

Placing People at the Heart of Climate Action

Patrick Devine-Wright, Lorraine Whitmarsh, Birgitta Gatersleben, Saffron O'Neill, Sarah Hartley, Kate Burningham, Benjamin Sovacool, Stewart Barr, Jillian Anable

Abstract

Profound societal change along with continued technical improvements will be required to meet our climate goals, as well as to improve people's quality of life and ensure thriving

The IPCC's new assessment report makes it clear that profound societal change will be needed alongside continued technical improvements to meet our climate goals, as well as to improve people's quality of life and ensure thriving economies and ecosystems. For the first time, IPCC Working Group III has a chapter dedicated to demand and social aspects.



Photo by [Brian Yurasits](#) on [Unsplash](#)

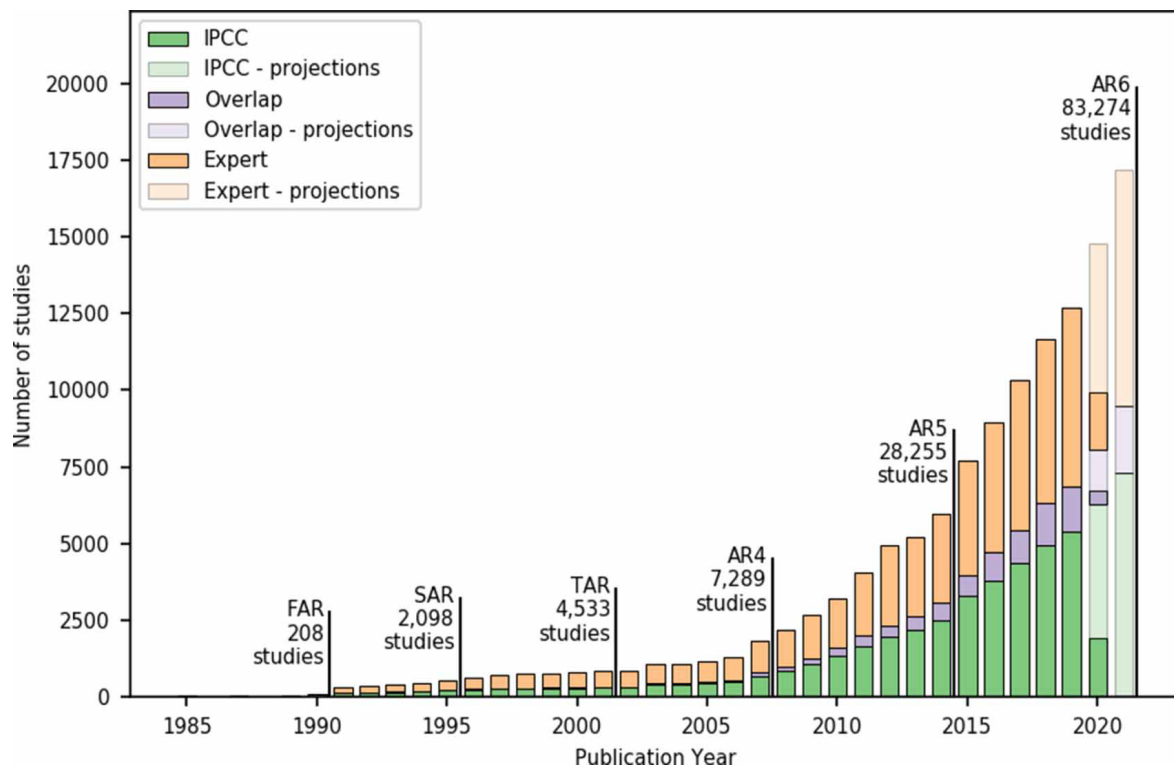
economies and ecosystems. Achieving the urgent and necessary transformations laid out in the recently published IPCC report will require placing people at the heart of climate action. Tackling climate change cannot be achieved solely through technological breakthroughs or new climate models. We must build on the strong social science knowledge base and develop a more visible, responsive and interdisciplinary-oriented social science that engages with people and is valued in its diversity by decision-makers from government, industry, civil society and law. Further, we need to design interventions that are both effective at reducing emissions and achieve wider societal goals such as wellbeing, equity, and fairness. Given that all climate solutions will involve people in one way or another, the social sciences have a vital role to play.

Introduction

The new IPCC assessment report makes clear that profound societal change along with continued technical improvements will be required to meet our climate goals, as well as to improve people's quality of life and ensure thriving economies and ecosystems.¹ For the first time, IPCC Working Group III has a dedicated chapter on demand and social aspects of mitigation and a cross-chapter analysis on equity and sustainable development. More social scientists have provided input to the sixth assessment report than ever before and the report synthesises more social science evidence (see Fig 1),² than all previous IPCC assessments combined.

The IPCC report [1] emphasises the importance of individual behaviour change for achieving rapid, deep cuts in emissions, but also recognises that a narrow focus on individuals is insufficient.

Fig 1. Growth of literature that underpins demand-side and service-related aspects of climate change mitigation [Creutzig, Callaghan, Ramakrishnan, Javaid, Niamir, Minx et al, 2021, [2].



If people are at the heart of climate action, then understanding and tackling climate change cannot be done by engineers or natural scientists alone. All disciplines need to work together—not least a range of social sciences including political science, sociology, geography and psychology—to find solutions in ways that achieve wider societal goals. The

¹ ↪ Shukla PR, Skea J, Slade R, Al Khourdajie A, van Diemen R, McCollum D, et al., editors. IPCC, 2022: Climate change 2022: mitigation of climate change. Contribution of working group III to the sixth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change. Cambridge, UK and New York, USA: Cambridge University Press; 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157926>

² ↪ Creutzig F, Callaghan M, Ramakrishnan A, Javaid A, Niamir L, Minx J, et al. Reviewing the scope and thematic focus of 100 000 publications on energy consumption, services and social aspects of climate change: a big data approach to demand-side mitigation. Environ. Res. Lett. 2021;16(3) 033001. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

All climate solutions will involve people in one way or another—as citizens, consumers, employers, employees, leaders, parents, investors, activists, and members of communities.

IPCC report [1] emphasises the importance of individual behaviour change for achieving rapid, deep cuts in emissions, but also recognises that a narrow focus on individuals is insufficient. Transformation requires infrastructure and design choices that are considered

systemically as an interplay between individual behaviour, cultural processes, corporate action, institutions and infrastructural change [1].

All climate solutions will involve people in one way or another—as citizens, consumers, employers, employees, leaders, parents, investors, activists, and members of communities. People need both the motivation and the capacity to choose low-carbon technologies in homes and businesses; to make decisions about what their company does and how it does it; to create policies and laws on climate change; to encourage and protect biodiversity; to vote, protest and organise community responses; to change how they travel and what they eat and buy; and to talk to their children or parents about climate change. This means social scientists are critical to achieving ‘net zero’ and adapting to climate impacts.

The social sciences have already contributed to our understanding of how to achieve the transformation needed. For example, a recent systematic review showed that transformational decarbonisation, where it has occurred, has tended to

Change requires moving away from reliance on informational and voluntary approaches to behaviour change to a focus on changing high-impact behaviours and high-emitting groups.

require a strong role for government and clear, long-term policy; but also involved supportive action by businesses and people.³

We also know that change requires moving away from reliance on informational and voluntary approaches to behaviour change to a focus on changing high-impact behaviours and high-

emitting groups.⁴ Interdisciplinary interventions need to address the multiple drivers, barriers and contexts of behaviour, and target moments of change when habits are weaker.⁵

We know much about how to engage people with climate change. Knowing your audience’s needs and values as a

Deliberative engagement, via citizens assemblies, which involve representative samples of people in climate policy making, can unlock new solutions and increase the legitimacy of difficult policy actions.

starting point for climate conversations sounds simple, yet can still be challenging.⁶ Social science research has much to say on the role of social media in climate communications (and attendant issues of polarisation, misinformation and bad-faith actors;⁷ or how the dominance of certain types of climate visual imagery can shape engagement in unintended ways.⁸ We also

know that transformation raises issues of justice and equity.⁹ Negative impacts among the rural poor, women, children,

³ ↪ Moore B, Verfuert C, Minas AM, Tipping C, Mander S, Lorenzoni I, et al. Transformations for climate change mitigation: a systematic review of terminology, concepts, and characteristics. Wiley Interdiscip Rev Clim Change. 2021;12(6):1–25. e738. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

⁴ ↪ Ivanova D, Wood R. The unequal distribution of household carbon footprints in Europe and its link to sustainability. Glob Sustain. 2020;3. e18. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

⁵ ↪ Whitmarsh L, Poortinga W, Capstick S. Behaviour change to address climate change. Curr Opin Psychol. 2021 Dec;42: 76–81. PMID:33991862 [View Article](#) [PubMed/NCBI](#) [Google Scholar](#)

⁶ ↪ Pathak M, Roy J, Patel S, Some S, Vyas P, Das N, et al. Communicating climate change findings from IPCC reports: insights from outreach events in India. Clim Change. 2021; 168(3–4):23. PMID:34703067 [View Article](#) [PubMed/NCBI](#) [Google Scholar](#)

⁷ ↪ Treen KMD, Williams HTP, O’Neill SJ. Online misinformation about climate change. WIREs Clim Change. 2020;11. e665. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

⁸ ↪ O’Neill SJ, Smith N. Climate change and visual imagery. Wiley Interdiscip Rev Clim Change. 2014;5(1): 73–87. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

⁹ ↪ McCauley D, Heffron R. Just transition: integrating climate, energy and environmental justice. Energy Policy. 2018;119: 1–7. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

and indigenous groups can be particularly stark.¹⁰ A carefully managed ‘just transition’ involves respect for vulnerable groups, creation of decent jobs, employment rights, fairness in energy access and use, and democratic consultation. Social science insights about democratic consultation indicate how consensus can be reached on controversial aspects of climate action across whole societies. Deliberative engagement, via citizens assemblies, which involve representative samples of people in climate policy making, can unlock new solutions and increase the legitimacy of difficult policy actions.¹¹

However, there is much more potential for social science contributions. We need to rethink how social science and policy interacts, to improve social science knowledge production and policy formation, and to broaden the range of social science disciplines that inform policy.

On the one hand, social science should be more accessible to people and other academic disciplines. A collaborative

A collaborative approach is required that involves citizens, consumers and stakeholders in setting research agendas.

approach is required that involves citizens, consumers and stakeholders in setting research agendas.¹² Social science researchers need to be equipped with the skills and capacities to participate in and lead interdisciplinary research teams, and to

work within policy as well as academic contexts. Research projects need to be more agile, responding quickly to fast-changing stakeholder evidence needs or societal disruptions.

On the other hand, policy making could be supported and equipped to draw more explicitly upon social science disciplines so decision-makers develop a better understanding of and effective response to climate change. Policy

To conclude, achieving the urgent and necessary transformations laid out in the IPCC report will require placing people at the heart of climate action... Tackling climate change cannot be achieved solely through technological breakthroughs or new climate models.

making that is currently centred on scientific or economic advice would benefit from a broader conception of expertise and evidence.¹³ Greater equity could be given to social science theory and method (notably qualitative approaches) as well as other forms of knowledge, including indigenous and lay people’s knowledges.¹⁴ The structures and timing of social science advice to policy makers should be more consistent

across government.¹⁵ There needs to be better recognition in policy of diversity across social science disciplines, what each can offer to climate policy making, and the different roles social science can play, including critical as well as applied social science.

¹⁰ ↪ Sovacool BK. Who are the victims of low-carbon transitions? Towards a political ecology of climate change mitigation. *Energy Res Soc Sci.* 2021;73 101916. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

¹¹ ↪ Sandover R, Moseley A, Devine-Wright P. Contrasting views of citizen’s assemblies: exploring stakeholder perceptions of deliberative public engagement on climate change. *Politics Gov.* 2021;9; 76–86. [View Article](#) [Google Scholar](#)

¹² ↪ Welsh C, Pike L, Elliott J, Bailey J, Quintin-Baxendale R, Billington J, et al. Why is it so hard to enact responsible change? Scientists need to work more closely with other social groups to implement sustainable innovation. *EMBO Reports.* 2020 Apr 3;21(4). e49493. pmid:32147905 [View Article](#) [PubMed/NCBI](#) [Google Scholar](#)

¹³ ↪ SAPEA, Science Advice for Policy by European Academies. Making sense of science for policy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. Berlin: SAPEA; 2019. <https://doi.org/10.26356/MASOS>

¹⁴ ↪ Pörtner HO, Roberts DC, Tignor M, Poloczanska ES, Mintenbeck K, Alegría A, et al., editors. IPCC, 2022: Climate change 2022: impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Contribution of working group II to the sixth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change. Cambridge, UK and New York, USA: Cambridge University Press; 2022. In Press.

¹⁵ ↪ Owens S. Knowledge, policy, and expertise: the UK royal commission on environmental pollution 1970–2011. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198294658.001.0001>

To conclude, achieving the urgent and necessary transformations laid out in the IPCC report will require placing people at the heart of climate action. We must build on the strong social science knowledge base and develop a more visible, responsive and interdisciplinary-oriented social science that engages with people and is valued by decision-makers from government, industry, civil society and law. Tackling climate change cannot be achieved solely through technological breakthroughs or new climate models. Further, we need to design interventions that are both effective at reducing emissions and achieve wider societal goals such as wellbeing, equity, and fairness. Given that all climate solutions will involve people in one way or another, the social sciences have a vital role to play.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
 - Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to Geocratia the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)
 - Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Deceptive Delusions of Green Capitalism](#)
 - Álvaro J. de Regil: [Marketocracy and the Capture of People and Planet](#)
 - Michael Löwy et al: [For an Ecosocialist Degrowth](#)
 - John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark: [The Expropriation of Nature](#)
 - John Bellamy Foster: [Marxism and Ecology: Common Fonts of a Great Transition](#)
 - John Bellamy Foster: [Marx, Value and Nature](#)
 - John Bellamy Foster: [Capitalism Has Failed — What Next?](#)
 - John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark: [The Robbery of Nature](#)
 - John Bellamy Foster: [The Contagion of Capital](#)
 - John Bellamy Foster: [The Defence of Nature: Resisting the Financialisation of the Earth](#)
 - Reinhard Olschanski: [After Industrialism: Reviving Nature in the 21st Century](#)
 - Erald Kolasi: [Energy, Economic Growth, and Ecological Crisis](#)
 - Erald Kolasi: [The Physics of Capitalism](#)
 - Ian Angus: [When Did the Anthropocene Begin... and Why Does It Matter?](#)
 - Ian Angus: [Facing the Antropocene — An Update](#)
 - Paul Burkett: [An Eco-Revolutionary Tipping Point?](#)
 - Amy Isham: [The Problematic Role of Materialistic Values in the Pursuit of Sustainable Well-Being](#)
 - Víctor M. Toledo: [What are we saying when we talk about sustainability?](#)
-

- ❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.
- ❖ **About the authors:** Patrick Devine-Wright: Institute of Geography and Global Systems, University of Exeter, UK; Lorraine Whitmarsh: Department of Psychology, University of Bath, UK; Birgitta Gatersleben: Department of Psychology, University of Surrey, UK; Saffron O'Neill: Geography, University of Exeter, UK; Sarah Hartley: University of Exeter Business School, UK; Kate Burningham: Department of Sociology and Centre for Environment and Sustainability, University of Surrey, UK; Benjamin Sovacool: Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex, UK; Stewart Barr: Geography, University of Exeter, UK; Jillian Anable: Institute of Transport Studies, University of Leeds, UK.
- ❖ **About this Brief:** Placing People at the Heart of Climate Action was originally published in English by by POS Climate in May 2022. This brevity has been released under Creative Commons, (CC BY 4.0.) You may share, copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. Adapt, remix, transform and build upon the material for any purpose, including commercially. crediting the author and providing a link to the original publisher (<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pclm.0000035>). **Funding:** This work was funded by a grant awarded to all authors by the Economic and Social Research Council (Ref: ES/W00805X/1) for the Advancing Capacity for Climate and Environment Social Science (ACCESS) project. The funders had no role in the study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish or preparation of the manuscript. **Competing interest:** The authors have declared no competing interests.
- ❖ **Quote this paper as:** Patrick Devine-Wright, Lorraine Whitmarsh, Birgitta Gatersleben, Saffron O'Neill, Sarah Hartley, Kate Burningham, Benjamin Sovacool, Stewart Barr, Jillian Anable — Placing People at the Heart of Climate Action — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, July 2022.
- ❖ **Tags:** ecology, climate change, justice, equity, anthropocene, sustainable development, IPCC, safe and just transition, climate action, behavioural change, democratic consultation.
- ❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>

© 2022. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org