

ZERO WASTE, WELLBEING AND VALUES

Opening questions for the reader before reading:

- Why do you dedicate your time to zero waste or other environmental issues?
- What do you value the most in life?
- What kind of connections do you see between your core values and zero waste?
- What are the reasons why people get interested in zero waste?
- How can zero waste solutions make our lives happier?

Main ideas in this chapter are based on the self-determination theory by E.L. Deci & R. M. Ryan¹

For people working in zero waste and in environmental topics in general, it's quite obvious that zero waste helps us to preserve natural resources and serves to protect the environment, which is often the main reason why we are working in it. We value nature and a clean environment. But there are also other connections between zero waste, wellbeing and values which are maybe not that obvious right away.

Values and attitudes are part of human nature and influence everything we do. There are also certain attitudes that are part of both the Zero Waste Ambassador and Trainer competences but they are of course something we cannot just teach in one training course; and they are maybe not directly teachable. What we can do at our training courses is to strengthen the already existing values and open the discussion on their importance. We have not included any specific sessions on values or attitudes into neither of the example training formats as this could be seen as a sort of horizontal topic and embedded into different activities, in the form of discussion topic, group or individual exercise. But of course it could be included also as a separate session.

Values are tricky. We can agree that all of us have certain values and we act based on them, especially in difficult situations. At the same time values are very difficult to change, as they start developing from early childhood and take a long time to form, and it's not always clear what shapes our values.

One theory dealing with values is the life aspirations theory.²

First, let's look at the types of life aspirations or goals people have. Take a look at some statements below. What 2-3 options would you pick from this list as important life goals for you?

1. To have many nice things
2. To be able to grow as a person
3. To be known by many people
4. To contribute to making the world a better place somehow
5. To have power and influence over people
6. To have close relationships with friends/family



¹ Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*.

² Life aspirations theory, officially goal contents theory, is part of the bigger motivational theory called the self-determination theory, developed by Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L.

There has been a lot of research³ on life aspirations and in broad terms two types can be distinguished. The options 1, 3 and 5 are what we call extrinsic goals and options 2, 4 and 6 are intrinsic goals, sometimes also referred to as hedonic and eudaimonic aspirations, respectively. It is likely that you selected the sentences from one type, not both. And if you are reading this and interested in zero waste education, it's likely that you picked from the intrinsic values' type.

Overview of the two types of values:

Intrinsic life goals (<i>eudaimonia</i>)	Extrinsic life goals (<i>hedonia</i>)
Happiness from knowing you are doing the right thing	Happiness from seeking positive emotions and avoiding negative emotions
Main goal types: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating and keeping close relationships • Personal growth • Contributing to your community 	Main goal types: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic success, having material wealth • Fame, being popular • Image, looking attractive

While we may want to look beautiful and value our family at the same time, on the level of life goals and what we find most important in life, people either have intrinsic or extrinsic value sets, and not a mix of both⁴. One of the value types always has a higher importance.



**And now the interesting part:
Guess which group has less anxiety, depression and unhappiness, as well as a smaller ecological footprint?**

It's the group with intrinsic values. So valuing community, relationships and work for the bigger cause (like environment) also actually means living a happier life. Why? Because intrinsic aspirations satisfy better our three psychological needs – relatedness, autonomy and competence,⁵ whereas extrinsic aspirations are based on comparisons with others, which make us more controllable and controlled by others. Same results have been found in many studies all over the world, across different cultures.⁶

So already working for zero waste solutions and improving our living environment is good for our mental wellbeing.

³ Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1993). A dark side of the American dream: Correlates of financial success as a central life aspiration. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(2), 410–422.

⁴ Grouzet, F. M. E., Kasser, T., Ahuvia, A., Dols, J. M. F., Kim, Y., Lau, S., et al. (2005). The structure of goal contents across 15 cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(5), 800– 816.

⁵ More about that in the *Learning motivation* chapter.

⁶ Just to name a few: Grouzet, F. M. E., Kasser, T., Ahuvia, A., Dols, J. M. F., Kim, Y., Lau, S., et al. (2005). The structure of goal contents across 15 cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(5), 800– 816; Williams, G. C., Hedberg, V. A., Cox, E. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Extrinsic life goals and health-risk behaviors in adolescents. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 30(8), 1756–1771; Utvær, B. K. S., Hammervold, R., & Haugan, G. (2014). Aspiration Index in vocational students: Dimensionality, reliability, and construct validity. *Education Inquiry*, 5(3), 359–383.

What about people with extrinsic values? Could they also move towards intrinsic values? The question perhaps is: what influences our values?

There are of course many elements in influencing values; childhood and upbringing have a big role here. But there are also some elements in our general surroundings that could have some effect in time. Some of the elements that influence our values are:

- **What the people that surround us (family, friends, co-workers, teachers...) value:**
 - which is emphasised more: cooperation or competition
 - which is more important: fast results or taking time to learn deeply
 - pleasing external parties or finding inner meaning
- **The culture, political regime, tone and style of journalism:**
 - how restrictive laws and rules are
 - what is considered acceptable and non-acceptable in society
 - what is praised as good behaviour in society
 - level of freedom of expression
- **The words we use everyday:**
 - do we talk more about extrinsic or intrinsic values, for example calling people consumers or citizens⁷
 - do we talk more about money itself or how we can invest into human wellbeing
- **Our everyday environment.**



**How does our living environment (our cities) influence our values and nudge them?
What kind of role could zero waste solutions play in there?**

Of course it starts already with city planning: what means of transport and movement are easier (walking and cycling vs cars), what are the options for how to spend your time (shopping malls or cultural spaces and green areas), how much is participatory human interaction supported by these choices and so on. And waste management is also part of that: starting with the basics of how clean and tidy the city space is (how much is common space valued and taken care of) but also showing how we treat resources that we ourselves no longer need.

⁷ There can actually be differences in people's behaviour depending on whether they are addressed as consumers or as citizens: [Consumerism and its antisocial effects can be turned on-or off](#), Association for Psychological Science (2012)

If we think about what the most important ideas we promote with zero waste are - waste reduction, reuse and repair centres, community composting and gardens, food sharing - then it's not only about environmental protection and cutting costs, but also about social bonds between people, developing new skills and keeping old (repair) skills alive, being creative and mindful with our things. Zero waste is about more connections between people, more meaningful jobs, it's about prioritising wellbeing over consumerism. Zero waste supports intrinsic values.

A quote by **Carl Jung** on values and human interaction as further thought in the topic:

“Loneliness does not come from having no people around you, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to you.”

You can read more about values, communication and getting people on board with environmental issues, in the *Communications and storytelling* chapter and *Learning motivation* chapter.

Ending questions for the reader to reflect upon:

- In what other ways could we support intrinsic values?
- How much do you think we can influence the values of others?
- How do you usually communicate the importance of zero waste to others?

