

Social change to the rescue? Balancing climate urgency with complex social realities

Danni Walters, University of East Anglia (Rapporteur); Tim Brauhnoltz-Speight, University of Manchester (Co-Chair); Timothy Foxon, University of Sussex; Alfie Gaffney, University of East Anglia; Claire Hoolohan, University of Manchester; Sean Irving, University of East Anglia; Michael Lomotey, University of Southampton; Carly McLachlan, University of Manchester; Katharine Steentjes, Swansea University (Co-Chair); Chantal Sullivan-Thomsett, University of East Anglia; Mark Wilson, University of Bath

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 11b on Wednesday 10 September 2025.

Technology alone is insufficient to tackle the climate crisis, and there is growing acceptance that profound societal change is needed to meet mitigation and adaptation goals. But is there a danger of taking an overly optimistic view about the possible extent and pace of ‘social change’? What is required to enable social change for a low-carbon future that is rapid, effective and fair?

In 2022, for the first time, the IPCC Working Group III (which deals with climate change mitigation) dedicated attention to ‘Demand, Services and Social Aspects of Mitigation’, signalling widening recognition of the role of socio-cultural change in climate action. However, at a global scale, lifestyles continue to become more emissions-intensive, and increasing numbers of people are exposed to complex and cascading climate risks. Those who emit the least are often most likely to suffer the impacts of climate change, while their low carbon ‘lifestyles’ are driven by poverty and low standards of living, rather than choice. Among the world’s richest people and nations, low-carbon living remains a novelty, not the norm. Bottom-up experiments with low-carbon ways of living can catalyse positive action, but extending and normalising transitions requires extensive fundamental changes in the behavioural, socio-cultural, institutional, business, and technological dimensions to overcome inertia and lock-in.

This session critically reflected on: tensions between the urgency of climate mitigation, and the pace at which different forms of social change can be expected to happen; the politics of social change, including issues of fairness and resistance; the methods and tools that might enable meaningful social change; and the implications of these issues for adaptation, including how social change for mitigation and adaptation might be related.

During the Critical Decade for Climate Action Conference, researchers from the Accelerating Social Change theme in the Tyndall Network gathered to discuss the profound challenges of mobilising the scale of social change needed to achieve effective climate mitigation.

This session was convened by Tim Brauhnoltz-Speight, Chantal Sullivan-Thomsett and Claire Hoolohan as theme leads for Accelerating Social Change at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. The briefing note was prepared by Danni Walters with support from Mark Wilson and Alfie Gaffney.

Speaker provocations and reflections

Here we summarise the key points from our panel of speakers in term of their take on how to manage balancing climate urgency with complex social realities.

Gaining public trust

Climate communication has long relied on established norms: emphasise hope over fear, stress urgency but avoid demanding too much, and call for small steps rather than systemic shifts. These strategies aim to keep the public on side, yet they risk undermining trust.

By leaving out fear, signalling urgency without visible action, and failing to communicate a compelling vision of the future, researchers and communicators risk losing credibility. Profound social change requires conversations that do not shy away from discomfort. —Katharine Steentjes

Harnessing the appetite for social change

Speaking truth to power doesn't work, because capacity for change is restricted. What matters is building capacity for action even in the face of uncertainty. This requires creating knowledge that builds power – not only speaks to it. This requires asking with who do we work, who do we produce knowledge for, and within which systems of power does this knowledge sit?

To reduce emissions, the UK faces societal shifts on an unprecedented scale: reducing material consumption, transforming farming and demilitarisation. Ecological economics has demonstrated that such change can go hand in hand with improvements in health, well-being and justice.

The challenge is, how to harness the appetite for change already in motion and channel it towards positive social transformation. —Sean Irving

Justice embedded within social change

Climate change impacts everyone but not equally. Black communities face greater risks yet receive less attention or adaptation support, deepening racial disparities in areas like health or housing. Calls for justice too often fall short of tackling ingrained anti-blackness within climate policy.

Climate universalism, which erases structural difference under the guise of unity, risks reproducing inequality. Anti-blackness offers a powerful lens to critique social change that, in the name of urgency, reinforces systems of repression rather than dismantling them. Justice for marginalised groups must be treated as non-negotiable in climate change adaptation and the disaster risk response spheres. —Michael Lomotey

Urgency and the multiple pressing priorities of policymakers

Local authorities face conflicting pressures: meeting carbon targets, constrained financial budgets, and balancing priorities across housing, health and social care. Climate policy must be integrated into these competing demands, finding co-benefits without losing sight of its core purpose. Academics working alongside authorities must combine empathy with challenge – recognising limits while pressing for ambition, it is about building trust.

The way that climate action is framed shapes what is possible. On the one hand, an emphasis on “profound transformation” could be unhelpful. It could provoke fear of imagined dystopian futures; and there is still uncertainty as to how different a net zero UK would look. But on the other hand, a focusing only on co-benefits risks overshadowing climate itself, erasing the “who” and “why” of climate action. With political shifts to the right and growing scepticism of net zero, the danger is that climate action is then seen as being smuggled in by the back door. Academics have a role in keeping the story of climate action visible as positive social change—rooted not only in what must be done, but also in what can be done now without losing sight of the work ahead. —Carly McLachlan

Challenging dominant economic paradigms

Energy demand reduction has struggled to gain traction, not because it lacks merit, but because it does not fit the dominant economic growth framing which pervades society. Social change requires structural transformation alongside individual behaviour change.

Post-growth frameworks align with demand-reduction scenarios such as promoting sufficiency, i.e. reducing intensive forms of consumption, and enabling universal access to basic services, in addition to investing in

renewables and contracting harmful industries. This requires moving beyond the primacy of top-down governance paradigms, to local delivery and a critical assessment of which sectors should grow and which must shrink. Post-growth centres on improving human well-being within planetary boundaries. —*Timothy Foxon*

Summary

Many attendees felt that climate researchers need to be bolder. Fear of public resistance has constrained the energy and appetite for change. Social change grows through collective goals and shared narratives. While narrative shifts may be necessary when working with institutions, structural inequalities embedded within systems demand deeper interrogation.

Academics must think critically about what they are already doing and how they can improve. Ultimately, positive visions can be a productive space for advancing social change, despite huge political challenges.

Group responses

Discussions highlighted concern that the burden of social change continues to fall on individuals, while structural and intersectional barriers remain largely unchallenged. It was suggested that ordinary people have already carried the brunt of emissions cuts, and that further progress must target systemic level emitters.

Participants also stressed the lack of positive, plausible visions for climate action. Populist movements succeed because they offer clear narratives rooted in nostalgia. In contrast, the climate movement too often fails to offer such a clear and directed vision that people can rally behind. Post-growth framings, in particular, may struggle to resonate in the Global South, although related concepts of human development have gained traction. Across discussions, there was agreement that social justice and environmental movements must go hand in hand.

Positive, achievable actions

- Develop transformation models that integrate social sciences and embed equitable futures
- Engage with the wider public, e.g., expanding environmental education in schools
- Strengthen public communication to deepen understanding of risks and actions
- Redirect shaming strategies towards high emitters, not social movements
- Adapt post-growth framings for global applicability
- Translate national level urgency into practical, place-based choices
- Design monitoring and evaluation of solutions with input from the Global South, ensuring adaptability and avoiding maladaptation
- Support place-based community initiatives that build local connections, person-to-person learning, and collective benefits

Final reflections

With only five years left in the critical decade, we must reflect on what progress has been made and where it has fallen short. Stronger narratives and positive visions are needed to inspire confidence and build collective momentum. Social change at scale will not be achieved through individual sacrifice alone, but from systemic shifts that align justice, well-being and sustainability.

Policies may find greater acceptance when framed as extensions of the familiar, rather than brand new 'transformations'. Given time, many people will adjust to change, and a silent majority continues to support bold climate action. Policymakers need to balance bravery and persistence in the face of initial vocal backlash, with genuine listening and willingness to adjust policies to ensure they are fair – and seen to be fair. The challenge ahead is to couple urgency with imagination, ensuring that climate action is understood not as loss, but as the foundation of a fairer, more liveable future that emphasises well-being and equality of society.

Tim Brauholtz-Speight, Alfie Gaffney, Claire Hoolohan, Sean Irving, Michael Lomotey, Carly McLachlan, Kat Steentjes, Chantal Sullivan-Thomsett and Mark Wilson are also members of the Climate And Social Transformation (CAST) research centre, which was initially established by members of Tyndall Centre's Accelerating Social Change theme. See cast.ac.uk for more information.