



for a living planet

Community learning and action for sustainable living (CLASL)

A summary of themes from initial research



defra

Department for Environment
Food and Rural Affairs

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Diane Warburton, Shared Practice



Background

Humanity is having an increasingly negative impact on the natural environment. In pursuing growth and development, we are creating climate change, consuming natural resources at a greater rate than ever before, driving more plant and animal species to extinction, and polluting environments in ways that make life dangerous and desperate for many - especially the poorest and most vulnerable. Yet much of this frantic activity is not making people happier, healthier or more content.

Much campaigning for sustainable development, that improves real quality of life without devastating environmental consequences, is directed at government and business. That remains a vital focus for lobbying, but individuals and communities can also make a significant contribution towards sustainability through local and

personal changes in behaviour and lifestyles, including feeling more satisfied with the way we live our lives.

‘Community learning and action for sustainable living’ (CLASL) is a new WWF project, funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Environmental Action Fund. The purpose of this project is to work with three pilot communities to develop a community-based method which encourages and enables local groups to define and work towards a new pattern of sustainable living.

WWF commissioned a review of the current thinking on behaviour change and methods for community engagement to feed into the early development of this new method. This paper summarises some of the main themes that have emerged from that review. The full report can be found at www.wwf.org.uk/localmatters

The focus for the review

The review examined what is now a significant body of research on human behaviour and attitude change including the more recent work on behaviour change for sustainable living and sustainable consumption. While there are clear links between sustainable production and consumption, the CLASL project focus on community-level activities led the research to concentrate on sustainable consumption, while recognising that there is research available on the local production of goods and services which may be very relevant to local lifestyle and behaviour change. The review also examined the wealth of material on 'what works' in terms of community involvement and social learning.

The research for this project was completed in October 2005. At that time, the research on behaviour change for sustainable consumption – including how to influence consumption patterns – was mainly academic and theoretical, often based on social and psychological theory about human behaviour. No 'lived examples' were found of attempts to change attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable living, and little practical guidance for community-level working on this subject. The picture was very different on research relating to learning theory and community involvement, which drew much more heavily on practice and provided more practical guidance on methods that could be used locally.



Key themes

Five linked themes emerged from the review, each of which is described in brief below:

- **There is public awareness of environmental sustainability.**
- **The problem for people is not a lack of information.**
- **Behaviour change is linked to people's underlying values and attitudes.**
- **The concept of 'environmental citizenship' is key to future work in this area.**
- **'Social learning' is an important factor in encouraging behaviour and value change.**



Public awareness of environmental sustainability

Many people are well aware of environmental sustainability issues, and recognise the responsibilities they have for environmental problems, even in low income and disadvantaged areas. The priority in encouraging behaviour change should not therefore be on raising awareness. Instead, research suggests (e.g. London School of Economics and the universities of Bath and Lancaster in ESRC 2004) a focus on the following:

- Practical support is needed for sustainable behaviour to take place, to overcome the many barriers that exist to prevent sustainable behaviour even where people want to change.
- Support needs to be tailored and geared to particular audiences and localities. Blanket information about 'sustainable behaviour' is not helpful.
- Clear links need to be made between community and individual change towards sustainable behaviour and wider change in other sectors. Business and government are perceived to be making things worse and people feel that there is no point in changing their own (relatively small-scale) behaviour if government and business continue with 'business as usual'.
- A critical mass of people needs to be involved in sustainable living to move it into the mainstream.
- There is little knowledge about how behaviour change towards sustainability works in practice.
- There needs to be a greater exploration of new approaches, good assessments of what works, lesson learning from experience and communication of the lessons to others, so that sustainable living in practice becomes better understood by a wider range of people.



Lack of information

The problem of supporting behaviour change towards more sustainable lifestyles is not a result of simple lack of information. The conventional information deficit model AIDA (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) assumes that there is a linear progression from the provision of appropriate information (awareness-raising) to new actions. This has been found not to work in relation to sustainability (e.g. Collins et al 2003; Owens in ESRC 2004) for the following reasons:

- People **don't trust the messenger or the message** – scientific 'facts' do not convince people of the need for change and people don't always trust the institutions (especially government) that are pushing the messages, so there is no belief in the need for change.
- There is a **value-action gap** (sometimes called the attitude-behaviour gap) where people know that there is a problem (they have received the information) and they know that they should do something about it, but they don't take any action.
- People don't have the **time or resources** to do it, even if they feel they should, and know what to do. This can be a particular barrier if they are in the habit of doing things in a certain way, and making any change is too demanding.
- People **don't think that what they do will make any difference**, and they therefore feel it not worth making the effort.

Information can help behaviour change if it is available in the right forms at the right time, but the research suggests that, alone, information is not a sufficient incentive to inspire or encourage people to change.



Behaviour change

Individual behaviour is based on individual values and attitudes, which are shaped by collective and social norms and expectations, habits and situations (e.g. Jackson 2005). Beyond that, and more practically, people's actions and behaviours are largely based on what they have always done, and they rarely question or think about those behaviours.

Changes in particular actions can be achieved by direct interventions such as taxes and interventions, but it is also recognised that this doesn't represent long-term behaviour change as people tend to revert to their old behaviours as soon as the tax or incentive is changed or removed (e.g. Shove in ESRC 2004). One well-known example is road pricing or congestion charges, which seems to change short-term behaviour but not necessarily long-term attitudes to travelling by car.

Rather than focusing purely on individual behaviour change, the research suggests that the best way to encourage broader social changes in behaviour is by working through groups and communities where 'good' behaviour can be encouraged by social pressure and 'bad' behaviour is discouraged (e.g. Gough and Scott, Bath University, and Foster and Grove-White, Lancaster

University in ESRC 2004). This 'social learning' from peers and role models is generally seen to build on people's altruistic and self-interested motives simultaneously, which is seen as much more effective than appealing to altruistic motives alone.

Social learning happens through social experience and social conversations about problems, leading to those involved questioning (and sometimes changing) their values, expectations and motivations. The use of deliberative processes for working with groups can encourage these social conversations and, in turn, these conversations can lead to a 'discursive consciousness', which is essentially a sense of responsibility and questioning that enables people to question and go beyond their normal habits and their everyday, practical thinking.



Environmental citizenship

Environmental citizenship is about formalising environmental rights and responsibilities as part of the broader concept of citizenship (e.g. Dobson 2003; Dobson 2004; Bell 2003); citizenship in general is about individual moral responsibilities for the common good (Jones and Gaventa 2002), alongside basic human rights. In terms of sustainable development, the common good is often understood as relating to ensuring that current and future generations have access to the resources they need to meet their needs (referring back to the definition of sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, in WCED 1987).

Environmental citizenship has become a crucial idea in moving towards sustainable living because environmental citizens are seen as being committed in the long term to the principles of ‘good’ behaviour and not just what is currently practical. Such environmental citizenship is therefore developed not just through practical activity but also through group learning that reinforces the ‘good’ behaviour in a social setting (e.g. Merrifield 2001).

Distinctions can be drawn between people acting as consumers or citizens: consumers are users of goods and services, whereas citizens act on behalf of the common good. It is likely that people will act as consumers and citizens at different times and in different circumstances, and both will be needed for sustainable living.



Social learning

Values can change through social learning as people learn from each other (e.g. Jackson 2005; Holdsworth 2005). Although there are different forms of social learning, there is often a major emphasis on learning through action: people working together to agree priorities, share responsibility for action, reflect on their experiences together and thus turn the experience into expertise that they can use in the future.

The key point about social learning is that it takes place in 'communities', either geographical or defined in some other way. However, the research clearly suggests that social learning cannot be done at a community level alone; there have to be links to other levels or the lessons cannot be translated into mainstream organisations. There is a need for 'system building agents' (Smith 2005) who work between the grassroots and the mainstream, facilitating grassroots action by ensuring top-down support, and translating lessons both ways so that learning is continuous and widely shared.

Social learning is needed partly to build the social intelligence necessary for people to find their own answers to the problems they face (e.g. Gough and Scott, Bath University, and Foster and Grove-White,

Lancaster University in ESRC 2004). Providing information alone may assist with solving a problem at a specific point in time, but as time moves on and the problem changes, the information is no longer valid and the capacity to search and act upon new information has not been built. Social learning that builds social intelligence develops people's capacity to deal with new problems as they arise and is therefore likely to always be an essential element of sustainable living.





How this research has been used in the ‘Community learning and action for sustainable living’ (CLASL) project

The key themes described above are being used by the CLASL project to develop and test a method for working with community groups on sustainable living, so they can build their knowledge and expertise and take action on something specific and relevant to their community.

Three aspects of social learning are key to the approach:

Action learning, which is about learning by doing and explicitly reflecting together as a group on experience. Action learning is an approach to learning that recognises that there are different types of knowledge and that some issues are problems with no ‘right’ answers, so simply finding the ‘right’ information is not enough. Action learning enables such problems to be addressed by applying personal and collective inquiry and insight, supported by research using conventional sources of knowledge. The action and learning takes place in groups that are facilitated rather than taught, enabling the group to build on their own knowledge, creating solutions that are relevant to their particular circumstances and developing the skills to tackle future problems more confidently.

Action research is about generating knowledge about something at the same time as trying to change it. It is about bringing

together theory and practice (action and research) by doing both at the same time, usually in a participatory process with the group or community. It may use various conventional research methods (e.g. surveys), but the outputs of the research will be focused on working through a particular problem or to support a particular process of change.

Monitoring and evaluation. Reviewing and reflecting are essential to social learning processes, but it is useful to include an explicit monitoring and evaluation process that continues throughout the life of any project that is about social and personal change. Evaluation is often seen as mainly about measuring change, but it is as much about capturing the lessons from the process, and translating them so they are meaningful both for those most involved and for wider audiences. Participatory evaluation, involving all those taking part in the project in the assessment, thus also contributes to the broader learning processes as the project progresses. Existing national sustainable development indicators may be used alongside specific local indicators developed with community groups so that both the local and wider impacts of the work can be assessed.

Next steps

The CLASL project is currently working with three groups in Surrey to pilot the method developed using the principles outlined above.

More information, including the full research report, can be found at

www.wwf.org.uk/localmatters

If you would like more information about the project, please contact:

Niamh Carey, WWF-UK Local Sustainability Unit, Panda House,

Weyside Park, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XR

Tel: 01483 412474 E-Mail: ncarey@wwf.org.uk

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The references cited in this summary are given only as examples; the themes in this paper draw on a much wider range of sources, details of which can be found in the full research report.

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- conserving the world's biological diversity;
- ensuring that the use of renewable resources is sustainable;
- promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

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WWF-UK

Panda House, Weyside Park
Godalming, Surrey GU7 1XR

t: +44 (0)1483 426444

f: +44 (0)1483 426409

www.wwf.org.uk