Overcoming cultural barriers to sustainable development

Moving towards a sustainable society means overcoming perceived barriers such as high consumption. A new report argues that policy makers can and must play a central role in this cultural evolution.

The study uses an evolutionary framework to analyse the barriers to societal sustainability. The framework views culture as composed of three elements: worldviews, institutions and technologies. Worldviews are perceptions of how the world works. Institutions are used to convey a culture’s norms and rules such as economy, religion, education. Technologies are applied information both in the form of physical technologies, but also instruments such as interest rates. Worldviews, institutions and technologies (WITs) work as an integrated system and they should change as such if society is to become more sustainable.

Current western WIT was founded in the industrial revolution in a relatively uncrowded world with abundant natural resources provided globally. It focused on unlimited growth of material production using consumption as an indicator of quality of life. However, the world has changed: fossil fuels are not abundant, natural resources have limits, signs of which are already apparent, biodiversity is declining and further material growth no longer significantly adds to quality of life. As a result, the current western WIT is creating several barriers to adaptation to environmental change.

The study proposes changes to the western WIT. Firstly it calls for a need to find better indicators of human well-being, for example, ones that distinguish between real poverty and not merely low monetary income. The authors suggest that reductions in economic output and consumption should fall on those who can afford to make these reductions, i.e. the wealthy.

The structure of society needs to be simplified so that bureaucracy can be reduced along with its demands for intensive and expensive energy, deemed necessary for economic growth. The authors also recommend the creation of a “commons” sector that is responsible for managing common assets such as ecosystems and information, when property rights do not exist. Suitable tools to achieve this already exist, such as the Alaska Permanent Fund1, a common asset trust. Knowledge and technology also need to be shared, specifically through the internet and electronic democracy.

Although these solutions may sound like big steps, policy makers can help lead the way. Cultural evolution is reflexive which means cultural goals affect how we adapt to environmental change. If policy shifts our goals from maximising growth of the market economy to maximising sustainable human well-being then societal adaptation can start to happen.

1. See: www.apfc.org


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