Understanding Climate emergency & local government

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Is climate an emergency?

Our climate is already too hot, with dangerous heatwaves and bushfires, droughts and crop failures, and coastal flooding becoming more intense and destructive.

Accelerating climate warming could result in social breakdown and global economic crisis.

But Australia's government, held back by vested interests, is failing to protect us and the things we care about.

Like other emergencies, together we need to take every possible effort to restore a safe, healthy climate. We have the resources and knowledge to succeed.

If the government makes climate its primary focus and strives to make big changes within a decade, and the community makes a wholehearted effort, we can succeed.

This guide explains:

- The scientific evidence of the emergency;
- The crucial initiating role of local government; and
- What is an emergency response.

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June 2019

An emergency situation is a threat to people, property and/or society that has the potential to overwhelm them. So why has climate warming now reached this emergency condition?

With the present level of warming — 1.1°C higher than the late nineteenth century — the Earth is already too hot and unsafe: we are in danger now, not just in the future. Catastrophic heatwaves and bushfires, droughts and crop failures, and cyclones and coastal flooding are reaching around the globe: from the Mediterranean to Mozambique, from south Asia to the Philippines, in the Pacific and across the United States.

The Great Barrier Reef and other coral systems are dying, and the world is now facing the sixth mass extinction in history. The world's insects are hurtling down a path to extinction, threatening a "catastrophic collapse of nature's ecosystems", according to a recent global scientific review which found that the total mass of insects is falling by a precipitous 2.5% a year.

As well, we are greatly exceeding Earth's limits. The growth in physical resource use is unsustainable, and will lead to resource and economic overshoot and collapse unless we change path.

Climate change is contributing to food and water shortages and declining crop yields. Rising food prices driven by drought, wildfire and harvest failures have already become catalysts for social breakdown and conflict across the Middle East, the Maghreb and the Sahel. Climate change has become an accelerant to social instability.

Drought, desertification and high food prices were drivers of the terrible civil war in Syria and the displacement of 11 million people, which led to the European refugee crisis. This in turn created political difficulties within the European Union and many of its members with the rise of far-right parties. National security analysts say that if warming reaches 3°C — which the world will exceed in three to four decades on current policies — the international order between nations will break down and the world might move into a state of "outright chaos".

Tipping points

Of particular concern are climate tipping points, the passing of critical thresholds which result in step changes in the climate system that are irreversible on human timescales without herculean human interventions. We have already passed some of these, including for a multi-metre sea-level rise from the melt of West Antarctic glaciers, the loss of the world's coral ecosystems, and conditions in summer where there will be no sea (floating) ice left in the Arctic. Some other potential tipping points and big changes in important climate system elements— such as the loss of the Greenland Ice Sheet and the Amazon rainforest — are not that far away.

Recently, attention has been given to a "hothouse Earth" scenario, in which system feedbacks and their mutual interaction could drive the Earth System climate to a "point of no return", whereby further warming would become self-sustaining. This "hothouse Earth" planetary threshold could exist at a temperature rise as low as 2°C, possibly even lower.

International failure

Yet the failure so far of nations collectively to face the climate crisis means that these are precisely the sorts of events we are heading towards.

If the current commitments by nations under the Paris Agreement to reduce their greenhouse pollution are not greatly improved, we face catastrophic warming of at least 3°C within a lifetime and possibly 5°C by century's end, threatening to make large parts of the world and food-growing lands

Fire-killed ancient pencil pines at Lake Mackenzie, Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

Photo: Rob Blaker

uninhabitable. This includes regions ruined by drought and desertification (for example, Australia's Murray-Darling Basin, sub-Saharan Africa, southern Mediterranean, south-western USA), areas too hot to live in year-round (parts of south and south-east Asia) or rising seas (for example, the food-growing river deltas in India, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Egypt).

We have learned from studies of past climates that the current level of greenhouse gases produced conditions that would be catastrophic for today's human society. In the mid-Pliocene around three million years ago, greenhouse gas levels were similar to today and temperatures were around 3°C warmer and sea levels at least 25 metres higher.

Risk to civilisation

Climate warming is an existential risk to human civilisation. Scientists warn that warming of 4°C is incompatible with an organised global community, is devastating to the majority of ecosystems, and has a high probability of not being stable. The World Bank says it may be "beyond adaptation". But an existential threat may also exist for many peoples and regions at a significantly lower level of warming.

The Emeritus Director of the Potsdam Institute, Prof. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, warns that "climate change is now reaching the end-game, where very soon humanity must choose between taking unprecedented action, or accepting that it has been left too late and bear the consequences". He says that if we continue down the present path "there is a very big risk that we will just end our civilisation. The human species will survive somehow but we will destroy almost everything we have built up over the last two thousand years".

Solutions

Our responsibility is to match actions to the size and urgency of the problem, in order to protect who and what we care about. We have four levers at our disposal:

- The **carbon neutral lever**: zero emissions of carbon dioxide with renewable energy, electric transport and changes to industrial processes.
- The **super pollutant lever**: cutting short-lived climate pollutants such as methane to the maximum extent possible by ending emissions from fossil fuel extraction and through changes to farming and land-management processes.
- Atmospheric **carbon extraction lever**: thinning the warming blanket in the atmosphere by drawing down all the excess carbon dioxide.
- Policy options to **cool the planet** if there is a demonstrable, clear, net environmental and social benefit.

Talking about the climate emergency

Polling from The Australia Institute has found that a clear majority of Australians agree that "the nation is facing a climate emergency" requiring emergency action and that, in response, governments should "mobilise all of society" like they did during the world wars.

Public health promotion campaigns such as not smoking show that the messages that work best combine a personally relevant description of the threat (fear), and a clear exposition of the solution with a clear path of available actions to address it (hope).

Counterposing "fear" and "hope" narratives is a false dichotomy, because both are needed. When fear is combined with hope, this can create an emotional drive that motivates a change of habit.

In their hearts, people value many of the same things: good relationships with friends and family, providing for and supporting their families and making a positive social contribution.

The "health, wellbeing and livelihood" frame is an opportunity to spell out not just the centrality of the climate change threat, but how it impacts on, and threatens, each and every aspect of our lives, including jobs, transport, energy infrastructure, the economy, where we live and even where we holiday.

It can activate and reinforce values of empathy, responsibility and opportunity. These values are commonly held by both conservatives and progressives.

Role of local government

The purpose of climate emergency declaration campaigning is to accelerate sustained and meaningful action by all levels of government, and for people globally to engage with the challenge of avoiding catastrophic climate change and restoring a safe climate.

The goal is to provide maximum protection for the local community and for people, civilisation and species globally, especially the most vulnerable, and to enable local communities to be strong in the face of any unavoidable dangerous climate impacts.

The use of the term "emergency" is a way of signalling the need to go beyond reform-as-usual.

The strategy is to start with local governments because it is easier to find innovative local governments to be early movers than it is to get state and national governments to take on the climate emergency response approach. Local councils and communities have an indispensable role in helping to build a national and global response.

Why start with local government?

In an emergency, society devotes all available resources needed to solve the problem. That means a leading role for the national government, which has the greatest capacity to plan, invest taxes, direct resources, coordinate and set a regulatory framework for effective emergency action. But it also requires every level of government and the community to work together.

Local government is generally more open, democratic and flexible, and less controlled by big money and big party politics, than State and federal politics. Community activism can build change more quickly at the local level. By June 2019, more than 600 governments in 13 countries covering 80 million people had recognised or declared a climate emergency (for updated figures, see bit.ly/ce-governments).

Most of these councils have committed to community-wide net zero emissions in around 10 years.

In a nutshell, we can start where the community support can most effectively be built, whilst recognising that local climate emergency action is both a building block to a wider and national effort, and also an indispensable, continuing element of change in its own right.

Local campaigning

The trajectory and impacts of climate warming are more severe than most policymakers have been willing to admit. Most people in professional politics are less informed about this topic than they imagine.

A big engagement effort is required, including through local community education and campaigns, workshops and forums, and petitions to build awareness of the need for a climate emergency plan, including at council level. Meeting with councillors to get commitments, and making climate a key issue in local government elections by supporting candidates with strong climate credentials and voting out intransigent councillors, have been successful tactics.

As local leaders step up and show the way, a clear understanding of the climate emergency spreads both deeper into the local community, wider into the local political networks, and upwards to State and territory governments and to the national government.

What can councils do?

Councils generally do not have the regulatory powers or financial clout of national governments, and they cannot reverse global warming by themselves, but they can get the ball rolling.

So the most important action of councils is to advocate to higher levels of government for emergency action.

They can lead the way in their own actions and pressure other levels of government to support healthier, more resilient and sustainable local communities powered by locally generated low-carbon energy, served by affordable and sustainable transport, higher quality and more efficient housing stock, and fed by sustainable food and land systems.

This must be backed up by meaningful emergency action:

- to eliminate emissions from the council's own operations;
- by developing and supporting projects to eliminate emissions across the whole municipality;
- by maximising drawdown of carbon dioxide within the municipality and beyond;
- by building local community resilience and looking after the most vulnerable members of the community in the face of a warming world with more extreme climate events.

Getting it done

In emergency mobilisation mode, governments allocate all discretionary funds available to the task of community education, advocacy for action by other levels of governments, mitigation (to end greenhouse gas emissions), draw down excess carbon dioxide and resilience building in the local area. It is also about building knowledge in government and the community about the science, projected local impacts, risk frameworks, solutions and strategies.

Advocacy and education is the most important role for council:

- **Sideways:** Encouraging other councils to take on a climate emergency response – to build the base of a community mandate for emergency action by all levels of government.
- **Upwards**: Lobbying State and national governments to adopt, fund, invest and regulate for a climate emergency response.
- **Downwards**: Foster local emergency action through knowledge sharing and training, capacity building, and facilitating community contributions to mitigation and building resilience. Community mobilisation is a core element in getting local councils into emergency mode and keeping action on track.

Council's own emissions

- Transform council's own properties to maximise renewable energy production and energy saving.
- Electrify council vehicle fleet.
- Source zero-emission materials for concrete and paving.
- Waste management and recycling: turn waste into biochar, target food waste, and eliminate /capture methane emissions.

Local council facilities and public areas

- Manage outdoor facilities to improve carbon drawdown in gardens and soils, urban forests, and by wetland restoration.
- Build zero-emission transport facilities: pedestrian and bike infrastructure, improved public transport integration, EV charging and promotion of car sharing and alternatives to air travel.

Using planning and regulatory powers

- Review planning code.
- Ban new fossil fuel projects in the council area.
- Higher energy standards for new construction, including gas ban.

Local mitigation

- Community renewable energy projects and financing schemes.
- Work with other levels of government to support energy efficiency and renewable energy programmes for public housing, renters and low-income households.
- Encourage consumption of low-emission foods.
- Promote low energy use in business and community facilities: smart energy, energy efficiency and conservation.
- Work with other levels of government to support zero-carbon enterprise zones and partnerships with incentives to nurture jobs, invest and innovate.
- Set up transition support services for local businesses.

Getting started

1. Council passes a motion that recog–nises the climate emergency, and:
   - acknowledges the need for all levels of government to act;
   - calls for rapid action because "business-as-usual" transition is not fast enough;
   - sets a target date consistent with the science to reach negative emissions;
   - commits to deep community engagement in developing and implementing actions.
2. Develops a Climate Emergency Plan (CEP). The plan should:
   - set a target of net negative emissions in an emergency timeframe (less than 10 years);
   - quantify what council can do towards reaching the target;
   - identify what the community can do toward reaching the target;
   - identify what central governments will need to do for the target to be achieved.
3. Ensures the council prioritises the CEP in its Strategic Plan.
4. Builds the capacity of staff around climate emergency and help then understand the why and how.
5. Communicates the climate emergency approach to the community and engages it to support the move into emergency mode.

Find out more

Council and Community Action in the Climate Emergency

http://caceonline.org

Emergency mode

Many of us have experienced emergency situations such as bushfires, floods or cyclones where, for the duration, nothing else matters as much as responding to the crisis.

If we want to survive, or help others effectively, we don't rush in thoughtlessly, but focus on a plan of action, implemented with thought and all possible care and speed to protect others and get to safety. Everyone chips in, with all hands on deck.

Climate warming has now created an emergency situation, which is being recognised by leading climate scientists, public leaders and community activists.

UN Secretary General António Guterres recently said that "we face a direct existential threat" for "the emergency we face".

More than 600 local government authorities in 13 countries, including Australia, the USA, Canada, the UK, Switzerland, Italy and Germany have recognised that emergency action is the only response that can fully address the scale and speed of the climate crisis.

Emergency threats

An emergency is a threat to people, property and/or society that has the potential to overwhelm them. It could be a natural disaster, a pandemic, a food–water crisis, or a more human-made disaster such as a nuclear meltdown, war, or climate damage.

The challenge is to stop the problem from escalating out of control, and then return to safety. In responding, failure and major tradeoffs are not an option, because the consequences are grave. Action is time sensitive: delay leads to escalation and increased damage.

Emergencies may be of short, medium or long duration, and geographical impact may be local/regional, national or global. And they can be orientated to recovery or prevention.

Bushfire: local emergency

For natural emergencies, such as bushfires, emphasis is placed on anticipating how bad the disaster could be, not just on middle-of-the road projections. People are educated about these high-end risks, and the appropriate responses needed, such as making property ready and chalking out evacuation plans. Governments are expected to be honest about what needs to be done.

The response is coordinated by government. Where emergency situations are of a familiar type, plans are made well in advance for adequate labour, equipment and logistical capacity. The affected population is mobilised for firefighting, support services, and care of the vulnerable. Communities are informed and consulted. As the disaster unfolds, some "business-as-usual" functioning may be suspended: schools and other facilities closed, transport rerouted, dangerous activities prohibited, and emergency volunteers are granted leave from their work.

Mostly, there is political bipartisanship to do "whatever it takes" and no effort or resources are spared.

War: long emergency

Many of the same approaches apply to mobilisation at times of conflict. Whilst wars are terrible events, they give us insights into how nations mobilise while responding to these grave threats. As with natural disasters, plans are made for the worst that could happen, the population is mobilised in an all-out effort, and generally there is political bipartisanship.

A "whatever it takes" attitude means that government plans and directs the nation's resources and capacity towards building up the war effort. This can be done at amazing speed. After the surprise Japanese attack on the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbour in 1941, the US economy was transformed from the world's largest producer of consumer goods to the world's largest producer of military goods in a year. The US Government directed the whole war effort, but business boomed as the national economy grew quickly. The proportions of national economies dedicated to the effort in World War II were staggering. Military outlays in 1943 as proportion of total economy were: USA 42%; UK 55%; Germany 70%; and Japan 43%. Japan's percentage reached about 70% in 1945.

War mobilisations are characterised by crash programs to rapidly scale up capacity and innovation. Non-essential consumption is curtailed (for example, through increased taxation on certain items and sale of savings instruments such as "war bonds"), whilst the basics for everyone are guaranteed. During World War II, rationing of some essentials was accepted by the population because such action or sacrifice was understood as being fairly shared and necessary.

Emergency mode

An emergency declaration shows that the government rates the problem as very serious, that priority will be given to resolving the crisis, that we are all in the crisis together and that, officially, "business as usual" and "reform as usual" don't apply for the duration of the crisis. Here are some characteristics of emergency mode:

Clarity of purpose In a bushfire, one clear goal is to save all human life. With climate warming, the purpose of emergency action is to protect all people, societies and ecosystems. This is not the case with the present climate policymaking

Risk management An emergency response starts by fully assessing all the risks and potential damage, especially the "high-end" and existential risks which would be devastating for human societies. Special precautions are required if the increased likelihood of dire climate impacts are to be adequately dealt with.

Full & frank communication Emergency mode is a whole-of-society effort which requires an aware and motivated population. In most cases it also requires political bipartisanship. A frank discussion of the threat, the response and what that means for the society is critical for building and maintaining active commitment across the community.

Highest priority During an emergency, the highest priority of the society is to deal with the crisis in hand, and sufficient resources will be applied in order to succeed. Climate Councillor Prof. Will Steffen says that getting greenhouse gas emissions down fast has to be the primary target of policy and economics (with) something "more like wartime footing" to roll out renewable energy and dramatically reimagine sectors like transportation and agriculture "at very fast rates".

Government leadership All rapid, large-scale transformations have strong government leadership in planning, coordinating and allocating resources. Only the national government has the society-wide responsibility and capacity to plan, direct resources, develop labour skills, provide funding from taxation, manage savings and investments, coordinate innovation efforts, and set a regulatory framework for effective emergency action. To do this, the prevailing neoliberal ideology (privatisation, deregulation, lowering of taxes, reduced government spending, and so on) must be suspended.

Physical transformation More than anything else, climate emergency mobilisation is about the transformation of the physical economy at great speed, delivering an integrated package of solutions for a safe-climate economy, zero emissions and large-scale carbon dioxide drawdown, plus critical research and development of solutions to close the knowledge gaps.

Fairness We now face large-scale climate disruption: either planned by way of an emergency transition to restore a safe climate, or much worse unplanned chaos because social and physical system failure will inevitably occur as warming intensifies. This dislocation requires a focus on fairness — both internationally and within the nation — and that the burden of transformation is fairly shared. Without a sense that the emergency and the changes are both fair and necessary, the public mandate for such change is unlikely to be built or maintained.

Normal and emergency mode

Normal mode	Emergency mode
Challenges are constrained within business and reform-as-usual mode	Society engages productively with crisis, but not in panic mode
Political media management and "politics as usual"	The situation is assessed with brutal honesty.
No urgent threat is perceived	Immediate, or looming, threat to life, health, property, or environment is perceived
Problem is not yet serious and can be prevented within business and reform-as-usual modes	High probability of escalation beyond control if immediate action is not taken
Time for response is not a problem	Speed of response is crucial
The challenge is one of many issues	The crisis is of the highest priority
A labour market is in place	Emergency project teams are developed, and labour planning is instituted
Budgetary "restraint" is shown	All available/necessary resources are devoted to the emergency and, if necessary, governments borrow heavily
Community and markets function as usual	Non-essential functions and consumption may be curtailed or rationed
A slow rate of change occurs because of systemic inertia	Rapid transition and scaling up occurs
Market needs dominate response choices and thinking	Planning, fostering innovation and research take place
Targets and goals are determined by political tradeoffs in a culture of compromise	Critical targets and goals are not compromised because failure is not an option
There is a lack of national leadership, and politics is adversarial and incremental	Bipartisanship and effective leadership are the norm

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