



UCL POLICY COMMISSION ON COMMUNICATING CLIMATE SCIENCE

New Ways to Shape Meaningful Action on Climate Change?

In January 2019, the UCL Policy Commission on the Communication of Climate Science (CCSPC) brought together 30 people from a variety of professional backgrounds but with extensive experience of addressing climate change. The aim of the meeting was to uncover better answers to a question that concerned citizens increasingly ask: "What can I do about climate change?" Here we summarise the findings and gaps that the meeting brought to light, and reflect on ways forward.

Background

The proportion of citizens concerned about climate change has grown in recent years¹, and those who are concerned increasingly ask the question "What can I do?" Despite valiant efforts, the answers currently in the public domain are unsatisfactory. Recommendations often do not come across as meaningful in comparison to the level of concern people feel, or are confusing and contradictory. Calls for drastic action are becoming louder - as evidenced by the school strikes and Extinction Rebellion. However, they lack specificity, and do not signal to leaders what kinds of policies the public want or will accept.

1 Fagan, M. and Huan, C. (2019, April 18). *Earth Day: how people around the world view climate change*. Pew Research Center. <https://pewrsr.ch/2UpGcq7>

KEY FINDINGS

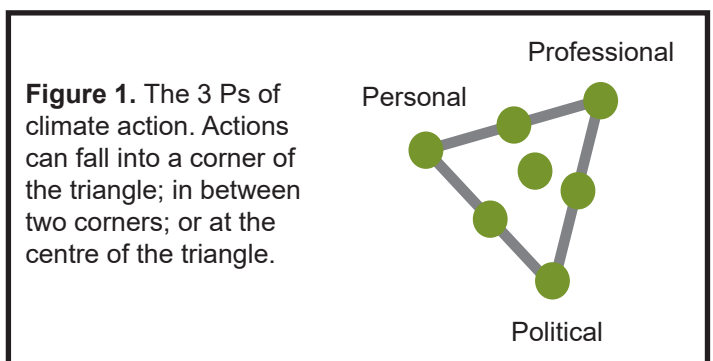
For reasons that mirror the complexity of the climate change challenge itself, new and/or actionable answers proved elusive. However, from the materials produced during the workshop, and from the soul-searching and reflection following the event, we distilled these insights:

- The existing landscape of climate change action lacks direction. New forms of leadership and coordination are required to break out of the current climate action paralysis. **(Box 1)**
- Despite the absence of common answers, participants reported new breakthroughs in their own practice after the meeting. **(Box 2)**
- There is a great need for increased opportunities, better practices, and a common language to support individuals, communities and organisations to explore the question "How am I uniquely qualified to make a difference - individually and with others?"

When politicians do propose new climate action plans, they receive an angry backlash from other segments of society (as recently in France and the Netherlands). This can sap the will for further interventions, and lead to a climate action paralysis.

Workshop Aims and Format

To explore new ways to accelerate progress, the CCSPC brought together participants from media, business, academia, funding and campaigning organisations to survey the range of existing knowledge and experiences of climate action in the **personal**, the **professional**, and the **political** domain (the 3 Ps of climate action, see Figure 1); and to develop opportunities for further action.



A central aim was to seek greater clarity on what actions people can engage in: How can leadership be encouraged to effect change in the community? What structures and resources can be provided to support long-term engagement? And what systemic changes are needed to make meaningful responses to climate change part of the fabric of everyday life?

Mapping Knowledge and Experiences

Mapping past and current experiences showed that many participants, throughout their careers, have occupied multiple points on the 3 Ps map. Collectively, we compiled an impressive list of achievements, lessons learned, and opportunities for development. Despite that, there was a realisation that the work to date had not had the required impact, and that progress could easily be undone. One participant reflected that, until a few years ago, citizens had options to campaign for renewable energy provisions in their local community (allowing them to effect change beyond the personal), but that the enabling policies had since been dismantled.

Differences of opinion emerged that mirror wider societal disagreements. Some of these are “usual suspects”, i.e., they are endemic to all climate change discussions. Here are 2 examples:

- What counts as ‘meaningful’? Actions that some participants regarded as positive were rejected by others as insufficiently impactful or misguided.
- ‘Tell’ vs ‘listen’: can we actually give people set answers to “What can I do?”, or should the focus be on listening instead, to help people find out what they can and want to do?

Usual suspects tend to follow from differences in underlying values and professional experiences, or reflect rigid social or systemic constraints. They cannot be resolved by rational debate. We will suggest new ideas to bypass them instead.

Observations

An important observation emerging from the mapping of past experiences was that very few achievements existed at the intersection of the 3 Ps - despite several participants recognising that the personal, professional and political need to evolve together. This lack of achievement in the centre proved to be symptomatic for several of the gaps that surfaced in the latter half of the meeting:

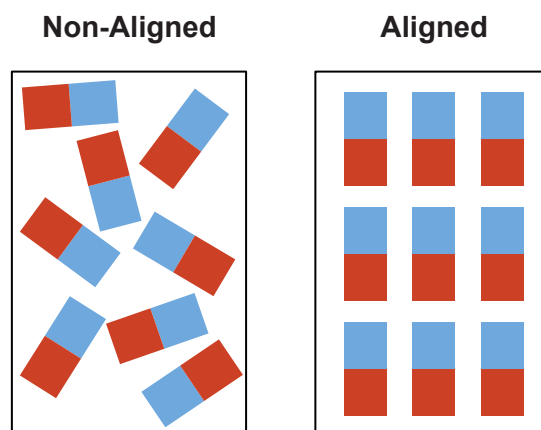
- When the conversation pivoted to ideas for further action, individually and collectively participants struggled to articulate how to pry open the vicious circles of the action paralysis. Does it start with citizens pressing political and business leaders? Do we expect politicians to lead citizens and businesses, or will they only follow after businesses take the initiative? How can the latter be prised away from their short-term profit model?
- Participants differed in where they stood with respect to seeing climate change as a standalone problem, or one that is embedded across society - with perhaps fewer seeing it as an embedded problem requiring systemic interventions.
- As a group with at least 300 years of collective experience of working on climate change, the lack of common direction in the room was little different from the confusion that exists about “What can I do?” in society at large. Many good ideas were articulated individually, but they lacked alignment. As one participant summed up their experience of the meeting: “Better understanding that ‘we’ are not providing enough direction on the ‘what’”.

Alignment, Coordination and Leadership

As the event made clear, current forms of leadership appear to fall short when it comes to climate action, as the lack of alignment of those with knowledge and expertise is little different from the confusion and disagreements that exist in society at large.

To understand the damaging consequences of this non-alignment, we suggest a metaphor that has its roots in the physics of how magnets work (**Box 1**).

Box 1. Magnetic states as a metaphor for direction and leadership.



Most pieces of magnetic material (such as iron) do not behave like magnets because the magnetic components that make up the material (shown like mini-magnets with a blue north and a red south pole) are randomly oriented so that they cancel out each others’ contributions. When such a piece is placed in an external magnetic field, the mini-magnets align along the north-south direction of the field. The contributions of the aligned mini-magnets add up and the piece becomes a magnet.

The existing landscape of climate change action resembles the non-aligned state. What is needed is a state of alignment where diverse actions are organised and communicated such that they produce a positive net effect. Alignment does not require that everyone promotes the same types of actions, nor that everyone buys into the same grand vision. On the contrary, a strong societal response follows from a rich variety of recommendations - albeit with a coherent thread between them.

At present, we only have an inkling of what the “forces of alignment” should look like, but they would certainly require the following:

- A **cross-landscape** or **eagle’s eye view** of the climate action domain map, in order to better understand how interventions in the personal, professional and political domain are connected; how to fill the centre of the 3 Ps map with more achievements, and how to think systemically about the development of new interventions.
- The ability to **step outside of differences of opinion** about what constitutes meaningful action, and develop new forms of dialogue that allow people with conflicting values and different professional experiences to create alignment in their recommendations for climate action.

Ways Forward

Since the meeting, we have heard several examples of and taken part in conversations that show the outlines of new ways forward. **Box 2** shows one such story by way of example.

The example encapsulates excellently how to offer direction and leadership when people ask “What is the one thing I can do?” It is neither prescriptive (“Stop flying!”) nor evasive (“What do you think?”). It does not judge from a conflicting values perspective (“Growing businesses is bad!”). It strikes a balance between telling people that change is needed and inviting them into a conversation about how they are uniquely positioned to make a contribution to this change. It exemplifies the new practices and the common language that will be required to support more people in their exploration of the question “*How am I uniquely qualified to make a difference?*”

Such conversations are not limited to individuals. Other examples we encountered over the last few months involve professional communities (organisational consultants, psychologists, health professionals etc) who, given their knowledge and skills base, are positioned to take up unique leadership roles, but who are currently not aware of how they can do this - beyond thinking of their own carbon footprint as organisations or communities.

Without such new practices, people will continue to protest and call for non-specific “action” - not because it can provide the required breakthrough, but because they do not know what else to do.

Box 2. “What could your role be?”

“When I got back to the office, a woman I didn’t know joined our table for lunch and of course when we said that we work on climate change she asked “What is the one thing I could do?” I said: “Change the world” and she said “What?!”

I explained that basically we need to change everything – what we think, what we say, what we do, the way we organise our society, our economy, the way we live, the stuff we use and buy, the way we relate to each other and the natural and material world – almost everything we do or think or believe needs to change.

Given that, what could your role be? Do you have a job? Are you a parent? Do you go to Church? Are you a member of a club? Do you belong to a political party? Can you write?

She thought and then said that her job is coaching businesses to grow. So maybe the most impact she could make would be to set a boundary around which types of businesses she accepts as clients, so that she is only helping those that have a deep commitment to sustainability, and are not growing products or services which will damage the planet. Bingo!”

Kate Power - KR Foundation

1. Identify gaps in climate change communication and policy and create targeted interventions with significant impacts.
2. Help break down communication barriers within and between professional communities and the wider public.