

Research-based theory

What is the evidential basis for attempting a new type of engagement for change?

Traditional models of engaging citizens to act for social change appear to be ineffective ? and not only in relation to climate change action.

The evidence of this failure can be seen in many different sectors. For example the framework developed by HIV educators is strikingly similar to all the main qualities required of effective climate change communications for those seeking to mobilise people on climate change.

In ?Rethinking conceptual approaches to behaviour change: The importance of context? Warren Parker (2004) the research notes:

?Elements of this framework include: moving away from people as objects of change, towards people and communities as agents of change; moving away from delivering messages, towards supporting dialogue and debate on key issues; moving away from a focus on individual behaviour, towards a focus on social norms, policies, culture and supportive environments; moving away from persuasion, towards negotiation and partnership; and finally moving away from external technical expertise, towards integrating communities in assessing issues of concern at local level.?

Futerra?s

?Rules of the Game - Principles of Climate Change Communications? notes the failure of the US attempt to cut energy use in the 1970s during the oil crisis, using top-down ?education?:

?Alone, education resulted in negligible energy savings. Even in combination with loan schemes, it was still ineffective. By 1980, already over 90 separate studies had been conducted testing the impact of information programs on consumers home energy use. Research indicated that pamphlets, videos and other information services result in very little savings ? possible in the region of 0-2%.?

The study cites research which indicates that:

?Social learning theory states that people learn from each other all the time, by modelling the behaviour around them and by using individual human contact and communication to set their behaviour and attitudes. This is why it is so difficult to change an individual's attitude without taking into account the attitudes of his or her family, friends, colleagues and community.?

There is now a large body of research into the psychology of behavioural change around sustainability issues ? including climate change. There is a remarkable level of agreement - well summarised in 2006 by research by the Institute of Public Policy

'Warm Words: How are we telling the climate change story and can we tell it better?' - that standard forms of expert-led top-down communication are not working for climate change:

?Communications that emanate from authority sources and that continue to instruct, or even to cajole, are likely to be less successful than those that work with this emerging dynamic where [top-down authority is being replaced by bottom-up or horizontal authority - where people increasingly trust other people... more than governments, businesses and other institutions].?

In

?Painting the Town Green. How to persuade people to be environmentally friendly? Stephen Hounsham advises:

? Create agency, the ability for people to understand a problem their own way, decide for themselves to do something about it, make a real difference that's noticeable to them, and receive recognition for having done the right thing.?

Recently (2007) IPPR has returned to this theme in

Warm Words !: How the climate change story is evolving and the lessons we can learn for encouraging public action? . The report notes:

?The ?energetic? local discourse deals in the real, the tangible, the directly imaginable. It speaks the language of collective action, in contrast to the relatively disempowered individualism of 'small actions' at the national level. It addresses individuals, as we have demonstrated, as a member of a community, as opposed to a citizen of the planet, and speaks peer-to-peer rather than from the standpoint on authority.?

The principles of COIN's communication and mobilisation programme.

COIN provides an evidence-based approach to social action on climate change which allows people to find a way to become active and involved within their socio-economic/intellectual/local community.

The concepts that form the basis of our work include:

Peer-to-peer: enabling people to communicate effectively with people like themselves. For example, our training programmes supports and strengthen the 'trusted voice' within the community.

Action Learning: people learn about climate change through working with others to respond to its threatening characteristics – whether through mitigation or adaptation strategies. Our 'Ecovation' initiative gives practical support and networking to citizens who want to renovate their homes in an energy efficient manner.

Multiplication: focusing resources on people who will, in turn, engage many others.

'Escalator': linking an easy and safe initial contact to further activities that will increase and 'escalate' people's activity.

Expansion of peer-to-peer activity

through the use of trainers: COIN is seeking to use a group of trainers to expand in 2008. This will spread action rather than leave the training procedure in the hands of a few 'experts'.

Partnership: COIN's activities are all developed in partnership with other organisations, especially those with large networks that can promote and 'multiply' the programmes. For example, COIN is currently pursuing partnerships with Trade Unions, business, the voluntary sector, tenants and community organisations, environmental groups and others.

Practical and financial support for networks and communities: COIN also has a core commitment to supporting new organisations and initiatives with advice and funding. The first period of a local community organisation or direct action group is perilous and can lead to failure of the initiative.

Cross sectoral: COIN strongly believes that climate change is not 'just' an environmentalist issue. In 2007, COIN has presented workshops for Amnesty International, led training with Ruskin College for trade unionists activists and tenants, created training course for international youth at the international Scout Jamboree and created a course for businesspeople within Rotary International.

Creating Democratic Legitimacy: COIN seeks to create a vocal and powerful community to deliver 'democratic legitimacy' for speedy and decisive action to our elected representatives. These representatives require a high level of legitimisation in order to: successfully negotiate GHG reductions with civil society institutions (including business who have largely opposed reductions up until recently); create effective international climate change treaties.