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## Green Family

### Generational Fairness in Climate Change

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Environmental behaviour and awareness differ according to the household composition, income and educational structure of families. Environmental policies should take into account that families are becoming increasingly heterogeneous.

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Families should be perceived as 'change agents' when it comes to environmental policy. They are also an important forum for intergenerational exchange.

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Tools to support families should be developed to enable them to cope with the financial and time challenges arising from climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

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## Introduction

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Up to this point, families have not played a significant role in the discussion of the climate crisis. Yet, they play a crucial role in shaping intergenerational relationships – also and especially when it comes to environmental protection and climate-friendly behaviours. (Grand)parents have a ‘role model’ function and they influence the environmental awareness and behaviour of the next generation. As consumers, families decide on the demand for environmentally-friendly (or -harmful) products and services. However, adapting to climate change and its consequences as well as taking on the financial burden of pro-environmental policy measures mean an additional burden for many families. This is especially true for families with small children and home care responsibilities.

## Background

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The role of families in mitigating and adapting to climate change is highlighted in the new study ‘Green Family – Generational Justice in Climate Change’, which was prepared by scientists from the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, ÖAW, University of Vienna), one of the leading research centres on the relationship between environmental and population development, in cooperation with Population Europe. The study was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

The results were then discussed with experts from academia, politics and civil society at a high-level discussion workshop. In addition to the authors of the study, representatives of various organisations participated.<sup>1</sup>

## Climate Protection – a Question of Age?

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Societal perceptions of generational differences in terms of sustainable behaviour have changed significantly in recent decades – especially in the wake of climate protests which were mainly driven by members of the younger generation. Indeed, studies show that as people get older, their ecological footprint increases. Much of this effect results from the fact that income rises with age. This allows for consumer behaviours that tend to be associated with climate-damaging consequences, such as driving a larger car instead of

using a bicycle or public transit, travelling by air for touristic purposes or having greater housing needs (Kleinhückelkotten et al. 2016, Pothen & Tovar Reaños 2018). Eventually, though, CO2 emissions peak in the age group of 50 to 60-year-olds. As people enter retirement age, emissions drop significantly, partly because older people no longer need to commute to work and their consumption behaviour changes.

Having said that, differences between individual birth cohorts must be considered. It is by no means certain that the pensioners of the future will behave in the same way as those of the present or the past. On average, members of the large baby boomer generation are in much better health than their parents were at the time of retirement. Therefore, they are, for example, more likely to remain mobile than previous generations. On the other hand, members of this generation were socialised during a time of strong environmental movements, which results in a greater awareness of climate issues.

If we look at today’s younger generations, we also do not find a homogeneous group. Younger people who live in rural areas and commute to school or vocational training facilities have different mobility needs than their peers in urban or suburban areas. Recent studies suggest that younger people are more committed to environmental protection and sustainability compared to older generations. But it is unclear whether they maintain this scale of environmental consciousness when they gain access to resources later in life that enable them, for example, to buy a car or fly to tourist destinations abroad. Nevertheless, Wolfgang Lutz (Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital) points out in the discussion that there are strong indications that values formed in younger years generally influence behaviour in older age.

## What Role does Parenthood Play?

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Apart from the transition to working life and an increase in income, starting a family with children is another life course event that has a strong impact on environmental behaviours, especially resource consumption (Milfont, Poortinga & Sibley 2020). Trisha Shrum (DearTomorrow) points out that the link between environmental risks and their impact on children’s health (for example, asthma promoted by fine dust emissions) can motivate parents to adopt a more proactive stance in terms of addressing climate change. According to Anna Rotkirch (Väestöliitto), a sustainable lifestyle should be made the benchmark of a

successful lifestyle and, thus, encourage appropriate parenting behaviour.

However, the caveat remains that not all families have access to the resources necessary for a sustainable lifestyle. For example, low-income families cannot always afford sustainably produced food, families in rural areas cannot fulfil their mobility needs without a car, etc. If families are to become active 'change agents' in the field of environmental policy, policymakers must help empower them to do so.

Representatives of family policy organisations warn that families are being overburdened in this respect. 'Parents are already under a lot of pressure just to be parents', says Sven Iversen (Association of German Family Organisations). On top of this, the still unequal distribution of household tasks and care work at the expense of mothers and working women must also be taken into account, which could be exacerbated by a further transfer of societal tasks to families.

## The Burden of Families

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Families are also particularly vulnerable in terms of their socio-economic situation to be burdened by climate change policies. The costs of environmental protection requirements and climate change mitigation policies, such as rising prices for food, goods, services and energy, are likely to be passed on in a large part to the consumers. Families are disproportionately affected by this and are often not able to react flexibly to such changes. For example, families with children or relatives in need of care are more dependent on their place of residence. Low-income families cannot always move to areas with a well-developed public transport system or into an energy-efficient apartment. Due to this, they are more greatly affected by increases in the cost of rent and housing due to environmental policies. Older people living independently may be particularly affected by an increase in the cost of living and mobility if they do not live close to family members or cannot access health care close to home.

The financial burdens associated with environmental policy requirements can also result in an intragenerational 'equity gap'. People with a lower socio-economic status often live in smaller flats and undertake fewer long-distance trips resulting in a comparatively low ecological footprint. However, whereas families with a higher income can adapt to price increases and afford more environmental consumption behaviour, lower-income families cannot adapt as easily.

## Mobility Matters ...

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A large portion of the experts' discussion focused on the topic of mobility, where there are still many everyday hurdles that make it difficult for families to adopt sustainable behaviours. This is especially true in rural areas: buses run infrequently, bus stops are not designed safely and the price structure is too complicated so that families and older people often feel compelled to use a car.

Parents – especially mothers – are therefore more likely to search for a job close to home, which can affect their career development. At the same time, families are more dependent on mobility in the private sphere than other population groups to, for example, take children to school or grandparents to the doctor. Therefore, measures aimed at developing equitable CO2 pricing should also be extended to families, especially those with children or relatives in need of help and care.

## Policy Recommendations

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1. Measures to combat climate change and to adapt to its consequences must be differentiated according to socio-demographic characteristics of population subgroups. A 'one size fits all' policy is not desirable.
2. Environmental costs of a product or service must be factored into its overall price. But those who are already disadvantaged should not be additionally burdened by this process. Policies should be designed to protect particularly vulnerable groups, such as low-income families or regions with inadequate access to public goods and services.
3. Public transport should meet the needs of families. This especially applies to rural and suburban areas. It must not be the default for a family to switch to a car at the arrival of their first child.
4. Special attention should be paid to vulnerable older people who may be affected by increasing mobility and energy costs.
5. Families are an important 'learning facility' for environmental behaviour and awareness. Therefore, policymakers should invest in creating information services tailored to families and promote civil society activities in this area. ■

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## Footnote

1 Svenja Bauer-Blaschkowski (Technische Universität Darmstadt), Dora Biondani (Climate Alliance), Frida Berry Eklund (Our Kids Climate), Iris Emmelmann (Deutscher Familienverband), Angelika Gellrich (Umweltbundesamt), Melanie Herget (Universität Kassel), Sven Iversen (Association of German Family Organisations), Tim Leibert (Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde), Wolfgang Lutz (Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital), Monika Mynarska Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Kimberly Nicholas (Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies), Iliaria Nilges (ThinkYoung), Anna Rotkirch (Väestöliitto), Selina Scheer (Deutsche Umwelthilfe), Matthew Schneider-Mayerson (Universität Yale), Trisha Shrum (DearTomorrow), Monika Skadborg (European Youth Forum), Jörg Tremmel (Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen), Alessandra Trimarchi (University of Vienna) und Monika von Palubicki (Deutscher Frauenrat e.V.)

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