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Leveraging social cognition to promote effective climate change mitigation

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1 **Effective environmentalism: leveraging social cognition to promote effective climate**
2 **change mitigation**

3
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5
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11
12 **Abstract:**

13 Effective climate change mitigation is a social dilemma: the benefits are shared collectively
14 while the costs are often private. To solve this dilemma, we argue that we must first understand
15 the nature of human cooperation. This constitutes a shift in the field of psychology and climate
16 change, which has traditionally focused more intensely on risk-perception, miscommunication or
17 time discounting, to explain the lack of climate action. We review three social cognition
18 mechanisms that regulate cooperation: norm detection, reputation management, and fairness
19 computation. We show that these cognitive mechanisms can prevent behavioral change and lead
20 to ineffective policies. At the same time, the very same mechanisms can be leveraged as
21 powerful solutions for effective climate change mitigation.

22
23 **Keywords:**

24 Climate Change, Social Cognition, Reputation, Fairness, Social Norms
25
26
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28

29 Over the past three decades, a number of reasons have been put forward to explain the absence of
30 behavioral change to address climate change. Behavioral scientists have studied issues related to
31 risk perception ^{1,2}, misinformation ^{3,4}, and time discounting ^{5,6} among others to explain people’s
32 collective apathy. The resulting common view is that climate change is hard to address because it
33 is a complex, long-term, and diffused phenomenon. However, individual climate engagement
34 around the world has now hit an inflection point. Today, a majority of people believe that climate
35 change is a serious threat ^{7,8}, that it is already happening ⁹, and that more should be done to curb
36 CO2 emissions ¹⁰⁻¹². Yet, despite increasing levels of climate change awareness, mitigation
37 efforts have been disappointing ¹³. People often fail to adopt behaviors that would be impactful,
38 such as saving home energy or reducing air travel, even when they have access to personalized
39 information about their carbon footprint ¹⁴. Given the high level of concern around climate
40 change, what is keeping people from adopting behaviors or supporting policies that effectively
41 reduce CO2 emissions?
42

43 Recently, empirical evidence has confirmed that the social dimension of climate change
44 mitigation both explains the absence of behavioral change and offers potential solutions.
45 Climate change is a large-scale collective action problem where outcomes are shared but the cost
46 of behavioral change is often individual. Thus people must resist the urge to free-ride on the
47 sacrifices of others while enjoying collective benefits without making any effort. One might
48 initially think that humans’ unique capacities to cooperate provide fertile ground to address the
49 collective action problems posed by climate change. Yet, the cognitive mechanisms supporting
50 cooperation evolved to increase individual fitness, not to maximize total social welfare ¹⁵. As a
51 result, the cognitive mechanisms involved in regulating cooperation do not necessarily lead to
52 the most effective outcome from a societal standpoint.
53

54 Evolutionary biology has demonstrated that cooperation can only evolve if it is conditional: for
55 individuals, the only evolutionary stable strategy is to cooperate if others cooperate, and stop
56 cooperating when others do not cooperate ^{16,17}. The consequence of this constraint is that humans
57 must develop cognitive mechanisms to detect social norms (i.e. whether the norm is to cooperate
58 in my environment), to manage their reputation (i.e. to convince others that I am cooperating),
59 and to compute what is fair and what is not (i.e. to assess whether my benefits are proportionate
60 to my contribution, and to others’ contribution). In this review, we present evidence that these
61 three mechanisms - norm detection, reputation management, and fairness computation - push
62 people to favor reciprocity, observability and equity over effectiveness in climate change
63 mitigation. We contrast this with the behavior that people would adopt if they acted as “effective
64 altruists” (see Box 1 for a definition of effective altruism). We then show that the very same
65 cognitive mechanisms can be leveraged to be part of the solution, as shown in Figure 1. By
66 carefully considering the social dynamics involved, policy makers can make climate change
67 mitigation efforts more effective.
68

69 **Norm detection**

70 To contribute to a collective effort, people need to have sufficient evidence that others will also
71 take action. In fact, people's perception of the right thing to do very much depends on what
72 others are actually doing. Far from acting as strict moral consequentialists who maximize the
73 positive impact of their actions, people often rely on what others believe to determine what is
74 appropriate¹⁸⁻²⁰. For example, although people may know that travelling by plane or eating meat
75 is detrimental to the climate, they may continue to engage in these behaviors if they see others
76 doing so²¹. Previous studies have shown that social norms have a large influence on people's
77 pro-environmental behavior²². Yet, social norms have also been shown to be ineffective or even
78 to backfire in the context of pro-environmental behaviors²³⁻²⁵. Drawing on recent research, we
79 discuss three aspects of norm detection that can be both a problem and a solution for the
80 emergence of effective climate-friendly social norms.

81

82 **Pluralistic ignorance**

83 Because of the costs associated with cooperating with a cheater, people's cheater detection
84 mechanism functions as a smoke detector: people minimize the risk of false negatives (not
85 detecting a cheater) while allowing more false positives to occur (mistaking a cooperative
86 individual for a cheater)²⁶. This means that people are likely to believe that others are not
87 cooperating. This can lead to pluralistic ignorance, a situation in which people privately reject a
88 norm (such as driving SUVs) but go along with it because they falsely assume that most others
89 accept it. For example, Americans hold the inaccurate belief that a majority of their fellow
90 citizens do not care much about mitigating climate change²⁷, and are overly pessimistic about
91 the views of conservatives on climate change²⁸. A study conducted with a representative sample
92 in the USA suggests that part of the reason why the poorest and ethnic minorities are
93 underrepresented in environmental organisations and US government environmental agencies is
94 the widespread false belief that they are not interested in environmental protection²⁹. Because
95 people are very sensitive to cheating, a few visible cheaters may also be enough to make an
96 entire cooperative system collapse^{30,31}. By identifying important areas of pluralistic ignorance,
97 governments and other entities can promote cooperation through simple information campaigns
98^{32,33}.

99

100 **Credibility of norms**

101 For a social norm to be effective in promoting cooperative behavior, people must find it credible.
102 Credibility comes both from the source promoting the social norm and from the content of the
103 norm³⁴. People are more sensitive to social norms when they are promoted by leaders in their
104 community²⁷ or when the individuals promoting the norm have themselves adopted the
105 behavior. For example, a study of a programme that promotes residential solar panel installation
106 in 58 towns in the United States found that community organizers who themselves installed
107 panels through the programme recruited 62.8% more residents to install solar panels than
108 community organizers who did not³⁵. For governments to effectively promote social norms, they

109 must first earn the trust of their constituents. In addition, norms about behaviors tend to be more
110 effective than simple injunctive norms, such as telling people what most others approve of^{36,37}.
111 For example, saying that most people recycle their waste is more effective than saying that most
112 people *approve of* recycling waste. Finally, in some situations norms are more effective if they
113 do not appear as coercive^{38,39}. Normative appeals that seem to limit people's freedom may have
114 the opposite effect because of 'psychological reactance' - a negative feeling arising from threats
115 to one's freedom. For example, telling people to "have fewer children, do your part" may be
116 counter productive. Policy makers can leverage credible sources such as the scientific
117 community to promote norms, and make sure that the content of a norm is descriptive and
118 describes a behavior that reveals preferences. Finally, people are more likely to respect social
119 norms within a group that they expect to cooperate with again in the future. The more local a
120 social norm is, the more effective it will be^{40,41}.

121

122 **Dynamic norms**

123 People care not only about current social norms, they also anticipate what will be normative in
124 the future. Hence, they are more likely to adopt a new behavior if they anticipate the change to
125 persist than if they believe the change is a passing fad. Many behaviors that fuel climate change
126 such as driving alone, eating meat, flying, or having multiple children, are currently the norm. In
127 such cases, using normal social norm messaging will fail to promote change as the norm is
128 indeed unsustainable⁴². Evidence shows that instead, communicating about the dynamic norm --
129 that is the current direction of change in people's behavior -- can have a major impact^{43,44}. For
130 example, Loschelder has shown that by conveying to people a dynamic norm about using a
131 reusable coffee cup rather than a disposable one ("Our guests are changing their behavior: More
132 and more are switching from the to-go-cup to a sustainable alternative."), the proportion of
133 consumers using reusable cups increased by 17.3%⁴⁵. This component of people's norm
134 detection mechanism provides a powerful tool for policy makers. By emphasizing a new trend
135 and showing evidence that it will last, they can promote behaviors that are not yet normative.

136

137 **Reputation management**

138 Given the high benefit of collective actions, being perceived as a good cooperator is crucial for
139 humans. Thanks to their reputation management system, people can anticipate how others will
140 perceive their actions and act accordingly. Having a good reputation is considered so important
141 that people often would prefer enduring physical injury (e.g. losing their dominant hand), rather
142 than having people believe that they are not trustworthy (e.g. becoming known as a Nazi)⁴⁶.
143 Beyond being simply perceived as trustworthy, people compete on traits that signal their
144 willingness or ability to confer benefits upon others such as intelligence, athleticism, but also
145 generosity and benevolence⁴⁷. Indeed, cooperation takes place in a competitive social market,
146 such that people can abandon a cooperation partner in favor of another. When deciding between
147 different options, people take into account both their direct costs and benefits and their indirect
148 reputational costs and benefits, often without any conscious awareness of such considerations.

149 When indirect reputational benefits are larger, people are more likely to be cooperative. For
150 example, studies show that people are more cooperative when they believe that they are being
151 observed, even when simply being exposed to an image of eyes^{48,49}. It is however important to
152 distinguish between the ultimate advantages of having a good reputation and the proximate
153 psychological level. Far from being Machiavellian, evidence shows that people genuinely enjoy
154 helping others, without any conscious representation of the fitness advantage their behavior may
155 lead to⁵⁰. In the following paragraphs, we detail how people manage their reputation and how it
156 can be leveraged to promote effective climate mitigation⁵¹.

157

158 **Observability**

159 When behaviors can be easily identified as signals of cooperation, people are more likely to
160 engage in them. This is the case in the so-called “prius effect”, by which individuals are more
161 likely to buy a hybrid Toyota Prius rather than another electric car model as the unique design of
162 the Prius makes it conspicuously green^{52,53}. Researchers have identified that many pro-
163 environmental behaviors have a signaling function^{52,54,55}. However, many behaviors related to
164 climate change are invisible such that reputational gains cannot take place⁵⁶. This is true of all
165 invisible efforts (e.g., adding a layer of insulation under one’s roof), private voting practices
166 (e.g., going to the polling station to support green policies) and, by definition, of abstinent
167 choices (e.g., not taking the plane or not eating beef). An obvious solution to this problem is to
168 make pro-environmental behaviors more visible. For example, in the Spring of 2020, the British
169 government adopted a new regulation allowing all electric vehicles to have a green flash on the
170 left hand side of the license plate (see Figure 2). This not only makes it easier for local
171 authorities to enforce policies such as reserved parking space for electric vehicles, it also allows
172 people to display their green behavior. In addition, given that governments have limited financial
173 resources to promote mitigation behaviors, they should focus their subsidies on hard-to-observe
174 behaviors such as renovating one’s home insulation⁵⁷.

175

176 **Competence and Effort**

177 People care a lot about enhancing their value to their social network as this will impact how they
178 are perceived and thus whether they are chosen as a cooperation partner⁵⁸. Appearing
179 competent, wealthy, or well-connected are all potential ways to demonstrate a high value to
180 others. However, appearing competent or wealthy can sometimes conflict with appearing pro-
181 environmental. For example, residents in a neighborhood might continue watering their lawn
182 despite calls to save water in order to maintain their image as wealthy neighbors who tend to
183 their lawn. Because environmental activists have on occasion been associated with negative
184 stereotypes such as being eccentric or too militant, people may be reluctant to adopt the
185 behaviors they promote⁵⁹. Similarly, environmentally friendly products are associated with
186 warmth, a trait that is not always desirable for consumers⁶⁰. When mitigation behaviors are
187 aligned with traits that people value, such as openness or innovation, then they are more likely to
188 be adopted.

189

190 Beyond competence, humans also care about how much effort people are investing when
191 cooperating, because all else equal, it is better to cooperate with someone who is willing to go
192 the extra mile. In addition, someone's efforts may be the only available information to evaluate
193 their quality as a cooperation partner. In many cooperative exchanges, the outcome or the impact
194 is hard to determine. For example, it may be hard to estimate someone's carbon footprint, while
195 it is easier to observe how much effort a person is making to reduce it, such as making long
196 journeys by train or boat instead of by plane. As a result, people are often insensitive to true
197 impact when evaluating others' reputation. In an experiment on charity donation, Burum et al.
198 show that people are insensitive to the impact of donation when evaluating the donor's character,
199 but they are sensitive to the effort⁶¹. By aligning effort with impact, policy makers can orient
200 citizens towards more effective mitigation behaviors.

201

202 **Intentions**

203 Evidence shows that intentions matter a lot when people judge each other's character⁶².
204 Achieving a good outcome based on bad intentions is often perceived as much worse than
205 achieving a bad outcome based on good intentions⁶³. Indeed, as consequences are the product of
206 many factors, intentions may be a more reliable cue than impact for someone's value as a
207 cooperation partner. In addition, when consequences or efforts are not visible, intentions may be
208 the only available information to judge someone. Recent empirical research shows that people
209 even punish others if they appear to act too rationally⁶⁴. Montealegre et al. conducted a number
210 of experiments revealing that participants judged people who deliberate more about the
211 consequences of their charity donations to have less positive moral character and to be less
212 desirable as social partners than individuals who relied more on empathy to make their choice⁶⁵.
213 In other words, although prioritising the impact of one's altruistic behavior is good from a
214 societal standpoint, it may come with a reputational cost. This may explain why despite
215 bulletproof rational arguments in favor of effective altruism, this movement is still confined to a
216 small group. For impact to matter as much as intentions, it must be easily measured and known
217 to people. Making the link between people's action and their environmental consequences more
218 clear will allow people to take impact into account more easily. Once causes are linked to
219 consequences, it is much easier to make a case for choosing the most efficacious course of action
220⁶⁶. Thankfully, there has been much progress in that direction in recent years. Impact assessments
221 have become a common practice in many areas of public policy, and even researchers have
222 called for impact-focused environmental psychology⁶⁷.

223

224 **Fairness computation**

225 When engaging in cooperation, people not only decide who they should cooperate with, but also
226 how the costs and benefits of cooperation should be shared. Research shows that our fairness
227 computation mechanism evaluates the costs and benefits based on the outside options available
228 to people⁶⁸. Individuals with more valuable outside options are usually given a larger share of

229 the benefits, thus ensuring that a cooperative interaction is advantageous to all parties involved.
230 To sustain cooperation, people constantly monitor the costs and benefits accrued to others, for
231 example how much effort people from other countries are making to reduce CO2 emissions. This
232 helps people identify the appropriate response, such as changing their lifestyle drastically or
233 spending little effort on reducing emissions. This sort of computation is constantly happening in
234 people's minds, most often beyond their conscious awareness⁶⁸. When people feel like the cost
235 and benefits of cooperation are not fairly distributed, they will refrain from cooperating. The
236 allocation of costs and benefits depends on specific principles, and is often deemed more
237 important than the aggregate outcome of cooperation. A good illustration of that is the fact that
238 citizens in low-income countries are less supportive of international agreements forcing their
239 country to take climate change mitigation measures than are citizens in wealthier nations and
240 tend to think that high-income countries should make more effort to protect the environment⁶⁹.
241 By understanding how fairness is computed, policy makers can design mitigation policies that
242 gather more support.

243

244 **Fairness depends on perceived status quo**

245 The fair allocation of costs and benefits to individuals who are cooperating depends on the
246 perceived status quo. Indeed, costs and benefits are calculated according to a given baseline,
247 which includes the outside options of each individual⁷⁰. People who have different perceptions
248 of the status quo may have a hard time agreeing on what constitutes a fair outcome. Perhaps the
249 most dramatic instance in which status quo perception matters is for a country's pledge to reduce
250 CO2 emissions⁷¹. If people consider that the status quo is the current emissions level, then all
251 countries should make commitments proportional to their current emissions and to their ability to
252 mitigate them⁷². However, if people consider that the appropriate baseline is the status quo *ante*,
253 which corresponds to the state of the world before the industrial revolution, then western
254 countries such as the United States, Canada or members of the European Union, who have
255 already contributed to more than 50% of the global cumulative CO2 emissions should
256 compensate this disproportionate historical contribution to climate change⁷³. Status quo
257 considerations may also affect more local decisions, such as how to allocate public space
258 between drivers, pedestrians and bicycles. If one considers that the baseline is that streets are
259 mostly designed for cars, then any policy aiming at increasing bicycle paths will be seen as a loss
260 for car drivers. However, if one considers that the relevant baseline situation is one where cities
261 are built for all people and not just car drivers, then such policies will be construed as claiming
262 back what rightfully belongs to pedestrians and cyclists. Changing our frame of reference can
263 therefore have a huge impact on how we see the world⁷⁴. By reframing the status quo, policy
264 makers can increase the perceived fairness of environmental policies and thus garner more
265 support.

266

267 **Fairness over effectiveness**

268 People often value fairness above and beyond the aggregate outcome of a given action. In other
269 words, people’s sense of fairness does not follow consequentialist principles, which favor “the
270 most good for the most people”. For example, a majority of people are unwilling to increase cure
271 rates for a large group if it comes at the cost of reducing cure rates for a smaller group ⁷⁵.
272 Additional examples include that most people will favor income distributions that are more equal
273 rather than those with higher total income⁷⁶; prefer retributive justice (in which the punishment is
274 proportional to crime) to deterrence, even though basing punishments on deterrence leads to
275 lower crimes than basing punishments on retribution ⁷⁷; and condemn pushing one person off of
276 a footbridge to stop a trolley from killing five people further down the tracks ⁷⁸. When
277 individuals must decide between different environmental policies, they will favor fairness as
278 much as effectiveness ^{79–81}. Policies that are seen as unfair have very little chance of success, as
279 the recent example of the “Yellow Vest” movement in France has shown ^{82,83}. The movement
280 started after the government announced a new tax on carbon that would lead to increases in gas
281 prices (which predominantly would affect poorer rural communities commuting by car to work),
282 without impacting kerosene prices (which would affect richer individuals travelling by plane). If
283 policy makers are to gain support for far reaching regulations such as a universal carbon tax, they
284 must take into account their perceived fairness by the general population.

285

286 **Outstanding questions**

287 Our review highlights a critical need for further research on at least three fronts. First, more
288 research should be done on the dynamic component of social norms. Experiments should be
289 conducted to identify how new social norms can emerge rapidly in a group and how to use
290 network analyses to target individuals who will accelerate the adoption of the norm. By
291 understanding the dynamics of social norms, we can steer groups towards reaching a moral
292 tipping point: a threshold beyond which it will become a moral obligation to adopt
293 environmentally virtuous behaviors. Second, more research should be done around the
294 promotion of effectiveness as a moral standard. To mitigate global warming, people will not only
295 need to change their behavior, they will have to systematically adopt those behaviors that are
296 most effective at reducing their carbon footprint. Making people adopt an “effective
297 environmentalist mindset” is a central issue for climate change mitigation. Finally, as many
298 economists and climatologists have argued, large scale policies such as a carbon tax are essential
299 tools for effective climate change mitigation. As such, further research on the acceptability of
300 these policies and the factors influencing perceived fairness is crucial.

301

302 **Leveraging people’s social cognition to accelerate the sustainable transition**

303 Cooperation is supported by dedicated cognitive mechanisms and can be seen as an adaptation to
304 solve humans’ collective action problems. By detecting social norms, managing their reputation
305 and computing what is fair, people ensure that they benefit from their cooperative endeavors.
306 Climate change is a perfect example of a social dilemma in which people’s social cognition plays
307 a large role. Even seemingly unrelated issues, such as informational deficits, can make more

308 sense when studied through the lense of social cognition. For example, one might wonder why
309 many people are unaware of the most effective ways to mitigate climate change. A simple
310 answer would be that people do not have access to enough information. However, careful
311 consideration might reveal that the real problem lies in people’s motivation to become informed.
312 People have the ability to become very knowledgeable in domains where information is hard to
313 access, such as medical information about rare diseases, when they are motivated enough. In the
314 case of climate change, a lot of information is accessible online for free on how to reduce one’s
315 carbon footprint. Yet, people do not actively seek this information because they would gain little
316 benefit from it. Indeed, one’s marginal impact is negligible and the reputational benefits from
317 being more effective are also trivial, or could even be negative. By studying this issue from a
318 cooperation perspective, it becomes clear that people have little incentive to identify effective
319 strategies when the benefits are shared collectively. Worse, they may think that knowing the true
320 cost of their behavior will force them to align their behavior with this new information or run the
321 risk of appearing hypocritical. People’s social cognition can often act as a barrier for change as
322 people will consider reciprocity, observability and equity over efficiency. However, by
323 understanding people’s social motivation, policy makers can leverage people’s social cognition
324 to accelerate the sustainable transition.

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Box 1: Effective altruism

Effectiveness is often defined as the size of the impact relative to the resources used to create such an impact. Under this definition, someone spending 100 euros to avoid 1 ton of greenhouse gas emissions is more effective than another individual spending 200 euros to avoid the same amount. This concept has gained some traction, moving from the field of engineering and economics to a diversity of domains such as organisation management or even charity.

The movement “Effective Altruism” was created in the late 2000’s around individuals such as Toby Ord, William MacAskill, and Peter Singer. This movement advocates being impartial and prioritizing causes that are great in scale, highly solvable, and tractable⁸⁴. This movement encourages its members to donate to charities that are effective, leading to the largest positive impact per amount spent. It also helps people define what career to choose to maximize their positive impact given their skill set⁸⁵.

We define effective environmentalism as giving priority to mitigation efforts that have the most impact per amount of resources invested. For example, an individual deciding between spending 100 euros to buy organic groceries or spending 100 euros to finance a solar powered stove in a developing country should prioritize the latter as the environmental impact will be larger. Similarly, policy makers deciding between allocating resources to providing all citizens with a composting bin or improving public transportation should prioritize the latter.

So far, the effective altruism movement has been confined to an active but small community, located mainly in the United States and United Kingdom. In order for this movement to gain traction, it should take into account people’s social cognition. Many studies have shown that people’s intuitions often go against principles of effective altruism, such as the idea that geographic distance should not affect our willingness to help people. By taking people’s psychology into account, the effective altruism movement can become more popular.

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330

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Box 2: The case of meat eating

Reducing meat consumption represents a major opportunity to mitigate climate change⁸⁶ with 14.5% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions coming from the livestock sector⁸⁷. In addition, there are few structural barriers to adopting a plant-based diet. Not only is such a diet often cheaper, it is nutritionally adequate and may provide health benefits for the prevention and treatment of certain diseases⁸⁸ and plant-based alternatives are easily accessible in most developed economies. Some informational barriers may still be an obstacle to adopting a plant-based diet, such as the belief that eating meat is important to stay healthy⁸⁹ or a lack of information regarding the environmental footprint of meat. Yet, many people frequently eat meat despite being well-aware of the negative impacts of these behaviours and having the means to make different choices¹⁴.

Taking into account people's social psychology is essential to encourage them to reduce their meat consumption⁹⁰. Wyker & Davison have shown that **normative beliefs** regarding how much one's friends, family, and colleagues believe one should follow a plant-based diet are strong predictors of intentions to do so⁹¹. People may suffer from **pluralistic ignorance** on the issue of reducing meat consumption. Although many people may privately believe that reducing meat consumption is important to mitigate climate change, they may hold the false belief that a majority of people would disagree with them. In addition, eating meat is the current norm, offering little social pressure for people to change their behavior⁹². However, as Sparkman and colleagues have shown in multiple experiments, when given information about the **dynamic norm** - that is the increase in the number of people switching to vegetarian diets - people are more willing to select vegetarian options^{43,44}. From a **reputation management** perspective, reducing meat consumption raises two issues. First, people's dietary choices are hard to observe, creating little incentives for people to reduce their meat consumption, for example when eating at home. Second, eating less meat may conflict with other aspects of one's reputation, such as appearing like a generous host⁹³. As a result, people may gain little reputational benefits from adopting a vegetarian diet. By making dietary choices more conspicuous and by aligning people's values with plant-based diets, policy makers and companies can encourage people to reduce their meat consumption. Finally, **equity concerns** may also impact people's dietary choices. People may perceive the reduction in meat consumption as an unfair cost placed on meat producers. Policy makers should thus ensure that no segment of the population is unfairly affected by such dietary changes.

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Figures:

Cognitive Mechanisms Supporting Cooperation



Adapted Policy Interventions



NORM DETECTION

- 🧠 People tend to underestimate the proportion of cooperators.
- 🧠 People are sensitive to the credibility of social norms.
- 🧠 People only respond to norms that are already prevalent.



- ✓ Make social norms more visible.
- ✓ Focus on action rather than opinions, use local community leaders to promote a norm.
- ✓ For behaviors that are not widespread, communicate about the dynamic norm.⁵

REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

- 🧠 People prefer engaging in observable behaviors.
- 🧠 People are insensitive to impact when judging other's efforts.
- 🧠 Maximizing impact can backfire as people will be seen as too calculating.



- ✓ Make sustainable behaviors more visible.
- ✓ Make the impact more direct and understandable.
- ✓ Make the most impactful behavior the default option.

FAIRNESS COMPUTATION

- 🧠 People will often prefer fairness over efficiency when deciding between policies.
- 🧠 People base their fairness computation on their perceived status quo (e.g. "streets are for cars").



- ✓ Include redistributive programs in policies and communicate about their impact.
- ✓ Provide information to help people change their vision of the status quo (e.g. "streets are for pedestrians and cyclists").

339

340

341 **Figure 1.** Cooperation between humans is supported by three cognitive mechanisms, (1) norm detection,
342 (2) reputation management, (3) fairness computation. These cognitive mechanisms evolved to make
343 cooperation beneficial at the individual level, which can often lead to ineffective outcomes at the
344 collective scale. For example, people's fairness computation mechanism induces them to favor equity
345 over effectiveness when supporting public policies. By taking into account the nature of human social
346 cognition, policy makers can promote more effective behaviors. For example, by including redistributive
347 programs in policies and communicating about their impact, policy makers can gather more support for
348 environmental policies.

349

350



351
352 **Figure 2.** In the fall of 2020, the UK government implemented a green number plate policy for electric
353 vehicles. The government argues that “the plates will make it easier for cars to be identified as zero
354 emission vehicles, helping local authorities design and put in place new policies to incentivise people to
355 own and drive them.” This policy will also allow individuals to signal more easily their commitment to
356 reduce their CO2 emissions and thus improve their reputation.

357

358

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