
Acting Together On Climate Change

**Attitudes, values and
new approaches to
international co-operation**

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In partnership with



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About Us

The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language. We work in two ways – directly with individuals to transform their lives, and with governments and partners to make a bigger difference for the longer term, creating benefit for millions of people all over the world.

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Executive summary

Climate change is one of the most complex challenges facing the international community today. Efforts to prevent an unsustainable rise in carbon emissions and protect biodiversity require not only immediate and large-scale changes to our societies, economies and daily lives, but also united agreement among a vast range of actors with different values, perspectives and interests.

New research for the British Council draws on experience from the field of international cultural relations as well as the latest academic research on values, behaviours and norms to understand more about how we can create the conditions for co-operation on shared global challenges like climate change. It delivers new insight on values and attitudes towards climate change among the populations of China, India, Japan and Mexico – selected to represent a diverse range of major world economies who are also important players in the global climate change debate.

The research shows that concern about environmental issues is high in the surveyed countries, but that there are differences over what measures should be taken. Key findings from the survey include:

- There is particularly strong support for environmental measures in China, India and Mexico even when substantial economic costs are involved; people there favour international and science-led approaches over ones which prioritise national interest and majority opinion.
- Japan's population, by contrast, is consistent in prioritising its economic position over environmental measures.
- In India, Japan and Mexico people with greater experience of international travel are consistently more in favour of prioritising environmental action over their economic interests. In Mexico and India, the same group also prioritise international co-operation over their national interests.

The research also draws on the experience of international cultural relations experts to provide new insight on how to strengthen international co-operation on climate change and the important role that cultural relations can play in supporting that. Two international focus groups of cultural relations experts were carried out online, involving participants from a wide range of countries including Brazil, China, India, Japan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Venezuela. Participants from these countries were selected to create an international, cross-regional dialogue where participants came from different national and cultural backgrounds, but shared common professional interests.

A key finding was the importance of certain values in fostering meaningful dialogue and co-operation. Valuing difference – in particular local culture and contexts – while working together towards a common goal was seen as critical to effective international co-operation, not just in climate change but across all issues. Approaches identified as the best way to foster international co-operation emphasised values such as mutuality and inclusion, collaboration and

context-sensitivity. These are all values inherent to international cultural relations, suggesting a particular role for cultural relations experts and organisations in creating the space for effective international co-operation.

Cultural relations organisations were identified as having a unique role to play on climate change. The research showed they are seen as providing attractive and engaging platforms on which international collaborations can be built, connecting actors from all levels of society as well as developing strong trust-based relationships through sustained engagement, sometimes over years. They enable the exchange of information and ideas which can help solve some of the thorniest environmental questions. And their activities promote a sense of greater international connection and identity which can increase the public's willingness to take action on global issues.

For the UK, these networks and relationships – often built over decades – are a particular asset as it takes a leading role in international action on climate change through its hosting of the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow this year. The environment provides a particularly useful platform for bolstering UK engagement with China, India, Japan and Mexico, given the shared priority in those countries for international co-operation on climate change. There is also scope for the UK and Japan to work together to challenge perceptions and build a case for action as both countries work together to achieve their shared net zero by 2050 goal.

There are a number of implications for action which the British Council has drawn from the research:

- Focussing on common interests on the environment provides an effective way for the UK to build institutional co-operation and people-to-people engagement with China, Japan, India and Mexico.
- Actors seeking to improve the success of international initiatives should emphasise mutuality, collaboration and context sensitivity over 'one size fits all', top-down approaches.
- Regional and country-level approaches to co-operation may be more productive in contexts where divisions exist over how to share the costs of environmental measures.
- Dialogue – a fundamental prerequisite to agreement – can be strengthened when parties have a deeper understanding of each other's values, attitudes and contexts.
- Countries should invest over the long-term in their cultural institutions and other elements of their soft power to build the relationships and networks vital to co-operation on climate change.
- Cultural institutions should incorporate climate change into their education and language learning programmes, to help raise awareness among young people and connect them to the international debate.
- The power of art should be harnessed in international initiatives to communicate the urgency of the climate challenge to local communities and inspire them to action.

Introduction

In recent decades, rapid globalisation and technological change have created a wealth of new opportunities for international collaboration and exchange in every sector, driving economic growth, raising living standards and providing rich new cultural experiences. Yet, as international opportunity has increased, so also have the number of challenges that cross borders, and which can only be dealt with through strong multilateral approaches.

In this new context, no country can act alone. Change requires uniting a whole range of actors – not just governments, but also businesses, educators, scientists, NGOs, companies, and individual citizens and consumers. Therefore, in today's world the most powerful leaders are no longer necessarily just those with the largest armies or strongest economies – they are also those who have the best networks. As international relations scholar Joseph S Nye argues:

'In this new world, networks and connectedness become an important source of power and security. In a world of growing complexity, the most connected states are the most powerful.'

Yet, that's not the whole answer. Taking collective action is not simply a case of bringing all the right people around the table and designing a plan – it's as much about how far they trust and understand each other. Reaching agreement on difficult issues, whether with individuals, companies or nations – is much easier if all parties understand each other's motivations and perspectives, and when they see each other as credible and trustworthy.

Soft power plays a vital role in creating and supporting the kinds of networks and relationships that enable successful international co-operation. By engaging people through the arts, culture, education, language and other attractive cultural assets, cultural relations build familiarity and trust between peoples, and provides a platform on which international connections and collaborations can be built. It is a particularly powerful way of engaging with young people across the world, whether through scholarships, language training or cultural experiences. The impact of engagement with young people can have a long-lasting effect, and leave strong foundations of mutual trust, respect and understanding which can enable effective co-operation.

Research background and outline

The British Council's new research programme, The Big Conversation, aims to capture the knowledge and expertise of cultural relations approaches to building trust-based relationships and fostering international dialogue and co-operation. The [first stage](#) of the project, launched in April 2021, explored international co-operation in cultural relations in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on case studies from the British Council's work in Malaysia, South Africa and the UK, the research looked at values-based engagement in cultural relations work and its impact on building trust, understanding and connections between the British Council and the societies it works in. It provided evidence to show that values do enable cultural relations to build trust-based relationships and improve dialogue and co-operation between nations in an effective way.

In this second stage of the programme, The Big Conversation returns again to the question of how to help create the conditions for international co-operation. This time it looks at new countries and uses a new issue – climate change – through which to explore values and attitudes towards international co-operation. Values are especially relevant to consider in the context of co-operation on climate change because they shape people’s attitudes and choices as well as social norms and public opinion. The research was carried out in February and March 2021 by LSE Consulting. It uses an adapted version of the original methodology for The Big Conversation and draws on three components:

1. A literature review on the role of values and trust in international environmental co-operation.
2. National surveys from China, India, Japan and Mexico, highlighting values, attitudes and priorities towards international co-operation on climate change. The sample in each country was between 1005 in China, Japan and Mexico and 1007 in India. It was weighted to representative criteria. Survey fieldwork for all countries was conducted 8-12th March 2021.
3. Two online focus groups of a total of 13 cultural relations experts from Brazil, China, Japan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Venezuela, exploring how to create the conditions for co-operation on climate change and the particular role of the international culture and education sectors in building trust and shared purpose.

The four countries in the survey – China, India, Japan and Mexico – were selected to represent a diverse range of major world economies who are also important players in the global climate change debate. Focus group participants were selected to create an international, cross-regional dialogue where participants came from different national and cultural backgrounds, but shared common professional interests.

The Big Conversation Climate Change Research complements a wider programme of research, policy dialogue and thought leadership that the British Council is conducting in 2021 looking at climate change challenges and action across the fields of arts and culture, education and the English language. [The Climate Connection](#) research includes studies of youth perceptions of climate change in South Asia, a report on green initiatives in the global English language teaching sector, analysis of the role of cultural policy in supporting environmental policy agendas, and a special series of essays focusing on climate change through a cultural relations lens.

Report outline

The full report is available on the Research and Policy Insight [webpage](#). The following briefing highlights key findings and outlines the role of cultural relations in fostering the conditions for co-operation. It starts out by looking at the values and attitudes of the national population towards climate change, to understand how important an issue they think it is, what changes they are ready to make in order to tackle it, and their attitudes towards international co-operation. The

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next section looks at barriers to international action on climate change and possible approaches to removing them. The final section provides some thinking from the British Council on the unique role that cultural institutions can play in advancing international co-operation on the environment.

Values and attitudes in China, India, Japan and Mexico

Climate change is one of the most challenging issues facing the international community today. There is increasing recognition of the urgency of the problem. Negotiations over the last few decades have produced major international agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. However, governments have so far not been able to agree on measures tough enough to prevent predicted temperature rises of 1.5 degrees Celsius. Two major obstacles to progress have been concern over the economic costs required to reduce emissions to a sustainable level; and disagreement on how to share out the emissions targets between developed and developing countries.

Public opinion is important because it directly affects the willingness of governments to sign up to environmental measures in international agreements. Concern about climate change has grown significantly across the world in the last decade, according to international surveys. Yet some governments have still faced significant push-back from publics, which has obstructed the introduction of stricter environmental policies.

High concern for the environment, but differences over the right response

The survey sheds new light on public opinion on climate change and the changes publics in China, India, Japan and Mexico are willing to make to protect the environment. It finds that climate change is regarded as an important issue in all four countries, but that there are differences over which changes should be made.

In China, India and Mexico, a strong majority of respondents favoured making sacrifices to protect the environment and support sustainability (ranging between 62% and 72% for the different measures proposed in China; between 53% and 74% in Mexico; and between 64% and 77% in India across the seven types of environmental measure proposed in the survey¹). In Japan, by contrast, a similar majority (ranging between 51% and 71% across the seven measures) said that they were not willing to accept sacrifices for the sake of the environment.

The findings indicate that people in China, India and Mexico are willing to make sacrifices for the environment not just in one or two areas, but across a range of areas and prioritise sustainability at all costs. There is some variation between nations on the type of changes respondents are most willing to make. In China, respondents are primarily willing to sacrifice

¹ See Table 1 below: Prioritisation of environment concerns over other sacrifices. Notes: Q7 respondents were asked: 'To what extent do you feel that national governments should prioritise the fight against climate change if it results in the following possible costs. Should the fight against climate always be prioritised if, as a result...? Base: The sample in each country was 1005 in each of China, Japan and Mexico and 1007 in India. It was weighted to representative criteria.

individual freedoms (72% in favour), while in India and Mexico people would more eagerly close businesses not respecting environmental standards (77% and 74% respectively). Sacrificing individual freedom is the proposal that gets the highest level of support in Japan (49% in favour).

Table 1. Prioritisation of environment concerns over other sacrifices (% choosing prioritised or not prioritised)

	CHINA		INDIA		JAPAN		MEXICO	
	Prioritised	Not prioritised	Prioritised	Not prioritised	Prioritised	Not prioritised	Prioritised	Not prioritised
Significant increase in taxes	62	38	66	43	29	71	53	47
Closure of business if environmental standards not met	67	33	77	33	46	54	74	26
Individual freedoms curbed (transportation or food)	72	28	75	25	49	51	63	27
Unemployment in industry	64	36	67	33	34	66	59	41
Greater inequality between regions or territories	64	36	64	36	34	66	56	44
Significant increase in cost of living	67	33	70	30	32	68	63	37
International tension between countries that disagree on best climate policy	70	30	74	26	48	52	69	31

Strong support for international initiatives and scientific expertise

The survey also explored the preferences of the publics of each country when they were asked to choose between different conflicting priorities which can arise in climate change policy.

- When asked to choose between following the advice of scientific experts and public opinion, the majority of respondents in all four countries opted for the former. The majorities in favour of scientific expertise were much stronger in Mexico (75% vs 20%) and India (66% vs 29%) than in China (50% vs 42%) and Japan (42% vs 37%).

Table 2. Preferences for following scientific advice or public opinion on the environment (% in favour)²

CHINA		INDIA		JAPAN		MEXICO	
Scientific Experts	Democratic Preference	Scientific Experts	Democratic Preference	Scientific Experts	Democratic Preference	Scientific Experts	Democratic Preference
50	42	66	29	42	37	75	20

- The survey revealed contrasting views on international co-operation. Respondents were asked to choose between taking part in an international clean energy initiative that would benefit everyone around the world, and not taking part, which would make the scheme unviable, but save money for the national population. An overwhelming majority in Mexico (84% vs 13%), India (78% vs 19%) and China (76% vs 22%) opted for the international initiative³.
- Views on the conflict between civil liberties and public order when it comes to allowing protests on climate change were much more mixed. A majority prioritised public order in Japan (59%) over freedom (26%), India saw a virtual tie between those who favoured civil liberties (49%) and those who favoured public order (48%) and a clear majority for civil liberties in Mexico (56% vs 40%).⁴

Young people and those who travel most are more supportive of environmental measures

The survey revealed some interesting differences between social groups within countries⁵. Younger people aged 18-34 were generally more in favour than older age groups of prioritising climate protection even it resulted in significant increases in taxes (the results ranging from 37%

² Tension scales: Scientific experts vs democratic preference. Base: The sample was 1005 in each of China, Japan and Mexico and 1007 in India. It was weighted to representative criteria.

³ Japan's answers for this question were invalid due to a translation error.

⁴ Question not asked in China.

⁵ The results in this section should be viewed with more caution as the sample was representative at the national level, but not representative of the different social groups within each country (e.g. 18-34 year-olds, or the people who travel internationally, etc)

to 68% of 18-34 year olds in favour across all four countries compared to a range of 27% to 66% in favour among over 55 year olds across all four countries). However, young people were less trusting than older people of scientific experts in India and Mexico. In India 62% of 18-34 year olds trusted approaches led by scientific experts more than those led by popular preferences, compared to 75% of over 55 year olds, while in Mexico the numbers were 73% in the younger age group compared to 81% in the older one.

Women are typically more supportive of environmental measures than men across the different questions asked in China, but the opposite is true in Japan and Mexico. One of the most consistent findings, however, was that people with greater experience of international travel (with the notable exception of those in China) prioritised environmental action over their economic interests. For example, among those who said they would usually do several international trips a year some 77% in India, 43% in Japan and 55% in Mexico favoured prioritising the fight against climate change even if it involves tax increases. By comparison, among those who never travel internationally, only 56% in India, 25% in Japan and 49% in Mexico prioritised climate change measures over tax increases.

Table 3. Support for climate change measures even with significant tax increases (% in favour)⁶

		CHINA	INDIA	JAPAN	MEXICO
Gender	Women	65	69	27	54
	Men	59	64	32	52
Age groups	18 - 34	65	68	37	56
	35 - 54	63	65	28	56
	55+	49	66	27	42
Experience of international travel	Never	62	56	25	49
	Every few years	64	67	31	55
	Several times a year	64	77	43	55

⁶ Table 3. Cross-sectional differences: The arbitration national governments need to make between the fight against climate change and bearing economical sacrifices (% chose prioritise climate protection over significant increases in taxes) Notes: survey Q7. To what extent do you feel that national governments should prioritise the fight against climate change if it results in the following possible costs. Should the fight against climate always be prioritised if, as a result...? Q7.A.1. ... there is a significant increase in taxes. Base: The sample in each country was 1005 in each of China, Japan and Mexico and 1007 in India. It was weighted to representative criteria.

Overall, these results show that there is particularly strong support for environmental measures in China, India and Mexico even when substantial economic sacrifices are involved, and that their populations favour taking international and science-led approaches to climate change and sustainability even at the expense of the national interest and majority opinion.

Understanding the barriers to international action

Action on climate change is commonly seen as too difficult and complex – not only because the measures involve asking the public to accept significant economic costs, but they also require countries to agree on how best to distribute the costs of environmental measures. The Big Conversation research highlighted a number of barriers to international agreement that are rooted in values and differences of perspective, and it also identified some possible approaches to help remove them.

Values shape our individual choices on the environment

As citizens and consumers, we all face individual choices that affect the environment, whether it's our choice of transportation, the food we eat and the goods we buy, or the causes we support. The literature review highlighted a conflict in values that may prevent us from doing more to support the environment individually. This was a conflict primarily between enjoyment and economic gain on the one hand and doing the right thing for the environment on the other. According to the paper (Steg et al, 2014) being environmentally friendly is usually perceived to be less enjoyable, more expensive and more time-consuming than not behaving in that way, even though many perceive it as the morally correct behaviour.

A question of fairness: Values in international negotiations

The review also highlighted how values are part of the divisions which block action at the international level. It identified questions of equity, fairness and accountability underpinning discussions on the issue of sharing the cost of climate change measures between the richer and poorer economies. It suggested that prioritising co-operation at a regional level or between blocs of countries with similar economies or geographies could be a more effective route to overcoming these particular divisions.

The complexity of collective action

While national governments take the lead on the big policy decisions, effective international action on climate change involves the whole of society. Many cities, businesses, and organisations are developing their own action plans to reduce carbon emissions and put themselves on a more sustainable footing. For their part, local communities, the media, artists www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight

and educators all play a role in raising awareness of the issues and encouraging people to take action. So, another major challenge for international co-operation on climate change is how to reach agreement and co-ordinate action among such a large range of actors.

The role of international cultural relations

Connecting local actors to the global debate

The international cultural relations sector has an important role to play in the global effort to protect the environment, by creating the networks and relationships that are needed for successful international co-operation. In particular, it provides a platform on which international connections and collaborations can be built between a diverse range of actors from all levels of society. As a current example, the British Council is convening more than 200 million people from the UK and the rest of the world. '[The Climate Connection](#)' focuses on young people, bringing them together with policymakers, artists, scientists, educators, businesses and community leaders to discuss and collaborate on solutions to climate change.

The value of this kind of activity was highlighted in the international focus groups carried out as part of The Big Conversation research. Cultural relations experts highlighted international cultural institutions as uniquely placed to connect local and international actors, and facilitate meaningful dialogue, collaboration and co-operation between them. They were identified as able to include a more diverse range of non-governmental voices into the global climate change debate, and to help connect local communities and grass-roots voices to the global conversation.

Informing and engaging communities

Education and communication are key channels for mobilising wider society. The focus groups saw cultural relations institutions as well placed to contribute to this effort, particularly by educating young people about the environment. Effective communication was seen as particularly important for engaging communities in the issue. This required developing different mediums that would appeal to different audiences: the arts and culture were seen as having an important role to play here, given their ability to connect with communities and also provide a different perspective on an issue.

Fostering global trust and solidarity

Cultural relations institutions are also well placed to build the trust and sense of solidarity required to increase willingness to make changes for the sake of the environment. The literature review suggests that a greater sense of international solidarity can be promoted through increased contact with people from other countries. This can act as a vehicle for individuals and

communities to see themselves as connected to a global community, helping them to perceive global problems as 'our' problems.

Creating the conditions for co-operation

In its first stage The Big Conversation research programme provided evidence to show that values do play a role in building trust-based relationships and improving dialogue and co-operation between nations. In this second stage, the research method was adapted to explore the same question through the frame of co-operation on a specific global issue - climate change - and draw insights from a wider range of countries. The findings reinforced the importance of values-led approaches to international co-operation.

Common values, shared goals

In the focus groups, participants saw respect and the valuing of principles such as inclusion and equality, solidarity and open-mindedness as important for successful international co-operation. They emphasised the importance of fostering a sense of commonality to enable engagement and develop shared goals.

Collaboration and the value of diversity

At the same time the focus group contributors underlined the need for the values of appreciating difference and respecting diversity. In practical terms, they saw this as translating into more collaborative approaches to decision-making, ensuring that every country has a voice, and that there is meaningful dialogue and exchange on different ways of achieving the common goal. The discussion emphasised the need to reach out and engage people with different opinions in order to find new solutions.

These findings reinforce the increasing importance of more mutual, collaborative and context-sensitive approaches to international co-operation. International organisations which emphasise and celebrate difference and highlight acceptance and tolerance towards different local and cultural practices will be the ones who will be able to gain the trust of and engage in effective action with local partners.

Building a group identity

This theme was reinforced in the literature reviewed, which suggested that it's not just the creation of opportunities for engagement which builds co-operative attitudes between different groups, but the way in which that engagement is facilitated. Drawing on literature from the field of psychology (Fritsche et al., 2017), it discusses theories which show how diverse groups can build a common group identity, by working together on a shared goal and by highlighting the value of the different contributions of each team member in achieving it. This values-led approach is integral to the practice of cultural relations, which facilitates opportunities for engagement on the basis of mutuality and inclusion.

Conclusion

Values-led approaches to international engagement provide new ways to foster global dialogue and agreement on climate change. Countries seeking to improve coordination and co-operation on the issue should promote cultural relations programmes that create the enabling environment necessary for effective action between people from different countries. They are attractive and engaging platforms on which international collaborations can be built, connecting actors from all levels of society as well as developing strong trust-based relationships through sustained engagement. The networks and relationships that these programmes create will be an asset for the UK and other countries working to prioritise international action on the environment.

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