Chapter 10

Dilemmas of sustainability in turbulent times

The Portuguese case in context

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Introduction

This chapter considers a group of data marked by multiple dilemmas and perplexities that challenge both citizens and decision-makers in troubled times. The financial crisis which, since 2008, has proved to have social, economic and ecological effects,[1] has given rise to increasing difficulties in bringing together socio-economic needs (i.e. ensuring or improving quality of life for everyone) and environmental needs (i.e. ensuring that ecological limits are not exceeded).

Hence we face a double challenge. On the one hand, it is increasingly acknowledged that the present socio-economic model 'cannot deliver well-being, environmental stability and social justice in a world where poverty and hunger occur simultaneously with overconsumption' (Leahy, Healy & Murphy 2014, p. 105). However, 'the institutional and technological locked-in situation into which the western path of economic development (. . .) has led our societies' (Van Griethuysen 2009, p. 6) imposes a situation where citizens and decision-makers are hostages to the market and to growth. On the other hand, in line with what has been claimed for two decades (WCED 1987), several documents focusing on the sustainable development and green economy narratives have come to light, pointing to alternative economic solutions capable of safeguarding environmental and social values (Bina 2013; Ferrão 2014).

There are thus two distinct narratives – unlimited growth (continuing business as usual) and sustainable development (investment in renewal and prevention) – that diverge in a context of socio-economic crisis. Austerity policies have aggravated social problems (weakening of the welfare state, unemployment, social exclusion). At the same time, environmental policies and programmes have been relaxed or neglected. Given these circumstances, present-day societies face difficult dilemmas. The urgent 'needs of the moment' are seldom confronted without negative consequences in the present, let alone in the long run and with regard to future generations.

In the light of this scenario, in which pessimism, disbelief and mistrust go side by side with a narrative of hope, change and the opportunity for sustainability, it is important to understand the public point of view and the factors that

contribute to differing opinions. This chapter aims to analyse a group of data from ISSP Environment III (ZA5500: International Social Survey Programme: Environment III – ISSP 2010),[2] taking different socio-geographical contexts into account and focusing on the Portuguese example – one of the economies most severely affected by the ongoing sovereign debt crisis since 2008/2009 – but also looking at other European regions and the international context.

With its Southern-European character, Portugal occupies a *sui generis* position within Europe as a whole. It has some of the characteristics that Mediterranean and Latin cultures bring to democratic practices and political systems, but at the same time is curiously similar to the former Eastern bloc countries in a number of ways. In both Iberian and Eastern countries democracy is relatively recent, and has emerged in a context of economic weakness. This has specific practical implications for environmental values and national sustainability performance (Schmidt, Nave & Guerra 2006).

Therefore, viewing the Portuguese case in a comparative and contextual approach, we will analyse the impact of the economic crisis in Europe on attitudes to the sustainable development model which, according to the normative stance in the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987), should include its environmental, economic and social aspects.

Methods and purposes

In order to pursue our goals, we chose a contextual set of countries based on their availability in the ISSP 2010 dataset, on Portugal's European status, and also on a long historical process that potentially involves other cultural proximities: America, and most particularly Latin America, which in turn is a useful point of comparison to the European situation. Accordingly, we selected a set of 27 countries, grouped into five different geographical areas: North America (Canada and USA; n = 2,423), Latin America (Argentina, Chile and Mexico; n = 4,203), Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom; n = 15,318), Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Slovakia, and Slovenia; n = 9,524) and Southern Europe (Portugal, and Spain; n = 3,582)[3].

Grouping countries in this way is not to deny their differences. It only seeks to simplify the analysis and to embrace some common but not necessarily essential conditions for the comparison, for exmaple: an authoritarian past and a legacy of social distrust; aggravated economic circumstances in turbulent times; tradition and common sociocultural characteristics. Moreover, to achieve a more robust set of contextual features (independent variables), we also used a set of international indicators that may assist us in understanding underlying inequities in adopting the sustainability case: Gross National Income per capita (GNI), the Human Development Index (HDI), the Coefficient of Human Inequality (CHI) and the unemployment rate, all taken from the Human Development Report 2013 (UNDP 2013).

Since it is not practical to cover all aspects of sustainability in an article of this kind, our main purpose is to test – at national and regional level – the influence of these contextual variables on three of the many possible sustainability dilemmas faced by citizens in times of economic crisis. Each of these dilemmas results from an apparent and supposedly difficult choice between alternative courses of action or arguments, taken from a set of variables in the ISSP 2010 database, and whose relationship will be tested, amongst others, by *F* test (differences of means) and R^2 test (coefficient of determination).

The first type, **dilemmas of knowledge and concern,** results from a panoply of variables including: 1) the extent of self-assessed knowledge of the causes of and solutions to environmental problems; 2) general environmental concern; and 3) a general evaluation of national environmental performance (e.g. 'this country is not doing enough to protect the environment'). The different levels of environmental knowledge and concern are mediated by diverse socio-economic circumstances, and by the greater or lesser confidence in the national ability to overcome environmental problems.

The second type, **dilemmas of environment and economy** emerges from the analysis of: 1) the importance attributed to the environment (one of the most important issues for the nation); 2) general environmental concern versus relative environmental concern, taking into account the idea that there is 'too much concern about the environment and not enough about prices and jobs'; 3) to what extent responders agree with two different statements concerning the relationship between the environment and the economy: a) economic growth always harms the environment; and b) economic growth is needed to protect the environment. Here we endeavour to identify and rethink the dichotomy between these two areas, analysing both their independence and clashes and trying to understand the effect of economic crisis on citizens' motivation and willingness to protect the environment.

Finally, under **dilemmas of predispositions and impositions,** we question the best way of leading and promoting the spread of environmental protection practices which make citizens hesitate between coercion and free will. For this, we will use variables that: 1) adopt different approaches to protect the environment for business and for citizens (heavy fines, tax incentives, more information/education); and 2) present two dichotomized policy measures to protect the environment (let citizens and businesses decide for themselves, pass laws applicable to citizens and businesses).

Dilemmas of knowledge and concern

Several studies have revealed and confirmed the social importance of knowledge, information and environmental literacy as factors influencing attitudes, opinions and values. We do not intend to relate them to a change in attitudes, but rather to analyse how the environmental literacy rate conditions the positioning of citizens towards basic but significant related dilemmas, such as the evaluation

of the state of the environment (worrying or not worrying) and trust in institutions (trust or mistrust).

There is a great amount of information available at present, although it is complex, contradictory and not always accessible, and demands effort and an exceptional ability to process and filter in order to turn it into practical knowledge. In this part we will analyse citizens' ability to evaluate the present situation (for instance, what do people know about the causes of and solutions to environmental problems), considering the complexity of the issues and the fact that a lot of information does not necessarily mean good information.

In the ISSP survey, two questions were considered to measure respondents' self-assessment of their knowledge of the causes of and solutions to environmental problems. In Portugal respondents tend to concentrate on intermediate categories: they neither consider themselves totally ignorant nor assume clear knowledge. However, there is a greater concentration of answers on the categories corresponding to lower levels of knowledge. At the same time, there is a tendency to acknowledge knowing more about the causes than about the solutions (Figure 10.1).

The greater struggle is not so much to understand the causes of a problem but rather to imagine a possible solution to it. This stems from a complexity of factors such as the absence of a basic culture or the fragmentation of information processes, which generate weakness and uncertainty (Schmidt *et al.* 2010).

Based on both variables, we have created an 'Environment Knowledge Index' which measures assumed knowledge of the causes of and solutions to environmental problems. According to Figure 10.2, the Southern-European countries (average = 2.84) stand out negatively in relation to their Western-European counterparts (average = 3.27), showing lower levels of knowledge. The results show greater similarities between the Iberian levels and those of some of the Eastern-European countries with lower rates (Russia, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Czech Republic), and also those of Latin-American countries such as Chile and Argentina.

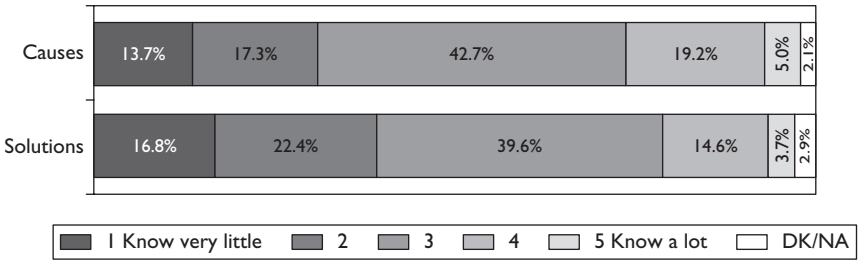


Figure 10.1 Extent of self-assessed knowledge of causes of and solutions to environmental problems in Portugal (ISSP 2010, N = 1,022).

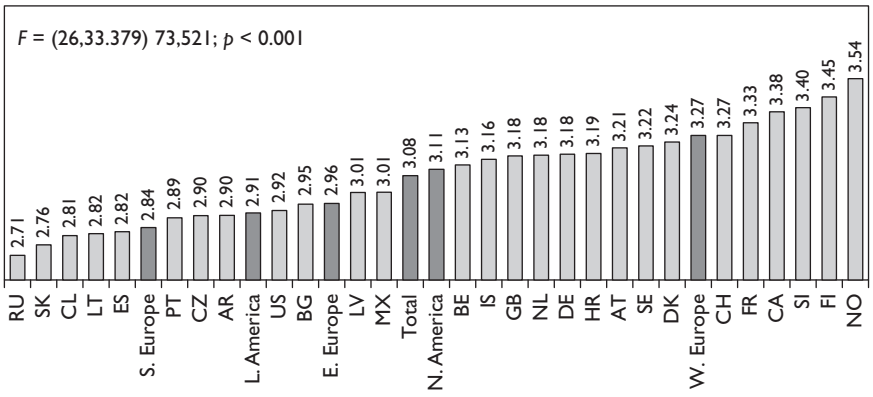
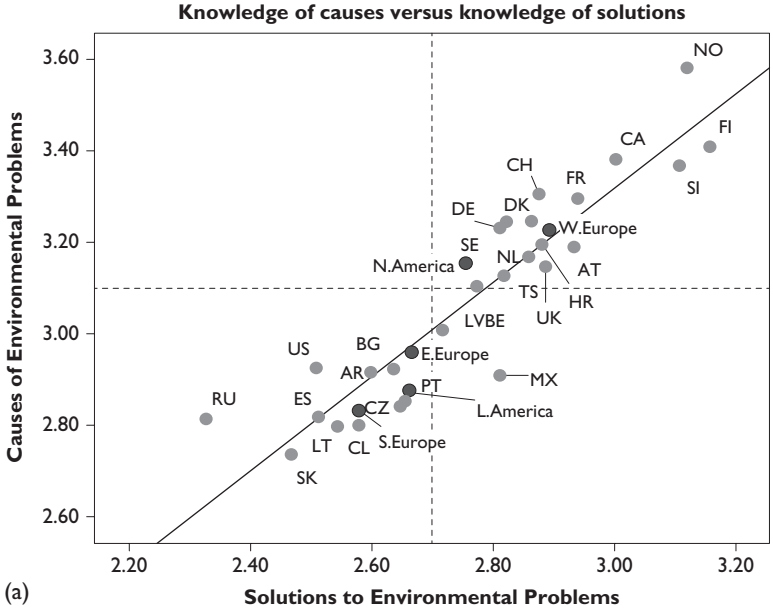


Figure 10.2 Environmental knowledge index (causes and solutions) within ISSP countries (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

In Figure 10.3a the correspondence between self-assessed knowledge of the causes of and solutions to environmental problems ($R^2 = 0.846$) is, unsurprisingly, very clear, but the distance between the two Southern-European countries and Western Europe, as well as their proximity to Eastern Europe and Latin America, is more interesting for our analysis. This may result from historically determined similarities (e.g. an authoritarian past), from culture (post-colonial ties with Latin America), but certainly also from common economic difficulties. Alongside them, some of the most affluent nations like Norway, Finland and Canada, as well as Western-European and North-American countries, stand out for their positive levels, showing higher rates of causes and solutions knowledge of environmental problems.

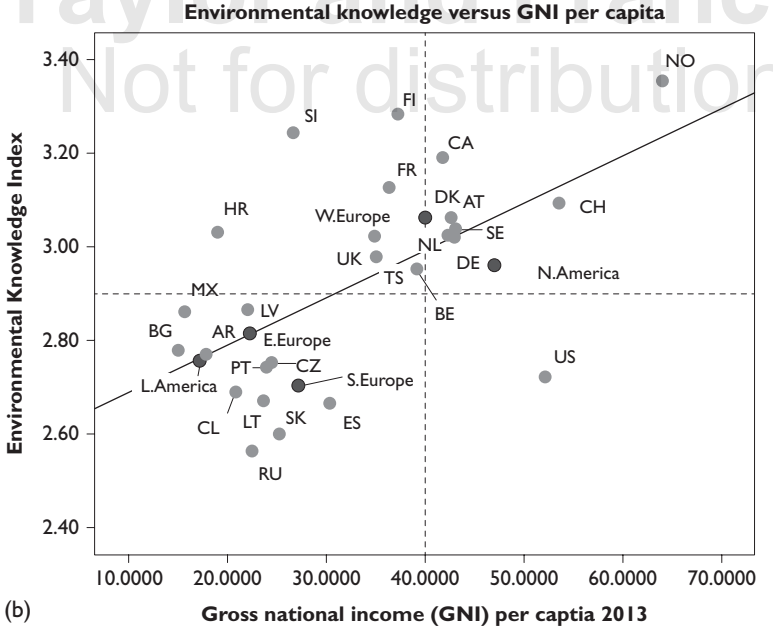
This means that, when considering indicators such as GNI per capita, HDI and the Coefficient of Human Inequality, we find correlations which confirm the interdependency of the extent of self-assessed knowledge in different countries and their socio-economic circumstances. We may therefore conclude that the higher the GNI per capita, the higher the stated environmental knowledge, which may imply that the population's environmental literacy increases overall with the country's available wealth (Figure 10.3b). The same tendency can be observed regarding HDI; that is to say, generally, countries with a high Human Development Index show higher levels of self-assessed environmental knowledge (Figure 10.3c). Lastly, this correlation reverses when considering the Coefficient of Human Inequality; that is, the greater a country's inequality, the lower the respondents' stated knowledge (Figure 10.3d).

In this context, does the level of environmental concern mirror the level of knowledge? According to the results in Figure 10.4, the percentage of respondents (regardless of their nationality) who say they are *not at all or hardly concerned*



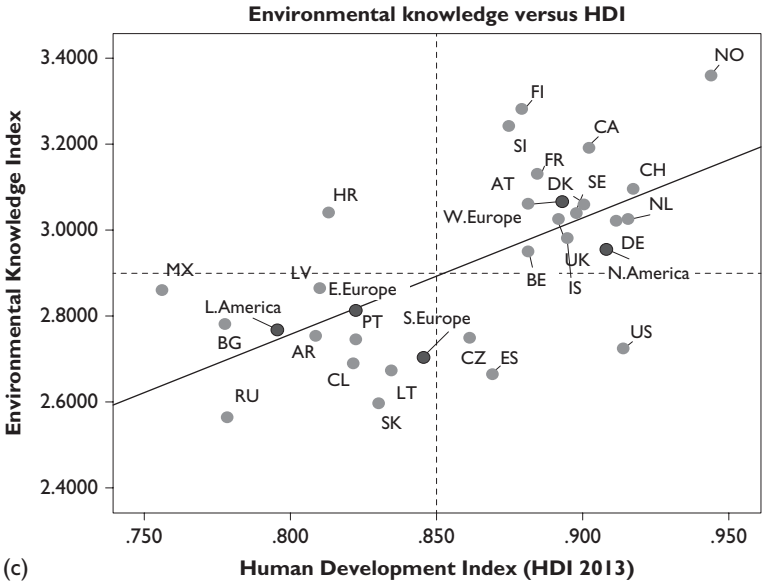
(a)

Notes: $y = 0.24 + 1.03*x$; $R^2 = 0.846$



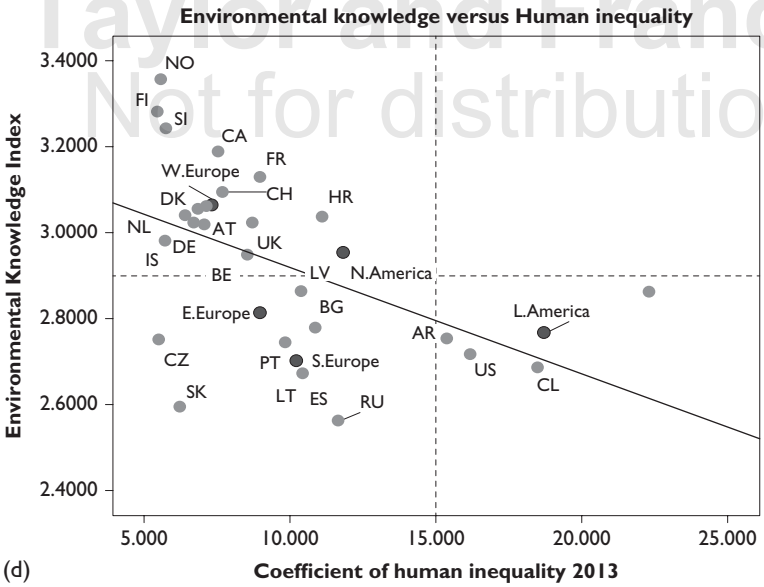
(b)

Notes: $y = 2.25 + 1.03*x$; $R^2 = 0.368$



(c)

Notes: y = 0.6 + 2.69*x; R^2 = 0.400



(d)

Figure 10.3 Environmental knowledge by GNI per capita, HDI and Inequality within ISSP countries (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051; UNDP, 2013).

Notes: y = 0.3,16 + –0.02*x; R^2 = 0.252

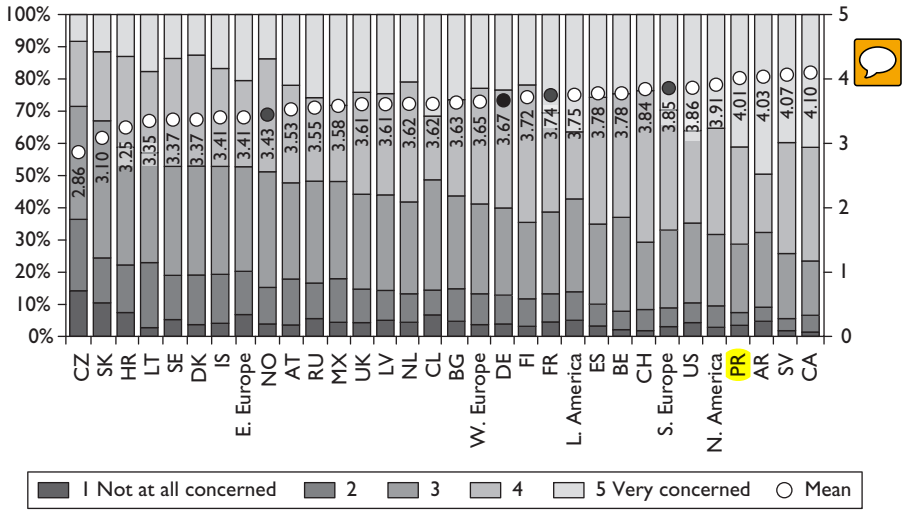


Figure 10.4 General environmental concern by ISSP country and region (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

with the environment is very small. Nevertheless, Portuguese respondents follow the Canadians, Slovenians and Argentineans, showing very high concern (average > 4). In the opposite position are the Czechs, Slovaks, Croatians, Lithuanians and, probably for different reasons, the Danes and the Swedes.

Also, according to Figure 10.4, significant differences are revealed when comparing respondents according to their greater geographical regions. North America (3.91), Southern Europe (3.85), to whose figures Portugal contributes significantly, Latin America (3.75) and, to a lesser degree, although still above the total average, Western Europe, stand out for their higher levels of concern. Eastern Europe is the only region below the global average, with a figure of 3.41.

The results shown in Figure 10.5 help us to understand this relationship between knowledge and environmental concern. It is possible to identify a group of countries whose respondents are hardly concerned and have very low levels of environmental knowledge (Lithuania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, and the average of the Eastern-European countries). In contrast, in the upper right-hand corner we can see another group of countries whose respondents are very concerned, and who also show high levels of knowledge (Canada, Switzerland, Slovenia, France, Finland . . .). In the upper left-hand and lower right-hand corners we see countries with mixed behaviour – high literacy and low concern (Austria, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden and Norway standing out) – and the group that includes Portugal adding extreme concern and a low level of knowledge (Argentina, USA, Spain, Portugal . . .). The relationship between the two variables is apparent and statistically significant – r (44.340) = 0.299, $p < 0.001$ – although in Figure 10.5

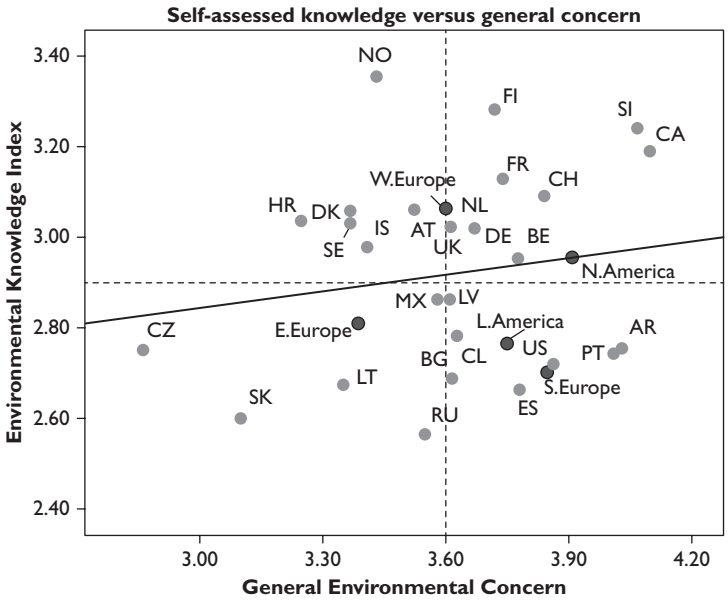


Figure 10.5 Environmental knowledge and general environmental concern (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051; UNDP, 2013).

Notes: $y = 2.48 + 0.12*x$; $R^2 = 0.027$

the mediation of the different national contexts does not permit a clear and unequivocal trend line.

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify significant statistical evidence of the correlation between levels of environmental knowledge – r (41.367) = –0.035; $p < 0.001$ – and concern with the environmental conditions – r (43.772) = –0.205; $p < 0.001$ – when relating them to the level of confidence in the national aptitude to solve environmental problems.

Figure 10.6 shows clear and widespread evidence of respondents' criticism of the performance of each of their states as far as environmental protection is concerned. The percentage of respondents who make a negative assessment of national performance on environmental protection exceeds one quarter in almost every case, except for the Netherlands. In the wider socio-geographical contexts, we can see that only Western Europe (38.7%) is below the global average (52.3%). Latin America (72.7%), followed closely by the Iberian countries with 69.2% (Southern Europe), are the most critical of their states' environmental protection actions, whereas Eastern Europe (58.7%), followed by North America (54.8%), show intermediate levels, but are still above the global average.

If we look at the same data focusing on each country's results it becomes apparent that the level of affluence of the country influences the distribution of

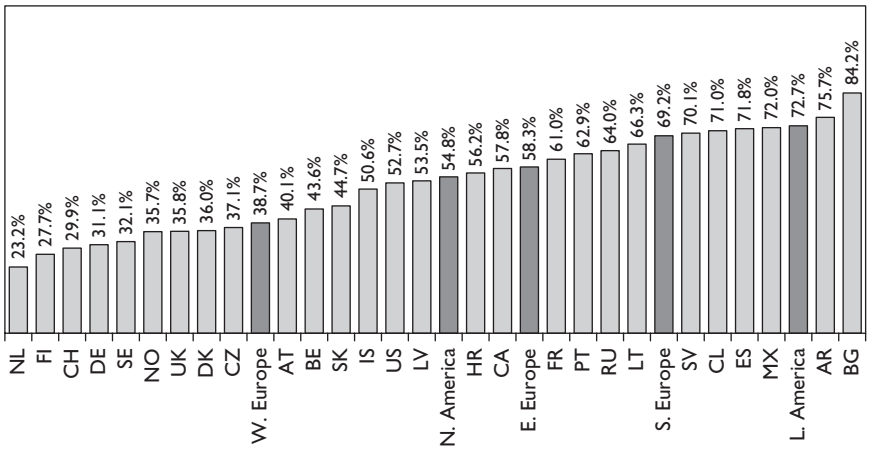


Figure 10.6 To protect the environment, this country is doing too little by ISSP country and region (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

responses, at least in part. It is in rich countries, such as the Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland that less criticism is made of the state's action and effectiveness in relation to environmental protection. On the opposite side are the less affluent and more critical countries, led by Bulgaria and including Portugal, with 62.9%. Concern with the environment also stems from a lack of confidence in institutions. This tends to be greater in poorer countries where the economic crisis is felt more intensely, such as in Southern Europe.

In short, although concern with the environment is a global phenomenon, the Portuguese stand out with above-average levels of concern. In the end, this is a distinctive cultural trait, identified in previous studies (Schmidt, Trüninger & Valente 2004; Valente & Ferreira 2014). Nevertheless, whereas in Portugal high levels of concern with the environment correspond to low levels of environmental literacy, globally this correlation is neither univocal nor constant.

In Western Europe, particularly in the Scandinavian countries, the somewhat low level of concern may be related to the presence of greater trust in institutions (Listhaug & Ringdal 2008) and a higher level of environmental literacy; two circumstances that seem to favour a more confident attitude towards problem-solving. On the other hand, in Southern Europe, and especially in Portugal, high levels of concern and low levels of environmental knowledge go hand in hand with high levels of institutional mistrust, as well as with inconsistent information policies (Schmidt & Guerra 2010). As a result, the ability to manage and filter the available information is scarce. Caught between deep concern and a high level of mistrust of the State respondents, especially the Portuguese, seem divided between impotence resulting from their admitted lack of knowledge, and inaction stemming from the alleged national inability to deal with the problems.

Dilemmas of environment and economy

Environment and economy have mainly been seen as antagonistic fields. However, with the dawning of the sustainable development narrative, as well as of a set of proposals based on it, environment and economy have started to be approached through an integrated perspective. A balance between the multiple interests at stake has been urged, at least since the publication of the Bruntland Report (WCED 1987). Nevertheless, these two areas are not always perceived socially as convergent. Former antagonisms seem to re-emerge, especially during troubled times.

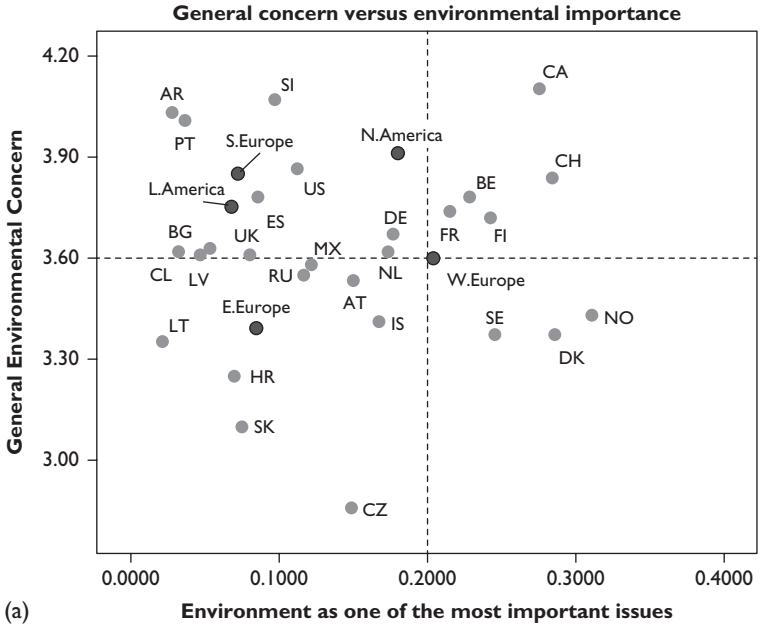
If concern with the environment is presented in an abstract manner – 'Generally speaking, how concerned are you about environmental issues?' – the answer tends to be straightforward and unrelated to the level of national affluence or the priority given to environmental issues (Figure 10.7a).

However, the concern-priority correlation changes significantly when pressing issues such as employment and cost of living mediate concern for the future of the environment. As shown in Figure 10.7b, Portugal's position – as well as that of many other countries – changes dramatically, appearing well below previous concern levels.[4] In other words, in the presence of other socio-economic urgencies, sharpened in times of crisis, high environmental concern lessens quite remarkably, especially in less affluent countries.

Let us then go further in our analysis by introducing other variables. Taking environment and economy to be opposing forces we will now analyse the respondents' reaction to the statement 'economic growth always harms the environment'. Figure 10.8 shows that the perception of economic growth being harmful to the environment is greater in Latin America; probably owing to the still few convincing examples of compatibility between economy and environment. Portugal (2.95) is near the Eastern-European countries' average (2.92) and very far from Western Europe (2.79), and even further from North America (2.56). In this last region, as in the Nordic countries, the dichotomy of environment and economy seems to have faded away, perhaps as the result of a more successful process of ecological modernization that made the compatibility hypothesis more credible (Mol, Sonnenfeld & Spaargaren 2009).

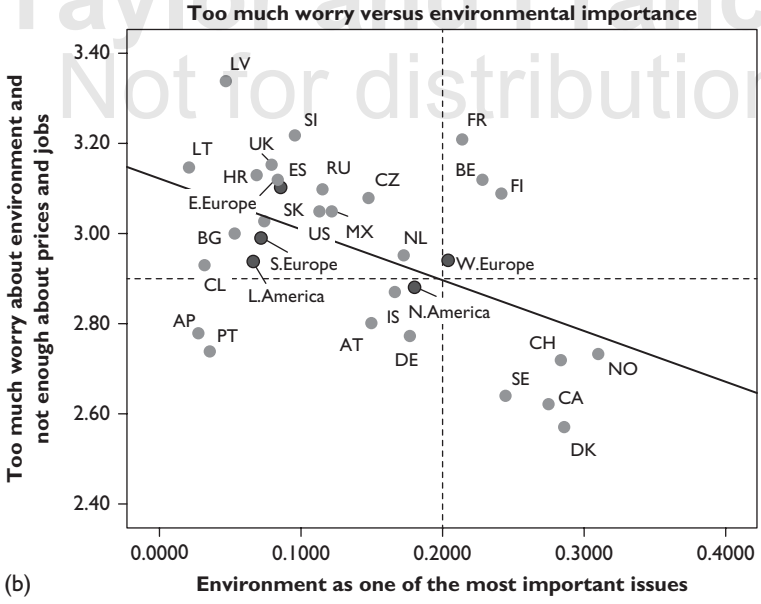
Nevertheless, it should be noted that the concurrence average never gets close to the scale's highest level (5). This suggests a general and pervasive refusal of a dichotomist vision that opposes environment and economy in a simplistic way. This approach has been gradually replaced by the sustainable development perspective, exhibiting more moderate principles and integrating both spheres. Thus, the ideas of sustainable development and the green economy seem to be gaining ground and, despite fleeting reversals, have already won a place in the social imagination and are likely to extend to several socio-geographical contexts.

Comparing the results of ISSP Environment III (2010–12) with ISSP Environment II (2000) (see, for instance, Schmidt & Valente 2004) the Portuguese case is one of the most interesting (Figure 10.9). It is among the Portuguese



(a)

Notes: y = 3.63 + –'0.01*x; R^2 = ns



(b)

Figure 10.7 Importance of the environment concern and other priorities (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

Notes: y = 3.12 + –1.12*x; R^2 = 0.249

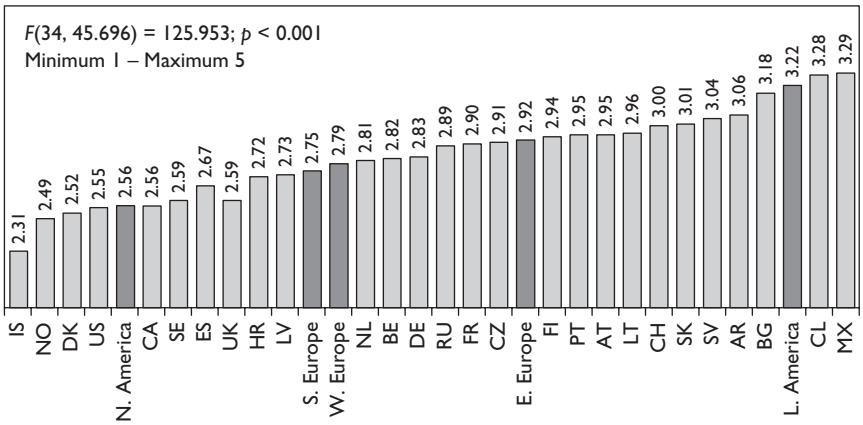


Figure 10.8 Economic growth always harms the environment (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

respondents that the most perceptible decrease in agreeing with the statement 'economic growth always harms the environment' takes place. This decrease in agreement – from 60% to 35% – suggests that, at least in Portugal, economic growth is no longer seen with the former distrust.

Thus, as far as Portugal is concerned, there is a persistent high appraisal of 'economic growth' as an increased necessity in a crisis context, which, to a certain extent, overshadows (but does not deny) the environmental values. Actually, as several studies have shown, the progress of the sustainable development and green economy narratives is undoubtedly real. The belief in a new green economy occurs mainly amongst the younger generations, who have the higher literacy levels and skills to process the environmental information discussed above (Ferrão 2014; ed. Schmidt & Delicado 2014).

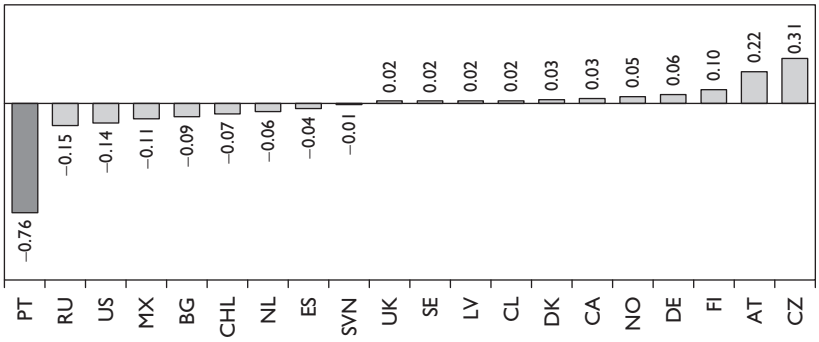


Figure 10.9 Economic growth harms the environment. Evolution between 2000 and 2010–12 (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051; ISSP 2000, N = 28,389).

The results presented in Figure 10.10 confirm this standard of response. Portugal (3.63) comes close to the average of the Eastern-European countries (3.19), and is above the average of the Western-European (3.19), North-American (3.30), Latin-American (3.36) and Southern-European (3.47) countries, exhibiting a significant difference between the Iberian countries. Yet, it is noteworthy that the lowest levels of agreement with the notion that environmental protection needs economic growth are found in rich countries such as Switzerland, Finland and Norway, which have already reached economic and environmental well-being. At the opposite end we find countries such as Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Russia and Latvia, where the integration of environment and economy is still to be achieved and where the levels of institutional trust are very low.

In short, present-day experience shows that the population's disregard for environmental problems reflects the economic crisis and poverty. However, in absolute terms, concern with environmental problems is still high, because the government's lack of investment imposed by austerity measures leads to decisions that neglect quality of life and the environment. The Portuguese, as with other people affected by the crisis, feel this situation and exhibit paradoxical positions. On the one hand, they prioritize the environment and disregard the economy, and on the other hand, they value the economy and growth as essential means of ensuring both social and environmental well-being.

In Portugal, as in other countries, the results show a decrease, varying across generations and social groups, of the perception of the economy as harmful and increased recognition of its potential to protect the environment. It is the countries going through economic crisis or with low indicators of development and affluence, such as the Southern and Eastern-European countries, which stress that environmental protection depends on economic growth. On the other hand, it is in Western Europe and in countries with a higher GNI per capita (where the standard

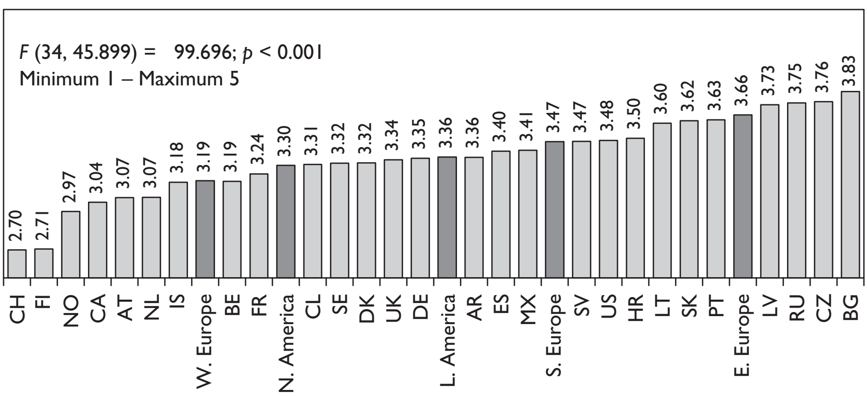


Figure 10.10 Country needs economic growth to protect environment (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

of living is stable) that this perspective is less marked. This means that economic security is an important condition, although not a sufficient one, for ensuring the population's unequivocal support for environmental-protection policies. Despite a tendency to subscribe to the sustainability and green economy narrative, seen as a hopeful route, the threat of economic insecurity produces social hesitation, even though it is known that short-term decisions may have unwanted and lasting environmental side effects.

Dilemmas of predispositions and impositions

According to Adger & Jordan (2009), the sustainable development concept embodies two greater and all-encompassing aspects: 1) results – the global quality of sustainability that includes human well-being and the well-being of the ecosystem; and 2) processes – the way and the means that lead to those results, that is to say, sustainability governance. Bearing this in mind, it is important to understand which interventions and strategies (processes) are chosen to conduct and support environmental protection (results).

Thus, the dilemmas under analysis focus on the greater or lesser acceptance of states' coercive means of protecting the environment (for instance, laws and fines), of the collection of non-compulsory taxes, which are dependent on institutionalized public policies, and of the State's regulatory power (such as tax breaks), or mobilization and persuasion relying mainly on the public's willingness to contribute to the common good (such as informative and enabling educational activities).

According to Figure 10.11, there is a clear tendency to support less coercive solutions for citizens and more coercive ones for businesses. Portuguese respondents (and consequently the Southern Europeans) are those who most value information and education, instead of coercive measures aimed at citizens (66.3%). On the other hand, Eastern Europe supports heavy fines for citizens and, above all, for businesses (37% and 46.9%, respectively). Latin-American countries follow suit (30.6% and 47.8%, respectively). As for the Western-European and North-American countries, they seem to reject coercive measures and to support environmental information and education as well as tax breaks – 'Use the tax system to reward people/businesses that protect the environment' – stressing the importance of accountability and reflecting green taxation policies already in place in many of those countries.

On the whole, despite differences between geographical contexts, levying fines on those who cause environmental damage is the preferred measure (39.2% among respondents of the countries represented here), followed by tax breaks that reward good environmental performance (32.7%) and lastly, information and education (22.7%). Amongst those who object the most to heavy fines are countries with a heavy tax burden, such as Portugal and many other countries affected by the economic crisis. It is also in these countries that we find greater mistrust of the end use of revenue from fines. The highest levels of

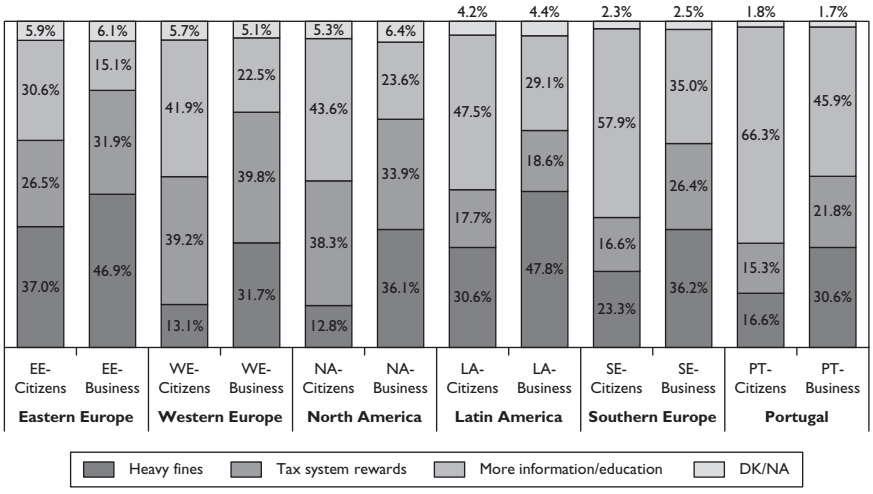


Figure 10.11 To protect the environment: best approach for citizens and for businesses (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

support for tax breaks are found in the Western-European and North-American countries. In these regions, a more conciliatory approach to environmental protection needs and market needs is apparent. This perspective feeds on the gradual implementation of green taxation measures and the ensuing tax breaks.

It seems unquestionable that in Portugal and Southern Europe support prevails for procedures based on increased environmental information and education. This reveals a greater trust in the power of the dissemination of information and environmental knowledge. At the same time, it shows a preference for measures with less impact on citizens' budgets.

We endeavoured to assess whether respondents believe that, as far as environmental protection policies are concerned, government action should be more coercive or more tolerant, both for citizens and businesses. According to the results shown in Figure 10.12 and, to an extent, contradicting the previous results, more coercive measures for citizens largely surpass the other options ('government should pass laws to make ordinary people protect the environment, even if it interferes with people's rights to make their own decisions'). Analysing this seeming contradiction, it is the Southern-European and Latin-American countries that support tougher governmental action (above 70%).

At the opposite end North American and Western-European responses favouring more coercive measures do not exceed 58.6%. These countries stand out, on the one hand, for their greater support of free will or citizen responsibility ('government should let ordinary people decide for themselves how to protect the environment, even if it means they don't always do the right thing') and, on the

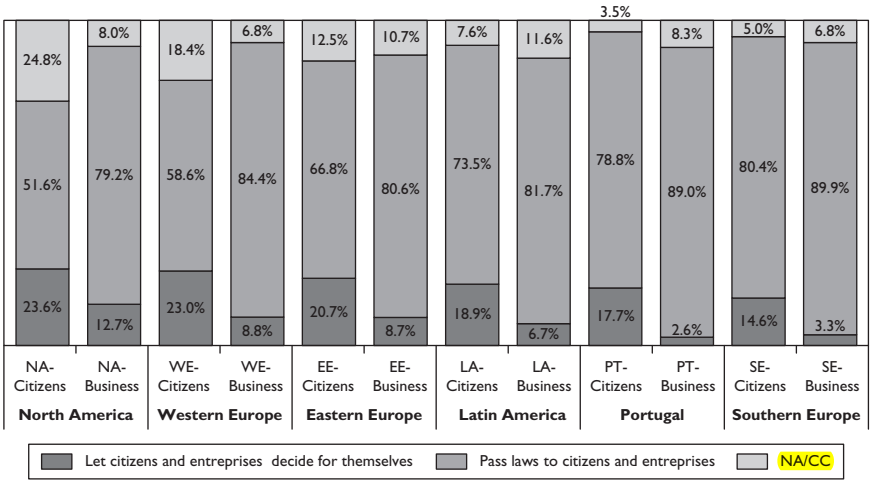


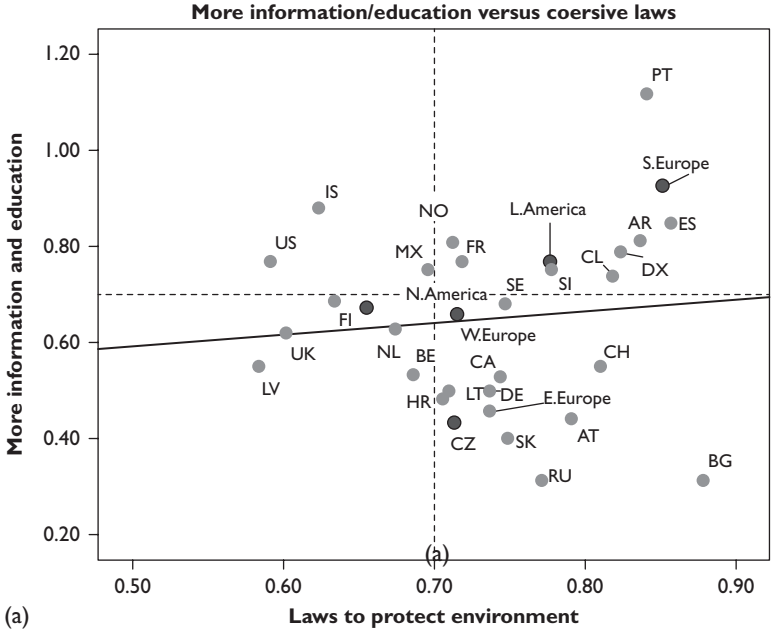
Figure 10.12 In order to protect the environment, government should . . . (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

other hand, for their higher percentages of 'don't know/no reply', perhaps reflecting a refusal to concede the dichotomy presented. It may be a way of expressing an intermediate position, integrating both forms of environmental governance.

Respondents' attitudes to businesses reveal an acceptance of stricter governmental behaviour: 'government should pass laws to make businesses protect the environment, even if this interferes with businesses' rights to make their own decisions'. These measures seem to be perceived as a means of protecting the environment; an interpretation that cuts across all socio-geographical contexts. It is once again in Southern Europe where people are more peremptory in defending State intervention to make businesses act in a way that ensures environmental protection.

We will now take a look at the distribution of respondents when crossing divergent options of environmental governance, such as 'more information/education for ordinary people and for business', and 'laws that make citizens and businesses respect the environment'. Figure 10.13 shows that Portuguese respondents stand out in supporting quite noticeably both more information and stronger laws to protect the environment. Crossing the 'more information and education' option with GNI per capita shows that responses do not seem to be strongly related to affluence, even if Eastern-European countries (with a lower GNI per capita) value information and education the least.

In sum, the best way to intervene for environmental protection seems to be a hard-to-solve dilemma for most respondents, and especially for the Portuguese. On the whole, the answers reveal respondents divided between support for more information and education on the one hand, and reinforcement of stricter



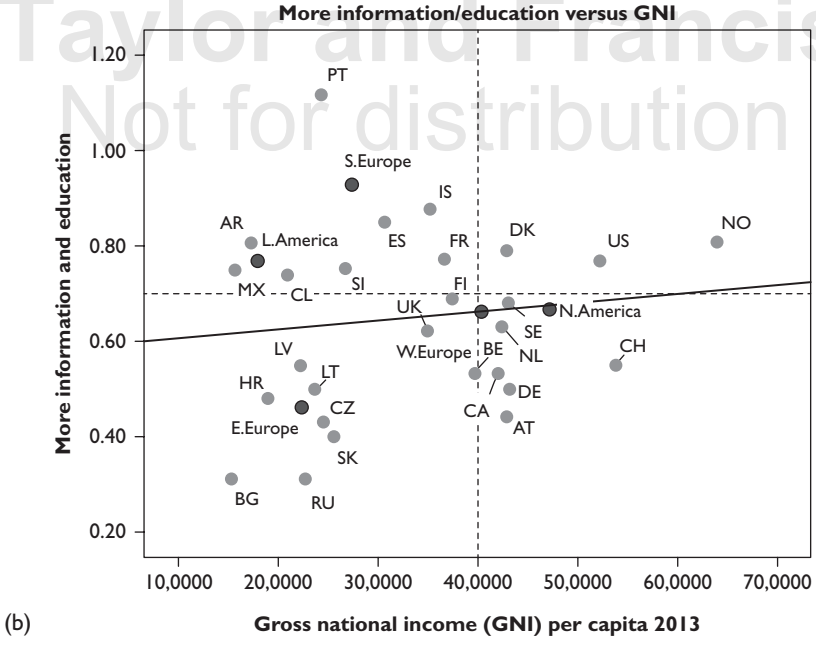


Figure 10.13 More information/education on environmental protection versus coercive laws and GNI (ISSP 2010, N = 35,051).

measures on the other. Despite demanding stricter laws and a tougher State to secure environmental protection, many respondents are unsure about accepting the higher costs of that protection. Thus, they support more liberal measures for themselves and stricter measures for others (businesses). This seeming contradiction cuts across the regions, but is more apparent in more vulnerable socio-geographical contexts, driven by the effects of the financial crisis. Such is the case in Portugal, where citizens feel that the imposed solutions to the financial crisis result essentially from the sharpening of their subjective and objective deprivation (Ferreira 2011) on the one hand, and on the other, have little trust in business leaders, or in political power and its counterparts (Schmidt & Guerra 2010; Schmidt, Nave & Guerra 2006) and therefore feel they cannot do without laws that are meant to protect the common good.

Concluding Remarks

In the multilayered troubled times experienced in Europe since 2008, the imbalance between economic, social, environmental and political aspects is acutely challenging. This challenge grows bigger in the face of the failure of the present growth model – the 'business as usual' narrative – in reconciling these aspects, and the weakness of the alternative model – the sustainability narrative – whose difficulties of execution have been highlighted by several authors. Michael Redclift (2005) states that it is the superficial consensus of the debate around sustainable development, converging on multiple parallel and contradictory discourses, that actually hampers its progress. After all, it is the 'white blackbird that no one has ever seen' and despite its rhetoric, the 'decolonization' process of the social imaginary is far from finished (Latouche 2004; 2005). This image postulates economic growth as an indisputable value, perpetuating misunderstandings and contradictions as reflected in the results presented here. However, successes in some contexts seem to have increased public support for the alternatives related to sustainable development, including so-called green growth, especially in Northern Europe, as shown by those countries' indicators.

As for Eastern and Southern Europe, there is also a wish for a sustainable balance between the different areas of development. However, at the same time, their willingness to change is still low. In the Portuguese case, three major factors help to explain this state of affairs:

1 The crisis and austerity context to which the country has been subjected since 2010 has centred citizens' concerns on a daily life marked above all by economic scarcity. This tends to overshadow the environmental problems, although it does not do away entirely with concerns about them, partly owing to the government's disregard of environmental policies.
2 The lack of environmental information, knowledge and culture leads to greater difficulty in perceiving an alternative path. It is not understood how to make sustainability and a green economy a fact and this blocks the citizen's

power to go beyond the 'business as usual' view (although some younger segments of the population have a greater desire to 'make a difference').

3 At the heart of these issues lies respondents' inability to anticipate truly sustainable development, because they do not trust the State. They find it weaker each day, with no capacity to fulfil strategic functions while ensuring greater social and environmental justice.

However, although it is true that accumulated mistrust persists and affects the ability to think of an alternative future, to many respondents the State continues to be the necessary assurer of the protection and defence of the environmental common good. In that sense, confidence in, and the credibility of governmental institutions emerge as fundamental elements of sustainability; more so because the socio-economic status quo to which we were accustomed 'failed in such a spectacular fashion that it is unclear when, if ever, it will recover in anything like its previous form' (Sim 2010, p. x). This global disruption creates new dilemmas for today's societies and particularly for the socio-geographical contexts where the system's breakdown is greater, and on that account, the environmental dilemmas are more important to citizens.

An alternative programme to the present socio-economic model cannot be easily put in place. We can only hope that the newer generations – with better education, more information and environmental skills – can create the space to implement the dynamics of economic, political, environmental and social modernity; in short, dynamics that lead to a sustainable future.

Notes

1 With the ongoing financial crisis, government policy has focused on the need for economic growth, and economic hardship has increasingly been used as a justification for delaying action on critical environmental issues (Tienhaara 2009).

2 The data sets from the Netherlands and Portugal were delivered to the Archive after the integrated file had already been prepared in 2014. The years in which fieldwork was carried out in these countries vary from 2009 (e.g. Slovak Republic) to 2012 (e.g. Portugal).

3 It is a grouping based on a limited number of available countries, which – as in the case of Southern Europe – is far from representing the whole region.

4 In order to measure the level of environmental concern, agreement with the sentence 'worry too much about the future of the environment and not enough about prices and jobs today' was inverted. 1 corresponds to the highest degree and 5 to the lowest.

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