

This is how we motivate people to tackle climate change

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Psychologists have a new way to make people act on climate change, regardless if they do not accept the underlying science.

A conversation on tackling climate change can become heated very quickly, especially if it challenges our core political beliefs.

Psychologists have now found that almost anyone can be motivated to take action against climate change, by appealing to the so-called co-benefits. These are the benefits that go hand in hand with tackling climate change, such as social, economic, and scientific development.

“Simply saying that we should tackle an environmental problem because it’s important has not worked, because it’s so linked to an individual’s political agenda,” says co-author Professor Lars-Olof Johansson, from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

“But we can influence peoples’ motivations if we talk about the effect of so-called co-benefits, instead of focussing on the science or the importance of tackling the problem of climate change,” he says.

They also found that reducing pollution was one of the least motivating co-benefits in many countries.

The research is published in the journal *Nature Climate Change*.

Appeal to what people already believe

Co-author Gró Einarsdóttir, a PhD student from the University of Gothenburg, describes how emphasising the co-benefits of tackling climate change can influence people’s motivation to act.

“Co-benefits are basically when you take things that many people already care about and connect this with taking action on climate or other environmental issues. These could be economic or scientific development, or simply living in a more pleasant and caring society,” says Einarsdóttir.

The new research suggests that by addressing these co-benefits, politicians, and communicators can circumnavigate the often insurmountable hurdle of trying to change a person’s worldview in order to motivate them to support environmentally friendly measures.

“It’s much easier to address the things that many people already care about and link these things to environmental action, like creating jobs and the state of their local community, rather than trying to change their stance on particular environmental issues,” says Einarsdóttir.

“Simply saying to someone ‘you have to change’ doesn’t work. But saying that ‘even if you don’t believe in

these measures to combat climate change, but by implementing them we can improve society' is a win-win," says Johansson.

Global surveys reveal common motivations

Johansson and Einarsdóttir were part of a team of international researchers, led by Queensland University of Technology, Australia. They sent out an e-survey to university students in 24 countries, covering all inhabited continents.

Another smaller group of people from 10 of these countries also took part in the survey. This group represented people from all walks of life--different ages and occupations--and allowed the researchers to check that their findings were not only applicable to students.

All participants were quizzed on whether or not they thought tackling climate change was important, and their opinions on a number of co-benefits that could motivate them to act.

Out of the 6,196 participants, they found that development co-benefits, which encompass both economic and scientific development, such as creating new jobs in new technology sectors, and benevolence co-benefits, where communities become more caring and moral, were particularly effective.

Crucially, these co-benefits motivated people in all countries regardless of whether or not they 'believed' in man made climate change, and motivated people far more than the prospect of cutting pollution.

Accepting policies to tackle climate change

According to Johansson, the results can be used in many ways to improve the public acceptance of mitigating climate change.

"For a politician, it's important that people accept environmental policies. So addressing co-benefits is one way of increasing acceptance," he says.

This could be particularly effective in countries where public acceptance of the underlying science is low, or in developing countries where the economic costs of tackling climate change may not be high on the agenda, says Johansson.

There may not always be a case for co-benefits

Dr Steffen Kallbekken, Research Director at the Center for International Climate and Environmental Research (CICERO) and Director of the Center for International Climate and Energy Policy (CICEP) in Oslo, Norway, says that communicating the co-benefits of climate action, as this study argues, appears to be a sound strategy.

"If cutting greenhouse gas emissions involves benefits such as new jobs at a local wind farm or cleaner air, people are more likely to support climate action. But one limitation of this approach is that not all climate policies have co-benefits," says Kallbekken.

He emphasises that there will be situations in which some businesses will close down and some jobs will be lost without necessarily being compensated by new jobs or cleaner air in that same community.

"It's possible to choose the climate actions that deliver the largest co-benefits, but we will still also need strategies for those situations where the co-benefits do not exist or are not large enough to sway public

opinion.”

“One strategy could be to soften the blow by helping people transition to new jobs through job training or government incentives to establish new jobs in affected areas,” he says.

 [Research shows that focusing on the co-benefits of tackling climate change, like creating new jobs in green industries, can motivate people to act. \(Photo: Shutterstock](http://www.shutterstock.com/da/pic-151957439/stock-photo-researcher-analyzes-readouts-on-wind-power-station.html)) [5]

 [The co-benefits associated with reducing pollution were among the least motivating of all the incentives studied, but creating a more caring society was higher on the agenda. \(Photo: Shutterstock](http://www.shutterstock.com/da/pic-220238260/stock-photo-diverse-and-casual-people-and-togetherness-concept.html)) [6]

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Side story

Side story

What are co-benefits?

Co-benefits aim to side-step traditional hurdles when discussing how to act on environmental issues, by highlighting the community benefits associated with these mitigation approaches.

Crucially they do not require someone to accept the underlying scientific case for climate change, or accept that it is an important issue and should be addressed. Rather, they encourage people to work towards a common goal, of which addressing environmental issues, is a side-effect.

These can include, steps to reduce pollution, encouraging economic development by investing in green industries, or promoting healthier lifestyles through walking or cycling. It may even be the idea of creating a more caring local community.

In the study, participants were quizzed on their motivation to act on environmental issues by considering how these co-benefits may change their communities in the future.

They found that development (scientific and economic development) and benevolence (creating a more caring and moral community) were most commonly related to people’s motivation to act, whilst cutting pollution was least effective in many countries.

[Catherine Jex](#) [17]

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