Mandy Schossig:

Right, 2025, Hannah. Crazy. If you have any requests or suggestions as to which topics we should record and discuss here, please write to us at podcast@oeko.de and leave us a little review in your favourite podcast app. See you next year!

Hannah Oldenburg:

See you next year. Bye bye!