Steady State Manchester

SSM

steadystatemanchester.net

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

Or

Are there easier ways to enable people to change what they do than focussing on individual behaviour change? If so let's use them!

My background is in public health and I am interested to find out how many people here are familiar with public health. It is an evidence based, interdisciplinary, team approach with 150 plus years of experience of societal behaviour change. Johnson (2013) argues that a lot of expensive, time consuming mistakes have been learnt in public health which the sustainability movement can learn from in fact they can ill afford not to learn from.

I am going to introduce public health by using the campaign to reduce smoking as an example. I will tell you a bit about ecological public health and tell you how it has informed my organisation, Steady State Manchester (SSM).

I qualified as a Health Education Officer in early 1980's. In the mid 80's, the name of the profession changed its name from Health Education to Health Promotion.

I think you will understand why, if I tell you about the smoking campaign which resulted in major very tangible changes during my career. Over 80% of adults in the UK are non-smokers now; whereas 48% were in 1948.

For years we kept repeating the dangers of smoking ; we learnt once people know, it does not have much impact to repeat it , unless the context changes massively

And as I can imagine many of you are aware, it is pretty frustrating to keep saying the same thing in different, and more imaginative ways, knowing it is not making any difference. So what made things change?

We realised we had to:

- Help people to stop; rather than telling them to
- Create an environment and culture where it is less attractive to start and where lighting up is less easy or attractive than not lighting up

While at the same time we needed to have compassion for people who did not want to or could not stop.

We involved everyone via a wide range of measures aimed at **SOCIETAL** rather than individual change - including legal measures. We recognised that education was an important component of making healthy lives accessible to more people. And it was one component of all the determinants of health which had to be tackled

The Determinants of Health (1992): Dahlgren and Whitehead

So as well as education and helping people to stop, the changes involved the price of tobacco, advertising and access to tobacco in shops, shifting ideas of where it was ok to smoke (bans at work, public spaces, in our houses, in cars...) and with whom, the idea of passive smoking emerged and that it was not ok to smoke in front of non-smokers, pregnant women and children and manners changed such as offering cigarettes and much more. It was a journey.

We had to recognise that while smoking might be important to us, others had more immediate concerns , such as their families, work and money and banging on a about it was not going to help.

Fundamentally it was a **DESIGN** job, involving all the determinants of health shown above; where education and awareness raising had a part to play alongside everything else. Once we realised this we started making a difference.....

And using our public health imaginations was very important –as can be seen in the changes that took place after the terrible fire at Kings Cross tube station in 1987. It was caused by a discarded cigarette or match, 57 people died. This led to an outcry and inquiry.

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 in 2006 banning smoking in public places.

In a small way (compared to climate change) we had **altered reality and accepted common sense**. It was not easy.   All along the way people said it was impossible to change people, some smokers were addicted, we were up against pressure groups for freedom to smoke, & large multinational companies with advertising budgets which were far greater than ours and who were happy to doctor the truth. What we had was influence; not power. I am sure you can think of other changes which involved transformating reality and accepted common sense eg gay marriage, apartheid). Do they also involve whole system approaches – societal redesign where through a process peoples interests and norms change?

Public health has been wrestling with addressing behaviour change for decades. Hard lessons have been learned – costly, time-consuming lessons that we can learn from.

Ecological public health learns from public health in general and recognises the importance of eco -systems on health as well as the other determinants

I have asked why focus on communication aimed at individual behaviour change; when making it easier to change is a much effortless way of enabling people to change what they do? We can see this with recycling, renewables etc –other things?

Make Eco Choices
Easier Choices

This approach acknowledges that individuals have limited control over their own lives and have good reasons to focus on their immediate their concerns, their families, work and how they are going to pay their bills, not climate change . Are we more likely to be successful if we value and respect people as they are?

A good example of using imagination in work to address climate change and changing **altered reality and accepted common sense** in a whole system way can be seen in the work of Wangari Maathai, What she did, and is continuing after her death, was by no means easy – it involved empowering women, campaigning, bringing down a repressive government and much more.

Wangari Maathai. Founder of the Green Belt Movement which facilitated the planting of 51 million trees in her life time! First environmentalist AND first African woman Nobel Prize laureate

There are lots more valuable insights that I think we can derive from ecological public health; you will have to read the pre-review draft chapter of our paper to find out more.

Finally, I am going to tell you about **Steady State Manchester as an example of ecological public health in action**

We are a small group of research activists, 9 are part of the collective, none of us are paid and we have minimal funds

We believe the greatest threat to us all is climate change. We understand climate change as part of a wider system and see economic, environmental, social and cultural factors as interconnected. We understand, as the IPCC (Intergovernmental panel on climate change) does that economic growth makes the biggest contribution

to climate change and environmental degradation. So we promote a viable economy that is resilient and dynamic; providing enough for us all and supporting social well being which will not further damage the environment. Our geographical focus is Greater Manchester

In these days when economic growth is seen as common sense we definitely are about **altering reality and accepted common sense**

As in ecological public health – we see what we are doing as everyone's business; we work where we think we can be most effective. We work primarily with local politicians, people who work in local authorities, voluntary organisations, businesses, academics and individuals

Another big lesson from those smoking campaigns, we try to start where everyone is at, find out their agendas. Where do theirs and ours co-incide? We are flexible. We think what we have to say is terribly important. We have to bear in mind that if it is not want they want to hear right now it may be overwhelming , they may run a mile, DENY. That is not easy. We are more likely to heard and accepted if we focus on finding common ground. This also respects the degree of control people at all levels have over their lives, their work and their decisions.
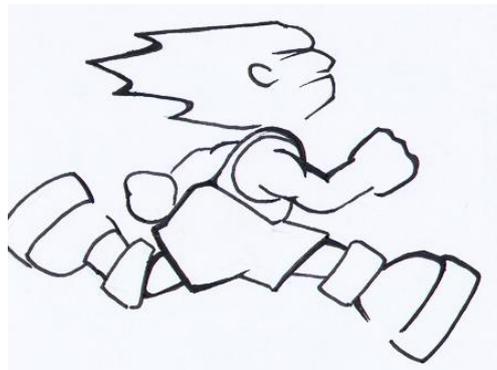

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We hope our work will be generative; things will take off and then will have a momentum of their own.

A lot of our work is about dialogue and networking ; we hold monthly cafe conversations, which provide a forum for people to share what matters to them and we can all try out ideas. We learn and they learn. We use ideas from World Cafe and Paolo Freire in how they are set up.

We do research and publish in order to support who we work with, as you will see in our work on fossil fuel divestment below. Another thing ecological public health tells us we need to embrace complexity by analysing and confronting it. This is a journey – it is not about quick fixes and soft policy options
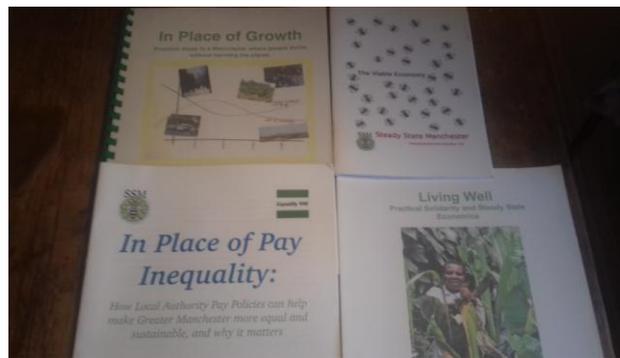
We articulate, design and champion projects which might be living examples of a viable economy. AS an example of our work, i will tell you about our **Fossil Fuel Divestment** work.

Steady State Manchester attempts to influence local politicians. We learned from a sympathetic councillor that there were substantial investments in fossil fuel held in the local government pension fund covering the ten local authorities in the region.

We worked with the local Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Finance. OSC's are like a parliamentary select committee at council level. They scrutinise the work of councils and the public can request things they look at. At the same time, we wrote blog posts summarising the discussion and researched and wrote a report focusing on fossil fuels and ethical investments.

As a result of our work, 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, another campaign emerged focussing on Fossil Free Divestment by the Pension Fund in Greater Manchester. SSM became part of this campaign and helped it get off to a flying start as we had done the necessary background. 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. Greater Manchester pension fund has not divested yet but Waltham Forest Local Authority Pension Fund has. The decision has partly been led by recognition that there is an increasing financial risk in investing in fossil fuels. It illustrates the value of using imagination and aligning the climate change message with that of improved economic security (where it is appropriate to do so). Successful divestment will enable people paying into the pension fund to lower their carbon footprint even though many of them may be unaware that they are doing this.

The fossil fuel divestment campaign illustrates our work at a political level, another important area stressed by ecological public health and something Viviene Westwood drew our attention to at the launch of the climate change exhibition at the Manchester Museum.

I have shared my journey with you. In SSM we think the ecological public health model has a lot to offer. It contributes towards altering reality and accepted common sense and providing examples of a viable future. We ask why tread the expensive, time consuming road of encouraging individual behaviour change when it is more effective to focus on making the changes at a societel level which makes it easier for people to change what they do? I wonder what you think. And if you agree, is there suffcent prominence of these ideas amongst people who are trying to communicate climate change and promote action? And if not what is the best way to change that?

For more information, references etc, please see pre-review draft chapter.