

Delivering multidimensional wellbeing: Integrating climate action and human health

Rita Issa, University of East Anglia (Rapporteur); Matthew Loxham, University of Southampton; Davide Filingeri, University of Southampton; Mark Chapman, University of Southampton; Mary Barker, University of Southampton (Chair)

During the Critical Decade for Climate Action Conference, hosted by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia (UEA), climate experts gathered to showcase evidence-based ideas and critically evaluate opportunities for climate action. This briefing note serves as a summary of Session 8c on Tuesday 9 September 2025.

Climate change exacerbates existing health inequalities and disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. Higher temperatures and air pollution exacerbate respiratory conditions such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and increase the risk of others. Rising global temperatures lead to more frequent and intense heatwaves, increasing the risk of heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and dehydration. Malnutrition and hunger increase when food supplies are disrupted. We explore specific impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing to identify and address primary research questions in each area.

Key messages

- **Wellbeing is plural:** material security, subjective perceptions, and relational attachments all matter, and often diverge.
- **Meet people where they are:** climate change is lived through housing, food, jobs, and health, not abstract anxiety.
- **Agency over anxiety:** programmes that enable participation and decision-making transform both communities and institutions.
- **Bright spots can bend trajectories:** community brigades and Indigenous stewardship succeed when connected to supportive networks.
- **Responsibility must shift upstream:** centres of wealth and consumption must be central to conservation and climate strategies.
- **Process quality matters:** inclusive, just, and reciprocal transformations are more durable than outcome-driven fixes.

Implications

- **For policy and funders:** invest in community-defined solutions and embed subjective wellbeing into monitoring, and acting on global drivers of ecological decline.
- **For practitioners and NGOs:** enable a bricolage of approaches that combine local capacity with multi-scale partnerships, and design interventions around empowerment rather than compliance.
- **For researchers:** co-develop tools to operationalise transformative change frameworks and commit to longitudinal, participatory methods that capture what communities themselves value.

Introduction

Human and planetary health are inseparable, yet the ways that action is organised often treat them as distinct. Climate

policies remain dominated by sectoral targets, conservation strategies by biodiversity metrics, and wellbeing programmes by narrow social indicators. This fragmentation risks undermining progress in both arenas.

Climate anxiety is abstract, meet people where they are

A recurrent theme during the session is the need to meet people where they are. For many, especially those facing precarity, climate change is mediated through immediate pressures – insecure housing, rising food prices, or ill-health – rather than through the abstract notion of ‘climate anxiety.’ A young mother on the south coast of England, for example, struggles with diabetes destabilised by heatwaves, asthma worsened by poor air quality, and the costs of feeding her child. She does not speak of climate change, yet her life is already shaped by it. The challenge for researchers and policymakers is not to layer new anxieties onto such lives, but to create avenues for agency and participation that strengthen present wellbeing while preparing for an uncertain future. The *NextGen Researchers* programme demonstrates this in practice, enabling excluded young people to design and conduct their own research and present recommendations to decision-makers. The result is empowerment for youth, and transformation for institutions suddenly required to listen.

Aligning knowledge and experience

Agency is also central to the story of community fire brigades in the Brazilian Amazon. In the face of increasing drought and flammability, local groups – farmers, Indigenous residents, and even volunteers from nearby towns – have organised to fight fires, restore vulnerable areas, and share knowledge of safer practices. Supported by partners at multiple scales, these brigades have dramatically reduced fire damage during recent El Niño years. The achievement lies not in a technical fix, but in aligning diverse knowledge systems, collective action, and external solidarity.

Wellbeing itself is a more complex and plural category than policy often allows. In Ghana’s Volta Delta, research showed that material poverty did not always align with unhappiness, nor relative affluence with contentment. Inland farming

communities, though deprived in conventional terms, reported high levels of subjective wellbeing rooted in place attachment and collective identity. By contrast, some peri-urban and coastal settlements, better off in income terms, were marked by fear of flooding, crime, and social fragmentation. This divergence illustrates the dangers of privileging a single measure of wellbeing, and the importance of listening to communities’ own accounts of what it means to live well.

Taken together, these examples point to a wider reframing of responsibility. Current conservation and climate models often locate solutions – and burdens – at the site level, especially in rural and Indigenous territories. Yet global drivers such as consumption patterns, trade systems, and economic models of endless growth remain under-addressed. *Connected Conservation*, as discussed in this session, challenges the field to amplify the flows of knowledge and values in biocultural centres while disrupting the destructive flows that emanate from centres of wealth.

Underlying all of this is the recognition, reinforced by the IPBES Transformative Change Assessment, that surface-level adjustments will not suffice. Transformative change requires concurrent shifts in how we see the world, how we act, and how we organise our institutions. Equity, pluralism, and reciprocal human–nature relations must guide these processes. Crucially, the quality of the transformation – whether inclusive, just, and empowering – matters as much as the outcomes.

Wellbeing is multidimensional

The session underscored that multidimensional wellbeing cannot be delivered through climate action alone, nor through wellbeing policy in isolation. It requires integration: empowering young people without burdening them with fear; resourcing community bright spots that already defy negative trends; embedding subjective and relational measures alongside material ones; and shifting responsibility towards those whose consumption patterns and power structures drive ecological decline. If these lessons are heeded, climate action can move beyond sectoral silos to become a foundation for healthier, fairer, and more sustainable futures.