

Raïsa Carmen and Donald Chapman see car-sharing as a tool leading towards a more sustainable policy

“Not everyone suddenly has to share cars”

Provide raw materials and products with the longest and highest quality service life possible. That is the philosophy of the circular economy. It's an important theme at a time when the climate issue determines the agenda more than ever. The Circular Economy Policy Research Centre brings researchers together. The goal? Looking at the future in a well-founded way. How will the circular economy change our daily lives in the coming decades? This interview series delves into their insights.

Why do or don't Flemish people share cars? Is it an engine for behavioural change? And what is the impact of car sharing on our everyday Flemish surroundings? These are just a few of the questions that researchers Raïsa Carmen and Donald Chapman would like to see answered. Their tool: an online survey with over 2,000 respondents. Their goal: to provide people with alternatives and to give policymakers options.

Online survey

“My research focuses on the consumer. And how can you achieve this better than through an online survey?” researcher Raïsa Carmen starts her story. Together with colleague Donald Chapman, she examines the pros and cons of car-sharing. Raïsa's field of work covers the economic aspect, while Donald examines the impact of car-sharing on the everyday surroundings.

“We were pleasantly surprised by the high response rate to our survey,” says Raïsa. “More than 3,000 people opened our online survey, and over 2,000 of those people answered all the questions.” “And that required a bit of commitment,” adds Donald. “That's because it took our respondents 20 minutes to complete the survey questions thoroughly.”

“We are currently processing all the results, but some trends quickly became apparent,” says Raïsa. “I wrote to many Flemish cities and municipalities asking them to share our survey via their social media. Did enough inhabitants fill in our survey? Then the board could count on a personalised report. Some clear trends emerged in this.”

Guidance for policymakers

“Today, young people in particular are involved in car-sharing. Their contemporaries who do not yet do so don't necessarily show more interest than other age groups. People with

a 'green' heart are more often charmed by the car-sharing concept. And it is especially popular with urbanites. The most frequently cited reason to stop car-sharing? A move to a more rural area."

"Those initial results may not be surprising," Donald joins in. "But they do send an important signal to our policymakers. Because they are the engine for behavioural change. Do you want to take fundamental steps towards a more sustainable mobility policy? Then you need data with which to align your policy."

Raïsa: "Our survey meets this demand by means of a very specific test. We asked our respondents to choose between their own car or a shared car. For each option, we changed a number of parameters. For a new car, for example, these are the type and cost price. With a shared car, this concerns for instance the distance they have to travel to reach the nearest car-share point. We presented these choices to them several times, with different options to choose from each time."

"The most frequently cited reason to stop car-sharing? A move to a more rural area."

"This test teaches how best to motivate people to share cars. Our governments also benefit from this. Because these kinds of experiments provide policymakers with a foothold."

Car sharing as a lever

Donald: "These policy actions also play an important role in my research into the environmental impact of car-sharing. Suppose that car-sharing systems only use electric cars. Then the consequences for our environment may be completely different than when car-sharing companies offer diesel or petrol cars."

"One of our big questions is what are the mobility habits of Flemish people? How often do they choose public transport or cycling? What is the extent of the behavioural change induced by car-sharing? By studying car sharing from different angles, we hope to create a constructive picture of the future possibilities."

Raïsa: "Do we want Flemish people to opt en masse for car-sharing tomorrow? No, we see it more as a lever to make people think about their daily journeys and their mobility behaviour. Does the average Flemish person realise that thanks to car-sharing, there are also other means of transport in addition to the familiar car in the driveway? Then

perhaps our research will already give the first impulse to have fewer cars on our roads and in our cities.”

“Car-sharing is not an end in itself, but it is a means of making people less dependent on car ownership.”

“Are more people leaving their own cars parked on the side to choose car-sharing? In the long run, we risk having at least the same number of cars left over. Not exactly the ideal way to more conscious mobility. Car-sharing is not an end in itself, but it is a means of making people less dependent on car ownership.”

Focus on urbanites

Donald: “So, putting this ambition into practice is the major challenge for our policymakers. The recent yellow vests protests show that there is significant opposition to make car ownership or fuel more expensive.”

Raïsa: “Our research proves that you can involve urbanites into the car-sharing story faster. In rural areas, there is no shared car available on every street corner. Our typical Belgian ribbon development plays an important role in this. It is no easy task to achieve high-performance bus connections there. And so it is completely impossible to reach a shared car within 2 to 5 minutes from everyone’s door in those areas.”

“In rural areas, there is no shared car available on every street corner. Our typical Belgian ribbon development plays an important role in this.”

“But there is that possibility in the city. That’s why we’d better focus on young urbanites. Can we convince them? Then we will succeed in raising awareness among more and more people in the long term. How do we do that? By highlighting the many advantages. More car sharing means fewer parking facilities in the city. The space freed up can be used to improve the infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians.”

Mobi Hub

Donald: "Car-sharing can also boost the market for electric cars. Are interested parties still in doubt today because of the still limited charging possibilities? In that case, the charging points installed by car-share providers also offer a solution to private owners."

Raïsa: "That's just a start. Why not combine all the mobility options in a 'mobi hub'? Various transport options come together at such a hub: parking spaces for (electric) bicycles, parking spaces for shared cars, and stops for public transport. Do you also develop an app that maps out your route and tells you where to find which means of transport? Then you have an ideal combination on your hands."

Veggie burger

"Convincing people and using technology is one thing. Providing the necessary infrastructure is another. To do this, again, you need policymakers who help support these mobility choices. And so it becomes clear once again: car-sharing is not an end goal, but a beginning. Compare it to a vegetarian burger. We do not only have to reduce our car use, but also need to eat more vegetables and less meat. A vegetarian burger is a meat alternative that very much looks like meat. Just like a shared car is almost identical to a private car. The ultimate goal? A reduced meat consumption and a healthy eating pattern."

"Car-sharing is like a vegetarian burger. It offers people an alternative, but actually focuses on reduced consumption."

Donald: "Our next step? When our research results are complete, we want to share our insights with a wider audience. To this end, we are organising a workshop this autumn in which we mainly focus on policymakers. That's how we hope to get the ball rolling. Plus, car-sharing is becoming a lever, now more than ever, for a more sustainable mobility policy."