

Everyday democracy

How can Kyoto provisions become individual and families responsibilities? How will citizens be engaged into the development of the cities of the future? What is democracy going to look like and which are the instruments to use the implementation of climate change policies as an opportunity to make democracy experiment new forms of participation?

Introduction

It is extremely difficult to translate huge global concerns into concrete individual, community and family responsibilities. Embedding the climate change agenda into everyday civic action is a case in point. Far-reaching changes in lifestyle and energy use are required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions¹. National government policy alone cannot enforce these changes; local initiatives, individuals and families must play an active role in creative future cities with a green conscience. Although politicians, scientists and activists agree on the urgency required in practicing environmental principles, putting these principles into practice is proving exceptionally thorny.

However, this is something which must be tackled head on, as our ecosystem cannot cope with the current standards of energy consumption. As it stands, humans are responsible for the destruction of natural resources, large-scale pollution and a severe reduction in global biodiversity.² Climate change not only poses environmental threats but also endangers the security of human communities; Bangladesh, for example, one of the hardest hit by the consequences of global warming, risks being submerged by rising sea levels³.

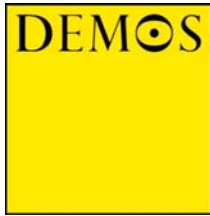
The many perils associated with climate change are well documented, yet making the necessary changes to reverse these effects is proving very difficult to enact. There are a number of reasons underpinning the complexity:

- National governments can be perceived as slow to react to such cross-cutting problems, and many initiatives are regarded as bureaucratic rhetoric;
- There is a lack of political will among individuals stemming from a sense of despair in the face of such a monumental threat;

¹ A target of 80% by 2050, as specified by the UK Climate Change Act, 2008. DEFRA.

² Vugt, Mark Van. "Environmental Change as a Commons Dilemma: Psychological Design Principles for Successful Resource Management." Canterbury, University of Kent. 2009.

³ Huggler, Justin. "Bangladesh: at the mercy of climate change." The Independent, February 2007.



- There is a lack of education on how and why to reduce one's carbon footprint, and a lack of knowledge on local initiatives and existing organizations tackling the issue;
- Humans are usually bad at acting in their long-term interests when these clash with their immediate goals and habits.

The issue of how to address big global problems at a micro level recalls Garret Hardin's famous 1968 article "The Tragedy of the Commons"⁴. The article argues that the pursuit of personal interests and gains can lead to disastrous results for the community, however large or small-scale. In fact, the article narrates the management of a pasture turned into an ecological catastrophe when all the members came to realize that individual gain runs counter to communal productivity. Herdsmen using the pasture for livestock grazing noticed that increasing the number of cattle in each of their personal herds resulted in greater individual profits while eventually obliterating the pasture⁵.

Perhaps Hardin's most valuable lesson for ecological issues today is the insight that, ultimately, no one benefits from individual gain. Once the communal pasture is destroyed, no herdsman prospers. Whether Hardin's depiction of humans as essentially indifferent to the welfare of wider society is accurate is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what *is* uncontested is the crisis our ecosystem faces, and the fact that implementing Kyoto provisions will require complementary measures at the macro and micro levels.

Everyday Democracy methods:

To revert to the original heading, how does everyday democracy provide a solution to the problems described above? What will our future cities have to look like in order to reduce CO₂ emissions, and who will be held accountable for emissions and energy usage levels? What new forms of citizen participation will facilitate the reversal of environmental degradation?

Our focus at the think-tank Demos, is on power and politics. We research ways to give people more power to shape their own lives. The overarching vision is one in which free citizens live in democratic communities and have an equal stake in society. Everyone should be able to make personal choices in their daily lives that contribute to the common good. The aim of 'everyday

⁴ Hardin, Garrett. "The Tragedy of the Commons". Science, December 1968.

⁵ Ibid.



democracy' is to put this idea into practice by working with organizations in ways that make them more effective and legitimate, and generating ideas which empower people and make a difference to how society functions. Demos believes in devolving power downwards; we believe everyday democracy is tied less to formal political outlets than to the actions and power structures within social groups, digital societies, workplaces, and families. We therefore propose four ways to implement Kyoto provisions at a micro level:

- Educational reforms;
- The Obama ripple effect/ Raising collective aspirations;
- Legalizing norms; and
- Behavioural economics /Nudge theory.

Educational reforms:

If environmental degradation is to be reversed and citizens seen as fundamental elements to that process they must, first and foremost, possess the necessary information to make informed choices. Environmental literacy courses therefore ought to be introduced in curricula worldwide. The problems of accelerating resource scarcity, the effects of pollution, the benefits of recycling, the availability of fossil fuels, and the necessity of reducing CO2 emissions are things which everyone ought to have a degree of fluency in. When individuals and families are expected—as citizens—to take responsibility and action on huge global problems, they should, at the very least, be equipped with some knowledge about them - not least because most people underestimate their adverse impact on the environment⁶.

Of course, simply knowing about climate change risks will not result in people committing to the changes in behaviour needed to implement Kyoto protocols. While knowing the facts is crucial to instigating change, the information provided in schools should also be geared towards coming up with solutions. At a very young age, children must understand what climate risks are *and* how they can be mitigated.

Furthermore, the very nature of the school should evolve. The primary objective of our education system should be to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need in order

⁶ Vugt, Mark Van. "Environmental Change as a Commons Dilemma: Psychological Design Principles for Successful Resource Management." Canterbury, University of Kent. 2009.



Silvia Guglielmi, Demos. March 2009.

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to succeed, not only in the economic sense but also in other areas of their life—including health and wellbeing, community engagement and forming positive relationships for instance. Our schools should not only educate young people but also keep them safe and meet their welfare and health needs. Increasingly this means focusing on developing less tangible social attributes in children and young people, such as civic engagement, citizenship, community enjoyment and participation, and thinking about how schools can relate to organisations and businesses in the wider community to achieve this. Civic engagement and participation in local activities can create collective strength and resolve to tackle environmental degradation.

The Obama effect/ Raising collective aspirations:

When people have overlapping interests, as within families, tribes and social networks, they are more likely to cooperate with one another for the collective good. People need reaffirmation that they are not the only ones making individual sacrifices for the collective pot. Similar aspirations and overlapping identities are therefore a route towards implementing environmental provisions. Humans with shared identities and goals feel social pressure to act in a responsible manner, and want to maintain a good reputation amongst their peers⁷. Collective aspirations are a great way to get people to act diligently towards climate change targets.

As history has proved on a number of occasions, and most recently with the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, collective dreams and collective energy can lead to social change. The election of the first black president in the USA has gone one step further to prove that almost anything is possible—that which seemed like an unrealistic dream only a few years ago can, with effort and shared action, be turned into a reality.

In the UK, the majority of people still dream for a better world⁸. If channelled positively, the “Obama effect” and the “yes we can” attitude could potentially have deep ripple effects. Obama has warned that citizens have a duty to challenge whoever has abandoned their responsibilities and acted solely through individual interests. We are no longer in a world where the pursuit of individual gain, to the detriment of everyone else, is acceptable. Nowhere is this more apparent than climate

⁷ Hardy, C. And Mark Van Vugt. “Nice guys finish first: The competitive altruism hypothesis.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32. 2006.

⁸ Buonfino, Alessandra and Silvia Guglielmi. *Wishful Thinking*. Demos, 2009.



change. Obama has warned us that acting collectively is tough, yet it is crucial that we accept that “long term goals can demand the abeyance of short term satisfaction⁹.” If humans do have a global consciousness and decided to act collectively, responsibly and accountably in the face of environmental degradation, we would live in a healthier and happier society.

Collective agency exists on a smaller scale every day – from neighbours’ collectives recycling together, to dreams of a better community spirit taking shape through village fetes and neighbourhood schemes. They happen all the time across Britain; this needs to become the future of city life worldwide.

Legalizing norms:

Formal incentives can also be an effective way of implementing Kyoto provisions. Applying outright sanctions for mistreating the environment, or offering financial rewards for conserving energy and other resources, can be a way to implement climate change targets. For example, restrictions on household waste collection, with excess waste punishable by fines, may encourage people to waste less while recycling more. Another radical change instituted via legally binding measures is the banning of certain products. By 2011, Europe will have witnessed the phasing out of traditional light-bulbs (100 watts and 40 watts)¹⁰ to be replaced by energy efficient ones.

The most important thing to consider when creating statutory laws on environmental issues is to adequately inform the citizens affected. People need to be kept abreast of what the government intends to do with “green taxes”, and explained the rationale behind rules and regulations. If formal procedures are to be accepted by the electorate, it is crucial to make clear the ‘greenness’ of new taxes and of the related public spend¹¹. If the public doesn’t agree with new environmental decrees, dynamic resistance will emerge. In the Netherlands, for example, the government instituted the first ever carpool lane in Europe in 1993. While the lane did significantly cut travel time and pollution, many single drivers felt excluded and deprived because they did not travel with the two passengers required to use the special lane. They felt increasingly constrained as their “single-driver lane” became ever more clogged, while the government seemed not to notice

⁹ Ramm, Benjamin. “Barack Obama and the Politics of Expectation.” The Liberal, 2009.

¹⁰ DEFRA < <http://www.defra.gov.uk/ENVIRONMENT/climatechange/uk/household/products/cfl.htm> >.

¹¹ Giddens, Anthony. “The Politics of Climate Change: national responses to the challenge of global warming.”



their frustration. After widespread protest and legal action, a newly formed single-driver interest group managed to effectively shut down the carpool lane within a year of its creation¹². Incentives, dialogue and appropriate and timely information are therefore key to effective law making. To fail to provide and enable these is to else risking upheaval and dissent from groups forming out of frustration with 'green' regulations.

Behavioural economics/ Nudge theory:

One way to address this problem is by coercive means or taxes. However, in their recent book on behavioural economics, *Nudge*¹³, American academics Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein propose another means of changing behaviour. A 'nudge' highlights one option, to encourage agents to choose it, while leaving the other, 'bad', options open. Nudges thereby preserve freedom of choice, such that the idea has recently found favour among liberals. However, nudges can also be extremely cost-effective ways to effect large-scale changes of behaviour.

Nudges remind us of the reasons to do the right thing. While many of us acknowledge that reducing our carbon footprint is the right thing to do, for one reason or another, we do not always do so. This may present many opportunities for effective nudges. One example of such a nudge discussed by Sunstein and Thaler is the installation of 'energy orbs' in homes. These glow red during periods of high home energy use. In trials in California, 'energy orbs' led to a 40% reduction in home energy use. The energy orbs don't prevent people from using large amounts of energy; they simply tell people that they are. This sets up a feedback process; we see the light glowing red, and are reminded of the costs (both personal and environmental) of high energy use, so switch off unnecessary appliances, and the red glow fades. Or, imagine electricity meters which tell us not only how much energy we're using, but also how much this is costing us per hour, and whether we are above or below the community average. Reducing energy use isn't just good for the environment - it is often in our short-term financial best interest. Yet we sometimes need to be nudged to act on these facts.

¹² Van Vugt, M., Van Lange, P. A. M., Meertens, R. M., & Joireman, J. A. "How a structural solution to a real-world social dilemma failed: A field experiment on the first carpool lane in Europe." *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 1996.

¹³ Thaler, Richard H. and Cass R. Sunstein. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.



Nudges can also exploit humans' desires to conform to social and moral norms. For example, requiring companies to publicly reveal their carbon footprint could nudge them in to reducing their climate change impact; no company will want to be identified by the media as bottom of the carbon footprint league-table. A similar nudge has proved highly effective in reducing US businesses' toxic pollution emissions, after the businesses were required to reveal these emissions to the Federal government's Toxic Release Inventory; businesses 'blacklisted' as amongst the worst polluters quickly tried to move up the ranking by reducing their toxic emissions.

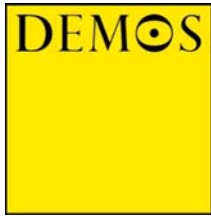
Conclusion:

There are effective ways to tackle climate change. Although many of us leave lights on in empty rooms, buy food with wasteful packaging, and leave our TVs and computers on stand-by, it is important to note that there are also many activists and organizations committed to reversing the effects of global warming. The success of some ecological movements is of particular note. The emergence of Transition towns in recent years is testimony to the will of certain communities in experimenting with new forms of democracy to environmental ends. Transition towns were started by grassroots groups wishing to mitigate climate change effects. The goal is to create sustainable communities. The voluntary groups meet to arrange "energy descent plans", setting out strategies to reduce their communities' energy use. These meetings take place through a new form of deliberative democracy called "Open Space Technology"¹⁴. The interesting feature is the lack of pre-designed agenda or set format to the meetings; instead, the meetings' is decided through consensus. Much of the success of Transition Towns has been through education and equal distribution of information, as well as community energy-generation schemes (micropower and wind turbines). Some Transition Towns are quite radical; Totnes in Devon, for example, has issued its own local currency (Totnes pound) to encourage relocalization of lifestyles and the reduction of residents' carbon footprints. Although the first Transition Town originated in Ireland as recently as 2005, they are now part of a recognized and fast-growing international movement¹⁵.

The plethora of organizations committed to implementing the Kyoto provisions is surely a step in the right direction. The time is now ripe to change the mentality of those not yet

¹⁴ Open Space World. < <http://www.openspaceworld.org/> >.

¹⁵ Lewis, Sarah. "A peak into the future." *The Guardian*. 10 September 2008; Transition Towns Wiki < <http://transitiontowns.org/> >.



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participating in reversing climate change—be it due to a reluctance to change entrenched habits, short-term pressures on time and attention, or a lack of information on the environmental harmful effects of their behaviour.