

# Voluntary groups can promote pro-environmental practice at small scale

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New research by the University of Southampton has examined the role of voluntary organisations in promoting pro-environmental behaviour change. It points to evidence of success around small-scale, local initiatives, but questions whether these can be scaled up to reach the wider public.

The research review points to qualitative and quantitative evidence of third sector initiatives that have changed people's practices around [recycling](#), reuse and home energy use.

Evidence suggests third sector organisations (TSOs) can be successful at changing behaviour within local, small group settings, which encourage [collective action](#) and the creation of new group norms. They have also been successful at providing alternative infrastructures – such as sustainable housing projects, community farms, food or renewable energy co-operatives – that enable behaviour change.

However, the small, local and time-intensive nature of many projects poses a barrier to implementing them on a wider scale. There is also a lack of evidence around whether TSOs can have impact on 'harder to change' behaviours, such as transport practices.

Milena Buchs, from the Third Sector Research Centre at University of Southampton, who conducted the research, says: "Quite broad claims have been made about the ability of third sector organisations to influence behaviour. There are certainly good examples of them working

with people to successfully change the way they approach things like [energy use](#), food or waste. But evidence also suggests that many people who get involved in these projects are already engaged with environmental issues to some extent. The question that remains is whether it is possible to engage the broader public, especially where [behaviour change](#) challenges mainstream attitudes and norms.

"This may mean that additional government action is needed to change environmental practices at a national level."

**More information:** The research paper 'Third sector organisations' role in pro-environmental behaviour change – a review of the literature and evidence was carried out by Milena Büchs, Rebecca Edwards and Graham Smith of the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Southampton.

Provided by University of Southampton

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