

Why are some people greener than others?

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Differences in attitudes and cultural values could have far-reaching implications for the development of a sustainable global society, according to an analysis to be published in the *International Journal of the Sustainable Economy*.

Rune Ellemose Gulev of the University of Applied Sciences Kiel, Germany, has explored the [cultural values](#) associated with sustainability that makes some people more inclined to adopt what might conventionally be considered as sustainable attitudes and behavior. Asking what promotes sustainable attitudes in different people has until now been a question to which little scientific insight has been applied. In order to explore the various [biases](#) and the ethical stance taken by individuals Gulev has collated a set of values and attitudes from different [demographic groups](#) throughout Europe. These have then been contrasted with what are considered to be sustainable behaviors by definition.

In the face of [climate change](#), [rising sea levels](#), melting icecaps, the depletion of natural resources, the destruction of rainforests, [species extinction](#) and many other environmental concerns, the notion of sustainability is high on the agenda. If we are to address the [environmental issues](#) then finding alternative ways to maintain or improve our lifestyle without further damaging the environment is essential to progress. The concepts of gender and [income inequality](#), literacy rates, education possibilities, [life expectancies](#) and poverty alleviation must also be incorporated into the sustainability equation.

To explore the root of sustainable behavior, values and attitudes of different populations were probed and correlated against sustainable behavior. The values pivoted around the basic beliefs different populations harbored towards actions that may support sustainability. For example, being unselfish is an important quality to encourage as is being prepared to do something to improve the conditions in your community. The attitudes also hinged on priorities individuals set when considering sustainable agendas. For instance, sustainable development should be a priority for society while the social responsibility of business leaders should be high towards society.

Both data sets were correlated against sustainable practices within the focus countries. From these correlation tests, the researchers noticed that the majority of positive correlations existed between attitudes towards business practices and sustainable behavior along both environmental and social sustainability. That is, countries in which the populace expressed concerns towards e.g. having high social cohesion, or having tolerance and respect being important qualities that children should learn, also scored highly with regards to environmental and social sustainability. Overwhelmingly positive correlations such as these support the notion that the greater the inclination to such values and attitudes, the more likely it is that environmental sustainability and social sustainability are priorities for domestic stakeholders.

The strong correlations suggest that it is possible that adopting sustainable practices can reinforce the attitudes that prompted the initiative towards greater sustainable behavior in the first place. As such, having attitudes that make a small shift towards promoting greater sustainable business practices may be the starting point for building sustainability agendas. Sparking the sustainability debate is a first step and once the ball is rolling this might imply that businesses would be more pro-sustainability, which would then cause a further shift towards greater sustainable attitudes in the populace. The overwhelmingly strong

positive correlations evidenced between attitudes and practices certainly seem to support this theory of reinforcement, says Gulev.

"Taken holistically, the results provide clear indication that some attitudes and values in people do facilitate sustainable behavior and that these attitudes and values can be fostered to create greater sustainable behavioral practices," Gulev concludes. "It is hoped that the results initiate a debate and further motivation for research into sustainable practices."

More information: "Exploring cultural values connected to sustainability: why some people are more likely to act in a sustainable manner than others" in *Int. J. Sustainable Economy*, 2012, 4, 286-299

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