

# Can behavioural science stop climate change?

With households responsible for [72% of global greenhouse gas emissions](#), Dr Jako Volschenk, senior lecturer in Strategy and Sustainability at Stellenbosch Business School, says on World Earth Day (22 April) it is time to stop waiting on governments to fight climate change, and to focus on how the behavioural changes of individuals can achieve the substantial reduction.



Image source: skigh\_tv from [Pexels](#)

[The Emissions Gap Report 2022](#) found that the world must cut emissions by 45% to avoid global catastrophe and the latest report by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) provides a last urgent warning to humanity to reduce carbon emissions to keep the earth from warming to 1.5°C, cautioning that the pace and scale so far are insufficient to tackle climate change.

“At this threshold, the change in climate will become irreversible due to tipping points in our climate system. Despite warnings from the IPCC and other studies over the last 30 years, governments have been unable to reach significant agreement about what should be done, and how to do it. Geopolitical lobby camps also make it extremely unlikely that consensus will be reached and is time to admit that we cannot expect global agreements to do what we should do as individuals,” says Volschenk.

## Meat production contribution to climate change

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, the production of [beef and cattle milk are primary drivers of climate change](#) contributing 41% and 20% of global greenhouse gas emissions. This is in stark contrast to the [transport industry contributing about 14%](#), with lesser impact than the meat production industry.



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In South Africa, about 14 million cattle are produced at factory farms at any given time, to supply the ever-growing demand for meat by an expanding population. To satisfy the country's appetite for meat, approximately 80% of South Africa's land is

used for [agricultural purposes](#) with 69% thereof used for grazing. The majority of South Africa's crops are fed to animals intended for human consumption, which uses [41% of total agricultural water](#) used to supply water for these crops, adding pressure to our dwindling natural resource.

He says that meat production is by far the greatest threat to global warming and that rather than relying on individuals voluntarily being pro-earth which is not nearly sufficient to achieve drastic reductions, policies should target lifestyles through behavioural sciences.

"Behavioural science, the use of gentle nudges to incentivise climate-centred choices around the use of meat and dairy, travel and energy, can proactively decrease consumption and demand, is our only hope right now. These nudges would preserve the freedom of choice but rather steer people in a direction to environmentally-friendly choices," says Volschenk.

"Most people are only likely to change their behaviour if everyone else, including businesses and governments, are collectively making a concerted effort. People naturally don't like changes in their lifestyles and would be reluctant to be forced to consume less meat, travel less or opt for more energy-friendly appliances, unless the transition is framed in a positive way to increase their motivation."



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## Ways to employ nudges

Volschenk says nudges imply that nothing is forbidden or enforced and implemented as passive and active prods.

"Passive nudges guide consumers to more climate-friendly options or removes obstacles in making better choices. For example, by moving vegetarian dishes from the vegetarian to the open menu in restaurants, it typically doubles the orders for that dish, whilst supermarket layouts can influence healthier options and purchase behaviour in store. Similarly, when airlines adapt their 'chicken or beef' meal offering, to include one meat and one vegetarian, the uptake for vegetarian would be far greater.

"Active nudges require that consumers already have the intention to buy products with a lower carbon footprint. In such cases, consumers find it difficult to shop around due to inconsistent reporting of information. If all labels on products have a standardised display of the carbon footprint, the products can better guide consumers in their choices," he says.

"[A restaurant in the UK](#) slashed the price of their meat-free meatballs by half to reflect carbon emissions saved by eating plant-based. Covid-19 has also illustrated that travelling to meetings is not a necessity. Using technology for businesses to connect has reduced the need for travel and [statistics for global air travel](#) shows that numbers are still 28% lower than in

2019 – a positive outcome from the pandemic.”



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### Make a FEAST

Volschenk suggests that for businesses to reduce the footprints of their operations, or their products, they need to make their interventions a FEAST: fun, easy, attractive, social and timely.

“In Berlin, many of its citizens avoided public transport during the pandemic, and in a response the city took advantage of the situation by providing a timely passive nudge by [adding 25kms of cycling lanes](#) after Covid-19. As a result, bike traffic rose by 25% in the last two years. Like Berlin, many European cities have found that bicycle lanes are fun, make it easier for cyclists, can reduce travel times, and create a friendlier and more social environment.

“Businesses should also start normalising greener consumption through messaging and social influence. The ‘Don’t Mess with Texas’ campaign has reduced litter in the state using multimedia, influencers and traditional media to create a sense of pride amongst its people.”

The world’s environmental crisis had been caused by people, and we are the only solution in curbing climate change. By understanding our behaviours, we can change norms and personal behaviour to bring about systemic change that does not have to wait for international agreements.

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