

How tight-knit communities might prevent environmental progress

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New research indicates that strong community bonds could hinder rather than help environmental initiatives. The study, led by researchers at the University of Sydney's School of Project Management, examined

communities where robust local ties lead to resistance against environmental initiatives, sustainability programs, and greenhouse gas reduction projects.

The study is [published](#) in the journal *Ecology and Society*.

"Traditionally, we've always thought of strong communities as a positive force—for locals and the environment," said the senior author of the study, Associate Professor Petr Matous, Associate Head of the School of Project Management.

"However, our study shows that's not always the case—strong communities can sometimes be significant obstacles to environmental initiatives."

The researchers suggest this could be due to the creation of echo chambers, where beliefs are continuously reinforced with little debate, fostering a strong consensus within the group. They compared their findings to analyses of social media communities, where like-minded individuals often reinforce each other's views on contentious issues ranging from vaccines and reproductive rights to housing and gun control.

Dr. Matous noted that while cohesive communities worldwide often collaborate to combat environmental issues like pollution, [invasive species](#), and overfishing, strong local bonds can also have drawbacks.

"We've observed entire villages mobilizing against renewable energy projects. For example, here in Australia, farmers in tight-knit communities have coordinated opposition to what they perceive as sudden, forceful changes on their land."

Program leaders now identify "community pushback" as a major

bottleneck in implementing projects toward Australia's net-zero goals. Sustainability transitions often require significant land areas and changes to longstanding land management practices, leading to resistance that can range from rejection of new methods to [legal action](#) and protests.

The study used [quantitative analysis](#) to examine how community networks influence outcomes in programs aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions from farming while maintaining productivity. Leveraging a comprehensive dataset from partner organization Swisscontact across 70 communities in Indonesia, the researchers defined strong communities as networks with many links or relationships broadly distributed within the community, fostering high cohesion.

Why some strong communities hinder environmental progress

"This study highlights the social dynamics of farming villages as a potential reason why the same program can yield expected outcomes in some communities but not others," said Associate Professor Matous.

"In tightly knit clusters of relationships with like-minded individuals, people may become entrenched in collective positions. Strong community bonds may coincide with distrust or indifference towards outsiders. Members of tight-knit communities may also be adept at defending their collective interests, which may not always align with broader environmental or societal goals."

Dr. Abner Yalu, who contributed to the study during his Ph.D., said, "When strong internal bonding exists within a community, farmers are more unified in their practices but less likely to adopt recommendations from sustainability programs, such as protecting trees around their farms or using organic matter to maintain soil health."

While anecdotal evidence suggests similar mechanisms operate in other countries, data remains insufficient to fully explain this phenomenon and design effective solutions to support environmental progress.

"Climate change demands [urgent action](#), but policymakers and program leaders must strike a balance by effectively engaging communities through genuine dialogue," said Associate Professor Matous. "We must respect that local community members are best positioned to evaluate the significance of their surroundings; they often understand what works in their context and may have valid reasons for resistance."

"Within these communities, divergent messages struggle to gain traction if they conflict with collective values. This is a consideration that election strategists and campaigners in multiple countries will certainly bear in mind in 2024."

More information: Abner Yalu et al, Which community network structures can support sustainability programs? The case of the Sustainable Cocoa Production Program in Indonesia, *Ecology and Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.5751/ES-15003-290216](https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-15003-290216)

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