



BEHAVIOR & INSTITUTIONS IOS PLATFORM

Behavioral Insights on Governing Social Transitions

Think Paper #5

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The mission of the Behavior & Institutions

IOS Platform

Effective and legitimate governance of societal transitions requires social and behavioral arrangements that facilitate local and regional ecosystems of citizens, community initiatives, service organizations, social enterprises and companies in contributing to these transitions under a shared framework of values and long-term goals. Appreciating the dynamics of these ecosystems calls for deep insight into human embodied processes of coordination and cooperation that allow people to make autonomous choices and, at the same time, care for each other in fostering their collective engagement with these transitions. Building on this model of contextually embedded governance that rests on insights from behavioral science, our platform addresses the critical issue of how we can create conditions that provide citizens and civil society organizations with opportunities to shape, design, and implement innovative solutions to pressing societal challenges. In examining the legitimacy of such arrangements, the platform (1) emphasizes the profound importance of conceptualizing citizen autonomy as transcending mere opportunities for choice and (2) foregrounds perspectives for collective action in local and regional networks of public-private partnerships. We adopt a strong but not exclusive focus on the transition towards an inclusive and sustainable society as a case that requires a rigorous analysis of how institutions – ranging from local and national governments to community initiatives, private companies and professionals in educational and social services – can significantly involve citizens with these matters.

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How to engage people with public issues that require their support and commitment – like caring for the planet and one another by, for example, reducing their carbon footprint or getting a COVID-19 vaccination? The days that policy makers could just command people to act in line with communal objectives are long gone, if they ever existed. However, the alternative is not so clear. Simply leaving it up to people themselves whether or not (or how much) they want to contribute to the public good may be a decision that is difficult to handle for a variety of reasons. People may have problems to appreciate the long-term consequences of their actions, feel uncertain about other people's commitment, or just don't know what to do because of complicated or contradictory information. Guidance may thus be needed to support people in caring for the public case. Whatever form it takes, guidance should preferably not patronize people but provide them with the opportunity to truly engage with the matter under consideration.

The COVID-19 pandemic – almost forgotten by now even though it deeply affected people's lives for about two years – is a good illustration of the challenges that may arise when trying to commit people to an affair that demands the cooperation of many, as only widespread adherence to mitigation measures could effectively ban the virus. As such, COVID-19 is an unintended social experiment without parallel showing that the majority of people are willing and able to adjust

their behavior if the circumstances require so but also that it is hard to get everyone on board. Whereas a large number of people kept their distance, wore a mouth mask, practiced hand hygiene, and stayed at home in case of symptoms, a small minority contested COVID-19 policies (or even the existence of COVID-19 itself) and created doubt in the social circles surrounding them. In the end, a majority of about 70% that stuck to the rules proved sufficient to curb the pandemic (both in the Netherlands and abroad). However, the (loud) protest of the other 30% clearly demonstrated how hard it can be to motivate people for a seemingly obvious good cause. Moreover, the hardcore members of this minority were probably difficult to engage with policies as their firm disapproval of COVID-19 regulations was ruled by deep distrust and serious alienation (Van der Linden, 2023). Regular ways of communicating with these opposing voices by using the well-known carrot, stick or sermon proved to be insufficient to convince them and sometimes even created stronger resistance, as exemplified by demonstrations, strikes, and even riots (De Ridder, 2021; Van Deursen & Vetz, 2021).

Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic may seem an exceptional case insofar it concerns securing public commitment, it is clear that similar dilemmas are already on the rise – especially when they relate to the sustainability transition. Indeed, some scholars distinguish clear parallels between these two phenomena (Markard &

Rosenbloom, 2020). Many challenges regarding the transition toward a sustainable society – no matter whether it concerns climate policies relating to air travel or a plant-based diet, the triple R of a reduce-reuse-recycle circular economy, or measures touching biodiversity – will require dedication and attentiveness by many. Such devotion may not come naturally to some people. And a call for greater commitment may even evoke straightforward reactance in others. Recent protest in farming communities and rural networks in response to plans for the reduction of nitrogen emission or other measures relating to agricultural reforms attests to that observation.

Hence, the pressing question is: How can policy makers respect diverging opinions and at the same time encourage many people to take part in vital societal transitions? Whereas the answer to this complex question calls for the input of many disciplines to appreciate its multiple facets, a behavioral approach is one of the critical elements to better understand how to engage people autonomously and wholeheartedly. In view of the urgent transition towards a sustainable planet, we need to develop ways of presenting people with opportunities that spark genuine motivation for the good cause. In this *Think Paper*, we will examine the potential of new institutional arrangements that support people in making their own contributions to this endeavor, either as individuals or as a community. We will illustrate the gist of this new approach with a particular focus on the energy transition.

The starting point of our paper is the debate on the legitimacy of employing behavioral insights in public policy that was generated by the publication of Thaler and Sunstein's book on nudges in 2008. Over time, this debate has shifted towards the question to what extent governments should make a call on individuals to change their behavior in achieving policy objectives – potentially at the cost of initiating system changes themselves. In reviewing these recent developments, we take the "disputable duality" (Bandura, 2000, p. 77) as a point of departure for exploring novel ways of engaging people as a community to reconcile both approaches to societal transitions. We will argue that any suggestions that 'the system' and 'people' operate independently from each other (i.e., the disputable duality) are untrue. Instead, we posit that institutional arrangements influence how people behave and vice versa. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate the potential of groups working together on a shared goal that inspires them contribute autonomously to a public cause such as the sustainability transition as a model for governing the sustainability transition without coercive or devious tactics.

How can policy makers respect diverging opinions and at the same time encourage many people to take part in vital societal transitions?



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What good are behavioral insights for public policy?

For decades, subsidies and taxes (carrots), mandates and sanctions (sticks) and persuasive information (sermons) have been popular tools of governments to influence citizen behavior and secure their support to policy objectives. The role of employing behavioral insights for strategic purposes became more explicit after the introduction in 2008 of 'choice architecture' or 'nudges' by economist Richard Thaler and legal scientist Cass Sunstein (Thaler & Sunstein, 2021). Whilst nudges are typically geared to American politics in an attempt to direct citizen choices by soft paternalism in a culture where free choice (about handguns, pension savings, or obesogenic food) is paramount, the concept rapidly became popular in international organizations like OECD and the World Bank as well as in national governments all over the world. The story goes that former UK Prime Minister David Cameron, who launched the first behavioral insights unit worldwide for direct advice to government, even required senior policy officers to read Thaler and Sunstein's book.

What's a nudge?

Nudges are interventions that steer people in particular directions but that also allow them to go their own way (Thaler & Sunstein, 2021). Whereas debate continues what kind of interventions count as nudges and how they should be categorized, most scholars agree that the essence of nudges relates to facilitating desired behavior that most people would agree on (e.g., leading a healthy life or saving energy) when mandates would be ineffective or interfere too much with people's freedom of choice. Nudges as a policy instrument build on a wide variety of techniques for behavioral change that lend themselves for implementation in public settings. Typical examples are an opt-out donor registration system, automatic enrollment in health insurance schemes, website design that places certain options first, smileys that provide positive feedback when driving within speed limits, reminding people to pay their taxes in time or placing healthy food items up front in supermarket counters.

BEYOND NUDGES

Theoretically, the advantages of nudging citizen choice are clear when comparing them with more traditional instruments to influence people's behavior. Take the COVID-19 case again. Health policy officers may inform people that they should keep a distance or forbid them to go out on the street altogether by installing a complete lockdown when fighting the pandemic requires so. However, these regulations may be difficult to maintain, prove ineffective or come with considerable side effects such as reactance. A better alternative may be to alert people at the very moment of choice by, for example, placing arrows and lines on the floor to bring the relevance of keeping a distance to their attention by making a call on empathy with other people (De Ridder et al., 2021). This way, people preserve the freedom to determine their own movements but are still reminded of the preferred way of not getting too close to others.

Literally thousands of articles on nudges have been published in the past fifteen years with supporters and critical followers debating about the potential and pitfalls of this novel policy instrument. Whatever their stance,

proponents and critics equally endorse the premise that nudges easily influence behavior as they speak to 'system 1 reasoning'; with system 1 reasoning referring to 'fast' automatic thinking as compared to 'slow' reflective thinking that is governed by system 2 (Kahneman, 2011). Moreover, both sides seem to agree on the notion that nudges are effective because people are unaware of their presence and purpose – which is a major advantage for some and an issue of concern for others. However, the very notion that nudges operate 'in the dark' (Bovens, 2009) has recently been debunked. People are only 'nudgeable' when the nudged behavior matches their pre-existing preferences; moreover, nudges are still effective when their presence is disclosed and people can reflect on their choices (De Ridder et al., 2022). This new understanding of nudges may soften alleged concerns about state manipulation of citizens by nudging them into directions they may not necessarily endorse. That being said, from a psychological point of view a number of unclarities remain to be resolved, including to what extent people with ambivalent preferences may (or may not) benefit from nudges or to what extent nudges may help to identify one's preferences (Vugts et al., 2020; Wachner et al., 2022).

People are only 'nudgeable' when the nudged behavior matches their pre-existing preferences.

I-FRAME VS S-FRAME

In the meantime, debate about nudging has shifted towards another level with a focus on what kind of behavioral strategies governments may use to involve people with their policy aims – if at all. This debate is not so much about using behavioral insights in public policy but about targeting individuals as being co-responsible for societal change. In this context, it should be noted that, different from what is often assumed, the concept of nudging does not by definition refer to a behavioral instrument per se but rather to a policy strategy that is positioned between paternalism ('government decides what is good for you') and liberalism ('it is up to you what to decide'). Hence, nudges are equivalent to *soft* paternalism – as in 'you can make your own choice but we make it easier for you to make the preferred choice' (which may not perfectly accord with people's preferred choice). To that purpose, policy makers can rely on a wide variety of psychological techniques, ranging from default options (the preferred option is standard) and social norms (revealing what most people do choose, want to choose or should choose) to presenting the preferred option in a salient way (people have an inclination to choose what stands out) or other tactics derived from the vast psychological literature on heuristics. Despite the popularity of the nudge concept in policy circles – or probably more accurate: because of this popularity – behavioral scientists themselves have started

to wonder whether an excessive I-frame (i.e., focused on Individual behavior like monitoring energy use by a smart meter) is a strategy that should always be preferred over an S-frame (referring to System changes like energy pricing). Or, as psychologist Nick Chater and behavioral economist George Loewenstein (2022, p. 10) observe: "...we have thought a lot about what interventions can help individuals reduce their use of heating, insulate their homes, shift to low carbon transport and more plant-based diets. But we now doubt that carbon emissions can be substantially reduced by i-level interventions such as providing small incentives, better (or more transparent) information, more feedback, more awareness of social norms, or greener "defaults. Having a real impact will require systemic transformation on a huge scale". Similar reservations about the role and the responsibilities of individuals regarding major societal transitions such as sustainability have been made in circles outside academia, such as those being voiced in the popular book *Een beter milieu begint niet bij jezelf* [*A better environment does not start with you*] by journalist Jaap Tielbeke. Those voices have, yet again, been criticized by a multidisciplinary group of scholars who questioned the sharp distinction being made between 'the system' and 'the individual'.¹

COLLECTIVE AGENCY

Although it makes sense to point to the limitations of an excessive focus on individual contributions to large-scale societal problems,

¹ <https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/Verslag%20van%20het%20symposium%20Een%20beter%20milieu%20begint%20bij%20jezelf%20-%20toch.pdf>

it is important to note that (individual) behavior is far from trivial. To clarify, it is obvious that separating the individual from the system creates a false dichotomy which may hamper a good understanding of the role of the behavior of individuals within a system. More than twenty years ago, psychologist Albert Bandura (2000, p. 77; for a recent review, see Hamann et al., 2023) noticed that "...personal agency and social structures operate interdependently. Social structures are created by human activity, and sociocultural practices, in turn, impose constraints and provide resources and opportunities for personal development and functioning". To better integrate these bi-directional relationships, Bandura introduced the concept of 'collective agency' (as a complement to personal 'self-efficacy' or the feeling of 'I can do'; Bandura, 1997), defined as people's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results. At the time, Bandura already emphasized that collective agency does not so much result from the sum of knowledge or skills of a group of people but rather emerges from their interactive, coordinative and synergistic transactions. Viewed from this perspective, reservations about the role of behavior in circles making a case for systemic change may not so much lie in addressing the role of behavior itself but rather in the focus on individuals, neglecting the power of collective behavior of an entire social group or even the behavior of individuals that inspires and motivates people at the top to implement systemic measures. Moreover, the

early Banduran view (as described above) also clearly points out that a call on systemic change without involving (groups of) individuals is pointless. Involving people as a group may not only accelerate the much desired system change but is crucial to achieve system change in the first place. Importantly, involving people as a group will avoid blaming individuals for their personal 'dragons of inaction' (Gifford, 2011) by not acting upon the recognition that sustainable behavior is required.

In recent years, the role of groups of people or collectives in addressing societal transitions in the field of sustainability has become an increasingly popular approach (Amel et al., 2017; Fritzsche & Masson, 2021), often with a focus on securing support for the transition by spreading favorable social norms on this transition so as to achieve a behavioral tipping point (Nyborg et al., 2016). However, when and how people get together and work together to achieve a common goal is a topic of fundamental psychological research that is largely unknown in circles outside academic psychology but still very important for understanding how to commit people to the good cause. In the following, we will therefore first discuss the psychological underpinnings of when and how people want to work with each other. Next, we will examine how and to what extent these insights lend themselves for scaling up in models of governance that address the sustainability transition.

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The role of collective action: What's psychology got to do with it?

In the past decades, different kinds of citizen collectives have emerged with the promotion of sustainable behavior as their focal point of interest (e.g., CollectieveKracht.nl). In view of the immense proportions of the transition toward a more sustainability society – regardless whether it concerns going circular or adopting climate-friendly practices – it seems obvious that many people feel overwhelmed when thinking about making a contribution on their own. As a result, people who consider themselves as individual actors are likely to experience helplessness leading to apathy and inaction (Fritsche & Masson, 2021). Whereas the notion is uncontested that the climate crisis results from human behavior, it is also clear that it is not the behavior of one or a few isolated individuals that leads to global warming, extreme weather conditions, or rising sea levels. It is the behavior of many people that counts – including the behavior of people who are responsible for system changes. Likewise, it is the behavior of many that may make the difference. Realizing that other people acknowledge the climate problem and act accordingly may already serve as a tipping point and support people in changing their behavior (Nyborg et al., 2016). However, even more than social norm communication of what other people actually do, wish to do or should do, supporting individuals to get going as a collective is an approach that is increasingly acknowledged as a promising way forward (Amel et al., 2017; Fritsche & Masson, 2021).

This perspective builds on a long tradition that primarily noted issues with engaging a group of people to act in their common interest (Olson, 1965) whereas the more recent revamped version emphasizes the potential of collective action.

Citizen collectives come in wide varieties. Some of these groups are genuine grassroot initiatives whereas others are more like neighborhood communities that are promoted and supported by local governments or receive another kind of institutional assistance. Some groups are even initiated by governmental bodies or institutions responsible for the sustainability transition (Jans, 2021; De Vries & Bouma, 2023). These latter ones are geared towards more traditional forms of citizen engagement by involving them with sustainability politics at different levels of participatory decision-making. Despite their growing popularity, it is not well understood what makes these groups tick, and why some of them are more successful than others (e.g., Mangnus et al., 2022). Whereas some collectives thrive, others have reported disappointing results – both in terms of group coherence and actual sustainable achievements (Bamberg et al., 2015). The European Newcomers project on energy communities, for example, failed in bringing together people to work on their common interest in energy reduction (Blasch et al., 2021). Capitalizing on the promise of citizen collectives in governing the energy transition, therefore, requires a profound understanding

of how and when people may collaborate successfully on shared goals and goes further than just encouraging them to act together.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

The majority of social research on the dynamics of collective action has employed a social identity approach that typically rests on the notion that such action is more likely when people identify with a group (their own ‘in’ group) which they consider to be unjustly treated by another group with whom they disagree (the ‘out’ group) (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Klandermans, 2002; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). However, in spite of research suggesting that working together would require a common outsider which would especially benefit one’s own group (‘ingroup favoritism’), recent research suggests that people may not need an outgroup for bonding together. Rather, the benefits of working together may even extend to the assumed outgroup when people can coordinate their actions – as, for example, in a synchronous walking intervention, leading to reduced stereotyping of minority groups; Atherton et al., 2019) or when it is emphasized that the outgroup is not a massive homogeneous group that is separate from the ingroup but a group consisting of separate individuals (Klimecki, 2019). To be sure, it is contested whether collective climate action truly requires intergroup conflict. Some scholars posit that collective climate action can do well without fighting against an (alleged) enemy (Fritzsche &

Masson, 2021). The latter perspective implicates that working together on a common cause may inspire climate action as this shared goal emerges from a sense of belonging to a community rather than the other way around (having a climate goal and then work together). Indeed, it has been shown that the very opportunity of getting involved in local collaboration is an underestimated aspect of becoming active in an energy community as compared with explicit sustainability motives (Sloot et al., 2019). Previous research on a ‘collective can do’ (collective efficacy: ‘yes, we can’) mentality already has emphasized the motivating role of belonging to a group of people which may create a willingness to act together on behalf of the common good (Sampson et al., 1997).

These understandings of how belonging to a group may foster collective effort for a common cause (different from the social identity approach emphasizing that people need an outgroup to get into action; e.g., Hamann et al., 2023) aligns well with fundamental psychological research on joint action (a term that is preferred over collective action when coordination is required), defined as any form of social interaction whereby two or more individuals coordinate their behavior to achieve a shared goal (Sebanz et al., 2006). This research is largely unknown outside the psychological community but lends itself well to appreciate the dynamics of working together on a joint cause as it builds on the notion that people are uniquely

able and motivated to collaborate and experience inherent pleasure from working together, even when it is less efficient than working alone (Curioni et al., 2022). Working on a collaborative task has been shown to promote a variety of prosocial attitudes and behaviors, including strengthening social bonds, trust, cooperative and helping behaviors (Carr & Walton, 2014). Moreover, working together on a common task inspires commitment and intrinsic motivation (Michael et al., 2016), leading people to work hard on a task for inherent satisfaction even in the absence of external pressure or reward.

FROM COLLECTIVE ACTION TO JOINT ACTION

Why is it that people would be willing and able to engage in joint action? Research into the brain’s mirroring properties suggests that people can have direct first-person access to the feelings, thoughts, and intentions of others (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2016). These basic mechanisms of resonance and simulation allow people to prepare for joint action by forming representations of each other’s actions and the relation between them. This enables them to predict each other’s upcoming actions, which, in

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turn, facilitates coordination (Sebanz & Knoblich, 2021). According to a ‘minimalist’ account, joint action towards a shared goal occurs when the following conditions are met: (1) two or more agents in a concrete situation perceive the same goal and are inclined to act upon this goal; (2) all agents perceive the other agents as capable and inclined to act upon this goal; (3) each agent is able to predict the result of his own and of all other agents’ actions; (4) each agent is able to predict the common effect of all actions; and (5) there is autonomy and equal control among partners (Butterfill, 2012).

These insights from basic psychological science are relevant for understanding the role of citizen engagement with sustainability challenges as they may support the design of collective action arrangements. As of now, and in spite of the increasing popularity of citizen collectives as an instrument to govern the sustainability transition, fundamental knowledge on joint action is absent from attempts to promote smooth collaboration within these collectives. Yet, it is known that the magic of collaboration does not happen automatically when people are simply put together (Blasch et al., 2021) and that attempts to get people working together may even backfire when they feel that their contribution is taken for granted (Arnstein, 1969). It is therefore urgent that micro-level insights into the group dynamics of coordination that have been discovered in lab settings are linked to a macro-level approach that allows for the examination of joint action

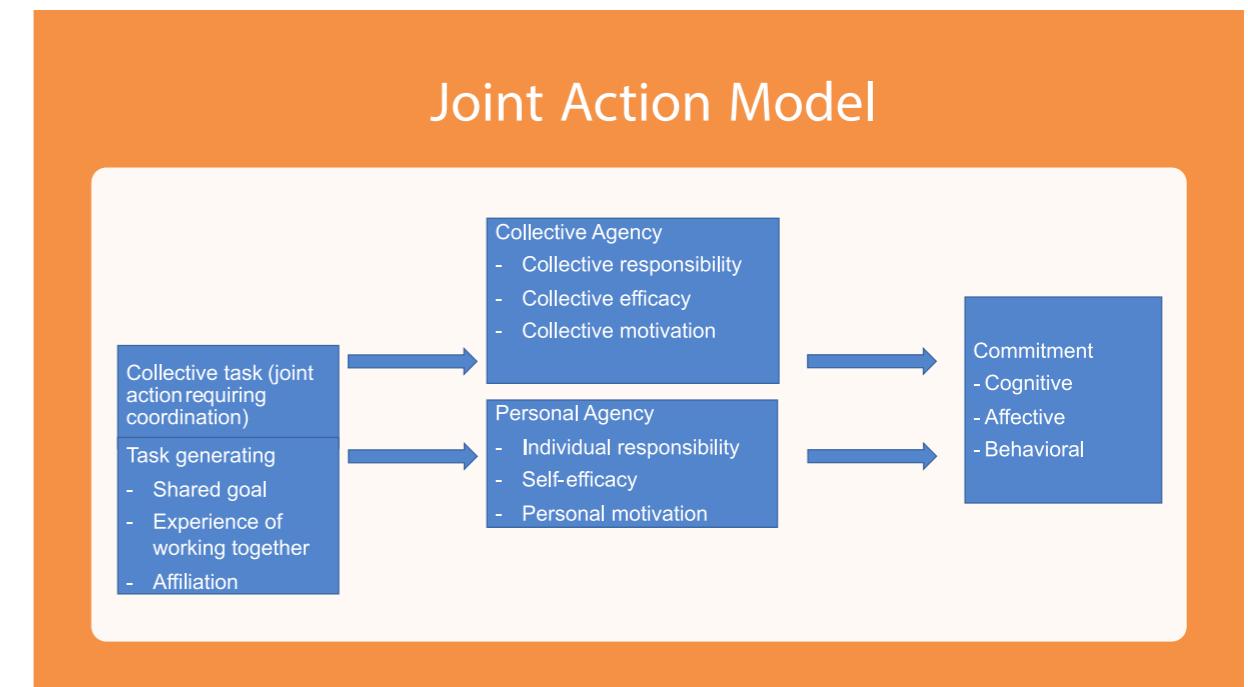
in real world conditions. Whereas coordination has proven to be a crucial ingredient that makes groups tick, we need to know more about the contextual factors ‘in the wild’ that determine willingness and ability to coordinate one’s actions with others. This requires an answer to questions such as: How well should people know each other (should they even know each other)? Should they have an opportunity to look each other in the eye and physically meet or could they also work together in a virtual ways? Do people have to engage in joint action themselves or can they also become engaged by observing other people working together? Should they share a common background or will working together compensate for the lack of having something in common from the start? What does it take for a plan to emerge that people commit to and experience as a shared target?

CONNECTING INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION WITH JOINT ACTION PRINCIPLES

In finding answers to these and other pressing questions, psychological science could build on what is already known on the ‘grammar’ of institutions for collective action (Ostrom, 2009). There is a wealth of research demonstrating that people choose for collective benefit instead of their own individual benefit when they meet in citizen-initiated self-governing collectives and cooperatives for the provision of energy, food and many other goods and services (Farjam et al., 2020; Vriens et al., 2021). Linking the

understanding that collectives are well able to manage their common resources without governmental control to the minimalist principles of joint action will allow for the grounding of institutional statements (norms, rules, sanctions) in actual psychological processes. In view of the growing popularity of the Ostromian perspective in political circles, it is important to back up this authoritative approach with quantifiable elements that lend themselves for application in group settings to accelerate the contribution of people to the sustainability transition.

For starters, we have developed a simplified working model to tackle the psychological underpinnings of how joint action arrangements (requiring the coordination of actions) may enhance both collective and personal agency (both comprising elements of responsibility, efficacy, and motivation), which in turn increases commitment to a cause either at a cognitive, affective or behavioral level.²



² This model was developed with support of Lieke van den Boom, Shahryar Ershad Sarabi, Frank Gootjes, Reinoud Moojen, and Lisanne Pauw, researchers at the SelfRegulationLab (Utrecht University).



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Implications for governance

Since the introduction of nudges more than a decade ago, behavioral insights have become increasingly popular in governmental circles to engage people with policy objectives. Understanding how people make decisions – a bit less ‘rational’ than was hitherto assumed – has indeed proven important for supporting people to act in line with important issues on the policy agenda (Benartzi et al., 2017). However, nudge thinking has been dominated by the view that decisions are inherently biased and that governments can or should employ these biases to their own advantage. Moreover, nudge thinking tends to narrow down government communication with citizens to speaking to them as individuals. Both elements make the classic nudging concept as we know it less suitable for designing novel ways of truly engaging citizens with societal transitions, in particular the sustainability transition. The crucial factor here, as we have highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, lies in involving people as a collective and make arrangements that allow for serious contributions.

MULTILAYERED GOVERNANCE

How can these insights inform new forms of governance? Current approaches to the governance of the sustainability transition accord well with the principles of New Public Governance that foregrounds participatory and collaborative governing practices as an alternative for market-oriented New Public Management (Osborne,

2010). The Earth System Governance framework (Biermann et al., 2010), for example, highlights the importance of multilayered or multilevel governance that is marked by participation of multiple public and private non-state actors at all levels of decision-making, ranging from networks of experts and environmentalists to social enterprises and local communities. It is also acknowledged that an institutionalized involvement of civil society representatives in decision-making should be an integral part of this approach to make governance more legitimate and accountable (Biermann & Gupta, 2011). A typical example of multilayered decision-making is the recent experimentation with citizens’ councils where representatives of the people speak on their behalf (Rovers, 2022). Nonetheless, whilst regarded as promising by some, the democratic value of this type of citizen input has been contested.³ Moreover, the defining feature of citizen councils that people are represented rather than participating themselves seems at odds with the notion that people can contribute to a common cause as a group with shared interests, which is a requirement for collective action. An alternative way of involving citizens with sustainability policies that may better meet the demand of direct contributions to governance is ‘serious gaming’ (i.e., using gaming elements to familiarize people with knowledge and skills). Whereas this approach has been primarily used to motivate people for sustainable behavior change, it has been argued that it can also be used as a policy support instrument that helps people in

³ <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/06/17/burgerberaden-leiden-tot-een-chaotische-democratie-a4133827>

understanding complex systems, future thinking and planning, and the design of new policies and strategies (Vervoort et al., 2022).

INSERTING COORDINATION PRINCIPLES

Still, whereas multilayered or multilevel governance perspectives point to the relevance of citizen contributions, they are mute about the potential of coordination and collaboration within citizen collectives themselves. Governing the sustainability transition with the support of large groups of citizens critically implicates the question of how collective action in groups of people can be facilitated. By definition, such

groups should be relatively small and having something in common (e.g., living in the same neighborhood) as a requirement for defining a shared goal. Whereas it may seem paradoxical that governments can support people in organizing themselves, it is not: one might argue that it is the very essence of (multilayered) governance to set up arrangements that accommodate this kind of collective action. Having said that, finding the right way to do so is not an easy task and may fail when citizen input is taken for granted, as demonstrated by a recent case of engaging residents with the energy transition in a social housing block of apartments.

Governing the sustainability transition with the support of large groups of citizens critically implicates the question of how collective action in groups of people can be facilitated

The Case of Engaging Residents with Energy Free Social Housing

Reducing household energy use in social housing buildings can substantially contribute to mitigating global climate change. However, engaging residents with the implementation of energy reduction measures may be quite difficult when they feel that their input is not taken seriously. A project by a social housing corporation aiming to get support from residents for the sustainable renovation of their apartment building found that residents were worried about climate change and already engaged in behaviors to reduce their energy consumption. They were also generally supportive of the renovation plans initiated by the social housing cooperation. Nevertheless, they listed many problems in communication sessions with the corporation. In particular, they were concerned about the fairness of the process. Overall, this project revealed that engaging residents in the sustainable renovation process is less about increasing their motivation for the sustainability transition and more about providing them with opportunities to seriously contribute to the renovation process. Social housing regulations require consent from residents to implement sustainable renovations in apartment buildings but one-way communication about measures that have been designed in detail without giving residents a say in how these measures may be implemented may create strong feelings of anger and uneasiness (Bal et al., 2021).

Thus far, no comprehensive list of features exists that could lead the governance of citizen collaboration to work on their shared goal. However, a preliminary overview based on available research that addresses coordination and collaboration within groups (e.g., Sebanz & Knoblich, 2021) and institutions for collective action (Ostrom, 2009) comprises the following elements where a fair amount of autonomous decision-making is a leading principle (Arnstein, 1969):

- Subsidiarity: local organization preferred whenever possible
- Groups of people can define their own concrete goals within the hierarchy of the overall policy goal of accelerating the sustainability transition. As such, they have significant input in how policy objectives can be realized
- Groups of people are reassured that their decisions will be taken seriously
- Groups of people work on their own behalf (not mandated)
- Reciprocity within groups is a leading principle of self-organization
- The emphasis should lie on coordinating actions for working on a shared goal instead of mere discussion
- Live meetings where people can actually meet are preferred over virtual meetings to allow coordinated action

These kind of requirements are for a large part already realized in citizen initiatives such as energy collectives or other types of ‘commons’

(Farjam et al., 2020; Vriens et al., 2021). However, these kind of collectives are often initiated by people from privileged groups who are able and willing to organize themselves. Unfortunately, the actions of this committed minority may ironically reinforce the majority's adherence to prevailing practices (Bolderdijk & Jans, 2021). It is therefore urgent to move beyond the avant-garde role of the environmental elite who are ahead of the crowd in their call for change in the sustainability domain (Tropp et al., 2021). Giving a larger and more diverse group of people (including those who lag a bit behind) the opportunity to contribute by promoting self-organization in underprivileged communities is critical for a fair transition (e.g., Maguire & Shaw, 2021). For that reason, it is important to consider criteria relating to equity (does the arrangement not favor some groups over others?), side effects (are there unintended consequences?), and acceptability (is there citizen support?) when implementing these kind of arrangements to promote joint action (Michie et al., 2014; Tummers, 2019).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Returning to the COVID-19 example from the introduction one can say at least this: support of and acting in line with policies to mitigate the pandemic did seem to be critically dependent on whether people could contribute to solutions that accorded with their own situation (Kolner et al., 2022). This may have wide ranging implications for answering the question what

kind of regulatory instruments government can use. Rather than employing sticks, carrots or sermons to commit citizens to the sustainability agenda, governments should consider providing people with the opportunity to contribute themselves. In doing so, governments are for the most part legitimized by democratic procedures to determine the overall policy objectives, no matter whether it concerns combatting the virus by reducing social contact or, in case of sustainability, reducing global warming. Yet, it is critical that collectives of people (regardless whether they concern neighborhoods, apartment blocks, schools, local entrepreneurs or any other kind of formal or informal group) have a substantial say in how these objectives can be realized by designing solutions that are geared toward the specific issues in their own immediate surroundings.

To conclude: behavioral insights related to coordination and collaboration mechanisms within (diverse) groups are essential for understanding when and why people will have a strong experience of joint agency that in turn may create strong commitment to the sustainability transition. Employing these insights to govern the transition by providing and/or stimulating arrangements for joint action, especially for people who don't gather naturally to engage in collective action, has the potential to make significant steps towards a sustainable society while securing their autonomy and respecting their understanding of the complexity of the transition.

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