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Communicating Climate Change in the Greater Manchester Region: a whole systems approach to change

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Abstract

This chapter aims to discuss how communicating about climate change, might be achieved at a Regional level. It is argued that it is impossible to separate climate change communication from communication about an alternative economic model – a Viable Economy and that the behaviour change needed is primarily a design issue. The challenge of climate change communication is considered in the light of social norms that fail to consider the urgency of adaptation and mitigation, even in the face of knowledge about climate change. Hard, costly, time consuming lessons learned in public health are relevant to communicating about climate. Ecological public health is offered as a framework within which to explore climate change communication. The task is a complex and long term process as it will involve altering accepted reality and common sense, changing culture not just behaviour. The multi-faceted communication approach of Steady State Manchester is outlined and three specific examples are given of different approaches to communicating climate change, drawing out features in common with an ecological public health imagination.

1 Introduction

This paper shares the knowledge and experience of communicating about climate change gained by Steady State Manchester (SSM). We will do this through analysis of our communication strategy using an ecological public health framework and case studies which illustrate aspects of our work.

SSM is a small group of research activists established in November 2012, working at the regional level in north west England (Burton 2016). We are a collective (currently 9 people) with a network of 31 members and many more supporters. Funding is minimal, mainly from membership fees, and there are no paid staff.

SSM understands climate change to be the most serious crisis facing the world, but in line with mainstream approaches to sustainability since the Brundtland Commission (WECD 1987) understands climate change as part of a wider system which recognises the

interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental factors (Meadows et al. 1972). We add cultural factors. At the core of this system is the economy and as the IPCC note (IPCC 2014:8), economic growth makes the biggest contribution to climate change and environmental degradation. Thus our focus is on envisioning and promoting a viable economy as a vehicle for climate change adaptation and further mitigation; an economy no longer reliant on economic growth and extraction from the natural world. What we call a viable economy is one in which people live *in a world that is viable, rather than one that risks tipping into decline or crisis: that means an economy that is resilient and dynamic, providing enough for all, while supporting social well-being. And it must be ecologically viable, not causing further damage to the earth's fragile systems without which life is not possible.* (Burton, Irvine, Emanuel and Barnes, 2014:2)

Communication about climate change, then, is inseparable from communication about a viable economy. Figure 1 shows the way that the economy is embedded in culture and society, which can only exist within the ecosystems of the natural world.

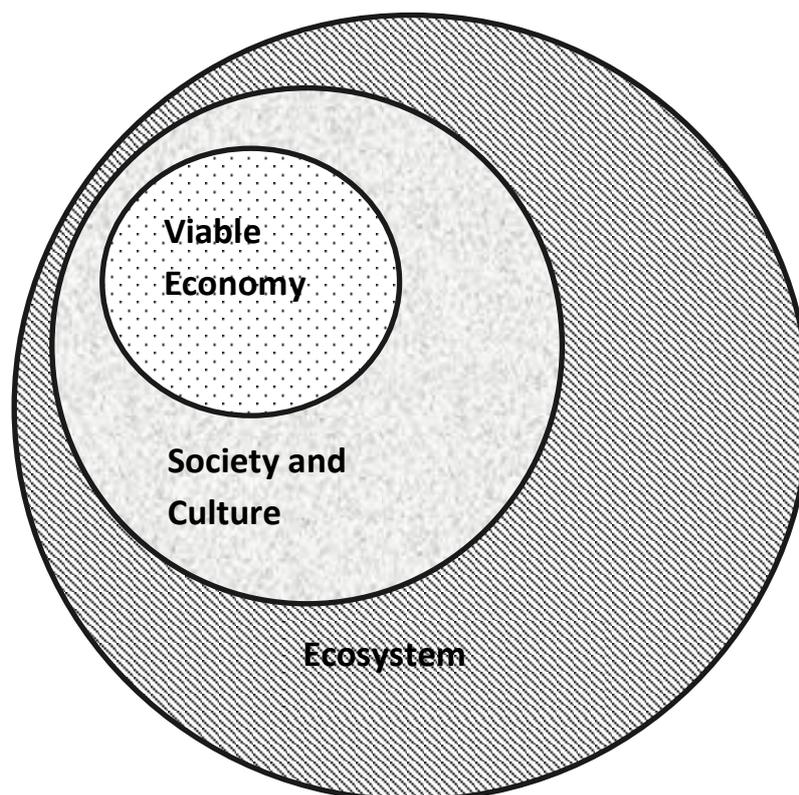


Fig 1 A Viable Economy, Society and Culture Embedded in the Ecosystems of the Natural World

Our communication aim is two fold. Firstly, to engage with decision-makers and the wider public in Greater Manchester and more widely, to raise awareness, and promote the idea of a viable economy in order to encourage a groundswell for change. Secondly, to advocate and support developments that demonstrate elements of a viable future, helping in the transition

to a viable economy and thereby growing a shared understanding of what is needed in the way of change.

Our activities focus on the regional level. We realise that whilst Government has an important part to play in leading and legislating on climate change, we can exert relatively little influence at this level. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that in many ways, fundamental change is needed at more local levels. As Stears (2016) recognises:

The old mechanisms of change don't work anymore because in other urgent moments in our past we have looked to the established authorities of Westminster and Whitehall and we have asked for change to emanate from there.Everything we know about what is going on in our country today, tells us that fundamental change is not going to begin from those places...The primary mechanism for change is working out who out there is rooted in the community, who actually can start this process going now be it a process of ... community economic regeneration... or a newly elected mayor trying to think about pushing the boundaries of the authority that he or she has within that situation,' (Stears 2016)

We are all local to the Greater Manchester region, so it is there that we seek to push the boundaries and catalyse change. Furthermore, there is growing recognition of the importance of cities and city regions, for economic and social development, largely due to their being large centres of population under local administrations (Simon 2016). Our work is concerned with identifying who we can best work with, who is or may become allies to our agenda, and endeavour to provide them with any support we can to get viable economy (and steady state) ideas taken on board for a future where everyone in our region can live well, with greater equity and within planetary resources.

2 The challenge

Our challenge, then, is to communicate the need for and promote social, economic and individual transformations that enable essential climate change adaptation and mitigation. Communication is an essential factor in achieving this, but we do not believe it can be effective if isolated from other crucial factors which contribute to a momentum for change, and, importantly, create the conditions for messages to be heard and acted upon.

We recognise that communication of climate change is notoriously difficult at all levels (Futerra 2005; Markowitz, Hodge and Harp 2014; Shome and Marx 2009). At the time of writing (2016) most people - and certainly decision makers - have had access to information. The enormity of the problem, however, invariably comes across as overwhelming, unpalatable and complex, and people may often feel powerless and unable to act. Furthermore, whilst the *fact* of climate change has been communicated, the *urgency* of adaptation and further mitigation has not. Many listeners, whether they be lay people, professionals, or politicians, do not see it as a priority in relation to competing issues in their lives. Consequently communications are not absorbed, or worse still make people defensive and/or can reinforce denial! The social consensus – or social norm – is to ignore the urgency

and importance of climate change and to support the notion of endless economic growth, irrespective of the damage that growth will wreak on the environment.

The good news is that norms do change. Naomi Klein, for example, argues that those of us determined to successfully address climate change can learn from the campaign to abolish slavery in the US in the 19th century (Klein 2015) and the role that the abolitionist movement played in breaking the control that slave owners had over the state. The lesson is that it is necessary to create a mass movement in favour of a different way of living, culturally, socially and economically.

Public health shows us other examples of norms shifting. A recent UK example is reducing smoking. Non-smoking rates almost doubled - from 48% in 1948 to 81% in 2014 (ONS 2016). Over the years there were mass communication campaigns about the dangers of smoking, and these played a part. However, a range of economic, fiscal, political and legal measures, designed a society which supported the non-smoking messages, offering alternatives to people, aids to help them quit smoking and making it easier for them to do so.

We are inspired by public health approaches, and we are seeking to explore the extent to which public health approaches are useful in this very different sphere, in attempts to effect change at a regional level. In the following discussion we use an ecological public health through which to view our communication and change strategies.

3 Ecological public health framework

Public health focuses on whole populations. It is concerned with challenging or altering mass behaviour, society wide processes and collective experience. It recognises that individuals operate within social frameworks, mediated by groups, which can be lost in more individualistic approaches. In our experience, locally, Public Health thinking has not had the impact it might on organisations seeking to address climate change, despite the point made by Johnson (2013) that hard, costly, time consuming lessons have been learned in public health campaigns which climate change campaigns can learn from, in particular the importance of locating our communications within –people’s existing value sets and priorities, starting from what is important to different audiences.

We try to integrate these lessons into our approach to communication about climate change. The task is greater than awareness raising or behaviour change. Like the relatively new branch of public health, ecological public health, we see the communication task as *altering accepted reality and common sense*, –changing culture not just behaviour, where culture is *a bundle of tensions and possibilities* (Rayner and Lang, 2012: 326, 276).

Some of the key features of an ecological public health approach, shared by SSM are:

- a need to *design* a world where ecological choices are easier choices through a range of whole system measures. This recognises that individuals and groups are located within a wider web of influences, which dramatically affects the amount of control they have to make changes. The design aspect of behaviour change in public health is, perhaps the disciplines most important contribution to transformational change

strategies, and there is an urgent need for sustainable frameworks for living to be articulated, designed and championed.

- an holistic or *whole system* perspective that recognises the interconnectedness of economic, social and environmental well-being and does not focus only on internal attitude change.
- A recognition that communication has a symbiotic relationship with a wealth of services and policies, qualities of which contribute to cultural and other norm and system change. This explains the many other factors in addition to communication, including practical measures which can be taken, which create momentum for change and importantly *create the conditions for messages to be heard and acted upon*.

The encouragement to *embrace complexity*, by analysing and confronting it. A recognition that a long term strategic approach to facilitate journeys, rather than singular acts of change is needed. There are no quick fixes and soft policy options on their own will fail and may even be part of the problem, obfuscating the task (Rayner & Lang 2012).

- An understanding of the array of components that will lead to sustainability or lack of sustainability, including: a focus on the interrelationship and dependence of human health (and in our case social and economic justice) on the eco-system (see, for example, Raworth 2012); the need to *integrate* the different dimensions (in our case social, economic, environmental and cultural) in order to recognise and manage conflicts arising from an emphasis on any one of them; an understanding that we live in a constantly changing world and that there are a number of different transitions for change - cultural transformation is one of them, alongside, economic, demographic, urban, energy, ecological, democratic transformations.
- Build knowledge through continual intellectual engagements. This requires more than evidence, including the pursuit of social values, highlighting the role of interest groups and debates, and not just limiting dialogue to restricted scientific circles. Wider thinking about the nature of life, good societies, order and change is needed: in other words, encourages *reflective thinking*.
- Adopt an overtly interdisciplinary and multi actor perspective. Action is required on multiple fronts and change requires the *building of a movement*. Communications thereby serve to facilitate multi level action by state, private spheres, commerce and civil society, building collaborations to drive innovation, grounded in citizen perspectives and adopting co-design, co-creation and co-production approaches (Durose and Richardson 2016) to mitigation activities

The need in climate communication is, therefore, for an ecological public health imagination, which stresses the need for critical thinking and imagining wholesale change and for using opportunities when they emerge. The fire at Kings Cross tube station in 1987 is a public health example of using opportunities when they emerge. It was caused by a discarded cigarette or match. This led to an outcry and inquiry, making the case for changing social

norms. The idea that smoking bans impinged on individual liberty, was no longer accepted by the majority of people and a cultural shift was possible, leading eventually to legislation banning smoking in public places¹.

Altering accepted reality and common sense, changing culture not just behaviour, is, undoubtedly a complex and long term process. Our work acknowledges this complexity and that whilst the work is urgent it is also long term. Our own communication strategy is consistent with an ecological public health perspective.

4 Steady State Manchester and communicating climate change

'How do you change a worldview, an unquestioned ideology?' (Klein 2015)

It is clear to SSM that our communication approach has to contribute to the necessary cultural transformation of Naomi Klein's question. Not only must we stimulate the momentum for the necessary change, but we must link our communication with factors which will enable messages to be heard and acted upon.

Everything we do in one way or another is about communication. We agreed an approach to communication in 2014 which aimed to both widen the base of who we engage with and maximise the impact of our communication activities. Essentially we are endeavouring to change a worldview, an unquestioned ideology about economic growth and the exploitation of environmental resources. We seek to enable people to discuss, challenge and develop their ideas and thinking; to help others see that their interests coincide with minimising climate change and a viable economic future; to offer hope and possibilities for living better within planetary boundaries; to share practical ways of doing things differently; to provide critiques of current practices but at the same time offer alternatives. Our communications are directed at decision makers (politicians and those with power to effect change), civil society organisations, academics and the general public, thereby seeking to influence both individuals and organisations.

We communicate in a variety of ways, framing the issues differently and using different channels for different audiences and different purposes, depending on whether we are seeking to introduce new ideas or challenge existing ones; changing how people think and act; helping others see their interests connect with climate change issues; offering possibilities for hope and providing solutions not just problems; or sharing practical ways to do things differently.

We publish and disseminate reports, articles, working papers and pamphlets. These introduce new ideas and give examples of practical action for change, are available in hard copy, on our website and distributed in meetings or at events.

¹ A fire at London's Kings Cross underground station in 1987 killed 57 people. Smoking had been banned on the trains in 1984 and was then extended to the whole of the Underground system in 1987. The 2006 Health Act banned smoking in public places.

We use social media to promote the idea of a viable economy and its link with climate change. We maintain a website where we have posted over 220 blog posts and make our publications available. These cover a range of topics relevant to social, economic, environmental and cultural issues, designed to introduce new ideas, help others think differently challenge received wisdom and offer detailed analyses of published research for others to use in their related campaigns. We have, a Facebook page and at the time of writing have made 3920 tweets with 1179 Twitter followers and have 345 subscribers on our mailing list, who receive regular email bulletins. In total we have 2,473 followers on social media so our reach is substantial. The majority of people who look at the website are based in the UK; but there is also a significant global following. Through our website we make connections with other organisations and relevant events.

We organise workshops, events and a monthly café conversation², both by ourselves and in partnership with others on a range of issues. These introduce new ideas and enable participants to see that their interests connect with those of the viable economy and climate change; and stimulate people to take action on climate change. We have produced films; go out to organisations to give talks, and present at conferences, locally and internationally.

We work in partnership with a range of organisations and arrange meetings and discussions with politicians and decision makers to discuss issues of concern, introduce new ideas and connect different interests to those of a viable economy.

We contribute to a range of campaigns mounted by other organisations with overlapping agendas. We seek relationships with those activists, academics, environmentalists, think tanks and influencers who share some common concerns in order to support a growing movement towards transformational change..

Underpinning the strategy is recognition that we are a learning organisation (Argyris 1999) with a need to develop our own understanding and skills of influential engagement with others. We hold regular meetings where we continuously review the ever changing context in which we work to form coalitions with others, share information and experiences and draw out the implications of these for our own understanding and activities.

Our strategy is influenced by Freirean methods (Freire 1972) which integrate learning, developing understanding and action. From this perspective, communication is a dialogic process whereby the taken-for-granted can be problematised, and as awareness grows, shared solutions and possible actions are articulated. Such an approach involves experts and lay people learning together, making sense of their world and thereby acting on it, changing it and being changed by it. It is an educational method which has an important contribution to make in transforming culture, as well as the other dimensions of life that need to change if climate change is to be addressed. It involves everyone potentially becoming a critical thinker, where the division between theory and practice (or knowledge and skill) dissolves (SSM, 2015).

² Informal themed conversations, loosely modelled on the World Café process (Brown and Isaacs 2005)

We create opportunities to network and engage others and to help others connect with each other. When writing a blog about an event, for example, we might interview people who were there to incorporate their perspective or ask a participant to write the blog for us.

We advocate, support and promote developments that demonstrate the application of ideas in order to generate shared understanding. As concrete alternatives take shape, we expect they will become more persuasive, more definite and more sophisticated.

The intention of our strategy to make our communication accessible in terms of language, to build from where people are and create a vision for action by

- Challenging feeling overwhelmed - communicate effective and credible solutions that can cumulate and scale up.
- Talking in relation to people's experience. Focus on the effects of climate change on people's lives, for example that people will need to pay more for dirty fossil fuel and alternatives
- Appealing to communal values for example health, community development, and having a clean and safe environment
- Amplifying the voices of affected communities: hear the voices of those directly impacted by climate change and from those implementing solutions at the community level – this will help to highlight how climate solutions can be empowering and could serve to overcome structural barriers.
- Empower people to send their own messages: give people the chance to communicate their own desire for climate solutions.
- Create a vision for action: Where possible, make it easy to understand what needs to happen; something simple that can capture people's imagination and is physical and concrete. An example would be a world powered by 100% renewable energy
- Incorporate questions at the end of written communications in order to stimulate readers to comment and open up dialogue

We illustrate different communication approaches via three examples, each of which involve different methods, messages, partners and audiences. We will critically evaluate some of the communication challenges and the extent to which we may be contributing to cultural transformation in Greater Manchester

4.1 Fossil Fuel Divestment: in which we carry out detailed research and use this to influence the local state via political decision makers and catalyse other campaigns.

Since its inception, SSM has attempted to influence local politicians. We obtained information about the City Council's banking strategy and investments from a sympathetic local politician responsible for Finance. It became clear that there were substantial

investments held in the local government pension fund covering the City and the nine other local authorities in the region.

One channel of influence is via the local Overview and Scrutiny Committees³. We participated in the Finance Committee, initially writing to ask them about their ethical investment strategy. We were able to follow this up by attending a meeting to speak to our letter and make suggestions for more ethical choices. A formal response was received to our letter in two parts a) banking and b) investments. We attended subsequent meetings, including one to which the Pension Fund senior managers had been invited (a year later).

In between meetings, we wrote blog posts summarising the discussion. In anticipation of the argument that the Pension Fund managers had a duty to get the best financial return from their investments, we prepared a well-researched report focusing on fossil fuels and ethical investments. Our report presented information from a variety of sources, including up to date legal advice on the broad fiduciary duty of trustees, beyond ensuring maximum financial returns and we discussed this at the meeting the Pension Fund attended (see <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2015/03/13/greater-manchester-pension-fund-some-positive-moves-but-more-ambition-needed/> for a detailed report of meeting, a link to our report as well as links to the previous discussions on this issue). We were able to question the restrictive interpretation of the duties of the Fund's Trustees, and drew attention to examples of decisions taken by other large local government pension funds about positive investment decisions in favour of renewable energy – all pointing to a broader understanding of ethical investment decisions. The council requested that the Pension Fund review their responsible investment strategy, which at that time did not include environmental and social issues and focused on maximising financial returns. This they did.

About the same time, a Fossil Free Greater Manchester campaign focussing on fossil divestment by the Pension Fund., was initiated by local environmental activists, including prominent members of Friends of the Earth, part of the national coalition of groups campaigning for a Fossil Free UK⁴. SSM became part of this campaign and helped it get off to a flying start as necessary background research had been done. We have worked together on a multi-pronged communication campaign for fossil fuel divestment from the Pension Fund, including direct action, letter writing, open letters to the Pension Fund, report writing, and presenting examples of divestment by other pension funds. We have used multiple message frames, tapping into different fields of meaning for different people at different times (Goffman 1974). Our frames began with ethical investment and went on to include financial risk, and environmental risk and/or benefit. The metaphor of dinosaurs (to evoke a lack of forward thinking), used in a direct action campaign, attracted media attention.

³ Scrutiny Committees are made up of elected members who act as 'critical friends' to local decision makers. They are able to consider any matters of relevance to residents and make recommendations to decision makers. Their meetings are made public through minutes and videos. Residents may request to speak to matters under consideration

⁴ See <http://gofossilfree.org/uk/>

4.2 Promotion of a sharing economy platform in which we build a coalition of different stakeholders to persuade experimentation with a scheme for utilising excess assets for community good.

In common with others, we have identified the nature of the finance and money system in promoting excessive exploitation of material resources and the deleterious consequences of the growth economy and material throughput for social and economic equity (SSM 2012; 2014). A steady state economy implies a more redistributive economy and society serving both climate change mitigation and adaptation. One way to connect redistribution with the reduction of material throughput is to make use of and share out the under-utilised, wasted resources of the hyper-abundant city economy.

We drew on our networks to identify people who had either worked on alternative financial institutions or were interested in exploring, in a practical way, the development of the sharing economy. We formed a steering committee for the project. This was a communication challenge: stimulating interest, identifying the points at which the proposed project idea fitted with each person's existing interests, and persuading them of the advantages of becoming involved, even before there was any practical realisation of initial ideas. Our steering committee was made up of a range of different stakeholders, including: the director of a third sector support organisation in the city, the person responsible for implementing a successful timebanking project in the city, the local credit union, a commercial ethical investment manager, a local politician with an interest in the sharing economy, a researcher from a local economic think tank who had been involved in research on the Brixton and Bristol Pounds, an academic with an interest in alternative finance and members of SSM. The group decided to explore setting up a viable, non-monetary exchange project through which spare local resources would be linked with people participating in and contributing to their local communities, supported by an online platform. A small grant application was made to support some development work, which entailed concisely describing the project, in writing. The major communication challenge then became one of stimulating interest and persuading organisations with surplus resources as well as community organisations of the potential benefits of such a scheme, and to illustrate how the proposed scheme built on their strengths and enhanced their local profiles. (see for a rationale for such a project, <https://steadystatemanchester.net/?s=sharing+platform>).

To do this we established meetings with key people in relevant local organisations, and then introduced the project, framing the benefits that involvement might bring, in a variety of ways, fitting the message to the audience. This included stressing the benefits in terms of corporate social responsibility; community service and low cost access to goods and services.

At the time of writing, interest in the idea is growing. In one locality a similar project is about to begin, as a result of our input although utilising a commercial platform, and there is a possibility that a pilot project in another locality will start.

The task of awareness raising, encouraging others to think differently and persuading other potential partners continues and we continue to play a part in communicating the possibilities

of a sharing economy that contributes to better use of spare resources and decreases the need for endless consumption and the ways in which this contributes to climate change adaptation and mitigation.

4.3 Café Conversation: in which people come together to explore tactics for climate change communication through a dialogic approach

Our monthly Café Conversations are carefully planned. We publicise them on the SSM website, to the SSM mailing list and social media. We prepare an introduction or set of provocations at the start of the event along with some focused questions for groups to consider. At the event itself, groups either move around in World Café style (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) between tables, or they consider each of the questions with the same group of people. The process involves participants collectively identifying the most important, inspirational or innovative points to emerge from their discussions. These ideas are then ‘harvested’ and shared with all participants. A closing summary of the overall set of discussions is made by the event facilitator and next steps identified as relevant, encouraging participants and others to suggest topics for further conversations. Feedback from participants has been very positive.

One café conversation held in October 2016 gives a taste of what they are like in practice. The theme for the event was ‘*Climate change is an emergency: what do we know about the best way of influencing decision makers?*’

We were keen to involve agencies in Greater Manchester which have a key role communicating about climate change and through their networks we were successful in attracting 25 people, one third of whom were attending a Café Conversation for the first time.

Two brief provocations from SSM collective members outlined the scale of the emergency. These suggested that a) the problem of creating momentum for the necessary change may not only be a communication issue; and b) that we can learn a lot from public health and other campaigns.

Participants energetically engaged with these provocations and stimuli and identified a wide range of scenarios, positive and negative that we can learn more from, including a range of possibilities for influencing decision makers to address climate change. These included:

- tactics used by successful lobbyists including the oil, gas and fracking industries;
- making the change an easier choice through a combination of contextual changes;
- developing a greater understanding of legislation-driven change has been achieved;
- understanding and seeing the humanity in others and appealing to what is important to them;
- the younger generation can be very influential;
- the potential of local authorities for leading change;

- the importance of engaging the media in addressing misinformation and supporting both climate change mitigation and adaptation;
- understanding that some changes are controversial
- realising that social pressure can catalyse action
- the importance of having a vision of what living well with adaptation and within planetary resources might look like – and involve a wide range of people in creating the visions.

Further dissemination of the conversation was done through a blog post (Emanuel 2016). This café conversation was successful in terms of helping people make connections between the environment and the economy, introducing new ideas and stimulating shared learning.

5 Conclusion

The task of communicating climate change at a City Regional level is complex and multi-faceted. We have argued that lessons can be learnt from public health in relation to cultural and behaviour change and that ecological public health offers us some pointers to effective communication strategies. In SSM we follow the ecological public health framework in our varied communications, arguing for a viable economy approach to climate change: one that takes a whole systems approach and that understands the interconnections between the economy, the environment, culture and society. . Our communication strategy sets out to communicate climate change in its totality; mitigating the effects of climate change and adapting to the changes in climate that are already with us.

We realise that many climate decisions must be taken at national and international levels. Nevertheless, the regional level is a useful level at which to pursue policies and practices that support a viable economic future within planetary boundaries. We have given some examples of complex communication approaches, and the importance of critical, continual reflection on their impact, in order to adapt and modify them. We have outlined, above, some of the lessons from ecological public health communication that we endeavour to take on board. Other lessons, from our own experiences include:

- Understanding the complexity of the context in which climate change is taking places and messages about it are either not heard or acted upon.
- Importantly, a regional communication strategy must take into account that there are few opportunities in the national and international landscape to progress an agenda of hope, but at a regional level this is possible.
- There are no easy, short term results to be gained. Climate change communication, and the necessary policy and practice change is a long term task.
- Struggle to get the messages across, and most importantly heard and acted upon, is inevitable.

- Communication about climate change, its mitigation and adaptation is part of a wider transformational change project that is needed to design a society which truly addresses climate change. Thereafter communication is needed to promote this design.
- It is important to seek out opportunities to enable people to make sense of what is happening in their lives in order to enable these cultural shifts
- Communication in narrow channels will be ineffective, and part of the communication about climate change lies in forging alliances with others and becoming part of a social movement for change.

Indeed, along with Lang and Rayner (2012) we suggest the need to “*be noisy and build alliances...to be change agents building and supporting movements*” and not assume that change will come from our communications alone.

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