

EV5V-CT92-0149

**BETWEEN EXPANSION AND RESTRICTION. THE
DEVELOPMENT AND FACILITATION OF
ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY**

SUMMARY FINAL REPORT

JANUARY 1995

Key-words : environmental awareness; environmental responsibility; ethics; empowerment; risk ; world-view

RESEARCH TEAM :

Co-ordinator:

Prof. Dr. Danny Wildemeersch

Unit of Social Pedagogy of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Research Group Environment, Society & Education
Vesaliusstraat 2, 3000 Leuven, Belgium
Tel. (32)16.286229
Fax. (32)16.326211
E-mail: danny.wildemeersch@ped.kuleuven.ac.be

Contractor :

Dr Gabriele Quinti

Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Febbraio 74 (Ce.r.fe)
Via Montezebio 32
00195 Roma, Italia
Tel. (39)6.3200851
Fax. (39)6.321218

I. OBJECTIVES

The general objective of the research project was to generate scientific and policy-relevant insights concerning the factors and processes that enhance and/or inhibit the development and facilitation of ecological responsibility in two different areas of Western-Europe (Flanders and Southern-Italy).

More in particular, the project aimed at generating knowledge and developing advice with regard to the following themes:

1. The significance of different attitudes and opinions towards the idea of ecological responsibility.
2. The significance of professional, geographical, educational and age differences with respect to the definition of ecological issues.
3. The significance of different kinds of socio-cultural organisations of citizens with regard to the development of ecological responsibility and ecological problem-solving capacities.
4. The significance of social and institutional conflicts and dilemmas for the facilitation or inhibition of ecological responsibility.
5. The contribution of different consciousness-raising programmes, including their media-organisational aspects, to the development of ecological responsibility.
6. The attitudes of citizens towards environmental government actions in various policy-making areas, such as urban, industrial, agricultural, mobility and energy planning.

II. METHODOLOGY

In the initial stage of the research, the issue of ecological responsibility was conceptually related to broader processes of socio-cultural transformation we witness today. The point of departure was the observation in the literature, confirmed in interviews, that a broad ecologically oriented attitude (ecological social paradigm) is becoming a widespread phenomenon in the global context in general, and in western (post-)industrial societies in particular. The diffusion of this paradigm was not considered an isolated phenomenon, but was related to broader processes of socio-cultural change. These broader processes were described in terms of a shift on a continuum from an 'expansion orientation' towards a 'restriction orientation', influencing current worldviews on a large scale. The term expansion-orientation refers to an ensemble of values, attitudes and opinions which reflect ambitions of growth, emancipation, competition among ideologies, energy expending attitudes, the surmounting of boundaries etc.. The term restriction orientation refers to the dominance of experiences of risk, the search for stability and order, a growing disbelief in overall (state- or bureaucracy governed) solutions, a growing belief in self-help activities in order to solve social and political problems, and finally an increasing 'energy-saving' attitude.

In order to investigate and eventually falsify these general hypotheses, a questionnaire was constructed aiming at interviewing two comparable samples of 325 people in two European regions: Flanders (the entire region, comprising some 5.5 million inhabitants) and southern Italy (the provinces of Naples, Benevento, Foggia and Bari, comprising some 4.5 million inhabitants).

Both samples represented an absolute minimum to meet the representativity criterion necessary in this type of research. Contrary to our original intentions, we decided to opt for oral interviews, as the issues we wanted to investigate turned out to be fairly complex and time-consuming. The final version of the questionnaire contained four types of questions. The first group of questions referred to matters of identification (socio-demographic variables, awareness of ecological problems etc.). The second group of questions aimed at registering the current diffusion of ecological orientations. Here the research heavily drew on the insights and instruments developed by Dunlap, Olson and Lodwick (1992)¹. The research project translated into Italian and Dutch a matrix measuring the extent to which individuals expressed adherence either to a 'technological social paradigm' or to an 'ecological social paradigm'. According to the authors, a new paradigm has emerged in industrial societies, with respect to environmental issues. This ecological social paradigm emphasises ecological concerns and the importance of understanding ecological systems and living in harmony with them. This ecological social paradigm is said to be replacing the previously dominant technological social paradigm emphasising the importance of technology in dealing with development and problem-solving actions in the field of the environment. In addition to this distinction, some more questions were included. As the process of re-framing of worldviews (the changes in the global understanding of reality) was a central hypothesis in the research, various scales were used to measure this phenomenon. Three important indicators were used here: the importance or relevance of different values and the

1 Dunlap, R., Olsen, M. & Lodwick, D. (1992). *Viewing the World Ecologically*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

evolution of their importance, the evolution of feelings of personal (in)security and an optimism or pessimism scale. The project also measured to what extent people expressed ethical and/or a political attitudes towards the solution of environmental problems. Finally we constructed or adapted some opinion questions about the attitudes of citizens towards political regimes on various levels, as the crisis of traditional regimes was postulated in the research. Respondents were asked to give their opinions about the problem-solving capacities with respect to environmental issues of local, regional, national and transnational authorities.

III. MAIN RESULTS

The investigation was conducted both in Flanders and in Southern Italy. This summary does not present the results for the two regions separately, as the similarities between both regions are much more striking than the differences. One of the main observations in the research is the very articulate presence of ecological attitudes both in Flanders and in southern Italy. Large numbers of people expressed adherence to the ecological social paradigm in both areas, whereas the technological social paradigm only is of limited significance. This overall result is entirely compatible with the results of similar investigations executed in the United States, and more recently on a global scale. Looking more closely at the data, one could say, with statistical certainty, that Flanders is slightly more oriented towards the ecological social paradigm than southern Italy. This difference is entirely due to the fact that the group of non-ecological believers in southern Italy is larger than in Flanders. On the other hand, no difference was found with respect to the issue of ecological values. With respect to the technological orientations, a complementary tendency was observed. The southern Italian population is slightly more in favour of the 'technological social paradigm' than the Flemish population. Especially there are more people expressing a weak adherence to this paradigm in southern Italy than is the case in Flanders.

A very striking result in both regions is the absence of any kind of significant relationship between indices measuring the ecological social paradigm and indices measuring the technological social paradigm. This means that a large group in both regions (somewhere between one fourth and one third) either adheres to both or to none of the paradigms. This lack of relationship or presence of some inconsistency can be explained completely by the fairly strong belief in technology. In Flanders as well as in southern Italy, the majority of the people still expresses beliefs in technology and technological solutions to environmental problems. Hence, people combine in a very explicit way their adherence to the ecological social paradigm with some technological beliefs. This category probably is a hesitating and wavering category when confronted with 'ecology-technology' dilemmas.

Also the profile of the people expressing the ecological social paradigm values, was investigated both in Southern Italy and Flanders. Here, a negative relationship was found between the age-groups and the ecological beliefs. This meant that the younger generations in both regions are attracted more to values and beliefs expressed by the ecological social paradigm than the elder generations. The educational level seemed, as expected, one of the most sensitive variables in Flanders as well as in southern Italy: the higher the educational level, the higher the score on the ecological social paradigm and the lower the score on the technological social paradigm. The type of education was only investigated in Flanders, and the following effect was found: the Flemish people educated in medical or humanistic disciplines adhere to the ecological social paradigm to a larger extent - and the technological social paradigm to a lower extent - than those educated in positivist-scientific, technical, and economic disciplines. In both regions, a positive influence of the employment-situation (having a paid job at the moment of the investigation) on the ecological social paradigm score has been found. With respect to particular professional activities, similar outcomes were found in both regions: intellectual workers are more oriented towards the ecological social paradigm than manual workers. With respect to the population density, it is clear that this variable cannot be considered as determining the development of an ecological orientation. A very striking difference between Flanders and southern Italy relates to the variable 'gender'. No difference has been found between Flemish men and women, whereas a tendency of lower ecological social paradigm scores was found among southern Italian women. Most of the above mentioned results were expected and hence, confirm the hypotheses put forward in the proposal and the findings in various other research.

However, in both regions there were also some unexpected results. We found that there is no significant relationship between the possible access to ecological information and the extent in which one adheres to the Ecological Social Paradigm. Another unexpected trend is the lack of relationship between the participation in actions or initiatives and the ecological social paradigm-score. Moreover, only a small proportion of the Flemish and southern Italian people participates in environmental actions. The limited willingness to pay for a better environment in both regions is a last important similarity. With few exceptions, this willingness is rather low. However, this variable is positively correlated with the ecological social paradigm-score in Flanders, as well as in southern Italy, which means that people expressing ecological social paradigm values and beliefs are more prepared to pay for a better environment.

The most important differences between the outcomes of Flanders and southern Italy concern the influence of the variable 'involvement in organisations'. In southern Italy a positive influence of different organisations was found : traditional organisations like trade unions, political organisations and youth organisations, but also the nature or environment organisations and the group of leisure and recreation-organisations seem to have a positive effect on the ecological social paradigm-score. In Flanders, only an effect of two kinds of single-issue organisations has been found : the nature- or environment organisations and the consumer-organisations. On the whole, these findings again confirm a noticeable inconsistency between knowledge and action with respect to ecological responsibility. The naïve rationalist model assuming that knowledge about a problem automatically triggers problem-solving action was again falsified. This observation has influenced some of the conclusions and policy-recommendations to a large extent.

One of the main hypotheses of the research was that the awakening of an ecological orientation in society in general is related to a broader process of global re-framing or social reality-construction. Empirical evidence was found for this re-framing process in both regions. Three indicators show that there is indeed a shift from 'expansion'- values towards 'restriction'- values, a growing feeling of insecurity and a general pessimism concerning different domains in life. First of all, it was very striking that in Flanders and in southern Italy a clear-cut predominance of the restriction-values (R-values) was found over the expansion-values (E-values). The following values were identified as expansion-values: emancipation of underprivileged, scientific development, productivity, technological evolution, success in the profession, political action and mobilisation. Restriction values were the following: health, life-quality, security/safety, personal freedom, stillness, self-realisation and self-care. Notwithstanding some differences between both regions, the general trend was very similar. Referring to Giddens (1991)², one can speak about a growing complementarity of life-political orientations and emancipatory political orientations. Moreover, the project also found that this emphasis on the restriction-values is a fairly new phenomenon. In both regions, many people recognised that over the last decade their orientation towards restriction-values became more prominent, whereas their orientation towards expansion-values lost significance. Another indicator relating to this issue was about insecurity. The project argued that the rise of a restriction orientation was fed by feelings of insecurity. Risk is becoming a characteristic experience in present-day society. Especially social risks such as drugs, the presence of migrants, crime and unemployment are becoming dominant both in southern Italy and Flanders. At the same time, a relatively low position of the phenomenon of environmental insecurity has been found in both regions. The environmental risk is not one of the major sources of insecurity today. Yet, most of the people report a growing feeling of insecurity also in this domain. The third indicator relating to the shift in global re-framing showed that there is a general pessimism concerning a lot of problems in both regions. Only with respect to the personal future and the issue of the women's rights, there was a tendency towards a certain optimism. Again, the social risks were at the top level, in Flanders as well as in southern Italy. The attitude towards environmental problems was not so pessimistic. It is remarkable that both the Flemish and the Italians in the south were pessimistic about the global environment rather than about their own regional environment.

In the theoretical analysis, the project related the rising of the ecological social paradigm to the emergence of a global re-framing process. This hypothesis was clearly confirmed empirically, both in Flanders and in southern Italy. Furthermore, it was also found a clear relationship between the technological social paradigm and the expansion-values. This relationship was very clear in the southern Italian context and somewhat less articulate in the Flemish context.

The opposition between ethics and politics was also researched following on from the opposition between expansion values and restriction values. According to the theoretical stance of the project, the global re-framing process was characterised by an increasing dominance of an ethical attitude and a decreasing weight of traditional political attitudes in dealing with reality. In both regions a clear relationship has been found between the ecological social paradigm scores and the preference of people for ethical solutions. The more one espouses ecological social paradigm orientations, the more one is in favour of an ethical orientation and of addressing personal responsibility in the solution of environmental problems.

As far as the experience of risk in present day society is concerned, the project made several observations. In both regions, most of the interviewees were concerned about environmental risks. A large majority thought that the quality of the environment had deteriorated over the last ten years and that the environmental problem was (fairly) urgent. At the same time, on the problem-solving level, there is a lot of scepticism about the problem-solving capacity of political authorities. Perhaps the disjunction between the overall experience of risk on the one hand and

² Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

the limited capacity to cope with these risks, is one of the major challenges in societies today. The scepticism about problem-solving capacities applies both to the regional and the European authorities. On the level of the regional authorities, the scepticism of the southern Italian respondents was remarkable. They distrust their own authorities much more than the Flemish respondents do. With respect to the European level, there was not such a difference between both regions. People are critical, because a majority thinks that the European authorities are inefficient with respect to solving these problems, especially in the short run. Yet, there was more optimism about the problem-solving capacities of the European authorities in the long run. Finally, we also found that people rather believe in technological problem-solving scenarios than in political solutions with respect to environmental problems.

IV. SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AND POLICY RELEVANCE

With respect to the scientific results, the research project contributed to a better understanding of the social dimension of environmental issues in various ways. In the first place the insight of Dunlap et al (1992)¹ was confirmed that there is indeed a paradigm shift taking place from a technological social paradigm towards an ecological social paradigm. Although this was not a very original element, it was a necessary step in the development of the insights which have a broader scope. While linking the paradigm approach to broader processes of socio-cultural transformation which take place today, it has been possible to confirm some important theoretical insights which dominate social analysis today. The project has indeed found that a major shift is taking place in the way people understand reality today. An anthropocentric, expansive worldview is gradually giving way to, or is being recombined with, a worldview which relates experiences of risk and insecurity with new understandings of social action. Thereby the idea of self-reliance and personal responsibility is gaining ground in combination with a growing distrust in traditional political problem-solving capacities. These empirical observations correspond with the theoretical insight formulated by Giddens (1991) that today, traditional emancipatory political orientations are being challenged by life-political orientations. The life-political orientation means that society is becoming aware of the necessity to limit its transformative power, taking into consideration the reality of global interdependence and the necessity to relate ethical and existential considerations to issues of socio-cultural, political, technological and economic transformation. This shift in worldview coincides with the experience of a 'risk-society' as expressed by Beck (1986)³. In many domains of life (cultural, economical, political, ecological) people experience a growing insecurity. This observation again found empirical support in the research. Furthermore, the prominence of risk-experience goes together with a strong tendency towards post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1990) which also point to the restriction orientation which is a key-notion in our research. It should be stressed that the findings thus contradict to a certain extent Inglehart's assumption that post-materialist values are stimulated by the experience of security and material wealth. In the research it was predominantly feelings of insecurity that coincide with values that reflect a restriction orientation.

Furthermore, the research again confirmed the gap between environmental awareness and responsible action. The observation inspired the project to relate the main conclusions and policy-recommendations of the research to this issue. Traditional information strategies to inform citizens about the features of environmental problems can be considered fairly useless. It was thus suggested to stimulate initiatives of public communication which are no longer grounded on awareness-raising information, but on problem-solving information, aiming at supporting citizens to cope with environmental problems. This approach should also strengthen people's sense of agency and ownership towards the territory they live in, which is a requirement for the activation of their involvement, by improving their control on local environmental risk.

With the close relationship between the experience of environmental risk and other forms of social risks, the project was strongly in favour of more integrated approaches of community empowerment, which systematically connect environmental problem-solving strategies with policies aiming at fighting social exclusion. This kind of synergism could also enable a more effective management of the inevitable conflicts among diverging needs (for instance the conflict between environmental protection and employment or between environmental protection and the development of transportation systems). As a result of the findings, it was suggested to engage not only ecological groups, but the entire spectrum of citizen's groups and associations so as to connect state-bodies and citizens, not in a bureaucratic way but conversely, to foster the development of self-organised entities. In this respect, it is necessary to diversify the messages in order to activate technical expertise often unused and apparently far from the environmental domain, by well-tailored and strategically-oriented proposals of involvement. Such initiatives could contribute to the regaining of citizen's trust in favour of public administrations. The establishment of monitoring and evaluation procedures undertaken by specialised actors and agencies (citizens, professional associations etc.) could furthermore increase the transparency of public administration's actions. Such orientations would necessitate the

3 Beck, U. (1986). *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

development of more equal and horizontal forms of interaction with citizens, limiting vertical decision-making procedures, which are not subject to negotiation. In addition it was suggested to develop two-way communication circuits, providing citizens with information, while at the same time developing tools and methods to collect and exploit information provided by citizens and citizen's organisations. These efforts could finally install multi-dimensional forms of communication, involving public and private actors operating at different levels of policy-planning and implementation. It must be clear that these suggestions necessitate a renewal of culture among policy-makers and public administrators. It is necessary for them to go beyond an approach viewing citizens in a limited way as payers of green taxes or as individuals whose ecological orientation could be experienced only within the private dimension of personal behaviours. In this view, it is necessary to set up environmental policies which recognise citizens as actual actors in preventing and controlling environmental risks, above all at the local level. In short, the environment issue makes clear the necessity of a reinvention of the public domain, both on behalf of the citizens and the authorities

In this framework, the European Union can play an important role through programmes and initiatives which enable the above-mentioned principles. The Union could contribute to the investigation and development of strategies for public communication oriented towards the dissemination of problem-solving information. The Union could exploit some of its tools, such as the European Social Fund, in order to support the development of non-profit initiatives in the environmental domain and to generate and disseminate at the grass-root level know-how related to people's knowledge such as adult and community education and development. In doing so, it could combine programmes of environmental action and the struggle against poverty and social exclusion. In addition, the Union could also stimulate networking actions, involving public bodies and private profit and non-profit organisations. Finally, the Union could promote pilot-programmes aiming at testing new procedures of interaction between citizens and public administrations, so as to arrive at institutional learning processes.