

Research probes cross-cultural beliefs about sustainability

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New research carried out in 12 countries shows most people believe achieving environmental sustainability could hinder quality of life but not the wider economy.

Contributing author Associate Professor Taciano Milfont from Victoria University of Wellington's Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research and School of Psychology, says the main goal of the study was to identify areas of compatibility and tension in how people view sustainability.

"In particular, we wanted to see if people's views of environmental, social, and economic sustainability differ across cultures, in order to better inform public communication," he says.

The study, led by Dr. Paul Bain from the University of Bath, asked more than 2100 people from 12 developed and developing countries what they thought the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed to achieve.

The findings published today in *Nature Sustainability* show that people understand

sustainability in four distinct ways, Dr. Bain says. Most people saw environmental sustainability as being in tension with social sustainability, but not with economic sustainability.

"Our research shows that people believe addressing [environmental sustainability](#) means less attention to solving [social issues](#) like education and health, and also to things like reducing inequality, fostering peace, and improving infrastructure. While we expected people to think sustainability involved trade-offs, until now we didn't know exactly what these trade-offs were."

Associate Professor Taciano Milfont says although New Zealand data was not collected due to budgetary constraints, the study is relevant here. "Results from Australia, China, the United Kingdom and the United States provide valuable information about how people from these key trade partners view sustainability. It can help us communicate our sustainability vision more effectively with them," he says.

He links the study's findings to current environmental issues in Brazil, such as farmers burning the Amazon forest to create more farmland. "The criminal fires of the Amazon forest and killings of Indigenous peoples in Brazil provide an unfortunate real-life illustration of the tension between environmental and social sustainability we observed in our study," he says.

Dr. Bain adds, "We can't tell people we can achieve environmental and social [sustainability](#) and expect them to just accept it—many people won't because it conflicts with their intuitions. To reduce this conflict and increase acceptance people need to be told how these tensions will be addressed."

The research team hopes the findings may help design better policies and the communication activity around them to overcome public skepticism that a more sustainable world is achievable.

More information: Paul G. Bain et al. Public views of the Sustainable Development Goals across countries, *Nature Sustainability* (2019). DOI: [10.1038/s41893-019-0365-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0365-4)

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