

ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR OF LATVIANS: INSIGHTS FROM A SOCIAL SURVEY

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Abstract: This study draws upon various and somewhat contradictory findings from previous research on the relationship between environmental views and actions. The key interest is to explore whether economic growth and protection of the environment are seen as compatible or conflicting goals, and how both relate to pro-environmental behaviour that people of Latvia engage in. The study is based on quantitative analysis of data from a nationwide representative survey of 1015 residents of Latvia conducted in November 2021. The results suggest that Latvians perceive economic development and environmental protection mostly as mutually dependent goals, and even those believing that the concern for the environment has gone too far at the expense of economic development still report practicing certain pro-environmental actions on a regular basis. Specifically, buying locally sourced and seasonal foods whenever possible, sorting different kinds of waste for recycling, and trying to reduce the consumption of disposable items like plastic bags are reported most often by the respondents. In the concluding part, the limitations of the present study as well as potential venues for future research are briefly discussed.

Keywords: economic growth, environment, logistic regression, survey.

JEL code: O44, Z13

Introduction

Threats to the environment, including those related to climate change, have gained attention and taken central stage among societal issues debated by the public policy makers and academia across disciplines. Quality of the environment has been brought to the forefront as one of the major concerns nowadays (Vicente P. et al., 2021). Climate change is mentioned among the most serious dangers to humanity (Kaklamanou D. et al., 2015). The negative impact of environmental degradation has not only biological but also societal implications (Mezghenni R. & Zouari S., 2016). This impact is largely attributed to the consequences of human behaviour (Mobley C. et al., 2010), acknowledging the disruptive effect of the present-day dominant modes of production and consumption (Mezghenni R. & Zouari S., 2016). This, in turn, is linked to economic and social behaviour of people and foregrounds the debate on the relationship between economic growth and environmental quality, including the question on the compatibility or mutual exclusivity of both goals (Drews S. et al., 2016).

Researchers have used different terms to describe people's actions related to influencing environmental processes and their consequences. Probably the most common and straightforward one is environmental behaviour (e.g. Evans G. et al., 2007; Poortinga W. et al., 2004) defined as actions that make a direct or indirect impact on the environment. These include, for example, "*lifestyle or purchasing decisions*" (Flynn R. et al., 2010) made by individuals. Other scholars have used terms like pro-environmental behaviour (Bleys B. et al., 2017; Steg L. et al., 2014), environmentally responsible behaviour (Mobley C. et al., 2010), or socially responsible consumption (Mezghenni R. & Zouari S., 2016) when the research focuses on the purchase of goods and services and resource utilization. It is typical to measure environmental behaviour by conducting quantitative surveys in which respondents are asked whether, how much, or how often they engage in certain actions like recycling, using energy sparingly, or sorting wastes (cf. Bleys B., et al. 2017). Studies that focus, among other actions, on socially responsible consumption (Mezghenni R. & Zouari S., 2016) can also include questions on purchasing certain goods such as organic food (Steg L. et al., 2014).

Numerous studies have highlighted the impact of attitudes and beliefs about the environment on people's behaviour. Doran et al. (2015) note that the typical finding is the direct correlation between

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attitudinal support for environmental preservation and pro-environmental actions. Other scholars observed that people may "*express strong support for environmentally sustainable policies, but display little commitment to alter their own behaviour*" (Flynn R. et al., 2010). The discrepancy between adherence to pro-environmental values and pro-environmental actions is referred to as value-action gap (Flynn R. et al., 2010).

Some argue that the value-action gap has to do with costs associated with engaging in pro-environmental actions. For instance, Evans et al. (2007) acknowledges that attitudes are a good predictor of pro-environmental actions but one should also consider the price of implementing such behaviour. Such price can include taking additional costs (e.g. buying organic food which tends to be more expensive than the conventional one) or taking public transport instead of driving own car (leading to discomfort or loss of time if one is used to drive a personal vehicle in everyday life). Also, the inconsistency between values and actions can be explained by varied salience of environmental issues among different social groups as some of them may have other priorities than other (Flynn R. et al., 2010). Givens and Jorgenson (2011) stress the importance of cross-national variation as well, arguing that most of the recent research on the association between environmental values and pro-environmental behaviour, including the willingness to pay more for a greener and cleaner environment, has been performed in better-off countries and societies that most data are usually available on. They agree with Brechin and Kempton (1997) who cast doubt on the usability of willingness to pay questions in poorer countries where much more individuals may find it harder to opt for spending more money or investing in energy-saving devices and solutions to lessen the ecological footprint of industries and households. This raises the issue of the possible trade-off between economic development and environmental sustainability, namely, whether people see both ends as compatible or mutually exclusive, in relatively poorer countries like Latvia. For example, Pisano and Lubell (2015) found that people living in more affluent countries and holding postmaterialist values are more involved in environmental protection than residents of poorer countries and less support for postmaterialism. Gu et al. (2020) have shown that materialistic values (prioritizing economic development rather than autonomy and sustainability) are negatively associated with pro-environmental attitudes and actions.

Some other studies suggest that economic growth and protection of the environment can be – or at least are perceived as – compatible and mutually dependent. An online representative survey of Spanish citizens conducted by Drews et al. (2016) demonstrates that economic growth and environmental sustainability are seen as compatible goals while support for the growth at all costs (ignoring the possible harm to the environment) has very few supporters. Also, results obtained by Kaplowitz et al. (2011) suggest that many respondents do not see the protection of environment and economic development as incompatible. Although the goal of their study was to test different wordings for the same question (not to draw general conclusions about the population at large) and the sample comprised only university faculty, staff members, and students (Kaplowitz M. et al., 2011), it is still a very telling evidence of how people perceive the complex trade-off between economic prosperity and environmental sustainability.

Drawing upon the findings and insights from the research outlined above, this study addresses two research questions.

RQ1: What are Latvians' views and attitudes towards economic development and protection of the environment? Are these goals seen as mutually exclusive, compatible, or mutually dependent?

RQ2: How do these views and attitudes affect their environmental behaviour? What is the direction and magnitude of this relationship, if any?

The following section describes the data used to resolve these research questions as well as the analytical procedure employed.

Data and Method

The data were obtained in a Latvian nationwide representative survey carried out within the University of Latvia research project *Ready for change? Sustainable management of common natural resources (RfC)* by the *Latvijas Fakti* survey agency from 1 to 29 November 2021 using computer-assisted telephone interview mode. The survey population included all residents of Latvia aged 18 and older. Respondents were approached by means of random-digit dialling from a computer-generated database of 8-digit telephone numbers. The achieved sample size was 1015 respondents. The survey was organized and conducted in accordance with the ESOMAR Code and Standards for Market and Social Research.

Ten environmental practices (see Table 2 for the full list) were selected as outcome variables, six of them were borrowed from the International Social Survey Programme 2010 Environment III survey questionnaire (ISSP Research Group, 2019). Their original response options including a subjective 4-rank frequency scale running from never to always. In aid of analysis, they were recoded dichotomously so that *always* and *often* response options represent the habit of engaging in a certain type of behaviour (1) while *sometimes* and *never* signal the lack of such habit (0). The recoding made possible the use of binary logistic regression for data analysis.

Five statements on environment and economy from the ISSP 2010 Environment survey questionnaire using a 5-rank agreement scale were included as factor variables (Table 1). Gender, age, respondent's place of residence (Riga vs larger cities vs smaller towns vs rural areas), having higher education, financial security assessment (How long would get by if suddenly lost steady sort of income), having loans to repay, and interview language were included as factors to account for possible behaviour variation across sociodemographic groups and living standards.

The next section presents the results of frequency distribution analysis and logistic regressions exploring the relationship between factor and outcome variables.

Results

Table 1 presents the levels of agreement with statements about the environment and economic growth. Those items were appropriated from the International Social Survey Programme 2010 Environment III survey questionnaire (ISSP Research Group, 2019), and their wordings are listed in the source questionnaire language, i.e. English. For ease of perception, the shares of positive and negative answers are grouped together (e.g. strongly agree and agree combined).

Table 1

Agreement with various statements on economy and environment

No.	Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N
1	We worry too much about the future of the environment and not enough about prices and jobs today	47.3	12.6	40.1	984
2	Almost everything we do in modern life harms the environment	46.4	11.3	42.3	974
3	People worry too much about human progress harming the environment	40.3	17.4	42.3	974
4	In order to protect the environment Latvia needs economic growth	69.4	15.2	15.3	978
5	Economic growth always harms the environment	31.7	16.3	52.0	979

Note: entries reflect the percentages of respondents. Don't know answers are excluded so the actual N varies between questions.

Distribution of answers in the first three items presents a noteworthy picture. None of the opposite mind-sets seems to be appealing to the majority of Latvians. For example, while 47 per cent believe that it is prices and jobs that have to be "worried about" nowadays and not the environment, 40 per cent believe the opposite, and more than 12 per cent more take a neutral stand on this issue. The differences are even less pronounced for statement 2 ("Almost everything we do in modern life harms the environment"), and there are slightly more people than actually disagree with statement 3 ("People worry too much about human progress harming the environment") suggesting that a slightly larger proportion of Latvians deem environmental concerns to be a priority. The answer distribution to the next two statements suggests that economic development and environmental sustainability are seen as compatible or even mutually dependent goals by most people. Specifically, almost 70 per cent believe that economic growth is a prerequisite to environmental protection while less than one-third of respondents think that economic growth always harms the environment.

Table 2

Frequencies of engaging in pro-environmental activities and practices²

No.	Activity or practice	Always	Often	Some-times	Never	N
1	Buying locally sourced and seasonal foods whenever possible	30.4	45.9	19.4	4.3	992
2	Sorting glass or tins or plastic or newspapers etc. for recycling	42.1	28	22.9	7	900
3	Trying to reduce the consumption of disposable items (e.g. supermarket plastic bags, overpacking, etc.)	21.7	41.5	29.7	7.1	993
4	Buying fruit and vegetables grown without pesticides or chemicals	15.8	40.3	32.3	11.7	873
5	Using environmentally friendly travel alternatives, e.g. walking, cycling, public transport	19.8	34.6	34.6	11.1	1004
6	Practice biocomposting	26.5	11.9	13.8	47.8	978
7	Avoiding buying certain products for environmental reasons	10.1	27.1	38.6	24.3	954
8	Reducing energy or fuel used at home for environmental reasons	12.6	22.9	22.3	42.2	948
9	Saving or re-using water for environmental reasons	12.8	20.2	25.7	41.3	980
10	Cutting back on driving a car for environmental reasons	2.9	8.5	28.4	60.2	679

Note: entries are percentages of respondents. For items 2, 4, and 10, individuals unable to engage in a given activity (e.g. due to lack of car) were excluded from the analysis. Don't know answers are excluded so the actual N varies between questions.

Table 2 items are sorted in the descending order of the combined portions of *always* and *often* responses. Buying local and seasonal food, sorting waste for recycling, and avoiding the usage of disposable items are the most popular pro-environmental practices exercised by Latvians, possibly not the least due to relatively low costs of engaging in them (cf. Evans G. et al. 2007). More than a half of the respondents "always" or "often" buy chemical-free food and choose nature-friendly travel alternatives. These activities are associated with bearing considerable costs in terms of money or time. Finally, reducing energy, fuel, of water consumption is often to always practiced by one-third of the sample, and less than 11 per cent of those owning a vehicle habitually cut back on driving it due to environmental motives.

Table 3 presents the results of a series of logistic regression analyses with 10 pro-environmental behaviours as dependent variables. Interestingly, reproaching modern society with too much focus on the environment at the expense of prices and jobs is a significant predictor for only two out of ten behaviours, and even in these two cases the association is positive (saving energy/fuel and water). The acknowledgement that "almost everything we do in modern life harms the environment" increases the odds of reducing disposable items, buying chemical-free food, saving energy and water. Also, the agreement with the statement "People worry too much about human progress harming the environment", far from being pro-environmental per se, shows a positive association with using environmentally-friendly travel alternatives and cutting back in driving a car (both behaviours are apparently related). Seeing economic

² Items 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10 come from the International Social Survey Programme 2010 Environment III survey questionnaire (ISSP Research Group, 2019).

growth as a prerequisite to protection of the environment is positively related to waste sorting, buying chemical-free food, avoiding purchases of certain food for environmental reasons, and saving water.

Some differences among sociodemographic groups are also noteworthy. Women are more likely to choose environmentally-friendly travel alternatives, to save energy, fuel, and water. Age appears to be a weak but positive and significant predictor of buying local and seasonal foods, biocomposting, and saving water. Residents of smaller Latvian towns are more likely to choose environmentally-friendly travel alternatives and engage in biocomposting, but are *less* likely to avoid buying certain foods for ecological reasons, probably due to more limited selection and lower income, or due to higher probability of producing certain kinds of food themselves in their home gardens. Living in rural areas is positively related to sorting and recycling, choosing environmentally-friendly travel alternatives, and biocomposting. Higher education acts as a strong predictor for buying local, seasonal, and eco-friendly foods, sorting and recycling, as well as abstaining from driving a car when possible. Respondents with more secure financial situation would buy local and seasonal food more often but are predictably less likely to abstain from driving a personal car (as well as those having credits and loans to repay). Language does not seem to be a significant factor in most cases, although the respondents who chose Russian as the interview language are less likely to engage in waste sorting and recycling.

Table 3

Results of regression analysis for pro-environmental behaviours and their factors

	Local, seasonal foods	Sorting for recycling	Reduce disposable items	Foods without chemicals	Travel alternatives
We worry too much about the future of the environment and not enough about prices and jobs today	1.044	0.963	0.962	1.013	0.988
Almost everything we do in modern life harms the environment	1.032	0.998	1.164	1.147	1.017
People worry too much about human progress harming the environment	0.961	0.865	0.990	1.058	1.144
In order to protect the environment Latvia needs economic growth	1.125	1.178	1.139	1.174	0.958
Economic growth always harms the environment	0.927	0.965	0.879	0.963	1.045
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1.163	1.412	1.188	1.209	1.737
Age	1.016	1.000	1.004	1.003	1.007
Republican city (comp. to Riga)	1.136	1.272	0.992	1.155	0.817
Other city (comp. to Riga)	1.012	1.363	0.985	1.112	0.494
Rural area (comp. to Riga)	1.409	1.895	1.474	1.297	0.374
Higher education (0 = no, 1 = yes)	1.856	2.219	1.313	1.220	0.830
How long get by if suddenly lost income	1.274	1.041	1.133	0.993	0.805
Credits or loans (0 = no, 1 = yes)	0.881	1.030	1.130	1.115	0.684
Interview language (1 = Latvian, 2 = Russian)	1.206	0.469	1.088	1.238	0.928
<i>N</i>	805	729	809	726	811

Note: entries are odds ratios; coefficients that are statistically significant at 0.05 level or less are bolded.

Table 3 (continued)

Results of regression analysis for pro-environmental behaviours and their factors

	Biocomposting	Not buying certain foods	Saving energy / fuel	Saving water	Not driving a car
We worry too much about the future of the environment and not enough about prices and jobs today	1.065	1.041	1.343	1.159	1.022
Almost everything we do in modern life harms the environment	1.046	1.132	1.216	1.211	1.234
People worry too much about human progress harming the environment	1.118	1.031	1.140	1.098	1.285
In order to protect the environment Latvia needs economic growth	1.016	1.162	1.118	1.209	0.944
Economic growth always harms the environment	0.903	1.087	0.904	0.961	0.968
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1.260	1.117	1.601	1.499	1.339
Age	1.028	1.007	1.008	1.014	0.988
Republican city (comp. to Riga)	1.883	1.073	0.914	1.010	0.813
Other city (comp. to Riga)	1.972	0.568	1.403	1.261	1.019
Rural area (comp. to Riga)	3.270	0.877	0.958	1.210	0.499
Higher education (0 = no, 1 = yes)	1.181	1.406	1.189	0.999	1.906
How long get by if suddenly lost income	1.341	1.008	1.059	0.868	0.903
Credits or loans (0 = no, 1 = yes)	1.044	0.987	0.975	1.299	0.576
Interview language (1 = Latvian, 2 = Russian)	0.774	1.097	1.281	0.995	1.611
<i>N</i>	798	790	775	804	584

Note: entries are odds ratios; coefficients that are statistically significant at 0.05 level or less are bolded.

Recurring to the first research question raised in the introduction, the majority of the surveyed respondents view economic and environmental problems as mutually related and dependent as seen from the frequency distributions for items 4 and 5 from Table 1. More than two-thirds see economic growth as a necessary condition to protect the environment, and more than a half disagree with the statement "Economic growth always harms the environment". This is generally in line with the findings from studies by Drews et al. (2016) and Kaplowitz et al. (2011).

As for the second research question, the expectation that the emphasis on economic growth would lead to disregard for nature and its problems found no confirmation in the results of the regression analysis presented above. The results apparently contradict the findings from previous research discussed by Doran et al. (2015) that reveal a direct association between pro-environmental attitudes and actions. Also, the Latvian data show that the belief about environmental issues being exaggerated may positively correlate with certain types of pro-environmental behaviour that may be an example of a value-action gap reversed (cf. Flynn R. et al., 2010). Latvians seem to view economic and environmental problems as mutually related and dependent, and even prioritising economic issues over the environmental ones shows a positive association with at least some pro-environmental activities. Agreement with two out of five ISSP statements included as factors in the regression ("Almost everything we do in modern life harms the environment" and

"In order to protect the environment Latvia needs economic growth") is positively related to four out of ten types of pro-environmental behaviour.

Conclusions

- 1) Although the distribution of some attitudes seems to picture a somewhat polarised society, most pro-environmental actions reviewed here enjoy widespread popularity among the Latvians. Few people report never sorting waste for recycling or reducing the consumption of disposables. Same applies to food selection and consumption as well as choosing travel alternatives with a lower ecological footprint.
- 2) Saving energy, fuel, and water is practiced by a minority and is still far from becoming a mainstream; the same, and even more, applies to abstaining from using a personal vehicle. These practices are apparently those that are often perceived as costly in terms of money, time, or convenience.
- 3) The assumption that economic growth and environmental sustainability are seen as rival goals should be rejected as most Latvians see economic growth as a *prerequisite* for the environmental well-being. Concern for the negative impact of human actions is positively related to some but not all pro-environmental practices, and even ostensible scepticism towards prioritizing environment over economy has actually a positive impact on the odds of engaging in such crucial practices as saving energy, fuel, and water.
- 4) Female gender, higher education, and living in smaller towns or rural areas seem to increase the odds of engaging in selective pro-environmental practices.
- 5) Just as any study, this one has its limitations. It would be worth conducting further research on whether salience of certain environmental issues (e.g. air pollution, climate change, or loss of biodiversity) predicts agreement with attitudes prioritising economy or environment or influences the likelihood of certain behaviours.
- 6) Experiments similar to that conducted by Kaplowitz M. et al. (2011) have a potential to be telling about development scenarios being perceived as mutually exclusive, compatible, or dependent on one another.
- 7) As pro-environmental actions belong to the realm of socially desirable behaviour (Vesely S. & Klöckner C., 2020), the fairness of survey responses should be assessed more carefully, and remedies that could mitigate the sensitivity of survey questions should be considered and employed in future research on the topic.

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