

Sustaining our sense of urgency and emergency

By Prof. Carly McLachlan and Prof. Robert Nicholls

Transformation through sustained incremental change has been the traditional and dominant framing of climate action. Now, a new more urgent framing has recently taken hold in some countries.

The Paris Climate Agreement's inclusion of 1.5 degrees, the School Strikes, Extinction Rebellion, The IPCC 1.5 Report, The Bank of England's warning that inaction on climate change risks an 'abrupt financial collapse', have all contributed to a new framing of both the significance and speed of change needed and the severity of impacts if such action is not delivered rapidly.

The climate emergency movement has stepped into this space, and particularly tapped into a desire of the need to take action at a local level - often with a more holistic approach that seeks to maximise the co-benefits of transformation (e.g. jobs, skills, health, prosperity, community). Sixty four percent, or 261 of 408 Local Authorities in the UK have now declared a 'climate emergency'.

As a climate change researcher, this movement is really exciting. Climate emergencies have a number of steps – declare, develop a science-based target, identify a plan to meet that target within 6 months and then deliver it. We have worked closely with Greater Manchester Combined Authority as they have set a target, developed a 'feasible' pathway and then declared an emergency (we like to do things differently in the North!).

Because of their ordering of this process, Greater Manchester has come to have a very concrete understanding of the scale of the challenge, and despite pushing their efforts to what they currently think is possible, they are still some distance from aligning with the science-based target they asked us to calculate for them.



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There is much talk of the need for 'innovation' to close this gap. However, it cannot be stressed enough that this is not simply a matter of waiting for technologies we have plenty of the technical solutions to make the necessary reductions, but innovation within and between the social, political, financial and technical spheres is needed. Obvious UK examples include onshore and offshore wind, incentives for solar, and home retrofitting for energy efficiency – the technology is there – but deployment is hindered in different ways.

Adaptation and enhanced resilience must also be central to climate emergency action - explicitly planning for more extreme climate impacts given the size of the challenge of limiting warming to 2 degrees. The UK's Committee on Climate Change recently reported that we are underprepared for adaptation to climate change in nearly every sector.

The climate emergency movement faces a perilous few months and years as authorities come to more fully appreciate the significance and scale of the change their declaration requires. Those signing the declarations have, in our view, done so on the basis of what is morally and scientifically justified. This may have to be sustained in the face of significant lock-in and inertia. With a very crowded political context it may be that sustaining a political, public and social sense of emergency is less than easy.

Local authorities, governments, and business can use this moment to refocus decision making framing to make urgent action the new normal – so that every decision delivers mitigation, make us more resilient, engages communities and evaluates co-benefits as standard.

For emergency declarations to translate into the action required they must be seen as a mandate to ensure that every decision made contributes to the delivery of a low carbon and resilient future.