

Transformation and society's response to environmental challenges: the interdependent relationship between government and citizens and the role of knowledge and values

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As human beings we ultimately depend on the services that ecosystems provide, such as food production, nutrient recycling and flood buffering, hence, current losses of such ecological goods and services due to climate change constitute a real threat (Rockström et al, 2009). Consequently, current times are demanding in that they ask us and our societies to address these challenges the best possible way, and also at some speed.

This paper focuses on the interdependent relationship of the individual (as citizen, voter and consumer), government, and business, in dealing with environmental problems and sustaining nature's services in democratic states, and, the role of socio-economic understanding along with values of ecosystems services, which is critical to the functioning of democracies. As citizens, we need governments to sustain collective action - through e.g. legislation or economic incentives - that generate a real effect in reducing for example CO₂-emissions.

However, governments are reluctant to take such decisions in fear of losing out in elections. This Catch 22 situation is at the core of current lack of changes and moving forward. The COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen speaks in itself of this crisis and dilemma. This paper considers government's dependency for their mandate on the views of the median voter and consequently the fact that they are somewhat bound by the way the median voter understands the socio-economic context in which they live. Transport costs illustrate the point. Economic growth is accompanied by a greater than proportionate use of roads which produces a range of social costs (such as congestion and pollution) that are not borne by the individual road user when roads are free at point of use. Also, for governments to successfully deal with environmental problems, it is crucial that citizens/voters understand the optimal ways and means that society can use to deal with challenges at local, regional and global scale, as in legislation, economic incentives or other arrangements for collective action.

This paper highlights the need to consider the interdependent relationships of key actors in democratic states, and discusses the role of citizens' socio-economic understanding, norms and values for enhancing society's response - adaptation and change - to meet environmental challenges.