

Public knowledge about 'sustainability' is scattered and incomplete

Existing survey tools that measure public understanding of 'sustainability' reveal widespread confusion – suggesting that efforts to educate the public about sustainability have not been successful.

Based on **Colin Kuehl, Aaron Sparks, Heather Hodges, and Eric Smith**. [Nature Sustainability](#) (2021).

The Policy Problem

Sustainable development has long been a central goal of the environmental movement, the United Nations, and other international agencies. One strategy for achieving sustainability is educating people on the topic around the world. In response, a global group of scholars and practitioners, with U.N. support, designed and fielded the 'Sulitest', a survey tool to assesses knowledge of sustainability and sustainability practices. The Sulitest has been taken by over 160,000 people across 63 countries. Despite its widespread use, there has been little systematic analysis of the data or what it says about the public's understanding of sustainability.

Key Recommendations

- Policymakers should not assume that the public understands them when they are discussing sustainability as a goal.
- Policymakers and educators should be particularly cautious when using the popular Sulitest as a diagnostic tool for assessing sustainability knowledge.

What We Found

Questions on the Sulitest were designed to measure knowledge about four key areas of knowledge of sustainability: (1) sustainable humanity and ecosystems, (2) global and local human-constructed systems to answer people’s needs, (3) transition towards sustainability and (4) roles people need to play to achieve sustainable development.

We found that people’s knowledge was scattered and incomplete. They did not recognize the four areas and their understanding of sustainability had no coherent structure. We concluded that either the test doesn’t work, despite the fact that it was designed by field experts, more likely, the general public does not have a deep understanding of sustainability. While environmental policy experts routinely discuss sustainability, the public does not seem engaged with the concept or its implications.

Theme	Subject
Sustainable humanity and ecosystems on planet Earth	1 Ecosystems: biosphere, global and local ecosystems, interdependent and diverse community of life, life-supporting cycles, system closed (materials)/open (energy) and so on.
	2 Humanity: individual human needs, diversity, social fabric, cultures, local and global world and so on.
	3 Sustainability: definition of sustainability/sustainable development.
	4 Ecological perspective: where are we at and why sustainability is both an urgency and an opportunity.
	5 Social perspective: where are we at (demography, (in)equalities, gender equality, education and so on) and sustainability being an urgency and an opportunity.
Global and local human-constructed systems to answer people’s needs	6 Local and global social structures and governance: paradigms; positive results, negative impacts; laws; how organizations work; land use; gender equality; and so on.
	7 Within local and global social structures and governance, zooms on: education and culture.
	8 Local and global economic systems: paradigms; positive results, negative impacts; production, distribution, consumption of goods and services; life cycles; value chains; finances; and so on.
	9 Within local and global economic system, zooms on: water, energy and food.
Transition towards sustainability	10 How to start, reinforce and accelerate systems change.
	11 Initiatives towards sustainability: mostly on institution/international level (for example, UN MDGs, Global Compact, GIEC, GRI, ISO 26000 and ESD).
	12 Concepts, tools and frameworks: mostly from individual NGOs or smaller networks (for example, Cradle to Cradle, Natural Capitalism, The Natural Step and Ecological Footprint).
	13 Examples and ideas we can learn from: case studies of successes or failures; technological, strategic or social innovations.
We each have roles to play to create and maintain individual and systemic changes	14 How does one become aware of his own roles and impacts whoever ‘one’ is (individual, organization, global south, global north and so on).
	15 How does one efficiently act to create both individual and system change whoever ‘one’ is (individual, organization, global south, global north and so on).

Figure 1: The Sulitest architecture, summarizing its approach to measuring public sustainability knowledge

What We Did

We obtained the results for 62,624 people in English-speaking countries who took the Sulitest. We analyzed the data using advanced statistical methods including a technique called factor analysis that analyzes how different survey items relate to one another.