

How can we mobilise new meanings for social change?

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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 6a on Tuesday 9 September 2025.

Energy is not consumed for its own sake but rather is used in pursuit of meaningful goals – comfort, convenience, speed, productivity, growth. These goals shape consumption across multiple sectors, and the nature of policy and intervention intended to mobilise sustainable futures. They affect social change at every scale – how energy is used in households, how particular transport modes are provisioned for in urban spaces, national policies and international trade – and they co-evolve with social, political and technological developments. Consequently, many of the meanings that are accepted and normalised today are geared towards acceleration of climate change and make it difficult for alternative, more sustainable practices to gain traction. In a world where we need to mitigate climate change and adapt to its effects, we must challenge these meanings as we enter the remaining half of the critical decade for climate change action. Despite the urgency of the climate crisis, much climate action struggles to imagine alternatives to these incumbent meanings, often intertwined with economic growth and prosperity, and therefore risks reinforcing existing patterns of consumption and resource use. This session reflected on the opportunities and challenges of shifting these cultural narratives. The aim was to explore how reimagining the meanings underpinning everyday life can help accelerate social change at scale.

This session was convened by Chantal Sullivan-Thomsett, Tim Braunholtz-Speight and Claire Hoolohan as theme leads for Accelerating Social Change at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. The briefing note was prepared by Leilai Immel-Parkinson with support from Joel Gilbert and Mark Wilson. It explores how meanings, norms and cultural narratives contribute to social change, and what can be done to mobilise meanings and accelerate climate action.

Introduction

Energy is not consumed for its own sake but rather in pursuit of goals such as staying warm, keeping clean or

or travelling to work. These goals are in turn shaped by shared meanings such as comfort, convenience, speed, productivity or growth¹. Meanings affect social change at every scale: from international trade, national policy and the provision of transport in urban spaces to how energy is used in households. And meanings co-evolve with social, political and technological developments. Consequently, many of the meanings that are accepted and normalised today are bound with resource-intensive ways of living and make it difficult for alternative, more sustainable practices

¹ Kent, J.L., 2014. *Driving to save time or saving time to drive? The enduring appeal of the private car*. Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice 65, 103–115.

to gain traction. As we enter the second half of the critical decade for climate action, challenging and reimagining these meanings is essential to overcome existing patterns of consumption and resource use.

This session, consisting of provocations by four speakers followed by a panel discussion, explored the opportunities and challenges of shifting these cultural narratives through both theory and practice. It discussed how reimagining the meanings that underpin daily life can help accelerate social change at scale.

Provocation 1

‘People are not the problem: publics as the source of new meanings for social change’ -Tom Hargreaves, University of East Anglia

The public are often framed as a barrier to meaningful and rapid climate action. For example, being portrayed as reluctant to change their behaviours or accept new technologies. Research from the University of East Anglia found that dominant approaches to public engagement tacitly adopt this framing, for example, when they seek to align with ‘public values’, or strive to make ‘sustainable consumption’ convenient or easy². Whilst these strategies have had some success, they also reinforce dominant framings of unsustainable meanings such as comfort, convenience and consumerism, shutting out alternative issues and problem framings that might be more congruent with sustainability transitions. In contrast, citizen-led approaches often prioritise fundamentally different meanings to social change, foregrounding equity, justice, inclusivity and control. These findings suggest that institutions must become more open to these diverse framings of climate issues, and embed new approaches to public engagement, such as the UKERC Public Engagement Observatory³, that are seeking to develop ‘whole systems’ approaches to public engagement that help facilitate higher levels of institutional responsiveness.

Provocation 2

‘Sufficiency – a new meaning for social change from research with off-grid (boater) households’ -Louise Turner, University of Manchester

Meanings are inseparable from other components of everyday life. The homes we live in, infrastructures we

engage with and experiences we gain all interact with meanings. So, to consider how to mobilise new meanings, we can learn from exemplars of those whose everyday routines already embody new meanings. Research with off-grid boaters⁴ and rainwater tank users⁵ shows that interactions with different infrastructures produces meanings that are more compatible with sustainability, such as sufficiency. Sufficiency denotes a shift away from increasing wants towards satisfying basic needs – consuming neither too much nor too little. Princen⁶ argues that this reflection on upper and lower consumption levels is key to sustainability and, in these settings, differentiation between luxury and functional use of water occurs as households engage with water containers. These findings suggest that experimentation with new infrastructures, and the corresponding acquisition of skills, can encourage the emergence of alternative meanings. Moreover, active repair of clothing and objects among participants living with these alternative water infrastructures highlighted that the meaning of sufficiency can potentially ripple out across multiple dimensions of resource-use from one starting point.

What would living with sufficiency mean for the critical decade and what technologies and skills might we need to achieve it?

Provocation 3

‘Climate change and underlying sources of meaning’ - Tom Crompton, Common Cause Foundation

In the context of climate change, meanings are often thought of as tied to high-emissions practices, for instance purchasing a luxury car or holiday in pursuit of a sense of self-worth. Yet underlying these meanings are more foundational questions about how we identify ourselves in relation to others, and our relationship with our mortality, that reach beyond meanings and practices with direct emissions implications. Social psychology research offers the perspectives of Social Dominance Orientation and Right-Wing Authoritarianism which explain variations in people’s indifference to the ecological crisis and predict hostility towards marginalised groups and right-wing political beliefs. Additionally, Terror Management Theory shows how fear of death is often metabolised by asserting dominance over others. These perspectives are fuelled on the one hand

⁴Turner, L., Hoolohan, C., Mander, S., 2025. *Learning from off-grid water use: how the bathing practices of houseboat dwellers reconceptualise the water infrastructure-consumption relationship: Learning from off-grid water use.* Consumption and Society 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1332/27528499Y2025D000000057>

⁵Gardiner, A., 2010. *Do rainwater tanks herald a cultural change in household water use?* Australasian Journal of Environmental Management, 17(2), pp.100–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14486563.2010.9725255>

⁶Princen, T. 2005. *The Logic of Sufficiency*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

²Chilvers, J., Pallett, H., & Hargreaves, T., 2018. *Ecologies of participation in socio-technical change: The case of energy system transitions*. Energy Research and Social Science 49, 199–210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.03.020>

³Chilvers, J., Pallett, H., Hargreaves, T., Stephanides, P., Waller, L., 2022. An Observatory for Public Engagement with Energy and Climate Change. <https://doi.org/10.5286/UKERC.EDC.000954>

by cultural values of power and security that valorise wealth, celebrity and consumerism, and on the other by feelings of insecurity such as economic precarity or perceived threats. Taken together, these dynamics vastly widen the field where climate-relevant social meanings form and are spread.

Are these dynamics immutable or must effective climate responses engage them? How should 'climate-relevant' debate expand to include the psychological links between collective tolerance for ecological crisis and other forms of prejudice and discrimination? Could some responses inadvertently strengthen these preconditions? And what practical steps emerge from research on generalised prejudice and fear of death?

Provocation 4

Mobilising new meanings: reframing responsibility as ability to respond -Ruth Larbey, University of East Anglia

Responsibility can denote a duty of care or control, or being accountable or blameable. Its scope is conventionally framed in moral, legal, scientific or policy terms. Dominant meanings of responsibility reinforce existing conventions of economic growth, technological optimism and market solutions by embedding technocratic and economic logics, and by depoliticising, universalising, commodifying, temporally displacing and superficially labelling. Indications of a different approach point toward decentred, distributed responsibility. Examples include responsible innovation – the notion of 'taking care of the future through collective stewardship of science and innovation' ⁷p.1570) – or by giving attention to differentiated abilities to respond, captured by the concept of feminist response-ability⁸. Research into mapping responsible assessments of tree planting for carbon reduction in the UK shows that assessments can help to shape the future, not just observe or predict it. It shows that responsibility emerges through science and policy and is generated through situated, relational practice, revealing possibilities to re-make social conventions. Therefore, integrating broader, non-dominant

practices of responsibility (and response-ability) into assessments opens up possible alternative choices.

What would change if we prioritised our ability to respond?

Panel discussion

The panel discussion covered a broad range of topics including the role of values, responsibility and equity in shaping social change. Participants reflected that striving for perfection can inhibit collective action, arguing instead for embracing imperfection and difference as sources of strength. Diversity was seen as both a challenge and an opportunity – while values vary across society, commonalities such as care and fairness can support more inclusive forms of climate engagement. Discussion also touched on the language of responsibility and innovation, highlighting tensions between precaution and urgency, and how terms like 'sustainable development' or 'innovation' can shape dominant meanings. The conversation explored enablers of grassroots change, noting that bottom-up initiatives often emerge from both crisis and abundance and interact as part of a wider ecology of engagement. Questions of gender, social justice and the risk of policy co-option were also raised. For instance, whether ideas like sufficiency could be repackaged as austerity. Throughout the discussion, speakers reflected on how meanings themselves are dynamic, being formed, contested and reinterpreted through collective action and language. They highlighted that social change depends as much on reshaping shared meanings as on shifting technologies and behaviours.

Conclusion

This session provided a wide-ranging discussion of how meanings shape climate action spanning policy, scientific assessment frameworks, public engagement and everyday life. It explored how and from where meanings emerge, and who drives them, contrasting dominant meanings with their always and already existing deviant meanings that may offer openings to more sustainable futures.

⁷Stilgoe, J., Owen, R., Macnaghten, P., 2013. *Developing a framework for responsible innovation*. Research Policy 42, 1568–1580.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2013.05.008>

⁸Haraway, D., 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* [WWW Document]. URL <https://www.dukeupress.edu/staying-with-the-trouble> (accessed 17.10.25).