



## How Researchers Changed the World Episode 9

### Anja Kollmuss: Climate policy and individual action: two approaches, one climate emergency

**AK:** Of course, I would love to have an influence. I would love to contribute to a more sustainable world, so it was in some sense, yes that I felt like I could have a bigger impact, but it wasn't so much that I felt like I could change the world. It was more that I felt I could more easily live in this world while trying to make a difference.

Because I find, if you look at what is happening, what the human species is doing to its environment, it's so dramatic, it's so huge that sometimes it can be hard to take. So I think, you know, having a job where you are trying to make a difference, helps me to psychologically cope with the enormity of the issues.

**KR:** That was Anja Kollmuss. The 'enormous issue' that she speaks of is, of course, climate change and the impact of humans on planet earth. Anja has focused her career around helping to mitigate the effects of climate change, and she's done this in two distinct ways.

She began her career as a researcher, looking at how best to motivate individual people to behave in an environmentally positive way. Now she works as a climate policy advisor, researching and advising on effective climate mitigation policies at the level of governments and organisations.

When it comes to overcoming climate change there's always a debate about what the best approach is. Do we need to focus on individual action and changing behaviors? Or should we be looking to businesses and politicians to enforce change from the top? Anja's career aptly embodies this dichotomy, so she's the perfect person to explore the debate within this episode of How Researchers Changed the World.

*[How Researchers Changed the World introductory music]*

**KR:** Welcome to How Researchers Changed the World: a podcast series which will demonstrate the real-world relevance, value and impact of academic research; and highlight the people and stories behind the research.

My name is Dr. Kaitlyn Regehr, I'm an academic researcher; an author and a scholar of digital and modern culture – and I'm interested in how new technologies can broaden the reach and real-world impact of academic research.

In today's episode, we're speaking with Anja Kollmuss and exploring her research into the motivation behind and impact of individual action against climate change. Specifically, we'll be unpacking her 2002 Masters thesis: 'Mind the Gap: Why do people act environmentally and what are the barriers to pro-environmental behavior?' We'll also discuss what led her to move away from this focus on individual actions, and into the top-down world of policy.

**AK:** I think one of the things that still strikes me is that we know very well, just knowing what's happening or knowing what you should do doesn't lead you to change your behaviour. I mean this is very common sense, we all know this from our personal lives and the research has very clearly shown that - I elaborate on that in this paper. And nevertheless, I think to get rid of that belief kind of on an emotional level is not easy. So if you are emotionally invested in the topic it's hard for you to imagine that another person, once they know, once they are



given the information, will not care.

And I think that is something that often, still today, leads to misunderstandings and leads to conflict, that, you know, people in the environmental movement think well, 'how could you not care' about these things when you hear about them? When you hear about loss of biodiversity, when you hear about climate change, when you hear about topsoil loss and desertification and the loss of freshwater, and all these things. How could you not care? And of course, we human beings are very complex creatures and what triggers one human being emotionally does not necessarily trigger another one.

That I find interesting and that's something that I still, to this day, grapple with. I think it's an important question. How do you make...how do you bring people on board? How do you create political acceptance for policy that is needed? I mean, when it comes down to it you know the science is very clear, we are in an emergency right now and if we don't act within the next 10 years the IPCC says, on climate change, and climate change is not the only crisis we're facing, then we're basically going to live in a world where it's going to be very difficult to keep civilisations the way we know them now.

**KR:** Bringing people on board to help tackle climate change is critical in this time of climate crisis. Anja herself was 'on board' with this from birth thanks, in part, to her being born in Switzerland. Switzerland is a country that often tops the Environment Performance Index, an annual report which ranks how environmentally sustainable the world's nations are.

In 1971, when Anja was still a child, 92.7% of Swiss people voted for an article to be added to the country's constitution which would be dedicated specifically to the protection of the environment. This led to the formation of the Federal Office for the Environment, Forests and Landscape being founded in the same year.

So Anja grew up in an atmosphere where caring for the environment was important and prominent. But when she left Switzerland to study in the United States of America, she was shocked...

**AK:** I grew up in a very environmentally aware household and I think also in the 70s and 80s, there was more of an environmental awakening in society, especially in Switzerland. If I compare it to now, I think people, at least in my circles, were more aware and tried to behave in an environmentally sound way. Of course, we all back then, still consumed much less than we do now. We fly much more now, we consume much more, we have a bigger footprint in terms of the houses we live in and the cars we drive and so on.

So when I came to the US, you know, I really had a culture shock and partly it expressed itself through realizing how really, being able to see how in the US there is little opportunity and little awareness to act in an environmentally sound way. So there is...public transportation is not very well developed. People drive very big cars. People live in much bigger houses, especially in the suburbs. The houses are built poorly in most cases. They are poorly insulated or not insulated at all. And people use a lot of disposables. So it's the things that are super tangible that really struck me.

I think in the beginning I was quite, I was quite sad about it, I was quite despairing about it and it was probably partly also because I had a culture shock. And that's really what motivated me to then start really delving into it and learning more about environmental policy and also about environmental behavior.

**KR:** Whereas Switzerland had been a very environmentally aware place to live, it seemed that people in America had less awareness about the environmental impact of their day-to-day actions. Anja's desire to understand this



cultural difference was the start of her path as a researcher.

Her first port of call was to try and understand what makes people choose to change their behavior for the good of the environment, so that she could work to promote this. She focused on this interest in her Masters in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning, at Tufts University in Massachusetts - and this became the thesis which we're exploring today.

**AK:** I wanted to find out, or I wanted to think more deeply about what makes people act in an ecologically sound way and how can you foster that kind of behavior and what is needed and what are the barriers?

And so what I did was I read a lot of research and I had a German friend who worked in a similar area and he actually gave me a lot of research that was published by German researchers. You know, this is research that I did around 2000, so it was before the internet was really big. So the research still involved going to the library and checking out journals and leafing through books and finding the right chapters.

So I spent a lot of time reading what other people had already thought about and then I tried to synthesize it all into a larger framework. Not so much with the intention to give the one definite answer but really to be able to put it in a context where I and hopefully the reader, can think more about these different factors and maybe then use it for their own research, or at least I didn't when I wrote it, I didn't think about that, but this is what happened in the years since, that people have used it to think about their own research, to come up with the lines for their own research projects.

**KR:** This type of research paper is known as a Literature Review: a comprehensive summary of existing research on a particular topic. It allows limitations and gaps in knowledge to be brought to light, highlighting areas where future research is needed. In Anja's case, her review more than stood up to such a task. Since publication in 2002, Anja's paper has been read over 80,000 times and cited over 2000 times. It's clear from these numbers alone that it has been an incredibly impactful piece of research, but the impact goes beyond the numbers...

**AK:** It just, when it was published it made quite a big splash and there were responses and people criticizing it and then people criticizing the ones who criticized it and so on and so on. And then the really interesting thing for me and really exciting thing is that a lot of people contacted me and asked me, you know "I read your paper. I'm trying to design this research project. Would you be willing to give me feedback and tell me your thoughts on it?" So I have students really from all over the world, really all over the world, contact me and say, you know, "we read your paper and now I have to write my thesis and I'm thinking of looking at environmental behavior in my school or in my city." So, I've had many, many really interesting conversations with people about how do you think about environmental behavior? What is important? How do we encourage people? What does it mean for education? What does it mean for primary education? What does it mean for informal education settings? This I found, it's very satisfying. It's a lovely thing to have happen to a piece of research one has written.

I mean it's great to feel like I've had...I was able to...a little bit influence the world. Because so often when you write research papers, you put in a lot of effort. I mean writing research takes a lot of time and a lot of effort and often you don't get the response you hoped for. Often it just goes unnoticed. So it's nice if you have a few papers where you feel like, wow, other people have read it and it has helped other people and it has helped push the envelope a little bit.



**KR:** After the completion of her masters and the publication of this paper, though, Anja began to question whether this was the right approach to climate change mitigation. Her career trajectory took a turn away from studying the environmental behavior of individuals. Stay tuned to find out where this turn took her, after the short break.

*[Advertising break: intro music]*

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*[Advertising break: outro music]*

**KR:** Before the break we were about to discover why Anja started to move away from her focus on individual behavior as a way to overcome climate change.

**AK:** It's actually been interesting to read the paper because I realized that I started out very much focusing on the behavior, on the individual, on what shapes an individual's behaviors and what do we need to do to change an individual's behavior. And I've really moved from that to a more of a policy view. More of a view that the answer is politics and lies within policy making and the economy. So I've, basically, I think I switched my view from a more personal to a more maybe, societal view for a focus in my work.

**KR:** Anja started to think that politics could be a more powerful route to tackle the climate change emergency than individual action. But why was this?

**AK:** I think in many ways, it's easier. Easier to get substantive change through policy. I think it is too much to ask each individual to be aware of all the ways they impact the environment. There's just no way everybody...it's asking for too much mental space to be invested in this question, if you say each individual is responsible for all this.



**KR:** Asking individuals to change their behavior to be more environmental sounds simple, but it's actually very complex. Deciding which brand of a certain product you should buy to be environmentally conscious in a supermarket, for instance, relies on an understanding of the raw materials, production, transportation, packaging and more. Even Anja, someone who has dedicated her career to environmentalism and cares deeply about the topic, struggles with this.

**AK:** For your personal lifestyle, it's really clear you shouldn't fly, and you shouldn't eat red meat, or you should do both of those things at the minimum level. Then you should just buy less stuff and live in a smaller place and drive less. I mean it's not that, it's not rocket science. It's just that some of those choices are hard to make. Like I lived in the US for 17 years and I traveled back to my family in Switzerland every year and I always felt guilty about it, but I did it nevertheless because my personal needs trumped my ecological conscious.

In many cases I think it's much better to simply have policy. For example, to just have policies that now the only lights that are allowed, or light bulbs that are allowed are LEDs or alternatives that are just as efficient. So the consumer doesn't have to ask, "is this the most efficient one?"

**KR:** At the start of the episode I mentioned the introduction of article 24 into the Swiss constitution in 1971, and the consequent creation of the Federal Office for the Environment, Forests and Landscape. It's this kind of policy introduction which can have a huge influence on a country's emissions. Anja gave a current example too...

**AK:** For example, in Switzerland we're currently debating our climate laws and one of the things the politicians are discussing is if we should introduce a tax on airplane tickets. People might not fly less, they might not be willing to say, "okay, I'm not going to take this flight because it's not good for the climate." But they might be more willing to accept a tax, which on the whole, given that there's quite some elasticity around flying, in other words, people will shift their behavior if the price is too high, it might have a bigger impact than if one person doesn't do one single flight.

**KR:** Top-down change, such as policy interventions, and bottom-up change through individual action, are often seen as two very separate ways to tackle climate change.

Clearly, though, the two are deeply interconnected. In these examples, Anja has shown how changes in policy at the top will directly impact individual behavior. At the same time, movements such as Extinction Rebellion and the School Climate Strikes - which have both made a huge splash recently - demonstrate that individual action can also be the spark for politicians to take notice and prioritize climate change as an issue. So what are Anja's thoughts on this supposed dichotomy?

**AK:** You know I think it's a little bit unfortunate that the two of them are pitted against each other. Now with the climate strikes for example, we hear a lot of criticism, people saying, "well those young people, they still fly around and well they should start with their own lives." And on the other hand, I also know people who say, well it doesn't, even climate researchers would say, "well it doesn't really matter what I do, because it has such a small impact. So, I don't care if I fly around, because I work on policy."



I think they are two different sides of the same coin. So there are different ways to look at this question. There is kind of the ethical or moral dimension of it. And for me personally, I don't have any illusions that my personal behavior will change the world, but it feels to me like I have a moral obligation to act in an ecological way.

**KR:** This debate is far from over. There's much research into the positive ways that we can influence policy and individuals when it comes to climate change, and Anja's work is in front and center of that. But we're still far from finding a way to truly tackle the impact of our human activity on the environment.

**AK:** What I would say though is that all these streams or all these movements, have of course been far outweighed by kind of the neo-liberal consumer machine. I mean in the last 30 years things have quite changed. I mean we consume much more than we used to 30 years ago. That has been promoted. This is companies and politicians promoting an increasing consumption to ensure an increase in economic growth. There's a lot of research around that. It's quite clear that this is what's happened and of course, that's kind of.... we have to keep this in mind. That this is, in a way, this is what we are up against.

So yes, it's great that we have much more say vegan options now and bike lanes, that's all wonderful. We are still in free-fall. We're nowhere near kind of slowing the...what should I call it? The descent into a world that is in many ways a catastrophic world and for many people, will be a catastrophic world.

**KR:** This is shocking, but it's true. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report stated that if global warming continues at current rates, we will reach 1.5 degrees of warming between 2030 and 2052, and 2 degrees by the end of the century. 1.5 degrees of warming is generally accepted as the 'danger line' amongst climate scientists. If we cross the 'danger line', scientists believe that the impacts of climate change will lead to a high level of suffering.

**AK:** People then sometimes say, "well why do you still do this if you just think it's too late?" I am not saying it's too late. I mean it makes a huge difference if we have a 2 degrees warmer world or if we have a 3 or 4 degrees warmer world. And of course, we have already lost a tremendous amount. There's no way around having to accept this. We've lost tremendous amounts of biodiversity already and we will lose even more, but that doesn't mean that we should just say, let's keep on dancing on the Titanic.

**KR:** So it's clear we need to act. This episode has explored the debate around individual and collective action against climate change, so we felt it apt to close our discussion by asking Anja what she would say is the most important thing we can do as individuals to mitigate climate change?

**AK:** I always stress that the most important thing that people can do, and that's something actually that I miss in my article, and if I had to re-write it, I would certainly put a stronger focus on that which is, that if you really want to have a big impact you must be politically active. That's where we really can make the big changes.

**KR:** To find out more about this podcast and today's topic, visit [howresearchers.com](http://howresearchers.com). We'd also love to hear your feedback on today's episode. You can leave us a review on your podcast provider, or send us your thoughts on



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In the next episode we'll be speaking to researcher Joseph Kahne about how social networks impact political engagement, and if the growth of social media has changed how political campaigns are run.

This podcast was written and produced by Monchü; recorded at Under the Apple Tree Studios. Our producers were Ryan Howe and Tabitha Whiting; with editing, mixing and mastering by Miles Myerscough-Harris at WBBC. We would like to acknowledge the incredible support of Taylor & Francis Group, with a special thank you to Elaine Devine and Clare Dodd.

I'm Dr Kaitlyn Regehr, join us next time for How Researchers Changed the World. Thanks for listening.