
We should halve the Danes' global climate footprint by 2030

Danish climate change policy is about to enter a new phase. As Denmark's territorial emissions are reduced, the emissions that occur outside Denmark's borders, because of our high consumption levels, will make up a relatively large share of our total climate footprint.

Therefore, there is a growing need for these emissions to be addressed and reduced. While the climate change agenda in recent decades has focused on energy systems and actions far from citizens' everyday lives, the next phase will involve a number of decisions taking place much closer to citizens' lives. Decisions that need to be taken by citizens in their communities, by workplaces and civil society organisations, and by authorities and politicians in municipalities, regions, and parliament.

Our recommendation for reduction targets for Denmark's consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions:

To create the framework for the next crucial phase of climate action, both Christiansborg and, as an indicative target, in the country's city councils, aim at halving emissions from Danish consumption by 2030 - or a 60% reduction by 2035 - compared to the level in 2020.

In order for this next phase of Denmark's transition towards sustainability to succeed in a democratic and equitable manner, deep and broad public participation is needed, with both national and local action-promoting conversations, activities and communities. The purpose of this white paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the decision-making process and available instruments for such a process. Drawing on the latest practical experience and research, it introduces a holistic approach to sustainable transformation, involving shared responsibility for action and committed collaboration in partnerships. By a holistic approach to climate change and transitioning, we mean systematically looking at supply as well as demand, production as well as consumption at national as well as global levels. This way, we recognise and support the communities we live in, because they are a bridge between the individual and the systems we live in, and thus an important key to enabling and maintaining sustainable lifestyles. Denmark is one of the countries in the world that is best positioned to demonstrate exemplary ways of tackling the challenges of climate change as a shared responsibility undertaken by committed communities. Luckily, research now points quite concretely to a toolbox of interventions that can help our societies through social tipping points to new ways of living well within planetary boundaries. The white paper outlines relevant frameworks for climate policy and action, as well as a range of concrete instruments.

Key points from the white paper

Commitment, potential and action

- the Danish population is ready for a sustainable transition and there is a widespread demand for climate policy leadership. While climate used to be on the agenda only for a few people, over the past decade, it has evolved into an agenda for most.

- Danes are looking for green options and there is a desire across the population for the green transition to be planned and carried out in a fair way. But there is also a need to address any concerns so that more sustainable ways of living are not associated with fewer opportunities and lower living standards.

Consumption-based emissions and reduction potentials

- Denmark's territorial emissions amounted to about 49 million tonnes CO₂e in 2019 (Danish Energy Agency 2021a). However, according to Statistics Denmark, Danish consumption-based emissions amounted to 65.4 million tonnes CO₂e in 2020 (DST, 2021a). The reason for this difference is that the consumption-based emissions include CO₂e emissions from the goods we import from other countries. Territorial inventories only include emissions emitted within the borders of Denmark.

- We Danes buy many things because we are wealthy. This includes many things produced abroad, especially food, cars and many things that have a high impact on the climate, such as electronics, clothes and kitchen appliances.

- Therefore, in order to characterise Denmark as a green pioneer and Danes as green heroes in this narrative, we also need to focus on our high levels of consumption, which as the situation is now, exceeds the planetary boundaries.

- The most polluting consumer goods, both in an international but also in a national context, are food, transport and commodities such as electronics and clothing.

Potential for change in everyday life and consumption

- To achieve sustainable lifestyles, we need to focus not only on the individual level, but also systematically on everyday communities.

- It is in communities that people's practices and culturally determined norms and values are anchored. By taking into account the social dynamics that take place here, practices, habits and norms can be changed.

Role and scope of social actors

- Given the scale of climate change, there is a need to further develop the facilitating role of authorities at all levels. For example, in recent years, the role of municipalities as facilitators in climate change adaptation efforts has become more central in several administrations across the country. However, the part of the climate impact that administrations cannot directly influence through their administrative or planning responsibilities requires other tools to achieve significant reductions.

- Increasing public commitment to the green transition requires investment. This can be promoted in particular through partnerships and cooperation across the state, municipalities, businesses, public libraries and the wider civil society. And it should be anchored in a strong local framework. As numerous examples show around municipalities, they are often anchored in foundations, in public-private partnerships or similar.

- A holistic climate and green transition strategy can usefully promote green citizenship through investment in public education and outreach activities that encourage further participation from more groups in society as co-deliverers, so that representation and appeal are as broad as possible.

Climate policy leadership in the new phase

- Climate policy leadership is about concrete and sector-specific instruments that enable citizens to take joint responsibility and actions that deliver significant reductions in the overall climate footprint. But it is at least as much about taking the lead on climate action and creating the broader framework that fosters public engagement in climate action to achieve systemic effects.

- Sector-specific instruments can usefully address the areas with the greatest reduction potential, which for high-income countries like Denmark are the three areas known as "the car, the steak and the home" consisting of our transport/mobility (via reduced car and air transport, more car-sharing, strategic urban planning and public transport provision that makes it easier to live without a car), food (via a more plant-based diet and less food waste) and energy consumption (via phasing out oil and gas in electricity and heat supply and expanding renewable energy e.g., through energy communities). In addition, there is great potential to reduce our consumption of goods and services (through more renting and leasing, recycling and repairing rather than buying new).

- Areas with great potential to strengthen the broader framework for public engagement in the green transition are: New public narratives on climate action, better consumption-based inventories and databases, reduction targets for consumption-based emissions, climate assessment of policy proposals and decisions, green public procurement and responsible investment, an ambitious and socially equitable green tax reform, and a reduction in fossil advertising. All these areas are further elaborated in Chapter 6.