



## Linking individual action and system change in climate advocacy

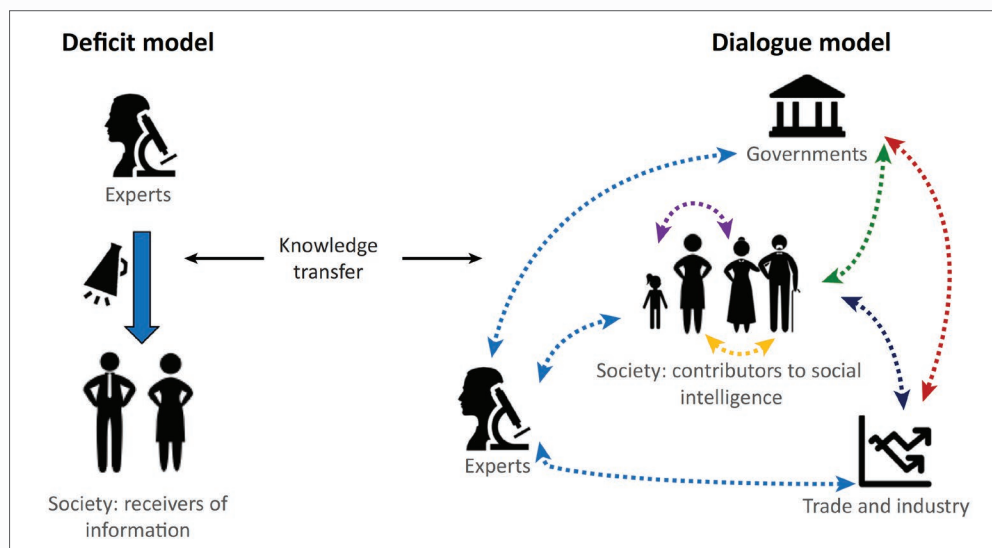
Some commentators argue that focusing campaign efforts on the actions of the individual simply makes people feel **guilty**, while acting as a **distraction** from the role of big polluters in driving climate change and the need for wider **system change** driven by governments. This is particularly true in the context of big international events like the next **UN Summit** on climate change or the release of a report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (**IPCC**).

The social science of climate change engagement, however, shows that individual change is an integral part of system change — in driving social shifts, influencing government and in wider climate advocacy. On the other side of the coin, it also shows that governments need to focus efforts on empowering individuals to take action in their lives for system change to happen.

### Individuals play a crucial role in driving wider social change

Social change emerges as a result of a dynamic interaction between different parts of society — as illustrated in the ‘dialogue model’ in the figure below. This compares to the older ‘**deficit model**’, where experts decide on the best course of action and then transfer that information to society.

In the dialogue model, individuals have many different roles to play in social change — as advocates, business people, consumers, friends, teachers, and community members amongst others.



**Source:** Courchamp, F. et al., (2017) *Invasion Biology: Specific Problems and Possible Solutions, Trends in Ecology & Evolution*

In previous **instances** for example, one person adopting a new behaviour like putting up solar panels or a vegetarian diet has prompted others to do the same. People are profoundly **influenced** by the behaviours of the people around them, particularly those they view as similar to themselves.

On a social level, there may be unexpected '**tipping points**', in which a large enough minority of people doing things differently is able to bring about wider cultural change.

This process is also important as a way of influencing governments. Politicians in democratic systems need evidence of **social consent** in order to introduce radical policy change. Unpopular climate policies have **threatened** the survival of governments in the past – and even seemingly 'win-win' technologies and ideas, such as free home insulation schemes, are not taken up if they are unpopular or if people view them as irrelevant.

### *Campaigning insight*

International climate summits like COP26 are an example of the world taking collective action in order to tackle climate change. People can also be a part of that. The actions we take as an individual, matter – driving wider social change and demonstrating to governments what is needed.

## Limiting temperature rise to 1.5C means changing lifestyles

Globally, households account for around **two-thirds** of global greenhouse gas emissions. Limiting warming to 1.5C therefore means profound changes to people's lives on a range of totemic and personal issues like diet, personal travel and home heating.

People living in richer countries have a particularly significant role to play. **Households** in the top 10% of income earners around the world use nearly half (45%) of all energy used for land transport and 75% of all energy used for flying. These households – which include a significant proportion of households in the EU – will need to make a major contribution to reducing emissions.

### *Campaigning insight*

Emissions reductions from the energy system can feel distant from people's lives, resulting in little change to the world they see around them. But the deeper cuts to emissions compatible with a 1.5C world will affect day to day lives and lifestyles, particularly for people with higher incomes.



## Governments need to empower people to change their lifestyles

Lifestyle change is an important part of system change – but short-term and voluntary effort by individuals is not **sufficient** to achieve the radical emissions reductions needed. Individuals operate within a broader context that enables or constrains them from taking action. This includes their physical environment, cultural conventions, social norms and financial and **policy frameworks** – as well as, crucially, income levels and access to resources.

For instance, an estimated **three billion people** worldwide currently rely on highly polluting and unhealthy traditional solid fuels for household cooking and heating. Shifting these energy sources to electricity and clean fuels could have a significant impact on household emissions around the world and provide multiple development outcomes, but people need the support, social context and income to make the change.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided an **insight** into the role that governments and society can play in driving rapid, extensive and profound changes in lifestyle – including through changing social norms, introducing a sense of collective agency, and infrastructure to lock in behaviour changes longer term.

### *Campaigning insight*

People are willing to make change, but governments need to create the conditions under which lifestyle changes are possible.

## The advocacy journey: campaigning on a personal level can open the door to campaigning for change

**More people** undertake low impact individual environmental behaviours in their lives (like recycling or turning off lights), than high-impact behaviours (like eating a plant-based diet or avoiding flying).

This may not always be a result of personal choice, however. Evidence shows that **younger people** may be undertaking small behaviour change actions not because they think it is the best answer to climate change, but because they can see no other way of reflecting their beliefs and values in their day to day lives. If they can access the knowledge, community support and confidence, they may be prepared to take more significant actions.

Once someone **adopts a more difficult behaviour**, they are also then more likely to adopt other significant impactful behaviours. This is probably because undertaking more demanding actions tends to have a bigger impact on identity, building a sense of commitment and confidence.

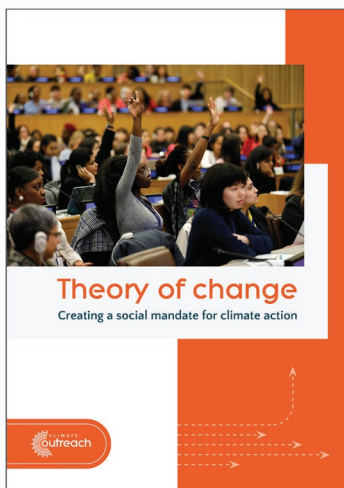
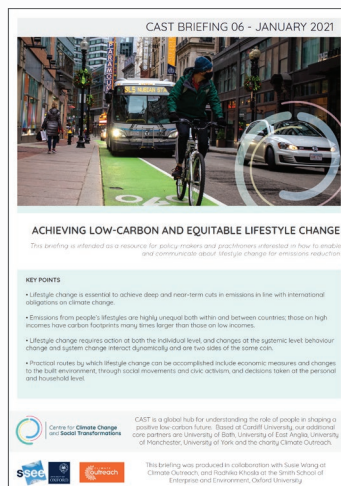
When **people do something** on the basis of their free choice and internal understanding of the world, the behaviour is also more likely to ‘spill over’ into other aspects of their life than if they followed a financial incentive.

People taking action in their personal lives are more likely to persuade others that wider change is needed. When interacting with others, people tend to strongly **dislike** it if they think someone else is being inconsistent or **hypocritical**. Climate communicators, advocates and researchers are seen as more **convincing** – and their advice more likely to be acted upon – if they themselves pursue low-carbon lifestyles.

### *Campaigning insight*

Citizens undertaking personal lifestyle change may move towards advocating for system change if they are given the support and context to do so. They are also more convincing to others, as they are seen to be acting in line with their beliefs and values.

# Find out more



This briefing was created as a part of Climate Outreach's [Climate Engagement Lab](#), working to enable climate campaigners to build campaigns around evidence-based practical insights into what works for delivering a social mandate for transformative climate action. The start-up phase of this project was kindly funded by the Samworth Foundation, Kestrelman Trust and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.



## About Climate Outreach

**Climate Outreach** is a team of social scientists and communication specialists passionate about building a social mandate for climate action. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, we help organisations communicate about climate change in ways that resonate with the values of their audiences. We have 15 years of experience widening and deepening public engagement with climate change, working with a wide range of international partners including government, international bodies, academic institutions, charities, businesses, faith organisations and youth groups.

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