



Perceived socioeconomic status as a predictor of environmental concern in African and developed countries



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ABSTRACT

An important literature examines the determinants of environmental concern within and across countries. The debate on whether affluence explains variations in environmental concern remains unsettled. An increasing number of studies acknowledge the importance of individual level characteristics as predictors of environmental concern. In this paper, we examine the relationship between perceived socioeconomic status and environmental concern among residents of less developed and developed countries. Our results show that in both less developed and developed countries, individual perceptions about their socioeconomic status are positively correlated with environmental concern. Specifically, aside from choosing environmental protection over economic growth and job creation, we find that people who perceive themselves as belonging to the working class, lower middle, upper middle and upper class are significantly more willing to make income sacrifices to prevent environmental pollution than those who believe they are in the lower class.

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1. Introduction

Environmentalism has traditionally been considered a preserve of the rich (Davey, 2009). Some scholars argue that people in developed countries are more concerned about environmental quality and are more willing to pay for environmental improvements than their counterparts in developing countries. Consistent with this view, some argue that people demand higher environmental quality as national income rises (Diekmann & Franzen, 1999; Franzen, 2003). In addition, some researchers contend that within countries, wealthier people have a greater concern about the environment and are more willing to pay for environmental protection than people with low incomes (Inglehart, 1990, 1995, and 1997). However, others advance the thesis that residents of developing countries have concern for environmental quality, too (Stern, 2004; Fairbrother, 2013; Bruneau & Echevarria, 2009;

Gelissen, 2007) and that national wealth is not directly correlated with environmental concern (Dunlap & Mertig, 1995, 1997).

Macro-level studies use country-level variable, such as GDP, income inequality, inflation, unemployment, to examine environmental attitudes, concerns and behaviors, and the determinants of these environmental phenomena (e.g., Franzen & Meyer, 2010; Fairbrother, 2013; Knight & Messer, 2012). Micro-level studies show that individual characteristics, such as age, gender, education, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status and political affiliation, are important for environmental concern or attitudes (Israel & Levinson, 2004; Sulemana & James, 2014). Some studies explore the determinants of willingness-to-pay for environmental protection (Huang, Haab, & Whitehead, 1997; Israel & Levinson, 2004; Witzke & Urfei, 2001). However, only a few studies (e.g., White & Hunter, 2009; Ogunbode, 2013) pay close attention to environmental concern among residents of African countries.

In order to address the dearth of studies of environmental concern focusing on African countries, we examine whether, and to what extent, perceived socioeconomic status influences concern for the natural environment. Perceived socioeconomic status (PSES) is

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defined as a person's subjective assessment of their social and economic standing within a community. We focus on individual preferences for environmental protection over economic growth and job creation, and their willingness to sacrifice income to prevent environmental pollution, comparing residents of African and developed countries. Using data from the World Values Survey (WVS), we find that PSES is positively and significantly correlated with environmental concern for residents of both African and developed countries. Compared to lower class individuals, those who believe that they belong to the working class, lower middle class, upper middle class and upper class tend to report significantly more environmental concern in both African and developed countries.

This study is important because environmental degradation has dire consequences for humanity, including health effects, extreme weather, and species loss (Donohoe, 2003). But the environment matters not just for the direct effect on health but also for the way people perceive their overall well-being. Furthermore, in developing countries where people are heavily reliant on natural resources (Hillie & Hlopho, 2007), environmental protection is particularly important for conserving these resources for sustainable livelihoods (Anderson, 2003). We focus on residents of Africa because of the expectation that developing countries are particularly vulnerable to climate change (Mertz, Halsnæs, Olesen, & Rasmussen, 2009; Ebi, Mearns, & Nyenzi, 2003). In addition, African countries have historically been underrepresented in cross-national surveys of environmental issues (Dunlap & York, 2008).

2. Related literature

2.1. Explaining the sources of environmental concern

There is a growing literature describing alternative explanations for environmental concern among and across countries (e.g., Dunlap and Van Liere, 1978; Stern, 1992; Dunlap et al., 1993, 2000; Dunlap, VanLiere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000; Dunlap, Gallup, & Gallup, 1993; Dunlap & Mertig, 1995; 1997; Inglehart, 1990, 1995, and 1997; Diekmann & Franzen, 1999; Franzen & Meyer, 2010). For instance, Stern (1992) identifies four mainstream explanations for environmental concern. The New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) scale developed by Dunlap and Van Liere (1978) seeks to measure a “pro-ecological” worldview. Environmental concern might result from anthropocentric altruism—that is, humans care about the environment because of the deleterious effect of environmental degradation to human well-being. Egoism is based on the effect of environmental degradation on the well-being of one's own-self or their close kin rather than on a larger population. Finally, some “deeper cause,” such as religious beliefs or shifts to post-materialist values, might be a basis for environmental concern.

Other theories seeking to explain why people differ in their environmental concern include Inglehart (1990, 1995, 1997) post-materialism hypothesis; environmental globalization by Dunlap et al. (1993) and Dunlap and Mertig (1995, 1997); and the prosperity or affluence hypothesis (Diekmann & Franzen, 1999). Inglehart (1990, 1995, and 1997) argues that as economies grow and become affluent, citizens no longer have to deal with materialist priorities such as economic struggles, fighting crime or fighting inflation. Instead, and consistent with Maslow (1954) hierarchy of needs, they concern themselves with post-materialist values such as self-fulfillment, self-expression, political freedom and environmental protection. Thus, environmental concern as a “higher order need” (in Maslowian terms) tends to be higher as countries become more affluent. He argues that willingness to sacrifice financial resources for environmental protection was highest among post-materialist publics (Inglehart, 1995, p.57).

However, using WVS data to empirically test this, Inglehart finds only partial support for this claim. In fact, his results reveal that residents of developing countries tend to show high environmental concern. For this reason, Inglehart proposed the “objective problems and subjective values” thesis. Accordingly, he notes that environmental concern among residents of developing countries is due to their direct experiences of environmental problems such as air and water pollution. Therefore, drivers of environmental concern could differ among people in different places.

Contrary to Inglehart (1995, 1997) thesis, Dunlap et al. (1993) and Dunlap and Mertig (1995, 1997) contend that environmental awareness or concern has become a global phenomenon independent of the wealth of nations. Dunlap and Mertig (1995, p. 121) correlate per capita income with aggregate measures of environmental concern for 24 countries and find that “overall national affluence is more often negatively rather than positively related to citizen concern for environmental quality.” In another study, Dunlap and Mertig (1997) observe that the negative association between post-materialist values and environmentalism contravenes previously held notions that the wealthy and people in developed countries have more environmental concern. In addition, they state that personal characteristics, social networks, media, etc. are all important in shaping environmental perceptions as much as the objective environmental conditions Inglehart alludes to as triggering environmental concern in developing countries. Thus, the findings by these studies are inconsistent with Inglehart's post-materialism argument. An interesting conclusion Dunlap and Mertig (1995, p. 135) draw is that, on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, “environmental quality seems to be moving from a ‘higher order’ value to a ‘lower order’ need.”

Diekmann and Franzen (1999) propose the prosperity or affluence theory. They argue that aside from being a public good, environmental quality is also a normal good. Wealthier societies and individuals tend to demand higher environmental quality. Therefore, they have higher concern for the environment than their less wealthy counterparts. Examining data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) for 1993 and 2000, and employing multilevel analysis, Franzen and Meyer (2010) find that while 85% of the total variation in within-country differences in environmental concern is explained by differences in wealth, wealth accounts for only 15% of the total variation in cross-country differences. Furthermore, Dunlap and York (2008) use data from three waves of the WVS to replicate results of Gallup's 24-nation “Health of the Planet” survey conducted in 1992 that revealed that environmental concern and national affluence are inconsistently correlated. Their results indicate that citizen concern for environmental protection does *not* depend on national affluence or on post-materialist values.

Among economists, the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) hypothesis (Grossman & Krueger, 1991, 1995) is probably the most widely accepted thesis used to explain the sources of environmental concern. According to this hypothesis, at early stages of economic growth, countries usually have less concern for environmental quality. However, as incomes increase, reach and exceed a certain turning-point level, people begin to demand higher environmental quality. This yields an inverted U-shape relationship between income and environmental pollution similar to the pattern Kuznets (1955) discovers between economic growth and income inequality. One implication of the EKC hypothesis is that poor countries are “too poor to green” (Martínez-Alier, 1995; Bruneau & Echevarria, 2009). For example, environmental quality might be viewed as a luxury good so that only people who lack economic struggles (e.g., food, housing, etc.) are concerned about it. Within the EKC framework, Israel and Levinson (2004) examine implications of several competing theoretical models of economic

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