Social movements: their role in advocating to reduce the negative health effects of climate change

Paul Laris, Regional Coordinator, PHM, South East Asia Pacific,

activist with Extinction Rebellion South Australia

**Introduction**

Climate change has been recognised by many global leaders including the UN General Secretary, David Attenborough, and Greta Thunberg as the greatest threat faced by humanity. Responding to this threat is going to require wide spread social support, and social movements will be central to this. Social movements specifically targeting the climate emergency include Extinction Rebellion, Stop Oil, School Strikes for Climate, Fridays for Future, Climate Justice Now, and many, many others. As well as these, most civil society organisations with broad objectives for environmental protection such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the World Wildlife Fund, have also campaigned specifically on the climate emergency and the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of fossil fuels. The shared objectives of health and action on climate already come together in a range of climate and health civil society organisations.

**The Climate Crisis**

The negative health effects of climate change are widely recognised as encompassing physical, mental and social health dimensions. More frequent and extreme heat waves, increased spread of water borne diseases, malnutrition from crop failures due to droughts or floods, forced migration and armed conflict are all likely. Depression, climate anxiety, fear and despair, all impact on mental health. In addition these effects are distributed extremely inequitably, with more severe impacts on poorer people and poorer nations – and of course, and so unjustly, on those populations who have contributed the least to the emissions. Some of these impacts will also have a divisive effect on social cohesion with high income countries having enjoyed the benefits of a fossil fuelled growth while the global south suffers more of the disastrous climatic impacts. Similarly, older people have benefited while young people are left to suffer an ominous future. Colonisers prospered and Indigenous people continue to be excluded and to suffer from the extractive capitalism which is fuelling the climate crisis.

**Role of Social Movements**

Social movements can achieve change by influencing governments to adopt policies and practices which will help resolve the climate crisis. To do so they must engage popular culture, build political support, and build an unstoppable public momentum for change. Historically, in ostensibly democratic countries, the strategic focus has been on building popular awareness of the problem and leveraging public support for political parties to support solutions which may be implemented via the ballot box. However, when no formal political parties or other structures exist that support substantial action on climate change, that becomes a very long road. Transnational corporations dominate industry, finance and media and spend a great deal of money, time and effort on lobbying governments for climate unfriendly policies. In doing so, they have captured national governments on the issue. This means the road to climate action can be blocked. When there is widespread acknowledgement of the unambiguously life-threatening situation presented by the scientific data - but no adequate responses, and the window for making vital changes is rapidly closing – then more radical approaches are required. Clearly, if social movements are successful in achieving real changes that can drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions and implement policies and practices which help mitigate both the effects and their inequitable distribution, the negative effects of climate change will be reduced. But how? And how can the global public health community become more involved?

**3 Key change strategies**

The social movements addressing the climate emergency have developed their strategies within this context of urgency and relatively uncharted social change waters. These strategies are based on three assumptions: that mass popular support is essential, that such support can only be gained when the majority perceive a common grievance and that emotions as well as evidence must harnessed. People only change their actions when their heart – as well as their head is engaged. As Roger Hallam, one of the founders of Extinction Rebellion has written, Y*ou cannot, overcome … entrenched power by persuasion and information’. (*XR 2109b, p 100). [[1]](#footnote-2)

**Civil disobedience: the example of Extinction Rebellion (XR)**

XR (Extinction Rebellion) calls for mass non-violent civil disobedience to mobilise a minority of the population to publicly and visibly break the law until the inflicted economic costs and logistical difficulties force governments to accede to the movements’ demands. Weaver calls this ‘green vanguardism’[[2]](#footnote-3). The argument is that cultivating awareness of a universal grievance will build mass participation that in turn will compel change in a harmful system. Civil resistance involving mass arrests forces both the state and the citizenry to take a side: Either to support change or to initiate repression to limit the freedom of any protests. The strategy is to heighten the dilemma for governments. Various social movements have argued that there is a social population tipping point beyond which the impetus for change becomes unstoppable. XR claims 3.5% (Chenoweth[[3]](#footnote-4)) although other figures including 25% have been proposed.

XR has 3 basic demands: tell the truth about the severity, extent and urgency of the climate emergency, act now to stop fossil fuel emissions – no new mines etc and phase out existing facilities, and finally, decide together – establish citizens assemblies on climate and ecological justice using deliberative democracy techniques to build a culture of participation , fairness and transparency.

**Attracting attention to the need for climate action**

Social movements for climate action use attention-grabbing strategies to publicise the cause. Emblematic actions aim to combine vivid imagery or sometimes shocking events with strong messages so as to engage people and build mass support. Stammen and Meissner[[4]](#footnote-5) describe this as artivism- transformative climate change communication. Art is seen as a pathway to engage emotions. Examples include banner depictions of fire, assemblies of thousands of childrens’ shoes, mass die-ins where hundreds lie as if dead to warn of human extinction. Recent actions involving protesters defacing (but not damaging) famous paintings in prestigious galleries have been controversial – but arguably successful in drawing attention to the seriousness of the climate emergency.

**A Step too far?**

However, just as civil disobedience involving disruption of traffic can either highlight the issue or – cause anger amongst the inconvenienced, artivism may build shock and denial, or anger and hope and these can be strategically difficult calls to make. Critiques of the confrontational approach based on civil disruption argues that this is driven by educated metropolitan elites unable to appreciate the needs or perspectives of the working class or the needs of people in the global south. This highlights one of the major challenges for social movements – that of fragmentation, where various sub-groups may share the same concerns about climate, but come from different demographic and cultural roots, form separate movements and lose potential collective impact because of this.

**Whose responsibility?**

Historically, those political and corporate interests which have opposed action on climate change have denied for decades that a problem exists. More recently they have begrudgingly acknowledged its existence, but say effectively, that it is too late to prevent the damage, so the only answer is in adaption – and that this is essentially a personal, individual responsibility and choice - to be encouraged, but not directed, by government. This reflects the usual response to public health reformers calling for system change and upstream prevention and action on the social and commercial determinants of health. An argument that is similarly unacceptable and unsupported by the evidence.

**Corporate capture and resistance to it**

A small number of very powerful transnational fossil fuel corporations have successfully built networks of lobbyists, public relations consultants, media connections, business interests and politicians and their staffers to claim and hold a tenacious hold over governments. [[5]](#footnote-6)Given this state capture by corporations, and their effective control of the climate policy agenda, a logical response by social movements is to target the corporations themselves, rather than governments. The rationale is that corporate interests respond to markets, so manipulating markets through public perception of corporations may be a lever for change. So social movements have focused their attentions on those corporations both largely responsible for carbon emissions and holding an enormous influence over national governments. Exposing and shaming corporate greenwashing, highlighting local effects of fossil fuel dependence, exposing corporate climate denialism, using shareholder meetings to highlight risks of stranded assets and culture jamming to erode corporate public image are all used.

**Linking health and climate activists for the common good**

The struggle of social movements for action on climate has much in common with the global struggle for health. Climate and health are not only causally interlinked. They also share many social, political and economic determinants. Because of this there are major opportunities for public health activists to build on links with climate activists in demanding change that will benefit both movements. The WHO has estimated that between 2030 and 2050 climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year just from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Opportunities exist for strengthening alliances between public health activists and social movements for climate action around key issues including fossil fuel pollution and cancers, transport and energy policies, climate damage reparations, refugee support, and food security, including a shift to plant based diets. As the covid pandemic has demonstrated, a physical and social infrastructure of universal comprehensive primary health care provides a basis not only for emergency management, but also for citizen participation, popular education and the building and mobilising of awareness of climate and health issues and the development of a mass base for advocacy and action for change. Indigenous health movements recognise the importance of Indigenous peoples’ close relationship with land to their health and this insight is vital for health and climate activism. The social movements calling for greater action on the climate emergency represent a huge and potentially powerful resource for change. Entities such as the Global Climate and Health Alliance with 125 member organisations across the planet, demonstrate the synergies possible.

 The Peoples’ Climate vote, a 2021 survey conducted by the UNDP,[[7]](#footnote-8) was the world’s biggest ever survey of public opinion on climate change. It covered 50 countries with over half he world’s population, including over half a million people under the age of 18, a key constituency on climate change that is typically unable to vote in regular elections. Sixty-four percent of people believed climate change is a global emergency. The most popular climate policies were conservation of forests and land, increased use of solar, wind and renewable power, climate friendly farming techniques and investment in green businesses and jobs. The researchers concluded that there is a broad based appetite for policy action but *there needs to be more outreach to explain how some of the policies address the issue- and more importantly how they benefit citizens*. This crisis is a great opportunity for health activists to make closer links with climate activists in the struggle towards health for all.

**Conclusion**

Civil society activism will form a crucial part of the transition away from fossil fuels towards a world in which Earth’s climate is stabilised. Greater links between climate and health activists will have benefits for planetary and human health and health equity. Given the need for rapid and intense action, civil disobedience may be an important way to counter the power of transnational fossil fuel corporations and to force the hand of governments.

1. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14742837.2022.2095997?src=recsys# [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14742837.2022.2095997?src=recsys [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190513-it-only-takes-35-of-people-to-change-the-world [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2022.2122949 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Lucas, A https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102271 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. https://www.undp.org/press-releases/worlds-largest-survey-public-opinion-climate-change-majority-people-call-wide-ranging-action [↑](#footnote-ref-8)