

Sheffield Solutions



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

GLOBAL CHALLENGES; SHEFFIELD SOLUTIONS | POLICY BRIEFING | OCTOBER 2017



TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Why we need UK government leadership on climate change and sustainable development

Summary

Climate change and sustainable development are two pressing, interlinked challenges for the UK, and globally. Whilst governments strive for economic growth and improvements in wellbeing, this should not come at the cost of the environment, and therefore, these agendas raise questions of responsibility and fairness between nations and generations.

INTERSECTION, a cross-national, cross-generational research project led by the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds, calls for a coordinated, policy-led approach to climate change and sustainable development. This research highlights that whilst in the UK people are concerned about environmental degradation, it is seen as an issue that affects future generations and distant others. This policy brief outlines how important it is for governments to lead the way, rather than placing the burden on individual consumption.



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POLICY CONTEXT

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development claims to be of 'unprecedented' scope, involving all people in a journey towards economic prosperity, social justice and environmental protection.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), coinciding with debates about the UK's aspirations post-Brexit, present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a greener, fairer society for ourselves and for the future. So far, the UK government's commitment to these Global Goals has been criticised by MPs, due to a perceived lack of leadership and focus on international, rather than domestic, policy¹. Meanwhile, the UK is not on track to meet domestic emissions reduction targets². Whilst public concern about climate change remains high³, public engagement with the SDGs has been described as 'shockingly low'.

INTERSECTION shows that there is an opportunity for news editors, journalists and campaigners to shape this debate, and highlights why it is important for policy-makers to lead the way to a sustainable future.

CLIMATE CHANGE, JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Climate change and sustainable development are connected in debates about the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of industrialisation, growth and consumer choice. Political solutions to both rely on shared ideas about justice, between people and nations today, and between generations. The Bruntland Report defines sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Whilst the UN Framework Convention on Climate

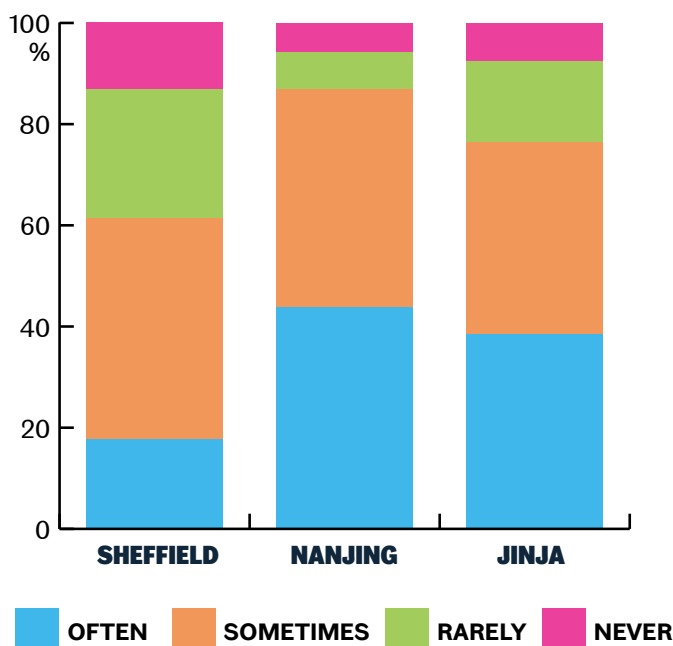
Change (UNFCCC) establishes the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' for addressing the legacy of industrialisation, recognising that some nations have greater historical responsibility for climate change, and that major polluters owe a debt for the damage they cause.

INTERSECTION put these principles to residents of advanced (Sheffield, UK), emerging (Nanjing, China) and less developed (Jinja, Uganda) industrial cities. In Sheffield, we found that people tended to agree with them:

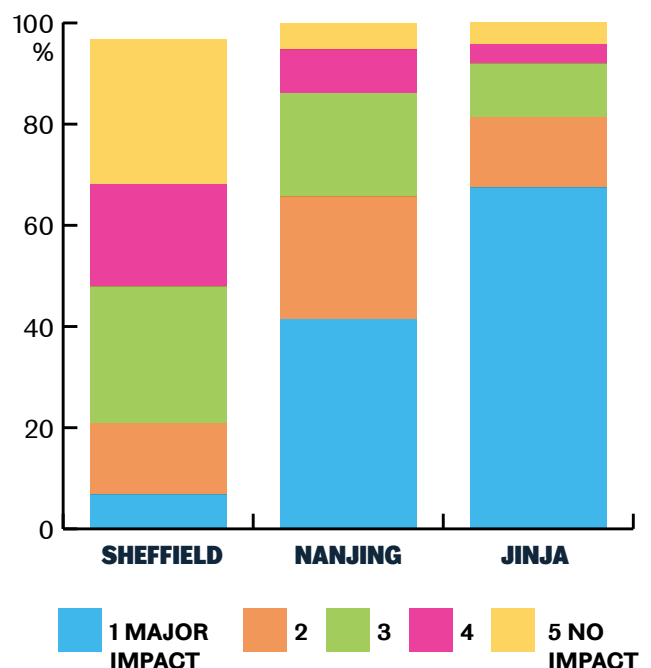
- 67% of people agreed or strongly agreed that 'Countries that have historically contributed the most to climate change have a bigger responsibility to act today.' 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- 57% agreed or strongly agreed that 'Countries that produce more pollution like the UK and China owe a debt to poorer countries for contributing to climate change there.' 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- 43% agreed or strongly agreed that 'It is fair that people like me in the UK should make sacrifices to save resources for future generations.' 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Whilst people in the UK agreed that the country has a responsibility to act and owes a debt for its pollution, fewer agreed that they should make individual sacrifices to achieve this.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU THINK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?



IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON ME PERSONALLY



ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE ACROSS GENERATIONS AND COUNTRIES

Compared with people in Nanjing and Jinja, far fewer people in Sheffield often think about climate change or perceive that it has a major impact on their lives. A major barrier to public action on climate change is the extent to which it is perceived as a distant and future problem.

"...we're in the wrong place for it to be affecting us... I mean, it's other parts of the world where it's noticeable at the minute. It'll become more noticeable here but not for a long time, and also not as drastically probably."

Rose, early 70s, retired teacher

When prompted, many people said that a number of environmental issues are a problem now, notably flooding and tree felling, which have both affected Sheffield directly. However, more people anticipated environmental problems for the next generation, with the difference particularly marked for energy and food shortages and extreme weather.

The older generation described their lived experience of environmental change as largely positive as a result of deindustrialisation, and tended not to see sustainable development as an urgent priority now.

"All the buildings in Sheffield were black. I think most of that's gone, because of modern thinking. Also the rivers, the river through Sheffield was always horrible and polluted and the canal was polluted. Now it's fairly clean all the way down to where it meets the Humber."

Geoff, late 70s, retired construction worker

Some residents in Sheffield also recognised that environmental problems had perhaps been displaced, rather than solved.

"See we've got rid of all that, sent all the manufacturing smoke and waste and dross over to the Far East to make our air better. I don't know, it's not ethical, is it, to do that? But they've cleaned our country up. I mean in days of old I can remember the smog was terrible."

Sally, early 80s, retired secretary

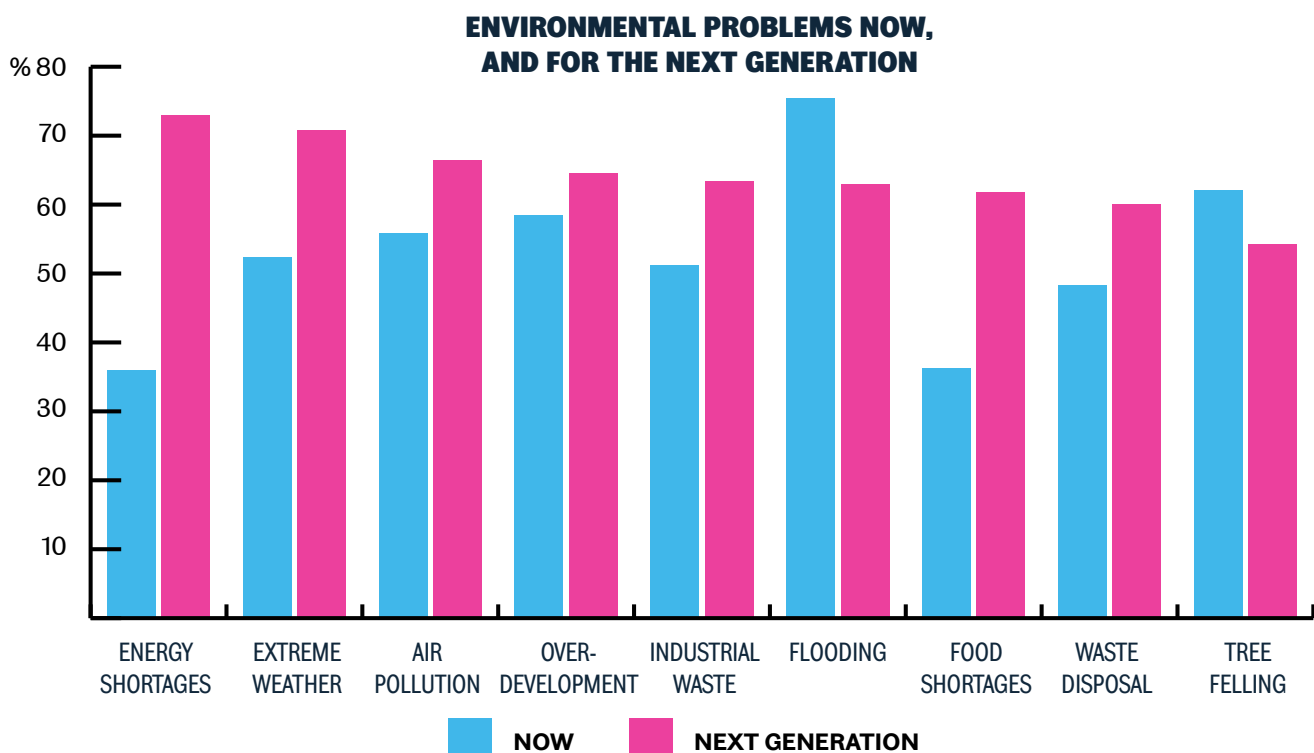
In contrast, people in Nanjing and Jinja felt the more immediate effects of industrial pollution and erratic weather.

"The waste water from factories' discharge outlets can cause serious pollution to the rivers... The latest change is smog. We hardly ever had a smoggy day before... Almost everyone could fall victim to the polluted air."

ZhenZhen, late 70s, retired lecturer in Nanjing

"...now the factory down that side, it pollutes the air so much, but also there's something more dangerous it does... they didn't have a proper place, they were dumping their waste and they were channelling it to the lake or to the river."

Bill, early 30s, journalist in Jinja



TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

We asked residents in each city who has a major role to play in protecting the environment. Most people said that their national government and industry play a major role, but far fewer Sheffield and Nanjing residents said that they personally play a major role.

The UK's per capita carbon footprint is estimated at 6.3 metric tonnes of CO₂ and China's at 6.7 tonnes⁴, while Uganda's is nearer 0.1 tonnes⁵. Yet, more residents in Jinja feel that they have a major role to play in protecting the environment, than people whose consumer lifestyles contribute to major environmental degradation. This again signals a disconnect between people's acceptance that countries like the UK should take action, and their willingness to accept individual responsibility.

We explored why people in Sheffield feel this way through in-depth interviews. Two key reasons emerged. Firstly, people were sceptical about the impact of lifestyle change without wider policy change.

"I'm talking about how cars pollute, but that's just one car. Down the road, there's a factory that has 50 years of pollution a day or something in comparison to the car. So it's a bit like what level does my consumer choice actually effect?"

Karen, early 40s, family support worker

Secondly, people believed that governments can and should lead on advancing sustainable development, including positive regulation of consumer choice.

"Hopefully governments will start to increase their work on climate change. So will there be fines if people aren't recycling? Will there be more taxes on energy-inefficient cars? Will there be more electric cars?"

Joseph, late teens, student

"The decision about plastic bags is an example of a fairly simple decision being taken, hasn't hurt anybody, hasn't impacted on anybody, it doesn't affect your free rights in any way... I think similar ideas in respect of renewable resources, which people won't notice particularly, if they were government-led could have a significant impact."

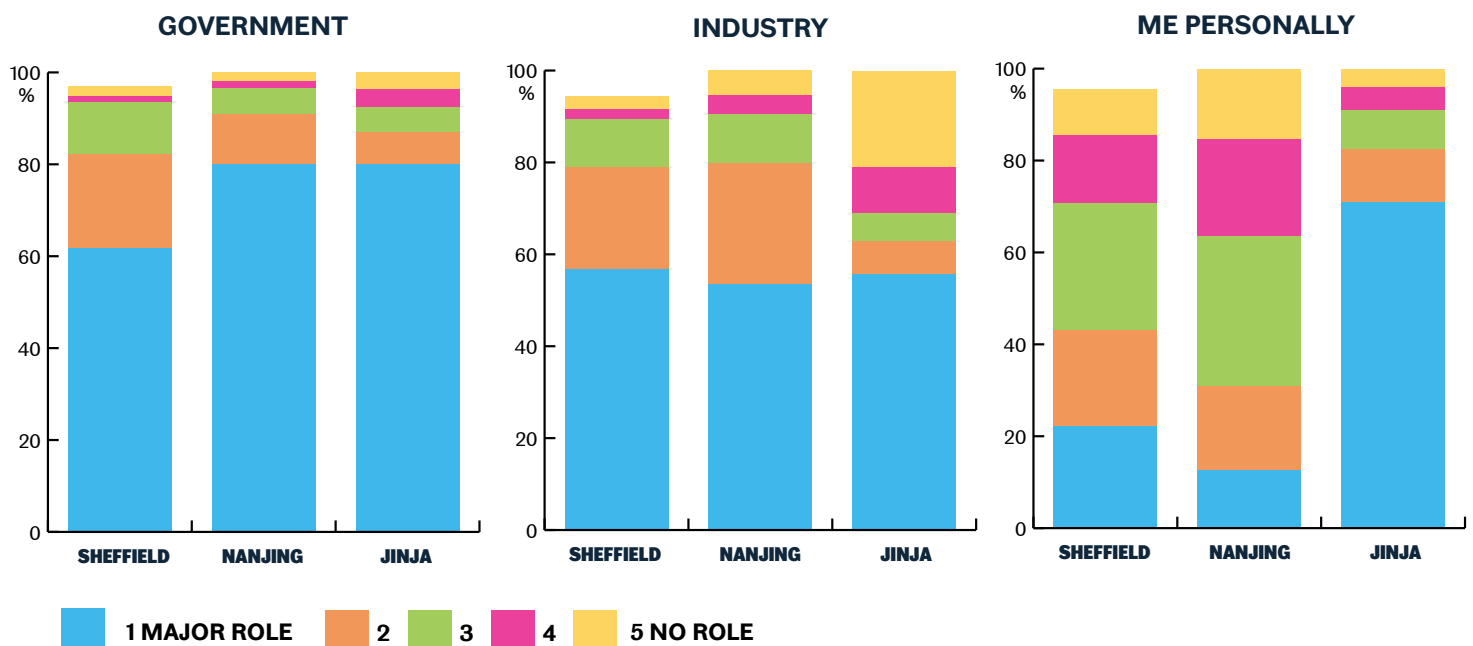
Janice, early 50s, family court judge

FRAMING THE DEBATE

Sheffield residents' perceptions of who should be responsible for protecting the environment are at odds with how sustainability is represented in the media. We analysed print and online sustainability coverage in a cross-market sample of five UK national newspapers, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Sun*.

We looked at newspaper coverage in 2015, the year the SDGs launched and the UNFCCC adopted the Paris Agreement on reducing global emissions. These landmark intergovernmental events were peripheral in UK press coverage of sustainability, appearing in fewer than 3% of articles in our sample. The main focus across all titles was the economy and sustainable consumption, particularly food, fashion, tourism, and corporate social responsibility. Action towards sustainable development was chiefly framed as driven by business leadership and consumer choice, rather than national or intergovernmental policies. This suggests that media coverage of sustainable development is not aligned with people's views on how it is best achieved.

WHO HAS A MAJOR ROLE TO PLAY IN PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT?



CONCLUSIONS

- **The UK has a moral obligation to act.** Principles such as polluter pays, common but differentiated responsibility, and duty to future generations have long been staples of intergovernmental climate change and sustainable development policies. Our research shows that people tend to accept these values.
- **Environmental problems are displaced in time and space.** People in Sheffield tend not to feel significantly affected by climate change and environmental degradation today. This suggests that domestic sustainable development is not seen as a priority. Agreement with saving resources for future generations is weaker than for other sustainable development principles, in spite of the perception that the next generation will be more affected by issues such as energy and food shortages, signalling an intergenerational justice value-action gap.
- **Individuals feel unable to make a difference alone and look to government to lead.** Our survey findings starkly indicate that people do not feel that they have a major role to play in protecting the environment. Our interview data suggests that this is because they feel that they don't have the power to make substantive change through consumer choice, without infrastructural change led by government and industry.
- **The UK is not embracing the Sustainable Development Goals as a domestic agenda.** Limited UK press coverage of the SDGs, contrasted with the dominance of sustainable consumption and lifestyle frames in national newspapers, is noteworthy in the context of low public awareness of the Global Goals and criticism of the government's low-key approach to domestic implementation. In view of our findings on how people view responsibility for environmental problems, we suggest that the public needs more information about government plans and priorities for sustainable development.



Community waste action intervention, Jinja. © Katie McQuaid.



Intergenerational workshop, Nanjing.

1. House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2017) 'Sustainable Development Goals in the UK'.
2. Committee on Climate Change (2017) 'Reducing Emissions and Preparing for Climate Change: 2017 Report to Parliament'.
3. Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017) 'Energy and Climate Change Public Attitudes Tracker: Wave 22'.
4. International Energy Agency (2016) 'Key World Energy Statistics 2016'.
5. World Bank (2014) 'CO2 Emissions (Metric Tons Per Capita)'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY-MAKERS

- The government should put in place a robust cross-departmental plan for advancing the SDGs in the UK. The public expects the government to take a leadership role, and is unlikely to embrace Agenda 2030 or the lifestyle changes needed in the long-term without stronger signals on the direction of travel.
- Aligning with its work on the Global Goals, the government should establish a taskforce, to explore how intergenerational justice could be enshrined in a post-Brexit sustainable development agenda for the UK, reviewing evidence and best-practice examples elsewhere.
- Interviewees were generally positive about pro-environmental regulation of consumer choice, such as the plastic bag charge and the microbead ban. Government departments should consider where similar interventions could effectively reduce resource consumption, for example, Defra and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) could work with industry partners to roll out zero waste packaging schemes.

AUTHORS

- **Dr Kristina Diprose**, Department of Geography, The University of Sheffield
k.diprose@sheffield.ac.uk
- **Professor Gill Valentine**, Department of Geography, The University of Sheffield
g.valentine@sheffield.ac.uk
- **Professor Robert M. Vanderbeck**, Department of Geography, The University of Leeds
r.vanderbeck@leeds.ac.uk



Intergenerational workshop, Sheffield.

NEWS EDITORS AND JOURNALISTS

- Media organisations have a crucial role to play in raising public awareness of the SDGs and holding leaders accountable, yet our research suggests the Global Goals are underreported in the UK, and there is a systemic issue with framing sustainability as led by consumer choice. Editors and journalists can redress the balance by increasing their coverage of the SDGs and what they mean for domestic policy, making use of existing media toolkits, and funding quality investigative journalism.

CAMPAIGNERS

- Over the past decade, researchers have made the case for promoting intrinsic values to mainstream pro-environmental messages. Campaigns to raise public awareness and the national profile of the SDGs should also frame their communications in terms of ethical first principles (polluter pays, common but differentiated responsibility, and intergenerational justice), which enjoy strong public support.

About the research:

INTERSECTION: *Intergenerational Justice, Consumption and Sustainability in Comparative Perspective* was a three year research project (2014-17) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through a Care for the Future Grant for Professors Gill Valentine, Robert M. Vanderbeck and Jane Plastow, Dr Lily Chen and Dr Mei Zhang (grant no. AH/K006215/1).

The research was a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds. The research team also included Dr Kristina Diprose (Sheffield), Dr Chen Liu (Nanjing) and Dr Katie McQuaid (Jinja). Research methods included, in each city: a survey of 750 residents, in-depth interviews with 90 individuals and 15 three-generation families, stakeholder interviews, intergenerational creative workshops, and discourse analysis of national newspapers.

Further information is available at www.sheffield.ac.uk/intersection

Sheffield Solutions an ambitious initiative of the Faculty of Social Sciences at The University of Sheffield, which supports events, activities and outputs aimed at connecting social science perspectives to policy makers, practitioners and other external audiences in order to tackle pressing global issues. For further information contact sheffieldsolutions@sheffield.ac.uk.