

# Greener Together: Influencing Environmental Behaviour the Co-operative Way

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Environmental policy makers widely acknowledge that in addition to improving the energy efficiency of our buildings and reducing the carbon content of the energy we use, we must also encourage, exemplify and enable pro-environmental behaviour. This maximises the fuel and carbon savings achieved in particular by programmes such as Green Deal, which aim to retrofit Britain's older housing stock. Yet attempts to influence environmental behaviour, in the UK at least, are in their infancy and few practitioners have attempted to get to grips with what motivates environmental behaviour and what works in changing it. The Greener Together project was a co-operative movement project in England that aimed to demonstrate a co-operative approach to environmental behaviour change.

## Introduction

Co-operatives are fuelling the rise of the green economy. We are experiencing rapid growth in renewable energy co-operatives in particular. Retrofitting existing buildings, firstly with measures that reduce demand for energy, and secondly with technologies to generate clean energy, is top of the agenda and could go a long way towards meeting our future energy needs securely and sustainably. But what if the people who use those buildings are not ready for change?

There is a growing awareness of the need to influence environmental behaviour, but less understanding of what we are trying to change and how we will change it. Some people make the mistake of believing that changing environmental behaviour is a 'no-brainer' because of rising fuel prices.

Karl Marx wrote that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living". Nowhere is this more true than in the use of fossil-fuels, where during a short-lived era of abundance, we have developed bad habits — being able to turn on the lights, the plasma TV or the car engine whenever we want, and leave them switched on as long as we like. Some environmentalists are surprised when people do not break with their fossil fuel era habits, and think that it is because they do not care about the polar bears. This is not the case, it is because of the way the human brain works. Our brains make some decisions automatically through mental shortcuts, such as ducking at the sound of an explosion. Other decisions we make deliberately, such as whether to move house or not. The ease with which we can use fossil fuels has turned the decision on whether or not to use them into an automatic one. Nudge economics alone is not enough to achieve the level of reflective thought required.

How can we turn those decision making processes from automatic ones into deliberative ones where people stop and make the right choices? During the Greener Together project, delivered by Co-operatives UK, the Confederation of Co-operative Housing and Plunkett Foundation, we have learned about some of the factors that influence environmental behaviour, and some of the ways in which we can influence it. Our starting point is that eighty per cent of the factors that influence environmental behaviour do not stem from knowledge or awareness.<sup>1</sup> These factors include:

- Commitment – people are more likely to go through with a promise to change their behaviour if they make a ‘contract’ to do so, and if this commitment is made public and shared with others
- Messenger – people are more likely to believe pro-environmental messaging if it comes from someone with whom they shared a common bond, such as being members of a community of place or community of interest. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) evaluation of the British Gas Green Streets programme (Platt et al, 2011) offered some proof of the contention that community organisations are more likely than a utility company to “get through the door”.
- Emotion – action on climate change should be associated with positive emotional responses, not negative ones.
- Norms – we people are strongly influenced by social norms, and what is seen as ‘normal’ behaviour.
- Diffusion of innovators – new ideas and products do not spread through population in a uniform or linear way, but are taken up first by ‘early adopters’ and diffused through the population by influential individuals known to marketing people as ‘mavens’.

Co-operation, co-operators and co-operatives are in a strong position to provide the social capital that can use these theoretical concepts in a practical way on the ground. The Greener Together project demonstrated this in a variety of ways. Firstly, it asked people to publicly commit to behaviour change through a pledge system. This meant that people felt more accountable to each other for their actions and helps to make it a social norm to adopt pro-environmental behaviours. Secondly Co-operatives are an effective messenger since membership creates a common bond that goes a long way towards gaining and keeping trust. The status of Co-operatives as an ethical super-brand even among people who are not members of one puts us in a unique position to gain people’s trust. The ‘good for everyone’ strapline is one that gives us an advantage by linking action on climate change with positive emotions, in the way that the Co-operative Group uses its position as a major wind farm investor to make people feel good about shopping with them. Finally, as co-operatives are enablers of active citizenship, it is easier to identify both the early adopters and the mavens within a community than it otherwise would be, because those types of people tend to come to the forefront in a co-operative organisation.

People do not need to be a member of a co-operative to garner co-operative ways of working. Any community or place or of interest can and will work co-operatively. Many communities have set up low carbon or Transition groups that use this co-operative approach even if they are not formally constituted as a co-operative.

What needs to happen is for the co-operative approach to influencing environmental behaviour to be adopted by the mainstream energy efficiency world. At the moment, energy efficiency programmes delivered by local authorities and utilities tend to approach householders largely as individual consumers. This consumerist approach makes it difficult to establish pro-environmental behaviour as a social norm, and the lack of trust that people have in the utilities can work the wrong way and make people more likely to believe that it is all a big money-making scam.

There is some evidence that utilities and local authorities are beginning to understand that community networks have a vital role to play in making pro-environmental behaviour a social norm. E-ON's Challenge 100, British Gas' Green Streets and Birmingham City Council's Birmingham Energy Savers are all good examples, and are likely to inform strategies for forthcoming schemes such as Green Deal.

The next step for these schemes could be to adopt a membership approach. Instead of just being offered some measures, householders could be asked to join up as members of energy saving clubs, with names like Bogtown Energy Savers Club. People would be more likely to commit to a club than to a straightforward commercial proposition, to trust it as a messenger, to feel positive emotions about it and to tell others about it in order to diffuse it and turn it into a social norm. The recently-formed Energy Saving Co-op is the best example of applying co-operation to energy saving.

The co-operative advantage is perhaps most keenly felt in its ability to connect people. The individualised approach to behaviour change that has characterised consumerist energy saving approaches up to now does not succeed in connecting people to each other. Even the more people-focussed approaches such as the Green Doctor programme, while having a community approach to marketing, essentially work at an individual household level. Mainstream economists tell us that people make decisions based on economic factors. It is important to get the economics of energy saving right, which is why it is good to see the prices of things such as solid wall insulation coming down. Yet we are often most likely to make decisions under the influence of the behaviour of people around us rather than through economics alone. This means that the nature of social networks between individuals has a deep influence on us, and our position in the social network affects which behaviours we are most likely to copy. Some individuals are more influential in social networks than others. Co-operatives and mutuals are good at connecting these people to each other and to others.

There is a further overlap between the Co-operative business model and the spread of pro-environmental behaviour. Some theorists of communication have argued convincingly that it is people's deepest value systems that govern their behaviour, rather than economics, or attitudes which can evolve over time (Rose and Dade, nd). Such theories tell us that people are divided into three main segments according to their value systems – Pioneers, Prospectors and Settlers. Co-operatives, which are values-based organisations, are better placed to be able to engage people at this level than private companies, although the latter may use values as an advertising technique.

Linked to the decline in trust is the loss of 'anchors of identity' in our society. Institutions with which people had a positive identification in the recent past such as the Church, the Monarchy, the media, the Scouts and Guides, the pub, no longer play this role in the way that they used to. For some people, brands have filled the gap and are their new anchor of identity. That's why marketing people seek information on consumer brand preferences such as M&S or Aldi, The Sun or The Guardian. Other people are more likely to look to people they know and trust for guidance on what to think and what to buy. Opinion Leader Research refer to the 'New Persuaders' who shape the opinions and behaviour of those around them. Influence increasingly revolves around the interaction of two personality types:

- Protagonists – these are skilled relationship builders who know a wide variety of people and are persuasive; they are skilled at absorbing new information and acting on it.

- Perceivers – these are the majority in any society or social group; they are more likely to listen to the opinions of others, and to hold on to ideas for long periods; they can make an idea more powerful through zealously pursuing a brand or idea (Opinion Leader Research, nd).

It is easy to think that Co-operatives are best placed to lead the environmental agenda because they attract Protagonists. This is true, but it is the wrong way of looking at it. There's no point in having a lot of Protagonists, or even Pioneers, in a community, if they do not interact with Perceivers, or with Prospectors and Settlers. The point about co-operatives, is that there are increased opportunities for Protagonists to interact with Perceivers, and for Pioneers, Prospectors and Settlers, to interact with each other, than is the case in an average community. It is this higher level of social interaction between groups that gives Co-operatives their distinct advantage in establishing social norms and diffusing ideas.

Within a community, there are 'network nodes' around which the interaction of people takes place. There are three concepts that help us to understand the characteristics of a network node. A node can be defined by:

1. Proximity, that is the spatial closeness of people to each other, eg as neighbours or co-workers – similar to the concept of a 'community of place'.
2. Homophily, the degree to which people share common interests, activities or beliefs – similar to the concept of a 'community of interest'.
3. Multiplexity, which means that the interactions between people take place on more than one level. An example of two neighbours talking over the fence – a multiplex conversation might touch on subjects such as how the kids are doing at school, the weekend's football results, the state of the economy, as well as the weather and the date of the next recycling collection.

A community where there are more network nodes is more likely to give rise to conversations about new ideas and behaviours than one in which there are less network nodes. Co-operation, that is where people co-operate to meet their common economic or social needs, creates network nodes. It brings people together by virtue of proximity and homophily, and creates inter-personal relationships that are multiplex – where people are not merely talking about the weather, there is more opportunity for new ideas to diffuse.

The co-operative advantage does not merely consist of our ability to deliver community wind farms or solar power schemes, important though these are. It is the ability of co-operation to get people of different value systems to interact with each other that means that it represents the best way forward for diffusing pro-environmental behaviour.

## **The Author**

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## References

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## Notes

- 1 Fliegenschnee and Shelakovsky, cited in Kolmuss and Agyeman, Model of Pro-Environmental Behaviour, 2002.