

# How the public finds out about sustainable development: An audit of key campaigns, TV and newspapers

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14.02.01



**Sustainable**  
Development Commission



How the public learns about sustainable development: an audit of key campaigns, TV and newspapers

(a report by Emily Hay for the Sustainable Development Commission)

*"... sustainable development is still at the 'undiscovered story' stage. The very phrase is enough to send a news editor to sleep before the end of the seventh syllable."*

Roger Harrabin

#### PURPOSE

1. The new Sustainable Development Commission has a remit to:

**"advocate sustainable development across all sectors in the UK, review progress towards it, and build consensus on the actions needed if further progress is to be achieved."**

2. This paper is intended to help the SDC decide what public role it should adopt in fulfilling that remit. It reviews the ways different organisations promote understanding of the concept of sustainable development to the general public – concentrating on those media and campaigns that reach large numbers. It highlights the very different approaches that organisations with different agendas take. It points to some good practice, and some weaker performance. It offers strategic options for future action by the SDC.

#### CONTEXT

3. The SDC enters a **crowded market**, where:

- **Others have gone before in examining how sustainable development ideas can be made more appealing to the average consumer/citizen.** This study draws particularly on the work of the Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment on stimulating the market for sustainable consumption; the work of Quadrangle Consulting for the Sustainable Development Education Panel on The Language of Sustainable Development, and DETR's experience and market research for the Are You Doing Your Bit campaign.
- **There are a large number of campaigns and media streams promoting sustainable development in one form or another to the general public. Many of them deliberately avoid explicit use of the term sustainable development.** This paper reviews a sample of 26, mainly those with a high public profile, and looks at the different approaches they take in addressing different target audiences and evidence of impact.
- **DETR and linked Departments and bodies struggle to 'bend' the government and economy towards rather than away from sustainable development.** Sustainable development as a concept competes with other overarching concepts such as prudence, tackling social exclusion, reductions in poverty and unemployment, competitiveness and better regulation as a guiding light to public action and political debate. It is often an 'add-on' to policy documents rather than their foundation. Its three pillars of environment, economy and social progress potentially encompass all of government – running the danger of being both everything and nothing.

#### METHOD

4. This data-based analysis is designed to explore whether there is **a consensus on good practice, how media engage interest in broader ideas of sustainable development, what language** they use, and how they make **the link between ideas and action.**

5. The study aimed to identify and analyse the key media and campaigns through which the public receives its ideas about sustainable development in the UK. The study focused on action ordinary people could take in the UK and on the domestic political agenda. It did not generally address international aspects of sustainable development. It looked at:

- the most significant media which reached a large number of people, and on the way they addressed sustainable development issues;
- even if these media did not explicitly use the term 'sustainable development' or have a clear sustainable development brand image;
- alongside more clearly sustainable development themed campaigns which often reached smaller numbers.

## SAMPLE

There was a huge choice of publicity material we could have selected, but I had a limited time budget and needed to cover material from a broad range of sectors. I therefore selected from each sector:

- **National newspapers** Tabloids The Sun and The Mirror; mid-market rivals the Daily Mail and Daily Express; Qualities The Times, The Sunday Times, The Guardian and The Observer. My search focused on key weeks – launch of the sustainable development strategy and Are You Doing Your Bit campaign in May 1999; publication of Quality of Life indicators in December 1999 and John Prescott's 'wake-up' call during the flooding November 2000.
- **Television and radio** The BBC1 State of the Planet series in November 2000. The Radio 4 Reith lectures 'Respect for the Earth' in April and May 2000.
- **Central government press notices** On-line search of press notices issued over the last two years by HM Treasury, Department for Education and Employment; Department of Health; Department of Social Security and Department of Trade and Industry. DETR press notices were not included in the sample.
- **Devolved administrations** On-line search of press notices and related material on the web sites of the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive.
- **Government-sponsored campaigning** TV footage, leaflets and website of the Are You Doing Your Bit campaign. Website, Planet Pledge material, press notices and press coverage of the Going for Green campaign.
- **Non-governmental organisations** Website information from Greenpeace. Website information, leaflets and posters from Friends of the Earth. Website information, magazines and leaflets from RSPB. Also a book 'Manual 2000.'
- **Business** Instore leaflets from B&Q; Body Shop and Sainsbury's. TV and cinema footage and customer mailings from the Co-op Bank.

Some information was also collected on DETR press releases and launch of the Sustainable Development strategy and indicators, LA21, WWF, Countryside Agency, Environment Agency, Energy Saving Trust, company sustainability reports and Real World but was not included in the analysis.

This report does not look at educational material for schools. The Council for Environmental Education has provided a detailed report to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority on Opportunities and Guidelines for Teaching about Sustainable Development.

## KEY QUESTIONS IN ANALYSIS

### WHO?

- **Who is its intended audience? How many does it intend to reach/actually reach?**

### WHAT?

- **Does it have a 'brand image'? With high recognition?**
- **Does it adopt the explicit language of 'sustainable development'?**
- **What key words does it use? Primarily environmental, or also social and economic?**
- **Does it focus on idealistic or abstract conceptual understanding, or on the tangible/immediate actions the individual can take/ practical case studies? Local or global?**
- **Does it seek to alter attitudes through questioning in the hope that this will lead to**



changed behaviour, or does it focus on conditioning and supporting better behaviour patterns that lead to changes in attitudes down the line?

#### HOW?

- How does it tackle barriers to individual action?

Self-interest versus the long term/ someone else's problem/ something for freaky eco-warriors

Helplessness – what can I do to make a difference?

Apathy/scepticism – if this was important, government and business would take more responsibility

Confusion – about what causes unsustainability/what would make a difference?

- Does it use negative motivators (avoiding harm) as well as offering positive motivators?

- Does it use

claimed 'turn-on' language like environment, balance, togetherness, personal pronouns, active verbs, questions, factual information?

claimed 'turn-off' language like economic growth, poverty, duty, sacrifice, shock tactics, accusation?

- How radical/ challenging is it? Does it lead people to seriously question how we and they do things?

Draft analysis was checked back where possible with the originating organisation. I did not approach the press, although my analysis was seen in draft by DETR press office. Contact with the BBC was limited.

#### ANALYSIS

##### WHO ADOPTS THE LANGUAGE OF 'SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT'?

**6. Business** Businesses are increasingly using the language of sustainable development in their corporate reporting, producing material designed to demonstrate to opinion-formers that they are responsible and far-sighted. Recent excellent examples of such reporting include:

- *United Utilities Environment report Contributing to a Better Quality of Life* and *Scottish Power's environment report* which link company strategy in detail to environmental, social and economic headline indicators for sustainable development;

- *BAA Heathrow's environmental, social and economic performance report Towards Sustainability* which looks in detail at transport, resource management and impacts on the local community, using the three pillars of sustainable development;

- *How can we be better neighbours? B & Q's approach to sustainable development – a discussion paper* linking clearly to the Government's headline indicators and setting out a principled response to 16 key issues.

7. But we should be under no illusions about the audience such reports reach. They are primarily directed at opinion-formers and internal company education, not at the wider public. Yes, they are often on the internet, and available to the public. But generally the external demand for these reports is from government, lobbyists and students.

8. Business deliberately adopts very different language when addressing its customers. Even when business is addressing a broad social, environmental and economic sustainability agenda, it does not use explicit sustainability language:

- *Sainsbury's* has carefully edited out such language from its customer leaflets. It says: "We need things that make sense to people as shoppers." Key phrases include 'environmentally responsible farming'; 'are you concerned about the environment and how your food is produced?' The link is made between farming methods and health concerns. Some social issues are addressed - 'socially responsible trading'; 'health and safety.. the protection of children.'

- *B&Q* uses the themes of 'Being a better neighbour' and 'How green is our patio?'

- *The Co-op Bank* uses 'cooperative – uncooperative'; oppressive regimes; pollution.



- *Body Shop* uses the term sustainability rarely, and speaks the language of globalisation, responsibility, women's rights, from global to local, cocoa butter, work conditions, health care, fair wages, education, environment, human rights, conscience, trade and respect.

**9. Campaigning NGOs** are similarly cautious about adopting sustainability language:

- '*Greenpeace* doesn't generally use the term sustainable development, or sustainable as it is often perceived as loose and undefined. If we were to use the term in each campaign it would be important for us to validate its usage with concrete examples of what sustainability meant in that instance. So rather than campaign on 'sustainability' we might focus, for example, on an end to fossil fuel exploration and burning and the promotion of a clean, green energy source, which will not run out and does not harm the environment such as wind, wave and solar. We try instead to be more specific and direct in our communications.'

- *Friends of the Earth* addresses the social and economic as well as the environmental eg fuel poverty, transport poverty and links between pollution and health. But the words 'sustainable development' are very hard to find. Instead we have 'a better future for ourselves and our planet'; 'enviro-friendly'; 'real food'; 'save a tree'; 'air is for breathing'; 'think ahead'; 'the car is going nowhere'; '30 million varieties still available'.

**10. Government-funded campaigns** have learnt similar lessons:

- The words sustainable development do not appear in the *Are You Doing Your Bit?* campaign – not even in the public enquiry leaflet for the engaged. The focus is on the environmental – the broader concept is seen as 'difficult to define and explain in simple language to consumers'.

- *Going for Green* avoids 'sustainable development' but adopts more explicitly green language and conveys some sustainability concepts in phrases like 'a gift to our children' and 'a cleaner greener planet.'

**11. Newspapers and television** The popular and mid-market press do wrestle with some sustainability concepts:

- *The Sun* is ready to use words like global warming, catastrophe and carbon dioxide.

- *The Mirror* says 'Voice of the Mirror – global warning' and points to global warming as a 'challenge'. It favours bizarre and catastrophic stories and found the quality of life indicators too difficult, ducking the issues with a light-hearted 'happy table'.

- *The Mail* offered far more serious coverage of quality of life indicators, climate change, fish stocks and the new national curriculum and is prepared to suggest greater political action.

- *The Express* is often sceptical and questioning about 'green' issues, and says technology will solve a lot of the problems, but covers 'quality of life' and uses phrases like 'affluence without effluents', 'future', and 'global warming' as well as 'uncertainties' and 'revolution in technologies'.

**12. The quality press** use the more formal language of sustainable development:

- A word-search of two years of *The Guardian* revealed 150 uses of the term 'sustainable development' and 300 uses of 'sustainability'.

- *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* also used the term 'sustainable development' – 47 times over 15 months – but also favoured more popular language including: 'rise in junk and jams'; 'environmental, social and economic health'; 'flood fears'; 'global warming'; 'disaster journalism'; 'not just a weekend world'; 'technological revolution'; 'clean new era'; 'species in danger'.

**13. Government** – particularly DETR, DTI, the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly – use the language of 'sustainable development' in public more heavily than any other sector:

- *DTI, Scotland* and *Wales* seem to have a competition to put the term sustainable development somewhere in a press notice.

- *HMT, DSS* and *DoH* scarcely use the term – with only one positive result each for these Departments. Other language is used – Treasury for instance point to their preference for more



specific phrases such as 'green transport package'; 'reducing greenhouse gas emissions'; 'environmental benefits'; 'neighbourhood renewal'; 'urban regeneration' and 'poverty relief.'

**14. Devolved administrations** are clearly attracted to sustainable development ideas as part of their vision for their countries, but face clear difficulties making this concept relevant or newsworthy:

- The *Northern Ireland Executive* makes strong efforts to relate these ideas to people and local communities, with heavy use of the term 'quality of life' in its press notices in a wide range of contexts: neighbourhood regeneration, climate change, sport, health, active ageing, education and training, social inclusion, air quality, active citizenship, and free travel for the elderly on public transport. There are clear references to social and economic issues as well as environmental. It makes lighter, more strategic use of the term 'sustainable development'.
- The *Scottish Executive* makes very heavy use of both 'sustainable development' and 'quality of life' – overwhelming the search engine with over 200 results each. The context is often very abstract – processes of consultation and policy-making rather than impacts on people. There are recent encouraging moves to addressing more concrete issues such as recycling.
- The *Welsh Assembly* similarly makes very heavy use of the term 'sustainable development'. It makes more effort to link it to healthy local economies and rural communities, and concrete news stories about engaging the public. But press notices still revealed few newsworthy facts about the state of sustainability in Wales.

**15. Key players are aware of the language of sustainable development and use it in discussion with opinion formers. But there is strong consensus among those engaging with the public that the phrase 'sustainable development' is a turn-off. Even those with a strong agenda to communicate sustainable development ideas firmly recommend against using abstract sustainable development vocabulary.**

**16. Some parts of central government and the devolved administrations have not learnt these lessons. They use the term 'sustainable development' liberally in press notices without giving it practical meaning, even when the stories are for general news rather than a specialist opinion-forming audience.**

**17.** The concept of sustainable development with its three pillars – economic, social and environmental - is very useful for environmentalists in linking their agenda to wider government. But it is not so central for those with social policy concerns.

**18.** The reasons are partly historical – the history of policy on VAT on domestic fuel showed clearly that environmental policies would fail if they were seen as imposing a disproportionate burden on particular groups such as fuel-poor pensioners. Strong action needed to be taken to tackle this.

**19.** Social policy makers have not similarly found that their policies fail if they do not recognise environmental concerns. There are areas of domestic policy where effective economic and social policies depend on environmental improvement – sustainable cities; environmental measures to improve health; the links between poverty and poor local environments; rural tourism. International development may find greater links – such as the link between poverty, deforestation and environmental degradation. But often, in domestic policy, the dependency is not obvious, and concepts like 'social exclusion' are more relevant - linking inequality with unequal access to services, limited educational and economic opportunities and vulnerability to crime and ill health.

**20.** It is therefore not surprising that use of sustainable development language is much greater in some parts of government than others, and that attempts at linking the three pillars of sustainable development are infrequent.

**21. I recommend that the Commission:**

- **accept that there are good reasons why many Government departments do not use the language of sustainable development in mainstream press notices and accept that other umbrella concepts such as 'social exclusion' are equally valid and that more specific terms such as 'neighbourhood regeneration' may be more newsworthy**
- **should make the positive links where they exist to tackling social exclusion and to maintaining competitiveness in the global economy, in promoting sustainable development thinking and practice across Government**



- **should resist the dilution of the term sustainable development as it is spread across government – there is a danger it becomes just taking the environment into account alongside everything else, a form of environmental impact assessment, rather than setting the agenda for more radical Factor 4 type changes.**

**WHO IS IMPORTANT? WHO REACHES THE MOST PEOPLE?**

**Subliminal awareness – who are the big players even if they do not convey strong sustainable development messages?**

**\* High audience**

- 9 out of 10 people recognised Are You Doing Your Bit campaign
- 'Potential 27 million exposed to' June 2000 FoE Real Food campaign
- Radio 4 Today programme 6.2 million listeners
- State of the Planet BBC1 4-6 million viewers
- The Sun 3.4 million readers
- The Mirror 2 million readers The Daily Mail 2.2 million readers
- Co-op Bank newsletter mailed to 1.3 million customers
- Press coverage of Environment Agency arguments about development on flood plains; NGO campaigns?
- The Daily Express 1 million readers
- Sainsbury's organics leaflet had print run of 500,000; Living landscape leaflet 250,000
- Press coverage of DETR sustainability policy issues
- The Times 700,000 readers
- The Guardian 350,000 readers
- Sustainability messages from most Government Departments



**\* Low audience**

**Active awareness and behaviour – who gets clearly labelled environmental/ social responsibility/ sustainability messages across to significant numbers?**

**\* High audience**

- Radio 4 Today programme 6.2 million listeners
- BBC1 State of the Planet 4 – 6 million
- Are You Doing Your Bit – 2 out of 10 people claimed they were motivated to do more by the campaign; 6 out of 10 said ads provided positive reminders of things to do
- Going for Green – local press coverage, recycling messages
- Supermarket purchases of organics, B&Q paint purchases
- Reith lectures – 800,000 listeners plus Times readers
- RSPB Bird magazine going to 850,000 adult members including lifestyle



features

- 170,000 Greenpeace supporters
- 160,000 Co-op bank affinity cards
- 114,000 Friends of the Earth supporters
- 30,000 individual Going for Green Planet Pledges
- Manual 2000 successor to Green Consumer Guide
- 6,000 Co-op Bank customers signed debt relief petition
- RSPB Go Green pack gone to 6,000

\* **Low audience**

#### **WHO MAKES SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT NEWSWORTHY OR POPULAR?**

**22.** One perspective is that 'there is plenty of sustainability material in the media but it isn't labelled this way' (Joe Smith, Co-director of the Cambridge Media and Environment programme). Although media coverage has a tendency to focus on floods, furry animals and rain forests, it can attract high audiences with more ambitious programming:

- *BBC1's State of the Planet series* got audience levels of 4 – 6 million for each episode. Roger Harrabin, environmental specialist on the Radio 4 Today programme, commented informally: 'I thought it was highly significant that BBC 1 broadcast such a powerful argument for sustainable development at peak time with a star presenter. It was an important landmark at a time when many wildlife programmes look at plants and animals in isolation from mankind, often mentioning that species are endangered without ever examining why. State of the Planet properly traced man's influence on the natural world, with worrying implications for species diversity and climatic change.'
- *Radio 4's morning Today programme*, which regularly runs environmental stories has daily listener figures of 6.2 million.
- *The Reith lectures Respect for the Earth* got 800,000 listeners per lecture on Radio 4. The lectures also appeared in The Times.

**23.** There are real success stories:

- *November flooding* – John Prescott's wake-up call and the Environment Agency's call for more careful development in flood plains got extensive coverage and discussion as mainstream headline news items and fodder for features and columnists.
- *Quality of Life indicators* – launch of the government's indicators got sympathetic articles in the Mail and the Express as well as the quality press. The Northern Ireland Executive has similarly used 'quality of life' to link social, economic and environmental issues and put them in the news.
- *The Are You Doing Your Bit campaign* has got substantial media coverage, generating nearly 2000 features since May 1999. Stories link to news – climate change negotiations and Christmas for instance. It has got high levels of public awareness. Research carried out while last year's adverts were running showed that 9 out of 10 people said they recognised it and 7 out of 10 said the advertisements made them feel they should be doing their bit - even if it got much lower levels of the public saying they would change their behaviour as a result. 2 out of 10 said they were motivated to do more as a result of the campaign, with most saying they did these things already.
- *Going for Green* offer a string of 'people' stories about issues potentially well down the news agenda – pre-Christmas coverage included Daily Express letter of the day on the environmental damage caused by plastic bags; Mirror letter of the day 'A tree is for life not for Xmas'. Press notices featured 'Santa says Park and Ride' and Christmas tree recycling.



ENCAMs – the Tidy Britain Group plus Going for Green claims almost 4,500 pieces of regional press coverage in six months last year, often reinforcing Are You Doing Your Bit campaign messages.

- *Body Shop campaigns* can achieve a high level of participation: 4 million signed a 1996 petition against animal testing; 1 million a 1995 petition against French nuclear testing.
- *B & Q* who have about half the domestic paint market, label paint for emissions levels – half of their customers interviewed claim to have noticed the label, although far fewer claim to have acted on it.
- *Customer environmental leaflets* have large print runs – 300,000 for each B&Q leaflet; 500,000 for Sainsbury's organics leaflet; 1 million customers received the Co-op bank's summer newsletter.
- *Mass membership organisations* have a strong role – the RSPB with 1 million members includes strong sustainable lifestyle messages in Birds magazine.
- *Websites with sustainability messages* get significant numbers of visitors - Greenpeace gets 60,000 visitors a month; Going for Green typically gets 7,000 to 10,000+; Are You Doing Your Bit typically gets 3-4,000 visits a month.

**24.** Sustainable development stories nevertheless struggle against the odds to be newsworthy:

- 'Any attempt by a journalist to do a story on sustainable development per se is almost doomed to failure' (Roger Harrabin)
- Stories about highly complex science and policy debates that unfold slowly, like climate change, may be important, but not news – 'this hugely ambitious concept, integrating economic, social and environmental concerns, presents so little hard news, clear stories, or significant action to back up the stated commitments.' (Joe Smith)
- 'Expressions of cross-party concern for climate change or biodiversity loss are deemed bland and unreportable.' (Joe Smith)

**25.** There are concerns about the paucity and type of documentaries addressing sustainable development:

- From an international perspective, the NGO consortium 3WE's ten year study of TV programming concluded – 'At the start of the decade, the largest category of developing country factual programming concerned human rights, development and environment issues at 30% of output. Programmes about religions, cultures and the arts of developing countries were also significant at 20% of output. Over the decade... these categories have been replaced by travel and wildlife programming which does not offer complete portraits of the world. In 1998-99 almost 60% of programming on developing countries concerned travel (20%) and wildlife (38%).'
- 3WE interviewing producers found 'most did not believe viewers want to watch programmes about the developing world' – they believe that 'a domestic agenda makes more attractive viewing' – but the domestic sustainable development agenda is itself poorly covered.
- State of the Planet itself, was a success story, but from my civil service perspective was thin on the real implications for northern economies and politics.
- Roger Harrabin commented on State of the Planet: 'The question now is whether BBC 1 can follow such a big success, conveying important information on the environment to the mass audience through strong and popular programming at peak time.'

**26. Government press officers and other officials contribute to the lack of coverage of sustainable development:**

- **Weak practice is amply demonstrated in the sample of Government press notices included in this study.** (The sample covered HMT, DSS, DoH, DfEE, Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Executive) Some fail to follow the old adage that 'News is People'. In people terms, too many government press notices reviewed add up to 'Man in suit



stands in grey building and speaks for twenty minutes to men in suits using words sustainable development a lot.' The Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly provide examples of this, despite their obvious commitment to talking sustainable development language.

- **Government press notices fight shy of the controversial** – and the answers they offer may be too glib. What could be controversial – and therefore newsworthy – becomes a consensual non-story.

One typical recent DTI press notice headlined 'Science and technology key to preserving the environment' pointed to areas of planned research. It failed even to hint at the problem that if resource use and environmental damage continue to have a low price, more innovation will be directed at reducing high labour costs than is directed at reducing materials and fossil fuel use – with the net effect that total environmental impact will increase as the global economy grows.

- **Effort tends to focus on specialist environmental journalists who are 'sympathetic' and will cover a story.** Other lobby groups work more widely – the RSPB for instance has recently decided to focus its attention on mainstream journalists and political correspondents rather than environmental specialists (source – Joe Smith). My sample of press coverage shows how targeting on a small number of sympathetic journalists gets coverage – but often in a limited range of newspapers with limited circulation. In some newspapers – such as the Daily Express – intelligent discussion in one piece is counterbalanced by a columnist's scorn in another.

- **Government is reluctant to run negative stories, fearing it will get the blame.** The focus is on policy statements, process and positive messages. More negative messages about worrying trends or consumer impacts are often left to the NGOs. Government can then find itself responding to and calming down 'hyped up scare stories'. Difficulties are compounded by the pressure on policy staff, who often feed press offices weak stories which offer few hard facts about the state of the planet.

27. Government press offices are often aware of these problems. DETR press office offer their own suggestions for good practice and improved coverage including:

- the scope for developing links with features pages and editors of newspapers, not just news pages/ journalists
- the scope for good coverage in the regional press, and potential for building relations with editors, particularly with information that relates stories to people in their areas
- the need to focus on how policy affects people, rather than on the fact that a policy document has been published
- the problem that saying something controversial may attract more coverage but not do much for instance to encourage the public to use their cars less
- giving TV stations advance notice and advanced detailed briefing – coverage may be directly proportional to the amount of such advance briefing, particularly outside the BBC where commitment to coverage of environmental issues is relatively weak.

#### WHO OFFERS THE PUBLIC WHAT MOTIVATORS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

28. Different sectors have different agendas and approaches. This comes out clearly in the analysis. There is nothing wrong with a variety of approaches – to a large degree these complement each other. Both **positive motivators** (wanting nice things) and **negative motivators** (fear of nasty things) may be important in motivating people to taking individual and political action to increase sustainability (see ACBE report on *Sustainable Consumption*). Government, business and much NGO campaigning concentrates on positive motivators. Some NGO campaigning and much TV and press coverage concentrates on negative motivators, reflecting journalists' love for conflict and disaster. But negative motivators and disaster journalism may also promote scepticism and apathy rather than increasing motivation and interest.

29. **Government popular campaigning** focuses on basic understanding of how individual behaviour affects the environment and on easy steps that individuals can take. *Are You Doing Your Bit?* concentrates on positive rather than negative motivators:



- **Don't scare the public** 'Previous campaigns on energy efficiency used 'destruction/apocalypse' images which were shown by research to be demotivating and unpopular. DETR did consider a more emotive approach showing pictures of global destruction but felt that localising would empower people.' (Former AYDYB manager)

- **Local motivators** 'As the campaign has matured, we have moved from an 'education/pre-disposition' phase to information/action, with the next phase concentrating on action/longer-term behaviour change. To achieve this we need to use the most powerful motivators to action which will resonate with the target audiences. Our initial attitudinal research told us that the local environment was of concern (litter, poor air quality, traffic congestion etc), and actions which would improve this, and also improve the health and well-being of children would work.' (Former AYDYB manager)

- **Reducing confusion** 'We have evidence that there is confusion amongst the general public about global warming/climate change/CO<sub>2</sub> emissions etc, the causes, the solutions, indeed, whether it's a bad thing anyway! The solution seemed to be to give simple and clear messages, linked to those policy areas we needed to raise awareness of, which were easy for consumers to execute and which involved little or no perceived lifestyle sacrifice. It's difficult to capture, explain and get people thinking about global warming within the confines of a 30 second ad... If you try to explain the science people glaze over. They are however willing to accept the link to energy use at face value.' (Former AYDYB manager)

**30.** The *Going for Green* campaign is increasingly closely linked to the *Are You Doing Your Bit?* campaign. But it broadens the range of motivators:

- **Using self-interest as a motivator in a broader variety of contexts** A 'Use Park and Ride – help our centres survive' press notice makes clear buses are frequent, staffed, secure, and an opportunity to travel quickly and in comfort, with links to detailed information on local facilities for busy journalists.

- **Making a difference together** It overcomes individual feelings of helplessness and the feeling that one individual's actions won't make a difference, by offering opportunities for individuals to contribute to a larger community activity.

- **Negative motivators as well as positive** Going for Green do make use of the idea that people will be harmed if they don't do something. 'Our press team have increasingly used this tactic... The latest example was the Christmas tree recycling release, which warned of a waste crisis.'

- **'A gift to our children'** Planet Pledge says 'Going for Green is looking for a million people to help the next generation enjoy our natural resources as we do.'

**31. Central government and the devolved administrations** say relatively little about whether consumer action is powerful, effective or important in shaping policy. Particularly outside DETR, they say remarkably little about what the public should be doing. They instinctively prefer positive news stories and motivators to action and are wary of adverse reaction if they present the downside. They do tackle more strategic barriers to action:

- **Overcoming scepticism – showing that government is taking responsibility** This is a strong theme of press notices from several parts of government including the DTI in their arguments for an industrial energy tax; DSS taking action to reduce poverty; the Welsh Assembly integrating SD into its policy development.

- **Tackling confusion about the causes of environmental damage** Central government departments such as DTI and DoH like DETR send clear messages about climate change and about poverty, but others do little to focus the public mind on what is important. The devolved administrations say very little about what makes us unsustainable, perhaps leaving it to London. HMT noticeably avoid strategic arguments about the balance of taxation between environmental bads and environmental goods. Thorough word-searching Treasury press notices for Factor 4/ green taxes/ carbon tax/ energy tax/ eco tax vocabulary yields a complete blank.



- **Overcoming the barrier of self-interest** DTI is very keen to find messages for businesses that immediate self-interest and sustainability point in the same direction, and is reluctant to acknowledge conflicts. DfEE with its curriculum role points to 'global interdependence and responsibility' as well as more immediate motivators – benefits to local community, family and self.
- **A positive future vision** Devolved administrations offer positive motivators – a linking prosperity and quality of life to a future vision for their countries. The Welsh Assembly links sustainable development to healthy local communities and healthy rural economies. The Northern Ireland Executive focuses on quality of life and social inclusion.
- **Overcoming people's feelings of helplessness** DTI seeks to make markets work, empowering the consumer by providing information and an accreditation scheme for green electricity tariffs. The devolved administrations encourage citizen participation, using the language of consultation and local democracy. DfEE similarly focuses on citizenship education and debate.

**32. Business** shows awareness of the need to avoid dumping too much responsibility on the hapless consumer:

- **Overcoming scepticism about business responsibility.** *Sainsbury's*, the *Co-op Bank*, *Body Shop* and *B & Q* are all keen to show in their publicity that they were taking the lion's share of the responsibility for the sustainability of their products.
- **Emphasising self-interest.** In *Sainsbury's* organics leaflets, the focus is on self-interest – "exciting, innovative food," "quality and choice". *B&Q* emphasise that low VOC paints dry quicker and have low odour. The *Body Shop* takes self-interest further – 'The politics of conscience are no more than an expression of self-esteem – we should accept that our opinions are valid and that we have a right to be heard.'
- **Making it easy.** *Sainsbury's* emphasise how easy it is to buy organic food. *B&Q* offers sustainable timber as standard, and has taken away the price differential between peat-free and peat-based composts.
- **Together we're stronger – the benefits of being part of a campaign.** The *Body Shop* and the *Co-op Bank* take an explicitly campaigning approach. The *Co-op* encourages customers to make a fair trade pledge. *Body Shop* run petitions and lobbying campaigns. At a more down to earth level, *B&Q* provides information and labelling to enable the consumer to handle paint more responsibly.

Businesses are generally much more reluctant to discuss:

- **The causes of unsustainability.** The *Body Shop* is an exception – it explicitly attacks the 'myth' of globalisation and unfettered free trade. *B&Q* also emphasise their investigative approach – making sure products are sourced sustainably.
- **The harm that products can cause** – the negative motivators for action as well as the positive. *Sainsbury's* have carefully cut out of the latest editions of their customer leaflets phrases such as 'some of our customers are worried about pesticide residues on food'. The latest leaflet simply offer the positives of 'biodiversity'; 'a healthier countryside', 'environmentally responsible farming'. The *Co-op Bank* unusually emphasises negative motivators – such as the harm that lending to oppressive regimes can cause – as well as its positive commitment not to use customers money this way.

**33. NGOs** are more prepared than business to appeal to conscience, but have much common ground with the business approach:

- **Offering positive consumer choices** You can buy your electricity through the *RSPB* and get an *RSPB* credit card as well as all you need for bird-friendly gardening. *Greenpeace* have an Active Consumer section on their website and extensive links to e-commerce sites. *Friends of the Earth* had a pre-Christmas campaign on buying local produce and offered a choice of e-Christmas cards to send.



- **Being wary of being anti-consumption or 'hair shirt'** Friends of the Earth are prepared to discuss re-use, and alternatives to buying a Christmas tree. RSPB slip in messages that consumers can use a more efficient car, use cars and planes less, reject overpackaged food and start composting. Greenpeace condemned the cut in fuel duty and said the public would rather the money were spent on public transport. But generally, such language is used with caution and is not high profile.

- **Appealing to self-interest** Friends of the Earth links its campaigns to people's interests – health, fresh food, the local economy. The RSPB starts with its members' interest in birds, and works outwards. Greenpeace more subtly offers individuals the chance to positively identify themselves as green campaigners.

- **Inviting the individual to become part of joint action** Greenpeace, RSPB and FoE all give plentiful opportunities to join campaigns.

The NGOs also offer:

- **Factual information for the public** They provide extensive briefings that are alternatives to official government information. The internet ensures that these are readily accessible. NGO websites would appear to have set the pace, with Government web sites catching up. The Environment Agency have invested in producing a high 'in my back yard' inventory of polluting sites backed by explanations of air pollution; and DETR now provide far more extensive information on climate change, air quality and other environmental issues.

- **An emphasis on political over consumer action** There is plentiful consumer action on offer – particularly where action has mass appeal. Greenpeace for instance say its GM shoppers guide is the most visited ever feature on its site. But there is also an awareness that consumer action on its own has limited leverage. RSPB Energy has almost 5,000 members signed up to buying renewable electricity; 4,000 members have picked up or asked for a Go Green action pack, compared to almost 900,000 adult RSPB members. Political action is likely to have greater impact, even if consumer campaigns help alter political attitudes.

**34. Newspapers, television and radio** have a very different approach to business, NGOs or government:

- **'Stories tend to be reported in terms of bipolar conflict.** We actively seek conflict.. Many debates... have the majority of people grouped slightly to one side of a central position. What is the effect on perception of we journalists choose two spokesmen from the far wings of the debate?'

- **'News as entertainment'**. 'Apart from touching tales of rescued furry animals, serious, complex, system-level environment issues can rarely aspire to the levels of entertainment required by such news shows.' (Julian Darley writing in *The Daily Globe* in the light of his Radio 4 experience).

**35.** The BBC is engaged in the debate about these problems and has held internal seminars.

**Other TV and radio stations and newspapers do not appear to be so engaged:**

- 'To my knowledge, no other media organisation in this country has attempted such a process involving its senior management.' (Joe Smith writing in *The Daily Globe*)

**36.** The approach these large scale media adopt may inform the public, and may raise awareness of sustainability issues, but may also raise rather than lower the barriers to individual political or consumer action:

- **The press may offer a superficially questioning approach that encourages greater understanding of the issues.** The *Daily Mail* for instance looks at the role of science. It also carries an article by Geoffrey Lean discussing the implications of climate change. There is extensive questioning discussion of global warming in *The Express*, *The Mail* and *The Sun* not just the broadsheets during the November 2000 floods.

- **Newspapers do make references to unsustainable lifestyles.** The *Sun* weatherman says: "The sensible but difficult thing would be to stop putting so much carbon dioxide into the air. But this would mean things like lower speed limits, making people use trains and insulating



houses. And people are not like that, They say, 'I want that air conditioning on.'" The *Mail* as well as The *Times* offers checklists for personal action.

- **Newspapers are sceptical about environmental issues being dumped on their readers, and want government and business to take responsibility.** "Much of what we can personally do is of marginal use at best .... if you are serious about global warming, then cancel that overseas holiday, stop keeping up with your relatives at the weekend and live in a city, then campaign noisily for a local municipal waste incinerator," says the *Daily Express*. The *Sun* car review says "Load of globals.. .. the flooding of Uckfield last month? Yup, that was global warming too.. This Government needs as many bad weather stories as it can ... muster... It needs to convince us that cars are causing global warming and that it's morally right to bleed motorists dry."

But the *Sun* also says: "Only the voters can decide by refusing to accept politicians who take no action. The whole agenda has to change." The *Daily Mail* similarly emphasises the importance of political action, while veering between supporting and attacking energy taxes. Simon Jenkins in The *Times* blames local planners and agricultural practices for the flooding of homes, and attacks climate change doommongers.

- **By presenting 'both sides' of the question in the form of extreme alternatives some newspapers seem to aim to stir up scepticism and apathy.**"The current floods may well show that global warming is already starting to grip the planet. But we can't be sure, so we shrug and queue to stockpile more petrol," says the *Daily Express*. There is a backlash to Prescott's wake-up call, and substantial scepticism about the data. The *Sun* quotes material that looks as though it comes straight from the Global Climate Change coalition, suggesting the earth has been cooling. John Diamond in The *Express* dismisses 'a freak typhoon in Bognor'.

- **Mainstream journalists get confused on environmental issues.** The *Mirror* has a big clanger in a leading article implying that climate change is caused by the hole in the ozone layer. Similar confusion creeps in to The *Mail* and The *Times*.

37. There is an industry of scepticism in some parts of the media: a cycle of reporting impending catastrophe, a call for someone else such as the Government to do something, followed by a backlash of scepticism about scaremongering, and a conclusion that since there is uncertainty we probably don't have to do very much. Some of the *Daily Express* and *Sun* coverage of the recent floods typifies this most clearly. But The *Times* also follows some of this pattern.

38. **If public attitudes about sustainable development are to change, small reductions in this incitement to apathy and disbelief may be just as important as increased awareness of the causes of climate change or unsustainable consumption.**

39. **Tackling the industry of scepticism means effective timely briefing of mainstream journalists and editors, giving them material they can use that addresses popular concerns. It is not enough to work through specialist journalists. Nor can we rely on non-specialist journalists seeking out data from published reports.**

**IS ANYONE PROMOTING A RADICAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA?**

40. There is extensive coverage of sustainable development issues, of varying quality. But analysis across the sectors also reveals that there is a big hole in the messages being sent to the public:

- **Nobody owns a radical Factor 4/ Factor 10 agenda for changes in the resource efficiency of the economy.** The message is tucked away in the *Government's Strategy for Sustainable Development in the UK*. On page 20: 'Cleaner growth: doing more with less.. as economies grow, significant emissions reductions will require continually greater reductions in emissions relative to economic output, eventually rising to ten-fold and beyond.' How such major changes in resource efficiency will be brought about is not considered.

- **Nobody highlights the unsustainable global trends in resource efficiency and emissions.**

- **Few attack a tax system that taxes jobs more than waste or greenhouse gases.** Government economists acknowledge that it is desirable to increase taxes on environmental bads, and reduce taxes on environmental goods. But they appear to regard this as a marginal instrument, and are rarely challenged by more radical Factor 4 type arguments.



41. Even NGOs and businesses that present a radical agenda, often focus public campaigning and fund-raising on radical action outside the UK, without making the link to unsustainability at home:

- *Greenpeace* adopts radical language: "an end to commercial whaling"; "direct action"; "confronting the nuclear operators". It appears less challenging on the way people live in the UK – although it did condemn the cut in fuel duty and say the public would rather the money were spent on public transport.
- *The Body Shop* makes links between unsustainability abroad and purchasing Community Trade products at home – but the impetus is chiefly to buy Body Shop products.
- *Friends of the Earth* comes across as the exception in my sample in addressing the Factor 10 agenda and promoting eco-tax reform and the links to jobs, although its messages are currently addressed more to an informed audience than to the wider public.

42. Analysis of the need for change is sometimes superficial. The recent *BBC1 State of the Planet* series demonstrates the difficulty of discussing political options:

- It offers a strongly worded and challenging view of the poor state of the planet and the need for action. '... in 50 years' time we will need another planet earth to sustain the world's population if it keeps using resources the way it does today.'
- But actions proposed are at the level of principle rather than at the level of radical economic shifts or behaviour changes to achieve them – 'Many people are switching to clean technology. That means having the same benefits from our modern lifestyle without the pollution.'
- Little is said about the political choices and actions needed to deliver a cleaner economy.

43. **The result may be that the public receives distorted messages about what is important for greater sustainability:**

- *We hear a lot about* GM foods, organics, cosmetics, fairtrade chocolate, recycling and turning off the tap.
- *We hear less about* pesticide reduction, re-use, packaging reduction, buying efficient washing machines and cars, toxic chemicals in our homes, and the impact of air travel and longer commuting.
- *We hear even less about* how high and rising taxes on labour compared to low taxes on industrial and domestic energy use mean that innovation steers the economy towards high material and energy intensity and falling employment levels. Science and technology on their own will not solve our sustainability problems unless the price is right.

44. Government is in a weak position to offer a radical agenda. It has too many interest groups to consider, and must necessarily focus on balance and consensus-building:

- Chris Patten in his Reith lecture commented – 'Dictators are rarely friends of the earth. But even those democratic leaders who espouse environmentalism sometimes appear fatally constrained by a prevailing public mood or private lobby.'
- Lecturer Joe Smith points to 'low levels of trust in relation to the messages of established institutions about the environment. People are sceptical about government and business performance in this area.'

45. **The Sustainable Development Commission, with its independent perspective, may be in a better position to offer a radical view.**

**WHAT CAN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION DO?  
DECIDING THE SDC'S ROLE**

46. **The SDC is not resourced to be a large scale campaigning organisation** able to communicate the concept of Sustainable Development to the public on a large scale:

- But it does have a **clear role in building a coalition** for sustainable development across sectors – and this could include a shared view of how the concept and practice of sustainable development can be communicated better to the public.
- It needs to **consider how much of a public role it will take on.**
- It also has a **role as critic or external stimulant** – to stimulate better practice in government, business and NGOs – it can hold up an (unflattering) mirror to what is being done.
- As an advisory body with independent high-profile members from across sectors, it can **reach the parts that DETR cannot reach** – potentially forging **new partnerships**.

47. It needs to consider effective methods of having a real influence:

- Not dissipating too much energy writing reports that may gather dust on shelves
- **Taking targeted action** – whether in public or behind the scenes
- **Action needs to focus on the big players** – particularly television and the higher circulation newspapers
- **Tackling the very patchy performance of Government** and adopting more effective models – such as the partnership and dialogue approaches used by DFID and offered as a model by IBT/3WE
- **Striking the right balance between challenging** (and potentially getting defensive reactions) and **helping** (working in partnership to get better practice).

#### **STRATEGIC OPTIONS**

48. I have sought to collect a variety of opinion on what actions the SDC might take. Recommendations below are presented for discussion.

#### ***Helping people across government take a more campaigning approach***

49. 'There are important conflict stories to tell, and the information is just sitting there: information clearing-houses, such as UNEP or EEA tend to be encyclopaedic in approach. They need to work on editing and presenting the often-explosive material they sit on.' (Joe Smith)

50. The SDC contains a wealth of experience in effective campaigning, on which the Government could usefully draw in presenting this information.

51. **There is no single model of good practice in presenting sustainable development to the public, but this paper reviews a variety of effective approaches which government, business and NGOs could usefully borrow from each other.**

Specific recommendations are:

- **SDC should lead a forum for better practice on SD stories, bringing together Government press officers with sympathetic producers, editors, journalists, business; this report could be used to initiate discussion and challenge some weak practice.**
- **SDC should press government departments and devolved administrations to get more hard environmental facts out as news stories, building on the successful coverage of the quality of life indicators – showing environmental challenges, not just successes.**
- **SDC should challenge government departments to campaign more on particular stories, where SDC members are aware data is available internally but has not been publicly promoted**

'Innovations in communicating sustainability have hardly begun to impact on public consciousness. Sustainable development indicators; corporate sustainability reporting; ecological footprinting; sustainability life cycle approaches to products: these all represent a rich vein for exploring and debating the huge consequences of the sustainability agenda for our societies. Energy needs to be put into presenting and placing these resources in the media.' (Joe Smith)

- **SDC should identify the gaps in central government and devolved administration campaigning and encourage them to be filled:**



Making sure public campaigning moves beyond 'switch off/don't fill the kettle messages to encourage consumers to use new energy labelling to buy more efficient appliances and cars.

Looking in a year's time at the implementation of a public awareness campaign in Scotland - the Are You Doing Your Bit campaign does not apply in Scotland and the Scottish Executive is planning a public campaign later this year focusing initially on climate change.

- **SDC should consider collaborating with Sustainable Development Education Panel in its future work.**

***Working in partnership with key media to improve coverage of SD issues***

- **SDC should develop outreach beyond environmental journalists – lunch with some key newspaper editors discussing what would help/ possible stories.**
- **SDC should give 1 or 2 Commission members a specific communications responsibility and/or give individual members specific responsibility for promoting better relations with specific media.**
- **SDC should consider appointing a media relations adviser.**
- **SDC should review DFID's experience in running dialogue with the media, and copy what works.**

Dialogue both formal and informal needs to get beyond environmental specialists.

'Stories which concern more than one area of interest have often fallen between the gaps in journalistic specialisms. Environmental economics was not taken seriously by most mainstream economics correspondents until the point when it was about to be launched on the unsuspecting public through fiscal weapons in the UK budget.' (Roger Harrabin writing in *The Daily Globe*)

- **SDC should initiate a dialogue with BBC and other terrestrial TV channels to ensure new self-regulatory framework for public interest broadcasting leads to clear policies on the presentation of sustainable development issues**

The Government's White Paper 'The New Future for Communications' sets out an increasingly self-regulatory approach to meeting broadcasting standards: 'The BBC, S4C, Channel 4, ITV and Channel 5 will continue to be required to produce a mixed and high quality range of programmes, variously including educational material,..... coverage of arts, science and international issues... it will principally be for the boards of each of the broadcasters to ensure that these remits are delivered. There will be a requirement for the public service broadcasters to develop statements of programme policy and self-regulatory mechanisms in order to give confidence that this new system will be effective.'

The IBT comments that there is a need for active engagement with the Boards to make self-regulation of the public service broadcasting requirement work. Paddy Coulter of the IBT suggested that the SDC could be very influential.

There needs to be a balanced approach. Joe Smith comments for instance of the BBC that 'there is a deep-seated opposition to representing an agenda, particularly what appears to be a green movement run through with values.'

- **SDC should identify the potential for DETR or SDC partnership with key TV or newspapers in taking a newsworthy look at SD stories, building on the experience of the AYDYB campaign in media partnerships.**
- **SDC should build relations with newspapers with large circulations and apathetic SD coverage.**



### **KEY SOURCES**

In addition to the campaign material, newspaper cuttings etc referred to in the analysis, and comments from organisations studied, I have also drawn from:

*The Daily Globe – Environmental change, the public and the media*, edited by Joe Smith, 2000; also *Communicating sustainability debates through the media: not a case of 'shout louder'*, Joe Smith, Paper to OCEES workshop on The media a resource for sustainable consumption - January 8th and 9th 2001

*Catalysing the Evolution of a Language for Sustainable Development – Final report and recommendations for the Sustainable Development Education Panel*, Quadrangle Consulting, October 1999

*Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment – Eighth Progress report*, October 1998

*Audit Bureau of Circulation National Newspaper Data for the month of November 2000*, UK sub-total circulation figures

*Viewing the World – a study of British television coverage of developing countries 1999*, DFID/Glasgow Media Group/3WE

*A Better Quality of Life – a strategy for sustainable development in the UK*, DETR May 1999

*Opportunities and Guidelines for teaching about Sustainable Development - Report to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority*, Council for Environmental Education October 2000