



Solutions

For a sustainable and desirable future

Published on *Solutions* (<http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com>)

[Home](#) > Finding Cultural Values That Can Transform the Climate Change Debate

Finding Cultural Values That Can Transform the Climate Change Debate

By: [Tom Crompton](#)

Volume 2: Issue 4: Page 56-63: Aug 17, 2011

In Brief:

Responses to climate change currently fall far short of the level of ambition needed to effectively tackle the challenge. But this same inadequacy of response can be seen in approaches to meeting other problems, for example, global poverty or biodiversity loss.

Evidence from social psychology highlights the importance of cultural values in shaping our collective responses to challenges such as these. “Extrinsic” values (those preoccupied with image, social status, and financial success) are associated with lower levels of concern about such problems and lower commitment to addressing them.

Many factors strengthen extrinsic values, yet these are often overlooked in the campaign activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Indeed, many NGO campaigns may themselves inadvertently contribute to strengthening extrinsic values.

“Intrinsic” values (including closeness to friends and family and commitment to the wider community) are associated with behavior that helps to tackle a wide range of social and environmental challenges. Giving careful thought to NGO campaigns and communications, and understanding the influence that business activities and government policies exert on cultural values, can help to strengthen intrinsic values.

This raises the possibility of a wide spectrum of actors—engaged in a range of social and environmental challenges—beginning to work in a more concerted way. This in turn can ensure that—while campaigning for their specific issues—NGOs will also be pursuing their shared interest in working to help strengthen intrinsic values.

Key Concepts:

- Certain cultural values motivate people to express concern about a range of social and environmental problems, and such values are associated with action to tackle these problems.
- These “intrinsic” values act in opposition to “extrinsic” values. Particular values are likely to be strengthened through many aspects of our daily experience, including the media we consume, the advertisements we see, and the public policies we experience.
- In the course of focusing narrowly on particular issues, NGOs may at times work inadvertently to strengthen extrinsic values—even as they achieve progress on specific issues.
- A more concerted approach to tackling social and environmental challenges is needed—one that responds to an understanding of values, the connection between values and behavior, and the way in which some values are strengthened culturally.

There is a wide gulf between the necessary scale of government action on climate change and the scale of response

that governments currently agree on. Essential as it is that the international community continues to work toward a binding agreement for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, this gulf will be difficult to bridge—this was only too apparent at the stalled international climate negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009.

Faltering attempts to secure an international agreement proportionate to the climate change challenge confronting us inevitably raise questions about whether individual countries can ever transcend their economic self-interest in pursuit of the common good. Indeed, the challenge of international action on climate change has the form of the familiar “tragedy of the commons”—a situation in which the pursuit of individual self-interest leads to the unsustainable exploitation of a shared resource. As it relates to the challenge of addressing climate change, it has been characterized in these stark terms: “If we [the United States] clean up our environmental act and the Chinese don’t, we all die anyway and their economy will outperform ours while we live. If we don’t clean up our act, we still all die, but at least we have a stronger economy until then.”¹

This conflict between self-interest and common interest is encountered just as powerfully at the level of individual action. Indeed, realism in international relations is based on the conviction that it is the perceived dominance of self-interest in shaping individual behavior that must inevitably lead nation-states to privilege their own interests above those of the international community.

An individual may well benefit personally from collective efforts to mitigate climate change. But the reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions arising from the steps she takes to reduce her own emissions will have an infinitesimal effect in reducing the impacts of global warming that she herself experiences. As a result, an individual is unlikely to take such steps—as an expression of self-interest—where these steps entail personal costs. This points to the need—in considering both international negotiations and individual behavioral choices—to ask how actors might be encouraged to take steps that are in the common good.

Such encouragement can be made in one of two ways. First, it can focus on those instances where national interest or an individual’s short-term self-interest can be convincingly married with the imperative to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. For example, early adoption of low-carbon technologies is promoted in order to benefit national competitiveness; adopting simple energy efficiency measures is promoted in order to achieve personal economic benefits. Alternatively, encouraging action in support of the common good can explicitly call upon the imperative to act in line with that common good, even where this demands action that departs from national or individual self-interest. I argue for the second approach, because attempts to marry self-interest with the common good—the first approach—often prove short-sighted, for both immediate and more systemic reasons.

At the immediate level, marriages of convenience are rarely without tensions. For example, aside from promoting increased investment in low-carbon technologies, the pursuit of national competitiveness may also provide imperatives for oil exploration in environmentally sensitive areas or for the construction of more coal-fired power stations. Analogously, at the level of the individual home, domestic energy efficiency measures—such as attic insulation—may not always lead to overall savings in greenhouse gas emissions, due to “rebound effects”: having insulated his attic, a person may simply enjoy a warmer house, or he may spend the money that he saves in other carbon-intensive ways. Moreover, a preoccupation with reducing energy bills seems likely to harden public resistance to environmentally motivated policies that would increase energy costs—for example, imposition of an effective carbon tax or disinvestment from cost-effective but carbon-intensive energy sources.

However, understanding how people’s value systems actually work points to a more systemic reason to appeal directly to the common good when attempting to motivate people to respond to environmental and social challenges. Social psychology studies show that people’s behavior in tragedy of the commons dilemmas—such as that presented by climate change—are determined, in part, by the values they hold to be important.² The values that motivate more socially beneficial responses to these dilemmas have been found to be of wider significance than values associated with narrow self-interest; closely related values underpin people’s concern about a wide range of social and environmental problems, people’s motivation to help address these problems, and people’s demands for government action—whether these are expressed by joining public demonstrations or by lobbying elected representatives.³

And yet, at present, a wide range of cultural influences—including, almost certainly, some of the campaigns launched by NGOs themselves—actually serve to reinforce *opposing* values. These opposing values erode people’s motivation to cooperate, undermine their concern about social and environmental problems, and diminish their motivation to adopt behaviors in line with this concern.

In order to grasp the significance of this, it is necessary to understand how people’s values are structured and the influence that values have on attitudes and behavior. A wealth of research in social psychology reveals that some values

are psychologically compatible with each other, such that it is relatively easy to attach importance to these at the same time and to pursue, simultaneously, behaviors consistent with these values. Other clusters of values tend to be in psychological opposition to one another, such that most people find it relatively difficult to attach importance to them at the same time and difficult to pursue, simultaneously, behaviors in line with these values.

People may differ widely in the priority they attach to different values, but the relationships between these values—the patterns of compatibility and opposition—have been found to be remarkably consistent: they are replicated across studies in nearly 70 countries.

For present purposes, it is important to distinguish between two broad classes of values that comprise this dynamic and “universal” system: intrinsic and extrinsic values. Though social psychologists draw an important distinction between intrinsic/extrinsic goals and self-transcendence/self-enhancement values, for simplicity I combine the two concepts into “intrinsic values” and “extrinsic values.”³ Intrinsic values include the value placed on a sense of community and concern for the weak, affiliation to friends and family, and connection to nature. Extrinsic values, on the other hand, include wealth and material success; a concern about image, social status, and prestige; and the exercise of social power and authority.

There are good reasons for expecting values and behavior to be correlated—people may strive for consistency between the values they hold and the behaviors they adopt, and they may well feel rewarded when they act in line with their more important values.^{4–6} As one social psychologist who has worked extensively on the links between values and behaviors writes:

The values that people hold affect their initiation of new goal-directed activities, the degree of effort that they put into an activity, how long they persist at an activity in the face of alternative activities, the choices they make between alternative activities, the way they construe situations, and how they feel when an activity is undertaken either successfully or unsuccessfully.⁷

As might be expected, behavioral choices made after a period of deliberation are related to a person’s values—for example, his or her voting choice. But there is also strong evidence that values correlate with an individual’s behavior even when a person does not consciously reflect on how a particular behavior fits with his or her values—for example, in deciding whether or not to open a door to a stranger.⁵

Research has examined the relationship between values and a range of attitudes and behaviors, at both personal and cultural levels. Repeatedly, individuals and cultures that attach greater importance to extrinsic values are found to be less concerned about global conflict and the abuse of human rights, to be less supportive of arguments for free movement of people, and to be more prejudiced toward outsiders—whether on the basis of race, religion, or gender. They are also less likely to buy fair-trade products, are less concerned about environmental damage, and are less likely to behave in environmentally friendly ways. Finally, people for whom these values are more important are also less likely to engage politically—either with electoral process or by engaging in demonstrations or other civic activities.³

On the other hand, individuals who attach greater relative importance to intrinsic values are more likely to express concern about a range of social and environmental issues and are more likely to adopt behavior in line with this concern.

It is one thing to demonstrate a correlation between the values a person says he or she holds and that person’s behavior. But is there evidence for a causal relationship? Does activation of particular values increase the frequency of particular behaviors in the directions that would be predicted based on the correlations outlined above?

Specific values can be deliberately activated under experimental conditions. For instance, participants in experiments can be given simple tasks, such as rearranging jumbled words to make meaningful sentences that invoke particular values. Participants who are asked to sort words into sentences that activate awareness of financial success (for example, rearranging “high a salary paying” to read “a high paying salary”) are less likely to take subsequent opportunities to behave in socially or environmentally helpful ways than participants in control groups who unscramble neutral words. Following the activation of extrinsic values in such ways, people are found to be less likely to donate to charity, to offer unpaid help, to assist someone with a particular task, or to recycle scrap paper. Conversely, activating intrinsic values is repeatedly found to increase the frequency of socially or environmentally helpful behavior.³

Activating and Strengthening Cultural Values

The significance of cultural values in determining attitudes and behavior inevitably leads one to ask, what is it that determines which values become particularly important at a cultural level?

Although the effects of experimentally activating specific values in the ways discussed above are usually short-term, it seems that many factors serve to strengthen particular values in a more persistent and dispositional way. Values are beliefs about what is important in life, and, like other beliefs, they are partially learned. Thus, people tend to internalize, and attach greater importance to, the values of those around them—the values expressed by their parents, teachers, peers, and cultural role models.

Values are also probably influenced by the commercial marketing that people are exposed to and the media that they consume.^{8–12} Thus, studies show a positive correlation, across different age groups and in different cultures, between exposure to commercial television and the importance people attach to extrinsic values. There is also evidence that increased exposure to commercial television can contribute to this shift in values.^{11,13–18} So, for example, some studies have focused on the impacts of the Channel One scheme in American schools. Schools adopting this scheme receive donated telecommunications equipment in exchange for encouraging pupils to watch short commercial television broadcasts during lesson breaks. Pupils attending a school that had adopted this scheme were found to attach greater importance to extrinsic values than pupils in a nearby and socially comparable school that had not embraced the scheme.¹⁷

A person's education also has an important impact on her values. At matriculation, law students seem to place *higher* priority on intrinsic values, relative to a control group of other undergraduates. But over the first year of their studies, the importance that the law students ascribed to these values erodes. In particular, and irrespective of age or gender, they come to place significantly lower value on "community contribution" and significantly higher value on an "appealing appearance."¹⁹

Finally, public policy and people's experience of social institutions are also likely to have an important effect on the values they prioritize. For example, citizens of countries that have adopted more competitive economic systems tend to place more importance on extrinsic values.^{20–22} Here it is difficult to establish whether pursuit of certain policies has led to shifts in cultural values or whether changes in cultural values created the political pressure for institutional reform. It seems likely that both processes operate. Certainly, studies support the view that public policy is a contributing factor in shaping cultural values.

German reunification, for example, presents a natural laboratory for examining the impact of changes in public policy on cultural values. Following reunification, West German policies were "imposed" on East Germany—not as a result of a sudden shift in public attitudes, but rather as a result of a seismic political event. Public attitudes toward government responsibilities in former West Germany (for example, whether government should provide health care for the sick, provide a decent standard of living for the old, or reduce income differences between the rich and poor) are found to have been stable for many years following reunification. However, attitudes in former East Germany changed markedly following the external "imposition" of West German institutions. Attitudes in East Germany shifted to become aligned to those in West Germany. It seems that the different systems of social protection in East and West Germany prior to reunification may have been translated into differences in the West and East Germans' values, which then shaped their attitudes to social policy following reunification.²³

These results have profound implications for the way in which those concerned about social and environmental issues campaign for change. It is to these implications that I now turn.

Implications for Social and Environmental Campaigns

There is an irony at the heart of advocacy campaigns concerning problems like climate change, global poverty, or biodiversity loss: as our awareness of the challenges—and the difficulty of addressing them—grows, civil society campaigners tend to rely ever more heavily on issue-specific tactics. Yet many of the campaigns launched by NGOs could have the simultaneous and contradictory effects of both helping to address the immediate issue-specific aspects of a social or environmental challenge, while also strengthening values that are inimical to the emergence of more systemic public support for action on social and environmental challenges.

As we have seen, there are dangers inherent in appeals to self-interest as a tactic to motivate action on climate change—whether at a national or at an individual level. Pursuit of national competitiveness, or individual self-interest, could lead to pressure to adopt a range of policies, or behaviors, that are actually counterproductive in the drive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But it is also clear that there are more important and systemic reasons for resisting the temptation to appeal to national competitiveness or individual self-interest, despite the political attractiveness of such tactics. Privileging national competitiveness and individual self-interest helps to activate and strengthen extrinsic values at a cultural level. In strengthening these values, such tactics also risk diminishing people's concern about social and

environmental problems. And these extrinsic values act in opposition to those intrinsic values critical for building public support, for example, for the ambitious reductions in national greenhouse gas emissions that will be necessary to alleviate climate change.

Attempts to assess the economic value of biodiversity may, in another example, facilitate dialogue with some decision makers—at least in instances where economic signals happen to be supportive of the need to conserve a natural resource. But such valuations are likely, simultaneously, to be damaging at a more systemic level: they will help to normalize the perception that the value of natural resources is to be assessed primarily in economic terms. As such, these valuations may undermine the intrinsic values upon which a more systemic and durable commitment to nature conservation could otherwise be built.

What can be done to safeguard against such effects? Most straightforwardly, the language and metaphors used in communication will invoke, and therefore help to strengthen, particular values.^{3,24} But, important as it may be to “get the language right,” this can be only a start: there are many other ways in which the public’s experience of an issue campaign or communication is likely to activate—and therefore reinforce—particular values.

NGOs should lead the way in openly discussing the values that a campaign or communication seeks to activate. They should present, for public scrutiny, both an analysis of how these values will be strengthened through the approaches deployed and the evidence that these values will help to achieve the aims of that campaign. This would help to build public understanding of, and critical reflection on, the values that people encounter in other communications, beyond a specific campaign. Indeed, having achieved transparency in the way that their own communications and campaigns invoke particular values, NGOs should then begin to demand similar standards from other organizations—both government and private sector.

Building New Coalitions

I have pointed to the extensive evidence for a high level of coincidence between the values that frustrate systemic responses to climate change and those values that frustrate the emergence of public demand for proportional responses to a range of other social and environmental challenges—whether those responses are to come from business or government.

It is a mistake, therefore, to circumscribe some set of “environmental” issues and imagine that it will be possible to address these in isolation from a range of other challenges. The values that an environmental organization activates and strengthens in the course of its work on biodiversity loss will affect, in one way or another, public concern about, for example, HIV/AIDS or animal welfare. Reciprocally, the values invoked by a charity working on disability are likely to affect public attitudes and behavior toward environmental issues. Recognizing this creates both an obligation and an opportunity.

The obligation is to ensure that, in the course of attempting to deliver issue-specific change, an organization is not simultaneously working to undermine those values on which we must rely for proportional responses to a range of other social and environmental concerns. Indeed, alongside pursuit of their particular campaign objectives, all NGOs should be working to strengthen these values.

The opportunity is to build new and powerful coalitions of groups concerned with a range of social and environmental issues. At present, organizations frequently do work collaboratively when they share concerns about a specific policy, business practice, or behavioral outcome. Trade unions and development organizations may lobby together on aspects of an international trade treaty; a wide range of groups concerned about cuts to public services may campaign against businesses that avoid corporate tax; environmental and public health groups may join forces to encourage people to cycle to work.

But far wider opportunities for collaboration emerge when we shift focus onto addressing the drivers that strengthen extrinsic values at a cultural level. For example, in addition to asking, “How can we marshal the widest range of interest groups to support the environmental cause?,” environmental organizations might come to ask, “How can we best build on our natural support base, and our natural areas of political influence, to support campaigns that promote intrinsic values and to tackle institutions and policies that promote extrinsic values?” An example of such a campaign could be for tougher regulation of advertising—particularly advertising to children.²⁵

Conclusion

We are faced with the challenge of galvanizing international momentum for ambitious action on climate change. Working

to strengthen particular cultural values is a prerequisite for the emergence of the necessary public demand for ambitious government action on climate change and adequate consumer pressure on businesses to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Strengthening these values will also encourage greater commitment on the part of individuals to reduce their own environmental impacts. The alternative, of couching appeals for environmental action in terms of self-interest, will likely lead to fragmented and inadequate responses to the challenges we confront. This shouldn't surprise us: Martin Luther King, for example, did not seek to galvanize the American civil rights movement by appealing to individual self-interest or national competitiveness imperatives. Rather, he drew upon people's sense of justice, equality, and empathy.

This is an ambitious agenda, but it is also one that is commensurate with the scale of the challenge that climate change presents. Moreover, it is an agenda made easier by the opportunity for new and broad-based coalitions of individuals and organizations to work in a concerted way to activate and strengthen intrinsic values. Thus a wide range of actors can establish common cause in promoting intrinsic values, irrespective of their particular social or environmental agendas. Drawing on the help of social psychologists and linguists, a growing number of NGOs in the United Kingdom, representing a diverse range of concerns, are beginning to work together in this way.

Acknowledgments

The perspectives developed in this article are drawn from a project run jointly by five UK-based NGOs: Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN), Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), Oxfam, and WWF-UK. For further information about this project, and to download our joint report, *Common Cause: the Case for Working with our Cultural Values*, please visit www.wwf.org.uk/change. The author is grateful to Tim Holmes and Tim Kasser for comments on an earlier draft of this article.

References

1. Clemins, EK & Schimmelbusch, H. The environmental prisoners' dilemma, p. 4 (May 20, 2007) [online]. opim.wharton.upenn.edu/~clemons/blogs/prisonersblog.pdf.
2. Sheldon, KM, & McGregor, H. Extrinsic value orientation and the tragedy of the commons. *Journal of Personality* 68, 383–411 (2000).
3. Crompton, T. *Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values* (WWF-UK, Godalming, UK, 2010). www.wwf.org.uk/change.
4. Rokeach, M. *The Nature of Human Values* (Free Press, New York, 1973).
5. Bardi, A & Schwartz, SH. Values and behaviour: Strength and structure of relations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29, 1207–1220 (2003).
6. Roccas, S & Sagiv, L. Personal values and behaviour: Taking the cultural context into account. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4, 30–41 (2010).
7. Feather, NT. Values, valences, expectations, and actions. *Journal of Social Issues* 48, 109–124 (1992).
8. Banerjee, R & Dittmar, H. Individual differences in children's materialism: The role of peer relations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31, 17–31 (2008).
9. Flouri, E. An integrated model of consumer materialism: Can economic socialisation and maternal values predict materialistic attitudes in adolescents? *Journal of Socio-Economics* 28, 707–724 (1999).
10. Goldberg, ME, Gorn, GJ, Peracchio, LA & Bamossy, G. Understanding materialism among youth. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 13, 278–288 (2003).
11. Kasser, T, Ryan, RM, Couchman, CE & Sheldon, KM in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* (Kasser, T & Kanner, AD, eds), Materialistic values: Their causes and consequences, 11–28 (American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2004).
12. Sheldon, KM, Sheldon, MS & Osbaldiston, R. Prosocial values and group assortment in a N-person prisoner's dilemma. *Human Nature* 11, 387–404 (2000).
13. Buijzen, M & Valkenburg, PM. The effects of television advertising on materialism, parent-child conflict, and unhappiness: A review of research. *Applied Developmental Psychology* 24, 437–456 (2003).
14. Good, J. Shop 'til we drop? Television, materialism and attitudes about the natural environment. *Mass Communication and Society* 10, 365–383 (2007).
15. O'Guinn, TC & Shrum, LJ. The role of television in the construction of consumer reality. *Journal of Consumer Research* 23, 278–294 (1997).
16. Shrum, LJ, Wyer, RS & O'Guinn, TC. The effects of television consumption on social perceptions: The use of priming procedures to investigate psychological processes. *Journal of Consumer Research* 24, 447–458 (1998).
17. Greenberg, BS, & Brand, JE. Television news and advertising in schools: The "Channel One" controversy. *Journal of Communication* 43, 143–151 (1993).

18. Shrum, LJ, Burroughs, JE & Rindfleisch, A. Television's cultivation of material values. *Journal of Consumer Research* 32, 473–479 (2005).
19. Sheldon, KM & Krieger, LS. Does legal education have undermining effects on law students? Evaluating changes, motivation, values and well-being. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 22(2), 261–286 (2004).
20. Schwartz, SH. Cultural and individual value correlates of capitalism: A comparative analysis. *Psychological Inquiry* 18, 52–57 (2007).
21. Kasser, T, Cohn, S, Kanner, AD, & Ryan, RM. Some costs of American corporate capitalism: a psychological exploration of value and goal conflicts. *Psychological Inquiry* 18, 1–22 (2007).
22. Kasser, T. in *Human Autonomy in Cross-Cultural Context* (Chirkov, VI; Ryan, RM & Sheldon, KM, eds), Capitalism and autonomy, 191-206 (Springer, Netherlands, 2011).
23. Svallfors, S. Policy feedback, generational replacement, and attitudes to state intervention: Eastern and Western Germany, 1990–2006. *European Political Science Review* 2, 119–135 (2010).
24. Darnton, A & Kirk, M. *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty* (BOND, London, 2011).
25. Kasser, T, Crompton, T, and Linn, S. Children, commercialism and environmental sustainability. *Solutions* 1(2), 14–17 (2010).

Source URL: <http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/969>