

Unlocking climate action at scale

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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 6c on Tuesday 9 September 2025.

There is a strong scientific foundation about the risks of inaction, increasing awareness of and access to solutions to climate change, and a growing understanding of human behaviour and psychology on how to stimulate action. Despite this, progress on climate remains slower and less widespread than needed. Evidence also shows that existing interventions on climate can and do produce inequitable outcomes undermining their sustainability in the long term. Bringing together researchers from the physical and social sciences with advisors to policymakers charged with delivering change in the real world, this session will explore how beliefs and practices at differing levels – the individual, community and government – can be brought together to deliver meaningful climate action. Drawing on cutting-edge insights and critical thinking, alongside the shaping and delivery of policy and societal interventions, this research-policy dialogue will explore strategies to break down blockages and accelerate meaningful and equitable climate action at the necessary scale.

Introduction

This session explored the barriers and enablers to delivering climate action at scale, examining individual, community, and governmental levels of intervention. Despite strong scientific foundations and growing awareness of climate risks, progress remains insufficient to meet established targets. The session identified three critical dimensions for scaling climate action: addressing negative political partisanship at the individual level, fostering collective agency in local governance, and transitioning toward mission-driven government approaches that prioritise long-term sustainability goals over short-term market efficiency.

Key findings emphasise the need to reframe climate action through co-benefits, particularly health and wellbeing outcomes, while addressing systemic inequities that undermine long-term sustainability. The discussion highlighted tensions between technical solutions and transformative system change, calling for more integrated approaches that bridge policy silos and engage diverse stakeholders.

The critical decade challenge

The session opened with acknowledgment that climate change should be central to every serious societal conversation during this critical decade. While strong scientific evidence supports the risks of inaction, and there is growing access to adaptation and mitigation solutions, progress remains slower and less widespread than required to meet even modest climate targets.

The transformation needed was likened to a murmuration, where each individual, community, and government must change direction simultaneously. This analogy was critiqued for failing to capture the deep-rooted systems and structures that incentivise inertia and promote business-as-usual approaches, as well as the costs associated with change and the inequitable outcomes that can undermine long-term sustainability.

Individual-level barriers: Political identity and climate action

Research conducted in rural Suffolk shows how political identity shapes climate policy support. The study area, historically conservative but recently switched to Green Party representation, provided a unique context for examining negative partisanship – defined as voters' aversion toward the worldview and values of particular political parties.

- Individuals often voted Green primarily to defeat Conservative candidates rather than from environmental conviction.
- Many indicated they would not necessarily vote Green again in future elections.
- Negative partisanship toward the Green party prevented some individuals from supporting renewable energy transitions, despite holding strong environmental values.
- Climate and environmental concerns, while widely held, rarely constituted voters' primary issue when making electoral choices.

Local energy development challenges:

- Rural communities perceived energy infrastructure developments as unfair, bearing costs and consequences while urban areas received benefits.
- Energy discount schemes for communities near infrastructure emerged as a potential solution.
- Local opposition reflected broader rural-urban equity concerns in energy transition planning.

Local government innovation: Unlikely pioneers

Analysis of local authority climate action revealed that resource-constrained contexts can sometimes produce innovative approaches to climate policy. Research examining 'unlikely pioneers' – local authorities operating under challenging conditions but still developing ambitious climate plans – identified key success factors. Enabling conditions include:

- Cross-party political consensus: Early, high-level political commitment across party lines provided mandates for action both within and outside local authorities
- Climate justice framing: Climate action was successfully positioned as addressing locally relevant issues, particularly fuel poverty and health inequities
- Place-based revitalisation: Communities conscious of declining economic status used climate action strategically for regeneration, leveraging carbon-intensive assets for transformation

Implementation approaches:

- Boundary object strategy: Climate action plans served as focal points, enabling diverse stakeholders with different priorities to collaborate
- Justice-oriented framing: Climate action was presented as both environmental necessity and route to economic growth and social justice
- Collective agency model: Success depended on collaborative approaches rather than individual 'heroic actors'

Governance transformation vs market-led approaches

Analysis of current governance approaches identified fundamental limitations in market-oriented climate policy, which has dominated since the 1980s. Current approaches emphasise market efficiency over outcomes, leading to inadequate progress across multiple policy areas including health service delivery, food policy, and energy systems. Evidence of market failure include:

- European Court of Human Rights rulings against governments for failing to protect citizens from climate risks
- Widespread adaptation deficits in protecting vulnerable populations
- Continued reliance on ineffective voluntary approaches across sectors

Mission-oriented alternative: The session proposed returning to mission-oriented governance approaches characteristic of mid-20th century economics, emphasising:

- Long-term investment over short-term cost considerations
- Changing economic structures rather than optimising existing systems
- Clear sustainability goals with holistic success measures
- Public investment that crowds in collective action and community initiatives

Scaling up climate action: Multi-level framework

Discussions identified several dimensions requiring simultaneous attention:

Individual action level:

- Public education on high-impact personal actions (moving beyond recycling to more significant behavioural changes)
- Support for adoption of superior technologies (heat pumps, electric vehicles) through addressing practical barriers

Infrastructure and policy support:

- Building public support for necessary infrastructure developments
- Maintaining public backing for net zero commitments amid political pressures
- Developing clear, localised adaptation strategies

Technology transition:

- Recognising that many climate solutions represent superior technologies (electric vehicles offering better performance, heat pumps providing consistent heating)
- Addressing misconceptions about 'going backward' to traditional technologies
- Communicating benefits effectively to overcome political messaging that frames climate action as regressive

Local authority capacity and constraints

Resource challenges:

- Funding limitations consistently identified as primary barrier
- Political will at local level often constrained by limited resources and competing priorities
- Local politicians typically receive minimal compensation while facing substantial workloads and public criticism

Capability gaps:

- Local authorities excel in familiar areas (home insulation, fuel poverty) but struggle with newer challenges (low-carbon heating systems, heat pump deployment)
- Climate action plans often focus on visible, familiar interventions rather than highest-impact measures
- Need for support in transitioning to next-level climate interventions

Institutional solutions:

- Calls for statutory climate duty to provide legal mandate for action
- Recognition that local authority reorganisation has disrupted ongoing climate projects
- Need for integration between national targets and local implementation pathways

Framing climate action: Co-benefits vs climate focus

Significant discussion emerged around whether climate action should be explicitly framed as climate policy or

emphasised through co-benefits:

- Health, economic, and social benefits resonate more strongly with voters than climate concerns
- Enables coalition-building across diverse political constituencies
- Addresses immediate concerns (affordability, health, jobs) while achieving climate goals

Arguments for maintaining climate focus:

- Risk of losing core environmental constituency if climate concerns are de-emphasised
- Need for clear accountability to climate goals
- Importance of addressing root causes rather than only symptoms

Synthesis approach: Rather than viewing this as either/or choice, participants suggested reframing where climate benefits become the co-benefits of pursuing health, economic, and social justice goals. This approach positions climate action as an additional advantage of policies primarily justified by their direct benefits to communities.

Justice and equity considerations

Structural inequities: Strong emphasis on addressing systemic marginalisation affecting vulnerable populations, including women, racial minorities, and economically disadvantaged communities. Participants stressed that climate adaptation without justice considerations risks perpetuating or exacerbating existing inequalities.

Colonial legacy recognition: Discussion acknowledged that extractive fossil fuel systems represent globalised colonial structures, and that effective climate action must address these historical and ongoing power imbalances.

Research limitations: Acknowledgment that much climate research focuses on voting populations, potentially excluding important voices including immigrants and other marginalised communities who may be significantly affected by climate policies but lack electoral representation.

System change vs technical solutions

Beyond business-as-usual: Participants questioned whether current approaches sufficiently challenge underlying systems or merely substitute technologies within existing frameworks:

- Electric vehicle adoption maintaining car-dependent infrastructure and individual ownership models
- Heat pump installation in second homes while housing inequality persists

- Technical solutions that don't address consumption patterns or structural inequities

Alternative approaches:

- Active travel infrastructure as alternative to car-dependent systems
- Community-led adaptation initiatives that build social resilience alongside climate resilience
- Integration of climate considerations into housing, health, and economic development policies

Community-led adaptation: Evidence and potential

Research on community-led adaptation has demonstrated potential for grassroots climate action, even in resource-constrained contexts. Studies across the UK documented widespread community initiatives addressing weather-related risks including flooding, heat waves, and fuel poverty.

Documented benefits:

- Direct adaptation: Effective responses to flood risks, heat wave preparedness, and fuel poverty interventions
- Social cohesion: Enhanced generalised trust, stronger community connections, increased place attachment
- Health and wellbeing: Reduced stress and anxiety through increased social connection
- Political engagement: Enhanced trust in political systems through direct community agency

Governance implications: These findings suggest that enabling and supporting community-led action could provide multiple benefits beyond direct climate outcomes. Questions remain about optimal approaches to measurement, enabling mechanisms, and the relationship between civil society initiatives and state support.

Communication and narrative challenges

Political messaging and storytelling

Current limitations:

- Climate advocates criticised for relying on data and graphs rather than compelling narratives
- Right-wing political movements identified as more effective at emotional storytelling and public engagement
- Limited use of advertising and mass communication by climate action supporters

Narrative structure analysis: Discussion included analysis of effective political narratives that position ordinary people as

protagonists, identify clear villains (either climate threats or vested interests opposing action), and present clear solutions or saviors. Participants noted that climate action narratives often lack these elements or fail to connect emotionally with audiences.

Media and commercial influence: Recognition that most commercial advertising actively promotes unsustainable consumption patterns, from cruise holidays to car ownership, creating a constant counter-narrative to climate action messaging. Suggestions included potential taxation on commercial advertising to fund alternative messaging.

Overcoming polarisation and misinformation

Social media challenges: Acknowledgment that social media environments create echo chambers where false information about climate action circulates without correction. Participants noted difficulty reaching audiences exposed to anti-climate messaging through these channels.

Contact theory applications: Research suggests that positive inter-group contact can reduce political polarisation in the short term, potentially creating openings for climate conversations across political divides. Local politicians engaging directly with constituents through door-to-door conversations was identified as particularly effective in building trust and support.

Trust building: Evidence that political trust can be enhanced through direct contact and authentic communication, with voters particularly responsive to politicians who engage personally rather than through mass media alone.

Recommendations

For practitioners and funding organisations

Resource allocation:

- Prioritise funding for community-led adaptation initiatives that demonstrate multiple co-benefits
- Support integrated approaches that address climate, health, and social justice simultaneously
- Invest in capacity building for local authorities transitioning to high-impact climate interventions

Research and development:

- Develop better measurement frameworks for holistic climate action outcomes beyond carbon metrics
- Support research on effective communication strategies for different political and social contexts
- Fund analysis of successful integration between community initiatives and institutional support

Network building:

- Facilitate connections between ‘unlikely pioneer’ local authorities and mainstream climate action networks
- Support cross-sector collaboration between health, housing, transport, and climate organizations
- Enable knowledge sharing on effective boundary object approaches for diverse stakeholder engagement

For political organisations**Narrative development:**

- Invest in professional storytelling and emotional communication about climate action benefits
- Develop narratives that position climate action as enhancing rather than constraining quality of life
- Frame climate policies through immediate community benefits rather than abstract global goals

Coalition building:

- Build alliances around shared concerns (health, economics, justice) rather than requiring pre-existing climate commitment
- Engage with communities affected by climate policies early in development processes
- Address equity concerns proactively in all climate policy development

Institutional reform:

- Support statutory climate duties for local authorities with accompanying resource provision
- Advocate for integration of climate considerations across all policy areas
- Challenge siloed policy-making that separates climate action from other social priorities

For government and decision-makers**Governance transformation:**

- Transition from market-led to mission-oriented approaches with clear sustainability goals
- Establish long-term investment frameworks that prioritise outcomes over short-term efficiency
- Create institutional mechanisms for meaningful public participation in climate policy development

Policy integration:

- Break down silos between climate, health, housing, transport, and economic development policies
- Develop place-based approaches that address local contexts and equity concerns

- Establish clear phase-out dates and transition support for carbon-intensive technologies and practices

Justice and equity:

- Centre marginalised community voices in climate policy development
- Address colonial legacies and structural inequities in climate action approaches
- Ensure climate adaptation protects most vulnerable populations without reinforcing existing disadvantages

Regulatory framework:

- Use regulation strategically to set clear standards and level playing fields.
- Provide certainty for long-term planning while supporting transition processes.
- Address commercial messaging that undermines sustainable behavior change.

Emerging themes for future research**Governance innovation**

- Optimal relationships between community-led initiatives and institutional support
- Effective measurement of holistic climate action outcomes
- Integration mechanisms across policy silos and levels of government

Political communication

- Evidence-based approaches to climate communication across political divides
- Effective use of mass media and advertising for climate action
- Counter-narrative strategies addressing misinformation and polarisation

Justice and equity

- Inclusive participation mechanisms for marginalised communities in climate policy
- Addressing colonial legacies in climate action approaches
- Ensuring equitable distribution of costs and benefits in climate transitions

System transformation

- Moving beyond technical substitution to structural change
- Integration of climate action with broader social and economic transformation

- Long-term vision development for sustainable and equitable societies

Conclusion

The complexity of scaling climate action and the significant opportunities available through integrated approaches are both immense. While individual-level barriers, local governance constraints, and institutional limitations create substantial challenges, examples of successful innovation suggest pathways forward. The emphasis on justice, community agency, and co-benefits provides a framework for climate action that addresses immediate social needs while building long-term resilience. Success will require sustained attention to narrative development, institutional reform, and genuine commitment to addressing structural inequities that currently undermine climate action effectiveness.

The critical decade for climate action demands approaches that go beyond technical solutions to engage with the full range of social, political, and economic factors that enable or constrain transformative change.