

What role do mindsets play in sustainability and climate action?

PodCast with Professor Christine Wamsler

Jeroen Janss, Director Awaris EU & Inner Green Deal Initiative: For our Inner Green Deal podcast series, we recently interviewed Christine Wamsler, Professor at Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies in Sweden. Several listeners interested in the field of personal development and sustainability asked for the full text of the interview as they found it so rich and insightful. We gladly complied!

Introduction *to PodCast* by Jeroen Janss: Welcome to the Inner Green Deal podcast: What role do mindsets play in activating sustainable development and climate action?

In this episode, my colleague Liane is talking to Christine Wamsler, Professor at Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies in Sweden.

Christine is at the forefront of research on the human qualities that are essential for sustainable climate action, and has over 20 years of experience working in sustainable development, risk reduction and climate adaptation. She has led many international projects and has published more than 200 academic papers, articles, and books.

But beyond the academic credentials, Christine is a remarkable person. Having worked on the ground with vulnerable groups, and in areas struck by hurricanes and other extreme weather events, Christine's interest and understanding of human behavior is profound.

From the conversation, you will get deep and rich insights on how our intrinsic qualities, such as awareness, openness, and compassion, relate to pro-social behavior and climate action in particular.

So let's listen to Christine and her profoundly human vision of climate action. We are Liane Stephan and Jeroen Janss, and we thank you for joining the Inner Green Deal podcast.

Liane (Inner Green Deal & Awaris co-founder Liane Stephan): Christine, thank you for joining us today. How are you doing?

Christine: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you here today.

Liane: So Christine, you have been researching how we as humans respond to sustainability and climate change in particular. And what mindsets, values and attitudes are helpful. I am so curious to know what inspired you to work in the domain of sustainability and climate change since these fields are so crucial to our future.

Christine: My inspiration, actually, dates back to my childhood. I've always been disturbed when I see inequality, suffering or destruction around me. And when I was a child, it often made me feel helpless and left me with a lot of questions about life.

So as long as I can remember, I've always wanted to dedicate my time to something meaningful, something useful. I wanted to find work that would enable me to serve the people and the world around me to the best of my ability and, at the same time, allow me to grow as a person.

With this idea in mind, when I was in my twenties, I decided to study architecture and urban planning first. And then I specialized in the field of international humanitarian assistance. It was an unusual combination of subjects, but it opened up a lot of meaningful opportunities.

So over the next few years, I worked on different projects and Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The aim was to help marginalized communities, for instance by building better homes for the urban poor, or reconstructing communities after major earthquakes, or by working with garbage collectors who live and work in waste disposal sites to help them get better and more just working conditions.

During this time, I got to know many wonderful people who are living in unthinkable, precarious and inhuman environments, and their day-to-day struggles touched my heart deeply.

But the real turning point for me was hurricane Mitch. You might remember that it devastated large parts of Central America in 1998. And in the aftermath, I worked in the region to help people reduce their vulnerabilities and exposure to disasters. This is when I started to focus more on the issue of climate, and climate change.

Around this time, the whole world actually began to increasingly experience the impacts of climate change. So, my work also became increasingly relevant in the European context.

At the same time, the issue of climate change opened up many new questions as to how we, as a society, could best relate to, and address, climate change to create more just and sustainable cities.

And it was these questions that brought me back to the academic world and since 2011, I've been working at Lund University as a Professor of Sustainability Science.

So why sustainability science? With academia, the field of sustainability science attracted me the most, because it tries to understand, and contribute to finding, solutions to complex challenges such as climate change that threaten the future of humanity and the planet.

So it's a really fascinating field. It's truly cross-disciplinary. And it's practical. So the aim is to advance both knowledge and take action, by creating a dynamic bridge between the two. And so for me, it was a perfect match given my early academic and practice experience and the search to find meaning in my work.

Liane: Wow, that really sounds like a very interesting life journey so far, Christine. And you have also recently launched two new research projects. One is called Mind4Change and the other is TransVision. These projects look into the role of mindsets and supporting sustainable climate action and also what is needed to enable such mindsets. Why were these two specific questions so relevant to?

Christine: The short answer is that we urgently need to find better ways to sustainably address climate change. In fact, the dominant approaches to sustainability have not, so far, catalysed the necessary change.

And this is despite the high profile of sustainability as a concept, and the associated goals and targets that have been set at global, national, and local levels since the beginning of the 1980s.

So as I see it, our technological capabilities have been increasing exponentially, but our ability to use them wisely has not. We are building vast, complex civilizations, but that very complexity is in danger of overwhelming us, creating huge and unintended consequences for the planet and all of the people on it.

So this tells me that we urgently need to find better ways to address climate change. Um, but let me explain first how we got to this point.

Actually, what we have seen so far is that the vast majority of sustainability scholarship, education and practice has only focused on the external world: ecosystems, wider socioeconomic structures, technology and governance dynamics.

At the same time, a second aspect of reality has been vastly neglected: people's inner dimensions and capacities. This is a major shortcoming in current approaches.

Therefore, there is a clear need to also look at sustainability from the 'other end', and by this, I mean not only the large scale systems level, but also from the individual level. It's a bit like engineers excavating a tunnel to a huge mountain. Why only dig from one side? Isn't better to dig from both ends at the same time?

In the domain of sustainability, this means that we also need to investigate how individual inner dimensions and related transformation can impact sustainability at different levels and contribute to a broader, cultural change.

So in simple terms, it's about how we can unleash human potential to commit to, care for, and affect change for a better life.

In more academic terms, it relates to the exploration of people's mindsets. And I use the word 'mindset' as an umbrella term to refer to people's beliefs, worldviews, values, and motivations. It relates to what people think and feel, and their cognitive, emotional and relational capacities, such as, for example, self-awareness, compassion or empathy.

So these ideas lead us to ask why people's mindsets are relevant to sustainable climate action? And the simple answer is because they can be seen as so-called 'deep leverage points' for change toward sustainability. This means that they are at the root of many sustainability challenges and, in turn, fundamental to solutions. Not least because they give us an insight into the capacity of individuals to reflect on their own mental models and assumptions and, maybe, adopt beliefs, worldviews and values.

And interestingly, this understanding is also supported by recent progress in social neuroscience. Social neuroscience suggests that expanded consciousness, which is the results of certain intrinsic capacities or qualities, might actually open up new pathways towards sustainability.

What I mean by expanded consciousness is strengthening and opening up our capacity to be aware. It involves an expanded sense of social and ecological consciousness. It goes beyond our five senses and includes internal bodily sensations, mental activities – feelings, and thoughts – and our sense of connection to other people and to nature.

So in short, there is an urgent need to better understand how our mindsets and associated capacities can support sustainable climate action, and the factors that influence these. We urgently need to understand the link between mindsets and sustainability in much more detail. And my hope is that our new research projects will help to address this gap.

Liane: This sounds very exciting. Do you have any initial results from your new projects or what have you concluded so far from your previous research?

Christine: Yes, we do have some initial results, which have recently been published in an article. Our first study focused on climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The study assessed if progress could be encouraged by changing the culture of cooperation and communication. And, if so, which mindsets, associated inner qualities and enabling factors would support the process.

It's a very interesting study because, as I explained before, we know very little about the intrinsic capacities and associated conditions that could support sustainable climate action.

In fact, we identified five clusters of skills or qualities that could support transformation towards sustainability. They include issues such as openness, self-awareness and -reflection, relational awareness, compassion, empathy, and intrinsic values that ultimately lead to action oriented attitudes.

These qualities inform our view of ourselves, our life, our society, nature and the world around us. So these perspectives, ultimately, underpin and inform our life choices, actions and interactions. We also found potential linkages between these qualities and notions such as emotional intelligence and mindfulness.

Liane: Oh, you just mentioned mindfulness. Have you also looked into the role of mindfulness for supporting sustainability and climate action?

Christine: Yes, my earlier work looked specifically at the issue of mindfulness.

For instance, we conducted a study on the link between mindfulness, compassion and sustainability, and how it is reflected in current sustainability research and teaching. We found that mindfulness and compassion have been vastly neglected in both sustainability science and teaching.

At the same time, we also found scientific evidence of the potential effects of mindfulness and compassion-building on issues that are relevant to sustainability. So examples would be subjective wellbeing, the activation of intrinsic, non-materialistic core values, people's connection to nature, equity issues, social activism, consumption, and also certain pro-environmental behaviors.

In another study, we focused on mindfulness in the context of climate change adaptation. Here we found that mindfulness disposition coincides with people's motivation to take, or support, climate adaptation actions, their risk perception, and how ready they are to acknowledge climate change. Another interesting finding was that mindfulness can increase our ability to cope with the impacts of climate change. So for example, post traumatic stress affects not only the victims of a climate disaster, but also emergency workers, firefighters, police, volunteers, and also the communities that are home to the victims. In this context, mindfulness can help people to cope better with stress, and adapt to new circumstances. It does this by minimizing automatic, habitual, or impulsive reactions, and increasing cognitive flexibility.

I'd also like to add that mindful thinking could encourage people to consider the consequences of not questioning current structure and power relations. And this is a very important aspect as global warming has environmental and health consequences that disproportionately affect people in low-income countries, and poor people in high-income countries.

So overall, our work so far indicates that mindfulness and global sustainability might be more connected than we think.

But at the same time, we need to understand the link between them in much more detail. And I believe that it is high time to explore the role that contemplative practices, such as mindfulness, can have for supporting sustainability, and how we can tap into this potential for transformative change.

Liane: So, thank you so much, Christine. I'm wondering about the role of politics and government in this context and what has to be done in order to turn your research findings into action.

So, I just realized, I think there are two questions in one. So let us start with the role of politics and government in this context.

Christine: Yes. Politics and governments definitely play an important role in this context.

Today, politics, along with many other larger systems, focus on motives, such as growth consumption and competition. It's clear that little attention is given to mindsets and intrinsic capacities, such as compassion, empathy, care, or solidarity.

Consequently, governments and other are struggling to address increasingly complex sustainability challenges, such as climate change, and their associated impacts. In fact, technological solutions exist, many countries could afford the transition, but effective action is still lacking.

So in this context, our mindsets, along with our cognitive emotional capacities and biases, make it difficult to adequately address long-term challenges. But they influence how we take decisions and deal with the increasing complexity and diversity of democratic and climate governance. So they influence how we analyze and understand data and evidence, how we negotiate and relate with each other, address conflict and equity issues, communicate risk, and develop solutions.

These challenges mean that governments across Europe are increasingly looking for ways to support policy makers' intrinsic capacities through for different interventions. But, at the same time, there is a lack of critical analysis and empirical evidence to understand if, and how, such interventions or programs impact sustainability outcomes at different scales.

In the context of politics, the ability to stop and feel can definitely be transformative, especially in a system that monetizes our attention, which is sometimes called cognitive capitalism. So, in other words, if we don't work at the level of internal belief systems and look into how current systems are shaped by power, privilege, and positionality, we are bound to recreate unjust structures in our daily interactions.

So it's clear that politics and governments play an important role.

At the same time, we shouldn't assume, or advocate, that specific interventions or approaches aimed to support intrinsic capacities automatically nurture sustainability, and address aspects such as injustice or climate change. Instead, we need to look at existing interventions to see if, and how, they can be oriented

toward sustainability. Can they, for instance, be integrated with other forms of approaches, such as complexity and system thinking, organizing for change, etcetera, rather than just focusing on individual awareness? So far there is a lack of research on such issues.

Our new research projects address the gap and focus on related analyses. They also include mindfulness-based interventions for parliamentarians and other leaders. And a clear example is our close collaboration with Awaris and the Inner Green Deal Initiative, which I'm particularly excited about.

Liane: Okay. So, um, there was a second question: What has to be done in order to turn your research findings actually into action?

Christine: What is needed to turn our research into action? I would argue that there are three important needs that must be urgently addressed.

First, there is a need to raise awareness of the importance of intrinsic capacity development for sustainability and climate action across society. We need to support this in the same way as we address other mainstreaming issues, like gender, or equality. It requires the integration of related considerations at all levels, and across all sectors, through systematic, targeted strategies and measures.

Second, there is a need for governments, institutions, and educational bodies to consciously and systematically facilitate personal development for all. In other words, we must develop and roll-out related interventions to facilitate collective leadership, and lead by empowering and serving others.

And finally, more time and resources should be invested in research and research cooperation. There is a huge lack of critical analyses and empirical evidence that would help us to understand if, and how, certain mindsets and personal development interventions impact sustainability at different scales. We need to have a better understanding of the pros and cons of different approaches, and their enabling factors. And such research requires close cooperation between governments, businesses, and academia.

In this context, influential actors, such as the European Commission, could be an important driving force. The Commission could be a role model for the changes that are needed and, at the same time, provide incentives for all other stakeholders to get engaged.

Liane: Now, let our listeners know a bit about how you on a daily or weekly basis sustain your energy and your drive.

Christine: Okay. This is a particularly relevant question at a time when we're seeing a rapid increase in climate anxiety and climate grief in society. I guess you want to know how I can wake up cheerful in the morning, when I have to deal with climate change on a daily basis. And not only from a personal perspective, but also as an academic who is expected to be critical and skeptical.

I think that what sustains me is the opportunity to help, to serve, to make things better, at least for some few people.

Another important aspect is that climate change has never felt like something abstract or far away. I've worked closely with people around the world who have been affected by climate change and disasters, and that experience has touched me deeply. Even today, this feeling is a strong driving force. It still keeps me going.

I believe that what we, deep down, feel to be right and truthful is ultimately what makes the difference, and gives us the drive and the courage to confront problems, and bring about change.

At the same time, the academic world often fails to provide satisfying answers to the big and important questions of life. It can be extremely frustrating to focus on narrower and narrower questions. And the results can feel quite abstract or distant from one's own life.

So to get in touch with life, with reality and one's self, other approaches have certainly helped. When I was a child, my mother introduced me to approaches, such as breathing and meditation techniques. And to this day, I have maintained a daily practice. I certainly have to regularly exercise both my body and my mind to sustain my energy and drive.

So for me, exercising my mind means approaching it with curiosity, openness, and kindness, which is not always easy. But I try to methodically observe my bodily sensations, the thoughts and feelings that arise in response to these sensations, and vice versa. It is fascinating to uncover the basic patterns of one's own mind. And over time, it has helped me to understand that whatever I experience when I practice is just a snapshot of what is happening in the mind during the rest of the day.

So this process of understanding your mind, and understanding how to deal with your inner fears and biases, helps me to sustain my energy. It certainly also helps me to cope with all the emails, meetings, teaching commitments, and other daily demands, and to stay focused when I'm writing, or when I'm exploring new fields.

Another point I'd like to highlight is that I think that it's important to first try to understand your own mind, before trying to understand others. It has taught me to approach my mind with curiosity, openness, and kindness, and I'd argue that it's a good way to approach others, and the rest of the day, too.

Liane: Christine, if you had the power to tell the government what to do next, what would you say?

Christine: The first thing I would say is that it should stop addressing climate change as a purely technological problem. Rather, we have to see it as a relationship problem. And this relationship problem is intrinsically linked to other societal crises, such as health, food, or poverty and, in turn, their root causes, such as consumerism, racism, and elitism.

And this view necessarily broadens the scope, and supports deeper analyses of how people relate to themselves, others, the environment, and future generations.

And following on from my previous answer, I think that governments should focus on the three needs that I mentioned earlier.

If I had the power to only change one thing, it would probably be education. Because children and teenagers study a wide range of subjects during their education – mathematics, physics, geography, history, sports – but we place very little value on ensuring that they understand their own emotions, and their relationships with others, the environment, and future generations.

But learning and development do not end when we leave school or university. We actually have the potential to develop our brains and minds throughout our entire life. And this means that we need to provide systemic and long-term support for individuals, beginning in childhood and continuing into their

adult life. So it follows that investing more resources in education and learning how to develop minds and hearts to create a kinder, more sustainable world, is absolutely crucial.

Liane: Thank you! Unfortunately we are running out of time, Christine. So where can we find more about your research? Can people sponsor or support your work in any kind of way?

Christine: My team would be very happy to hear from your listeners. The work and research I have talked about form part of the 'Contemplative Sustainable Futures Program'.

The Program's website provides information on the projects we discussed earlier, it lists all of our publications, and it gives an overview of our research, education and networking activities.

It's clear that we need more support and resources for this kind of work, and we very much welcome new collaborations and partnerships. In fact, we're always looking for ways to learn and work together so that new approaches and new solutions for transformative change can emerge.

Liane: Thank you so much, Christine for joining us. This was a rich conversation, insightful, and I really wish you good luck with all of your projects.

Christine: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

Liane: Reflecting on the conversation with Christine, I feel very grateful for her relentless drive to uncover the inner human dimension of climate action. Her work has the potential of reshaping the way we address climate change. It balances a long tradition of focusing on technology, and brings a sense of urgency to the question of what we need to learn as humans.

When you reflect on this, the potential implications are enormous! If Christine is right and inner qualities, such as awareness, openness and compassion, are indeed central to sustainable action, then that gives us a roadmap, something to work on as individuals, as communities and as organisations.

It gives us all the agency to act. There's no excuse not to. And of course it doesn't mean that we abandon our search for technological solutions. That search must continue, but surely, such external efforts must be matched by efforts to enhance the way we are, the way we interact, and the way we collaborate as human beings. We have work to do, but we may now have a better understanding of what to work on!

In the meantime, our podcast series continues. While we let the work of Christine sink in, we meet next week with Lionel Wauters, Founder and Chairman of Farm, a group of organic shops. We ask him about the human behaviors that drive food choices, another fascinating conversation. So, subscribe to the Inner Green Deal podcast, and continue to hear about the struggles, the insights, and the inspirations of those on the frontline of climate action.

Thank you for listening and take care.