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Why is it so hard to change people's behaviour?

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Richard Docwra

Why is it so hard to change people's behaviour?¹

Abstract: The essay focuses a major challenge of various movements for human development and educationists – the options of changing people's behaviour in a globalised world. The author names barriers for this and describes perspectives to overcome these.

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel nimmt eine der großen Herausforderung für Bemühungen im Rahmen von Entwicklungspolitik in den Blick – die Möglichkeit, das Verhalten der Menschen in einer globalisierten Welt zu verändern. Der Autor benennt Grenzen und beschreibt mögliche Perspektiven, wie diese Grenzen überwunden werden können.

Introduction

A range of urgent issues threaten the future of the planet and its various inhabitants. These include climate change, the unsustainable use of natural resources, the abuse of human rights and the unjust distribution of resources among people.

A broad body of individuals and organisations is seeking to address these issues, including environmental groups, development charities, animal protection groups and human rights organisations. In this article we will refer to this broad group as the 'Movement for Global Change' (or simply 'the Movement'). Although the Movement crosses a diverse range of issues, the organisations within it share some basic underlying values. For some time, the Movement has sought to change the attitudes and behaviour of individual members of the public on these issues – for example, to get them to reduce their carbon emissions, to use less water or to buy fairly traded products. This article suggests that the Movement's efforts to date have been inadequate to achieve real change, because it has failed to understand the real psychological position of the individual in the western world. Specifically, it has failed to address three of the biggest barriers to attitudinal and behavioural change that this individual faces.

Barriers to Change

The three major barriers are as follows:

1. Complexity of the Modern World

In a localised economy it would be reasonably easy for an individual to judge whether they were acting in an ethical way

on any issue, as they would be able to see and feel the effects of their actions at first hand. For example, the wheat needed to make the bread that they bought from the baker might be grown in a nearby field, or the waste they produced might be disposed of locally. In the globalised economy that we now live in however it is a different matter. The individual rarely sees the impact of their actions at first hand. If they are to act as an ethical citizen on any issue they will therefore need to have a reasonably detailed understanding of 'how the world works' – for example, the effect they have on other people and the planet through even their most simple day-to-day actions such as shopping.

It is very difficult for most people to develop anything like the level of 'global awareness' that they require to function as ethical citizens, for the simple reason that the modern world is too complex to allow this. The chain linking suppliers, materials, production, packaging and transportation of even a relatively simple product to an individual consumer can be lengthy and complex. A similarly high level of complexity is present in many other chains and processes that an individual may be connected to in their everyday lives, including the disposal of waste and corporate relationships.

This situation has many consequences for the individual. These include:

- It makes it hard for them to realise that their actions have broader consequences – and thus that they need to change their behaviour;
- It makes it even harder for them to understand what the full range of these consequences is, even for one simple action of theirs. This in turn makes it difficult for them to know what behaviour they need to change and how to change it;
- Overall, it seems to require an impossible level of knowledge and time – a thought that may make the individual unwilling to change anything;
- Even if they want to make changes, the individual may not know which changes will make the most difference.

Complexity is not only present within the processes and relationships that link individuals to the world and other people. It can also be found in the wide range of moral values that these processes and relationships cut across. For example, a t-shirt you are purchasing may be made from sustainable cotton, but workers picking the cotton may have been subjected to unfair working conditions. Should the environment 'trump' human welfare? How should we prioritise our ethical concerns?

2. *The Gap between our 'Radius of Impact' and 'Radius of Moral Concern'*

The process of globalisation has meant that the 'radius of impact' each of us has on the world has extended massively whether we are aware of it or not.²

Although the above extension has taken place, our 'radius of moral concern' as individuals or societies has not expanded to the same extent during this period. This extension of moral concern is critical if people in the globalised world are to live in a manner that we in the Movement regard as 'ethical'.

The movement is now asking people to expand their range of concern from a very small, local area or group of people to the whole world, and also to become motivated by issues that are in some cases both a little abstract and long-termist in outlook – i.e. making changes in their behaviour now in order to provide benefits or protection for the future, or for people, creatures or other beneficiaries they cannot immediately see or do not know.

It may seem that we are asking people to make a substantial shift on this point. For some it may be a big change but for many others, living their daily lives in a way that is consistent with 'universal moral principles' (which is all we are talking about) has been a part of their lives for years. The most common way in which these universal principles are manifested in the mainstream is in religious belief and the moral codes of the type 'behave in <x> way towards all <y>s' (e.g. be kind to all animals) that spring from it.

It can be argued however that religion is less influential in today's western world than in the past, and the level of influence it should have is open to question anyway. For the millions of people who are not religious, there is very little opportunity to gain moral guidance, reflect on their own moral principles or learn about how to put them into practice, particularly the universal moral principles that affect our response to living in a globalised world. We do not seem to have an explicit set of values as a globalised society.

One of the main voices on universal values in modern society is that of interest groups such as those within the Movement. The moral message of these groups is however very much hidden, in favour of a focus on issues. Additionally, many organisations within the Movement still tend to promote one particular issue in isolation (e.g. poverty relief), which may represent only one moral value (e.g. 'every human being should have a minimum standard of living') that an individual may hold. In contrast, our moral outlook as individuals tends to consist of a range of values rather than one in isolation.

If people do not receive the support they need to consider their range of values and how they might put them into action in their lives, most will only be able to act as somewhat ineffective moral agents – they may be inconsistent or sporadic in their moral actions.

3. *Influences of Society*

The first two barriers are exacerbated by the fact that many actors in society (both organisations and individuals) have developed means (some subtle, some not) of communicating

messages in order to influence others, the most powerful of which generally seek to promote and protect the status quo. In modern society, this status quo can be defined as 'the pursuit of economic growth and profit', under which other factors are only given secondary consideration – whether these are human welfare or the natural environment. This dominant ideology either possesses values that are contrary to the human and nature-centred ones that the Movement is trying to put forward, or has adopted a highly ineffective strategy to seek the values it shares with the Movement.

The values of the dominant socio-economic system begin to be instilled in the ordinary individual in the Western world as soon as they are born – through sources such as the education system through to newspapers, television, the workplace etc. – and thus most people are born into accepting a particular picture of how the world is and what life is about.

Very few of us appear to have appreciated the all-encompassing way in which people are affected by these seemingly irrelevant inputs, or the way in which the economic and political orthodoxy spreads into so many social, cultural, educational and private areas of our lives. Once you 'place yourself within the mental worldview' of the ordinary individual, the potential severity of the effect becomes clear.³

Consider what your mental worldview would be in their position – living in a world in which economic growth and consumption are seen as the engines of a 'good society'. This underlying assumption might affect many areas of your life, including how your education is delivered to you (e.g. with a focus on providing skills that will enable you to fulfil a particular economic role), the ethos at your workplace, the messages you receive from various media (e.g. promoting consumption), even how your peers relate to you (e.g. competition to live similar lifestyles). Given these inputs, your ambitions in work, values, lifestyle, attitude towards life and various other factors would be confined within the parameters of the consumerist worldview. And you simply wouldn't realise that these mental barriers existed or have a clear idea of the other possibilities that existed beyond them.

The dominant socio-economic system is therefore a powerful force in moulding the values, aspirations and behaviour of the individual in the West. The system reinforces its values in people on an ongoing basis, all day every day, therefore it is almost impossible for the contrary messages of the Movement to get through to many people to enable them to even realise that there may be something wrong in the first place – let alone to challenge their own behaviour patterns or review the alternatives open to them.

For the people who have been able to battle through the 'smokescreen' of the modern world to the point where they wish to make changes, further obstacles lie ahead. They may find it difficult to locate the alternative options they want. They are also likely to receive little support from wider society in pursuing these options – indeed they are likely to find regular obstacles. These will take many forms, including meeting opposition, confusion or ridicule from peer groups or self-doubt as to whether the inconvenience of these changes is really worth the effort for the benefit they will bring.

Summary of Barriers

The position of many individuals in the modern world could be likened to them being suspended in a ‘bubble of delusion’ about their lifestyles, values, effect on the world, vulnerability to external influences, and many other areas – they simply lack perspective about their situation as a creature and their world. This bubble is reinforced everyday by the society around them.

On the rare occasions when messages from the Movement do get through this bubble to people it is highly likely that they will regard the messages as alien, confusing, guilt-inducing and generally inconvenient to deal with. Even when people do want to change their behaviour, they face a further set of major challenges – some of which are practical, others more intellectual and moral.

Overcoming the Barriers

In order to ‘burst’ the bubble of delusion around the ordinary individual and address the other effects of the barriers, we need to *turn people into well-informed, self-determined agents and ethical global citizens*. In a democracy, changes in people’s attitudes and behaviour will be at their most powerful, consistent and sustainable if the individual is sufficiently well-informed and equipped with the necessary intellectual faculties to be able to consider matters – both moral and practical – for themselves and arrive at conclusions for themselves. These skills can transform people from reactive vessels needing guidance, orders and protection into proactive, empowered, politically and socially aware citizens. We therefore need to empower people with these skills and the socio-political conditions to practice them in.

The benefits of this approach also extend far beyond the practical aims of the Movement – many great thinkers over the millennia have argued that the possession of these skills is an important end in itself for human beings and is a key feature of the most attractive long-term future for people and planet.

We will split up our recommendations as to how to overcome the barriers into two sections – firstly, discussing the intellectual skills and socio-political conditions that will enable people to become ethical global citizens. Secondly, considering what the Movement itself can do to address the barriers, including the possible role it could play in helping to deliver the aforementioned skills and conditions.

Overcoming the Barriers 1 – Creating a Global Citizen

Tools and Conditions Required

We will now present three crucial factors in a person’s ability to develop into a well-informed, self-determined agent, and an ethical global citizen:

*(1) The Development of ‘Intellectual Independence’
The tools of intellectual independence include:*

Perspective on the World and One’s Life

- A broad understanding of how the world around us works;
- An awareness of human beings and what we are as creatures;
- An awareness of our present situation and context – including political, social, cultural, historical, economic, scientific and philosophical factors.

Informed Decision Making

- Devoting attention to assessing the likely consequences of any action prior to taking it, weighing up options intelligently and if necessary finding further information to assist the decision-making process.

Intellectual Agility

- The ability to stand back, gain perspective and see the ‘big picture’ in everything one considers, in order to arrive at better-informed and considered conclusions;
- The ability to draw a balanced conclusion from opposing arguments;
- The awareness that black or white (or perfect) answers to a question often do not exist and that compromise is often required;
- The ability to think and act in a consistent manner.

A Questioning Attitude

- A desire to question some of the basic assumptions that underpin one’s existence;
- A preparedness to question all the inputs they receive from the external world – whether from the media, books, friends or any other source.

Self Determination and Courage

- An overarching sense that one is a self-determined, proactive creature, able to exercise some control over one’s life;
- An awareness that one has an impact on the world and a sense of responsibility for one’s actions;
- The courage to live in accordance with one’s values, even if these are not consistent with the political or social norm.

(2) The Development of ‘Values Awareness’

This quality is linked to ‘Intellectual Independence’, but has been separated from it to provide clarity. Values awareness includes the following factors:

- Awareness of one’s main moral values;
- Awareness of the territory of morality – for example, the fact that many moral issues do not have an optimum solution;
- Realistic expectations of how far one’s own values can be followed by other people and oneself;
- A willingness to consider one’s attitude towards universal values, and those relating to non-immediate beneficiaries or consequences;
- A willingness to consider how one’s values should manifest themselves in one’s behaviour in every aspect of one’s life;
- A willingness to be open-minded and review one’s values and associated matters in the light of experience.

(3) *The Availability of Information*

Aside from developing the skills outlined above, the individual needs an ongoing supply of clear, balanced information on which to base their decisions and views. This includes information relating to:

- Their 'global awareness' – including understanding of the global situation, the links between individual issues, and the influence they have as individuals on the rest of the world;
- The sources of information they receive and how this might affect the information they receive from these sources;
- The alternative options available in all areas of life.

How to Gain these Tools and Conditions

In order to apply these recommendations equitably in society, we need to ensure that the circumstances of every individual are such that they are given the opportunity to develop the skills and access the information – from the day they are born. This article will not undertake a detailed exploration of the broader socio-political conditions that will be needed to deliver the above skills and information to the public, but summarised below are some of the basic ways these could be delivered:

(1) *Education*

The majority of the skills of 'Intellectual Independence' could be delivered within the education system. Indeed, many of these are already delivered within the 'Citizenship' component of the UK National Curriculum.⁴ The education system could also deliver a significant proportion of the skills relating to 'Values Awareness'.

Currently, the UK curriculum doesn't provide a sufficiently rigorous appraisal of current global economic orthodoxy, and it could also provide greater focus on the philosophical territory of morality and how to live more effectively with one's values. Additionally, education on these topics needs to be extended beyond children, as many adults remain just as ill-equipped as children in relation to them.

(2) *Society*

Other ways of delivering these conditions and skills include:

- A national 'World Awareness Information Service' that provides information on the world and areas such as the links between people's actions and their consequences. Some of this service could possibly be provided by organisations such as the Development Education Association (www.dea.org.uk);
- A national 'Ethics Support Service' that helps people to consider what values are, what *their* values are and how to put them into practice;
- Legislation to regulate certain types of 'mental input' that are deemed to be particularly manipulative and damaging to people's intellectual independence – for example, banning advertising to children.

(3) *Specific Organisations*

A final possibility to mention in this section is the development of initiatives that are designed specifically to

deliver the individual skills mentioned in this article. One such scheme under development, called 'just think...', is a course that aims to empower the ordinary individual to develop a well-informed, considered and independent approach to living within the confusion and complexity of the modern world. For more information on the scheme, visit www.justthink.org.uk.

Overcoming the Barriers 2 – What the Movement Can Do

Now we will consider what the Movement can do to address the barriers in its direct communications to the public. The selected recommendations are as follows:

Make an Investment in Educating People

Alongside shorter term aims such as raising funds or campaigning on a specific issue, the Movement needs to make an investment in the long-term aim of changing people's attitudes and behaviour in its direct communications with the public. This long-term investment requires a greater level of information, delivered in a clear and accessible way. Perhaps most importantly, it requires organisations to incorporate an 'education strategy' component into their communication plans which sets out the role that each communication department intends to play in educating the public, the goals it is setting itself to achieve this and the specific ways it will deliver this.

Contextualise Individual Issues

In their direct communications with the public, each organisation in the Movement should constantly seek to show how its own area of interest fits within the context of the world in general, links to other issues and fits within the overall values of the Movement.

Make Their Values More Explicit

Each member of the Movement should be more explicit about the values that lie behind their focus on the particular issue that they communicate to the public. For example, behind the campaign to release Chinese political prisoners may be the value that 'everyone should have freedom of speech'.

Show their Full Range of Values

In fact, organisations should go beyond the above point, and show the full range of basic values they hold. It would also be useful if they could show how they prioritise these values, where they draw the line in any choices between differing values and the methods they use to make these decisions. A possible delivery channel for this is a detailed 'values statement' by each organisation.

Provide an Overall Vision

Organisations within the Movement should provide the public with a description of the world they want to see in the future – the world they are working towards.

This 'Vision for a Better World' should be backed up by detailed, robust and serious thinking as to how the values held by the organisation will be manifested as a whole in its vision of a 'good society'. For example, a development charity would need to consider questions such as what a poverty-free world would look like and whether this vision would be desirable from the point of view of other values it may hold (e.g. sustainability and human rights).

Form a Global Movement

Although we have referred to an entity called the 'Movement for Global Change' throughout this article, the phrase has only been used in a figurative sense, as this movement does not currently exist. We recommend that this movement should be established.

Its aim would be to unite as many people and organisations as possible behind a common desire for a better world and to help them pursue this effectively.

An individual or organisation's desire for a better world would be expressed by registering support for a particular set of ethical values – perhaps up to 10 of them – which would be explicit in the movement's communications and work. The values would be broad enough to ensure that people could support them regardless of their faith or lack of it – for example 'We need to live sustainably – within the limits of one planet' and 'Human beings should have equal rights, regardless of their gender, race etc.'⁵ They could be described as the common values of modern humanity.⁶

All organisations working towards the values of the movement would be encouraged to join it, and in doing so display its logo in all their communications. Individuals would also be encouraged to join, and various involvement devices (e.g. bracelets) could be developed to enable people to show their support for it.

At its most basic level, the movement could simply act as a 'brand' for a particular set of values – a vision for a better world that people could unite under. It could however do more than this – from helping people to develop the intellectual skills needed to become ethical global citizens through to becoming a 'philosophy of living' that flows through every area of an individual's life (from their relationships with other people through to their attempts to cut carbon emissions). Under this 'extended' conception, the movement becomes almost an 'alternative to religion' that embeds its values in society in the long term.

Uniting the Movement in this way brings it many benefits, not least the fact that a unified movement will be a great deal more effective, powerful and influential than an uncoordinated array of separate entities with seemingly differing agendas.

Provide Support

The Movement needs to provide support to people whilst they are embarking on a process of change, rather than leaving them to make changes alone. This support should be aimed at helping people to overcome any obstacles that are commonly encountered whilst making changes – for example, inertia, self-doubt and peer group pressure. Support can be delivered in various ways, including internet forums,

telephone helplines and local support groups. A vital element of any support mechanism is likely to be the notion of community – giving people the ability to get in touch with others who are or have been undertaking similar changes.

Become More Radical

Members of the Movement need to be more willing to question the most basic foundations of our society, such as the success or otherwise of the global economic system in addressing human and planetary interests. They should then communicate this to the public, however uncomfortable this process may be. Only then can people gain a clearer perspective on the world, and only then can we come up with appropriate, visionary solutions for the challenges that we face.

Anmerkungen

1 This article is an edited version of a report available at www.changestar.co.uk/thinking_reports.htm

2 We can choose to reduce our global impact radius as far as possible through initiatives such as local food schemes, although most of us are likely to continue to have lives that have global impact, however hard we try to 'localise'.

3 It is also quite possible that many members of the Movement remain in something of a bubble of delusion themselves and thus find it difficult to concur with the idea that there is something inherently contradictory between our economic orthodoxy and the causes we are seeking.

4 See www.nc.uk.net for further details.

5 For a full list of these values, see www.changestar.co.uk/Downloads/Our-Values.doc.

6 Implying both humanity in the modern age and a sense that these are reasonably sophisticated values.

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