4 Expert interviews

4.1 Introduction

In this first research step, experts were interviewed to attain access to the current constitution of societal knowledge about climate change and -action. Questions asked related to this study's key concepts of responsibility, efficacy and knowing and either concerned the experts' own opinion or their take on what the public believed.

The aim was thus also to gain an insight regarding *to what extent*

- these experts conceived of responsibility in relation to or even in terms of efficacy,
- they valued the provision of (cognitive) information,
- they classified climate action as an inclusive project involving the whole of society – and –
- they observed diffusion of responsibility in society.

4.2 Statements concerning responsibility

This excerpt from one of the interviews immediately exemplifies the complexity the concept of responsibility conveys in connection with climate action:

> I think, one takes responsibility for things one has not caused. And one causes things for which one does not take responsibility. I think, for a long time, this had been more or less congruent. And that's also how the term responsibility was meant [originally]. But, in the modern knowledge society, if you will, so at least since the sixties, these connections have become so complex that you can say: you are buying a piece of butter at a discounter. You are now responsible that nitrate levels[1] in the water are rising because this is why so many cows are on the

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1   Nitrate contributes to climate change, see for instance: https://www1.wdr.de/wissen/natur/nitrat-stickstoff-100.html (accessed 16/09/2022).

pasture. Or rather, they are not on the pasture but in stables and produce masses of manure that then lands on the fields. In some way this can be said. Of course it can also be said: that's complete nonsense!

Academic (sociology and sustainability)

Amongst the experts, there was a general recognition for the many layers and facets as well as the cumulative nature of the responsibility question. Responsibility was termed *an object of negotiation* by one of the experts (academic sustainable consumption), indicating that its attribution in general and with respect to climate action in particular is far from straightforward and oftentimes fiercely contested.

Here, in some of the interviews, the moral component of the responsibility question was referred to:

… in any type of green consumption, my conscience always plays some role.

Expert 2 at federal environmental agency

One interviewee (head of environmental NGO) cited Immanuel Kant in voicing that individual freedom is limited by it infringing upon someone else's freedom. One of the experts (academic sustainable consumption) also stressed that individual responsibility was bounded. Determining what was right beyond what lay in one's own responsibility for oneself was paternalistic in her eyes. By contrast, one other participant (expert 2 at federal environmental agency) deemed the application of such moral demands to be quite unhelpful at times. With respect to voluntary carbon offsetting, he emphasised that despite its reputation of being no more than 'indulgence trade"[2], this was indeed efficacious, whilst the environmental movement failed to recognise it as such because it was imprisoned in its 'moral high ground type of thinking'. At another point in the interview he did however point to his observation that people tended to flee into individual behaviour, thereby losing the political dimension. He often heard that people were allegedly contributing as much as they could whilst they forgot that climate action also had a *normative* dimension.

When asked who in society held responsibility for climate action, in most cases in these interviews the answer came quickly and staunchly along the lines of "everyone". So, in a first instance, responsibility was overall attributed to the whole of society. Delving deeper into the conversations, several nuances could however be filtered out with regard to this aspect:

in some cases, this reply, "everyone", referred to the single consumer. Repeatedly, it was recommended, also by two scientists (academic sustainable innovation,

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2   *Ablasshandel* in German original statement.

expert 2 at federal environmental agency) that for decades had worked extensively on this question, that *strategic* distinctions should be prioritised when thinking about one's own carbon emissions. Moreover, some of the experts (particularly the teacher and the conservative politicians interviewed) had quite an individualised concept of responsibility for climate action, presenting it as a personal choice that should not be interfered with:

> I think that we fare well here in Bavaria by living by the maxim 'live and let live'. So in terms of diet, I do not want to dictate... It is however important to raise awareness...

<div align="right">Member Bavarian State Ministry (Freie Wähler)</div>

Therefore, in wondering how to mobilise the consumer, the other politician emphasised that her party wanted to frame the topic of climate action in a positive way:

> With incentives, with technology, with innovation and not from the start with prohibitions and regulatory law. [...] so that we achieve acceptance. And that is perhaps also the focus that sets us apart from the Green Party. If we, for example, raise the fuel tax, we won't score any great hit and this will only cause contempt...

<div align="right">Member of Bundestag (CDU)</div>

This clearly illustrates how the responsibility is shifted from the political to the individual sphere. Interestingly, when employing this individualised concept, it was often insinuated that there was a moral demand for the individual to contribute to climate action whilst at the same time the consistency and dedication with which this was practiced was being judged (e.g., how consistent the *Fridays for Future* protestors were in their own consumption decisions) *even though* it was deemed to be a personal choice:

> ... when I'm for example hearing that the average age for cheap or short-distance flying is sinking, then I wonder whether they [the young protestors] are contributing themselves [to high emissions]...

<div align="right">Member of Bundestag (CDU)</div>

In line with these individualistic conceptions, it was repeatedly pointed to carbon footprint calculators and individual purchasing decisions when it came to climate action:

> Principally, it begins at your own door. So from the moment that I actively partici-
> pate as a part of society [...] [I have] an individual footprint [...] and therefore I have
> to begin with myself and think about how I move about, what trips I take, what my
> consumer behaviour is like, how I live, whether I heat to 19 degrees, 21, 23 for my
> own well-being or whether I just wear another sweatshirt. So principally it is a bit
> the attitude of the individual, at first. [...] So [climate action] begins with oneself
> and then it is of course rolled out institutionally...
>
> Member of Bavarian state ministry (Freie Wähler)

In relation to this, another interview partner stated:

> So I don't think that the responsibility can be pushed off towards politics. Because
> they are in their own sphere of tension. Say the Green Party won the next election,
> even then they could not simply turn everything upside down, because at some
> point you would anger so many people that [...] the far right would gain from this
> and then climate action plays no role at all any more. [...] So if everybody took re-
> sponsibility, then there would be no need to pass the buck [in the first place].
>
> Teacher (secondary education)

In one interview it was noted that the responsibility question tended to polarise
within the climate debate. Here, three "extreme" positions were identified: this
aforementioned focus on the individual, then a deep trust in innovation that sal-
vaged the individual from foregoing consumption and lastly, voices that were asking
for more regulation, which in this case were deemed to be underrepresented. It was
then problematised that focusing on one of these groups immediately deflected
from the bigger picture as each of them were connected and interdependent:

> So if you say, the individual has to change their consumption behaviour, then you
> overlook that there are framework conditions that determine these consumption
> practices. It is easy to say: don't drive. But when you live in the countryside and
> there is no infrastructure, then you don't have the choice. I believe many of the
> protests in France can be attributed to this dilemma.
>
> Academic (sociology and sustainability)

These yellow vests protests (*Mouvement des Gilets jaunes*) that happened in France
around the time of the interviews were often mentioned when speaking of the need
for public acceptance of political actions. Here, the interview partner recommended
to consider the different actors concomitantly and ask in what kinds of practices
each of their behaviour was embedded respectively. Decision-makers should exam-

ine from what type of demands behaviour emerged from and who must be activated in what manner so that behaviour could unfold differently. So the question also needed to be, who is not acting and what kind of interests were at play in the current situation. This was also emphasised by a different expert:

> ... the incentives in everyday life are such that often one once again opts for another [non climate-friendly] alternative...

> Expert 1 at federal environmental agency

Following from this, we see a particular area of tension emerge between responsibility attributions to the individual versus to the political sphere. One expert said the following in relation to individual responsibility:

> I think, you should not make life too hard for the consumer. When I go to the supermarket and I only want to buy, for example, a tooth brush or some tooth paste, do I have to trace the supply stream all the way back to the country of origin? Do I have to investigate whether there is child labour in the bristles of the tooth brush? Sorry, no-one has that kind of time. [...] You can think about it a bit, as a consumer you can at least avoid the worst excesses, but ...

> Chairperson socio-ecological think-tank

This idea of *avoiding the worst excesses* resembles the recommendation made above in terms of making *strategic* consumption decisions. Overall, there was some agreement amongst the experts that this was as much as what could be asked of the consumer when it came to individual responsibility for climate action.

However, in general, choosing the option with the least climate impact on a voluntary basis was not deemed sufficient by most experts:

> ... simply pleading for a change of behaviour doesn't work. This we know. Already in 2008 there was a voluntary self-commitment for the automotive industry to reduce carbon emissions, of which nothing was implemented in the end.

> Division head climate change private foundation

It was further problematised that climate action could become a divisive force for society, as only more affluent segments would be able to afford the moral absolution granted by 'consuming climate-friendly', rendering the issue somewhat an elite project. In this respect one academic (sociology and sustainability) referred to literature that had found climate action to have become a means of *distinction* through

which the middle class was valorising itself vis-à-vis lower and upper classes. She deemed this to be responsible nevertheless, even when the key motive was distinction and not climate action per se.

The following was also stated by another expert:

> So there are people who do perceive this (need for climate action) and who do suddenly switch their behaviour and that on all levels I think. But of course it is the case that those who are socially deprived, who receive social assistance, who are underprivileged or who feel disadvantaged, always point the finger up to those at the top.

> Head of environmental NGO

One expert nevertheless found voluntary climate action to be underrated within the climate movement, not least because of the potentially positive relational effect setting a good example could have in his opinion. In relation to the aspect of voluntariness, the two conservative politicians were in favour of incentives in the form of nudges so that prices would steer consumers into a climate-friendly direction:

> […] and in fact, this (emission trading scheme) would be the most supreme instrument, the scientists who are currently writing the report for the chancellor all agree on this, to extend this market-based instrument to other sectors, and ideally also to the European context right away. And right now would actually be a historic opportunity with the results of the European election[3].

> Member of Bundestag (CDU)

Accordingly, these two politicians were against prohibiting by law certain climate-harmful forms of consumption:

> We can also try to interfere with the use of taxes. We can introduce incentives. This is still much more congenial than steering things with the use of regulations. I find incentives to do certain things still much nicer [than regulations].

> Member of Bavarian state ministry (Freie Wähler)

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3   Where there had been much demand for more climate action and the Green Party had significantly gained votes.

> If we prohibit the combustion engine by, say, 2020 or 2025, but then we don't have an alternative for the old lady in the Rhön Mountains [...], then the AfD is going to become stronger and stronger...

<div align="right">Member of Bundestag (CDU)</div>

Here, one participant (teacher secondary education) elucidated to people, in this case politicians, potentially harbouring a different concept or definition of responsibility. In referring to an imaginary FDP-politician, he stated that what would be irresponsible from their perspective would be acting according to lobby-interests for his or her own personal advantage. If it was instead the politician's conviction that the market should operate freely and this was best for the climate, then this conformed to this person's understanding of what it meant to act responsibly. Opinions over the right course of action with respect to climate change varied and although the participant himself had a different political orientation and therefore a different concept of climate responsibility, he still classified this as responsible behaviour.

Overall it can be said that there was a trend in these elite discourses to go beyond calling the single consumer to action and beginning to emphasise the need for political action, as this statement exemplifies:

> I actually find it problematic when responsibility for climate action is so vehemently unloaded onto the consumer. And also that ultimately the political courage or the political will for implementation of stricter regulatory measures is somewhat missing.

<div align="right">Expert 1 at federal environmental agency</div>

The politicians interviewed did also (at least in principal) acknowledge their own responsibility:

> Indeed, we politically responsible do, we belong (-)– we cannot further delegate this responsibility.

<div align="right">Member of Bavarian state ministry (Freie Wähler)</div>

Acting responsibly as an individual with respect to climate change was therefore increasingly described in political terms. For example, voting for a kerosene tax even though one enjoyed vacationing by plane was seen as displaying individual responsibility for climate action. One expert said in relation to this:

> … to me it really seems that in Germany seventy percent of people are pro environmental protection […], but of course they don't transfer this into their voting behaviour because there they care more about their own comfort but at least a general willingness [exists] and more people know that something has to happen. We don't have a critical mass yet…

> Chairperson socio-ecological think-tank

Hence, individual responsibility was repeatedly referred to in terms of one's role as political agent or voter. This also echoes the evolution that has taken place in more progressive elite discourses from purely individualistic responsibility attributions that revolve around the power of the consumer and go along the lines of "your grocery receipt is a ballot"[4]:

> So I consider it to be the job of politics. And thus indeed also to lie with the citizenry. But as citizens, who take responsibility for political processes, yes, as voters. As citizens, yes, …

> Academic (sociology and sustainability)

Whilst agreeing that climate change needed to be prioritised more, the politicians however also described the difficulties they faced when trying to move into this direction. Those politicians who were currently part of the government voiced that they in some ways felt treated unfairly as in their own view, they were already doing a lot to advance climate action:

> I always hear, "Yes, politics finally has to do something. Do something! You haven't been doing anything for 30 years" [this refers to the recent accusations made by Rezo in his infamous Destruction of the CDU-video], and that is completely without any foundation.

> Member of Bundestag (CDU)

This politician further admitted that she felt treated unfairly by the message of the video because she personally had done a lot for climate action in the course of her career. She then added that if Rezo had looked into her as a person, the video would have had to have been different. Generally, even though political actors were under increasing pressure to prioritise climate action, there was discontent with how serious politicians were about this:

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4   https://www.derstandard.at/story/1385169710727/der-einkaufszettel-als-stimmzettel.

We simply have to be aware that politics is just not objective or interested in so-
lutions, it works exclusively according to power dynamics.

Division head CC at private foundation

Occasionally it was however also said that politicians were acting increasingly re-
sponsibly, for example by allocating funds for more climate research. Yet it was for
example also repeatedly criticised that political sanctions over the automotive in-
dustry had been much too lax in the aftermath of the *Dieselgate* scandal.

There is a large discrepancy between how current politics are perceived and what
people want politics to be like in the future.

Expert 1 at federal environmental agency

Corporate interests were repeatedly deemed too influential over political decisions
and public opinion was said to mirror this perception. Frequently it was stated that
corporate decision-makers were too profit-driven and self-interested to act respon-
sibly in the light of impending climate change. It was however also recognised that
corporate actors were themselves embedded in certain structures:

The automotive industry is asked to come up with solutions that it is not equipped
to deliver. The automotive industry is stuck in its own system logic.

Expert 2 at federal environmental agency

Especially within large corporations, change was deemed to be slow and sharehold-
ers' short-term interests were also recognised as a hurdle. Here, it was again the sin-
gle consumer in the role of the investor who was thought to hold the responsibility
to invest in climate-friendly sectors (chairperson socio-ecological think-tank).

There was overall a strong call for the reduction of lobbying by the companies
themselves. Moreover, it was found necessary that corporations acted socially and
environmentally responsibly...

... under their own roof instead of doing a little pseudo-CSR. At the same time,
companies are also responsible to shape framework conditions in a way that eco-
nomic aspects are compatible with ecological and social ones, since as long as we
have these preconditions like global competition and so on, the sticks are just not
all the same length...

Academic (sustainability innovation)

One of the experts answered the corporate responsibility question as follows:

> There is some room for manoeuvre. You do not need to jump over each stick and take part in every competition. Within the framework and structure that does exist, you can take responsibility, first and foremost for your employees. You can close contracts that let your people work properly. You can move away a little from exclusive profit optimisation. As much as is possible, yes. And this can mean that you are not competitive in some sectors, yes.

<div align="right">Academic (sociology and sustainability)</div>

Some responsibility was further attributed to NGOs and environmental associations. Their main role was perceived to lie in holding other societal actors responsible for climate action. Holding others responsible or calling them out on supposedly behaving hypocritically was in some instances however strongly rejected:

> I cannot stand this reasoning anymore! The Greens, they drive to the organic supermarket with their SUVs... I don't think that is the client base of the Green Party. I think there is this statistic that green voters earn almost as much as FDP-voters, which I find remarkable, but when I'm at the organic supermarket I don't see an SUV and in front of a discounter I see a whole series of SUVs. I think this comparison is unwarranted. Responsibility, yes, I think a lot of people sit comfortably, they lean back and say, politics has to fix it. ... but please no interdictions!

<div align="right">Head of environmental NGO</div>

Repeatedly, responsibility for climate action was also ascribed to the scientific community in pointing society towards the right direction. One expert said:

> Even if, say, everybody starts living super 'de-growth-like', then this would also have consequences that cannot be foreseen. Yes. [...] I think it is important that this is critically accompanied. There I see a responsibility for the scientific community.

<div align="right">Academic (sociology and sustainability)</div>

One participant (division head CC private foundation) said in relation to this point that he actually found those funding research to be even more responsible than the researchers themselves, and this he found to be particularly true for public funding bodies, as the sums that were given out there were so substantial. Consequently, this placed a large portion of the responsibility once again into the direction of political agents.

Different opinions surfaced however with respect to who held the responsibility to communicate scientific findings. The previous participant said he was against training researchers to become science communicators as this task required a completely different skill-set as the one a scientist typically had. Another participant (expert 2 at federal environmental agency) emphasised that it lay in the responsibility of the scientific community to present knowledge in more practically relevant forms. Repeatedly, it was demanded by the experts that the messages sent out in relation to climate action should be unequivocal and clear in order to stimulate action.

When asked who was responsible for scientific knowledge actually reaching the public, one expert said:

I see this as a two-way-street [between science and the public].

Head of environmental NGO

Lastly, at times it was pointed elsewhere when confronted with the question of responsibility, for example when the Bavarian politician referred to *the lack of creativity on the part of Berlin* (in the context of energy efficiency of private homes) whilst in Bavaria one was supposedly *trying with 100 different measures to get somewhere.*

Hence, as unequivocally as it was stated that responsibility for climate action lay with the whole of society, there was also an explicit mentioning of such 'diffusion of responsibility'. Oftentimes this phenomenon was deemed to lie at the heart of the problem:

People push the responsibility away. Why should I act when 80 million other people don't?

Head of environmental NGO

Here it was noted that often there was preoccupation with ascribing responsibility which deflected away from actually acting responsibly. It was perceived that societal actors often pointed to each other and shifted the blame, which could easily be done due to the many interdependencies that surfaced with respect to the question of responsibility.