

Getting people on board with the energy transition: 'Times of crisis can help'

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Credit: Leiden University

Gas prices now exceed 300 euros per megawatt hour—a record. The transition from fossil (natural gas, coal, oil) to renewable energy is needed and soon. But how do you get a society (and its citizens) to switch to sustainable energy?

Europe wants to force 15% in [energy savings](#) in EU countries, which is somewhat of a change. "There are many ways to inform people about such a big change, particularly something as abstract as energy transition. It's a real balancing act. What is currently stopping people from switching to [sustainable energy](#) or making their homes more sustainable?"

Are they unwilling or unable? For example, it's often cheaper not to use sustainable energy," says Alien van der Vliet. She is a researcher and advisor at the Knowledge Centre for Psychology and Economic Behavior at Leiden University. Their work consists of researching [human behavior](#) and developing behavioral interventions.

Know where the barriers are

It's important to know what holds people back in the process. For example, some people find it difficult to decide what best they can do, with all the information about greenwashing and different types of energy. Others don't have the time to read up on it. "The opportunity must present itself," says Van der Vliet. "If you lead a busy life with fixed routines, it takes a lot of effort to change. There are all sorts of barriers. We look at where these are."

She thinks that we focus too often on [motivation](#) because we think that's where our behavior comes from. But a large part of our behavior has to do with our circumstances, such as our living situation. If these circumstances change, for instance if sustainable choices are made easier, this can change people's behavior. If the government makes the desired behavior easier by providing accessible tools and information, this can already change a lot.

Behavior change method

One method to get people to change their behavior is the "EAST" method, which stands for Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely. If the government wants people to make lasting changes in their behavior, it must therefore ensure the change is easy to implement and fun or attractive to make. The [social aspect](#) also helps: people are naturally inclined to follow one another. So if people know that 70 percent of the

people in their neighborhood are switching to [green energy](#), they are more likely to follow suit. As regards the last term, timely: [behavior change](#) is all about timing. At certain points in their lives, people are more open to change. "People are more likely to switch to a new energy contract when they're moving house."

People can now feel the gas crisis in their pockets

Timing is crucial to such a large-scale energy transition. How do you get the public on board at such short notice? "When it comes to the timing, times of crisis can help," says Van der Vliet. "People can see that these are turbulent times and that helps motivate them. They know there's a war going on and that this has caused a gas shortage. They understand the circumstances." As people live in the present, they find it easier to make decisions that have an impact now.

If there was only going to be a gas shortage in a few winters' time, it would be harder to motivate people to change. "That's normal from an evolutionary perspective. You want food and shelter and you want them now. That's why it is so hard to get people to make more sustainable choices from the climate perspective. But a crisis like the one we're currently experiencing with the war is close at hand and you can feel it in your pockets right now. Then people show willingness and the flexibility to change."

Provided by Leiden University

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