

## WALKING THE TALK ON CLIMATE CHANGE

▶ But don't stop with politicians. You could raise it at your workplace, talk to your friends, make it clear on social media. In short: fight socially organised denial. Last year, I took a deep breath and chatted to the parents on the touchline when my son was playing football. It was a really positive conversation. Since then, I've tried to include it in a lot of general chat. Or rather, I have stopped censoring myself.

The UK charity Climate Outreach has been encouraging people to have these conversations, and researching the impacts. They worked with volunteers who offered to start up conversations, with strangers, family members, acquaintances and work colleagues, and to report back on their experiences. Though it was sometimes hard to start with, participants were glad they had done it. As one said, "talking about it breaks down the isolated feeling, and makes me feel more supported to take action". This confirms research which suggests that taking action on climate is good for you: it helps overcome feelings of helplessness or grief that may emerge from contemplating something so all-consuming.

### Practising what you preach?

This brings me to the all-important question of your own footprint. Of course, we should all be thinking about this. Your own carbon footprint is a drop in the global ocean. But every drop, like every vote, counts. It counts even more if you talk about it. What better way to talk about the need to reduce aviation than to say that you have restricted your own flying, for work and for holidays? Imagine how powerful it would be if everyone who campaigned for climate action – politicians, businesspeople, celebrities, everyone – made meaningful pledges about what they would do in their own lives. Could you be the person who prompts your organisation to change?

There is a growing band of university researchers who have pledged to stop the wasteful amounts of flying that are currently a

normal part of academic life. As a result, new options are opening up. International conferences have been run without air travel – like the 2018 'Displacements' anthropology conference, where online presentations were watched at different regional hubs. When I write research grants, I factor in the time and money for train travel, not flights. I have also done some brilliant research using webinars rather than actual meetings. It's different, but it can work really well. On one memorable occasion, a workshop participant in California decided to show everyone joining from round the world his beautiful stripy knitted socks. I remember him waving his feet in front of his laptop camera.

It's not a case of all-or-nothing. My good friend Kate Rawles, an amazing adventurer and climate communicator, has set herself a budget of one flight every three years, and talks about this whenever she can. She says that people find it easier to relate to than stopping flying altogether (in rich countries, at least – it's always worth adding the caveat that most people in the world have never got on a plane). Similarly, I'm an occasional meat-eater – I don't think you have to choose between meat every day and a strict vegan diet. Do what you can – and tell people about it. There's research to show that it makes a difference. As my research shows, people are heavily influenced by their social world. If people they respect have changed their behaviour significantly, this has an impact.

We are now seeing higher levels of concern about climate change than ever before. This is thanks to many brave people who have decided to speak out, and confront societal denial. It's a lesson that bravery and honesty are as important as technology in the climate struggle.

*This article covers themes discussed by Rebecca Willis at the Responsible Science conference and draws on her forthcoming book, [Too Hot to Handle? The democratic challenge of climate change](#), published by Bristol University Press, Spring 2020.*

## Why I swapped UN negotiations for direct action

**Farhana Yamin** is an international climate change lawyer who swapped negotiating rooms for street protest. Frustrated by the failure of official action to match the scale and speed of what was needed, she decided to change her own behaviour and use direct action to campaign for system change. Also a speaker at the Responsible Science conference, here she explains why she changed tactics.

**L**ast year, I superglued my hands to the pavement outside the headquarters of the oil company Shell in London, surrounded by dozens of policemen. Once unstuck, I was arrested for causing criminal damage. I have been a lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for three of its five assessment reports, and an adviser in the United Nations climate negotiations for almost 30 years.

Why did I, an international environmental lawyer, break the law? Having spent three decades failing to get governments to pay attention to the climate crisis through advocacy at the highest levels, I felt that activism was now crucial. I wanted to show how ridiculous it is that a law-abiding (indeed, law-making) mother of four should be handcuffed while the world's major polluters remain unaccountable for ecocide.

My arrest was part of a wave of peaceful protests against the UK government in April 2019, organised by the global movement Extinction Rebellion, or XR. It uses non-violent civil disobedience to demand radical action to tackle what many of us now refer to as the climate emergency.

I coordinated XR's political strategy team for much of 2019. My role was to find ways to build momentum across the party spectrum and organise negotiations with government. I helped XR meet with various political parties and was pleased our protests led to the UK Parliament declaring a climate and ecological emergency in May 2019.

I've now returned to my profession: helping governments of developing and developed countries to implement commitments ▶



## WALKING THE TALK

under treaties such as the 2015 Paris Agreement to stay on track for the well below 2 °C and safer 1.5 °C temperature goal. Countries are due to submit new targets and plans ahead of the UN Summit on climate change in Glasgow, UK, in November 2020. But the larger countries and historic emitters are dragging their feet. My focus is on helping people understand how they can support vulnerable countries and communities fight to enhance global ambition and hold larger emitters to account. I am also working closely with activists and local authorities to set up pop-up “Think and Do” eco spaces in their communities to design new projects and policies. Bottom up action can pressure governments to act and citizens come up with faster, more effective solutions, including by testing behaviour change.

Global treaties and national laws provide a crucial framework for action. But sadly, weak legislation and tweaks to ‘business as usual’ practices have not prevented environmental devastation. We need new kinds of collaborations and policy frameworks to challenge endless growth and consumption-based lifestyles. The current form of capitalism is toxic for life on Earth. It is based on the never-ending extraction of nature and an unjust appropriation of resources that belong to historically marginalized communities. In their current forms, green taxes and tradeable carbon permits let polluters pay to play the same old games.

The global economy must be fundamentally reconfigured into a circular system that uses fewer resources and is based on renewable technologies. The time for half measures has run out – as made plain by the 2018 IPCC special report on the impacts of a 1.5 °C rise in global average temperatures. That’s why I chose to get arrested. That’s why I am working now with local communities in Camden, London, to pioneer new forms of living that are consistent with the circular economy and with deep cuts in emissions including from products we import from other countries like China and India.

Talk of injustice, devastation, emergency and the need for radical change is far removed from the neutral vocabulary used by the scientific community. But these seemingly emotional terms now fit the facts – and they effect change. I’d rather be labelled ideological than mislead the public into complacency.

Many of my climate colleagues were surprised when I became an activist. But since my arrest, they have applauded what I, and thousands of fellow rebels, did in shifting the political discourse. Many others still question whether disruptive, mass civil disobedience is really necessary.

I believe it was and remains so. In large part, this is because it is producing the sorts of positive rapid result I could only dream of in my years of committee-sitting and draft-wrangling. We need to ramp up disruption because business as usual is not changing fast enough.

## Disruptive force

Representatives of UK political parties on all sides congratulated XR for its festival-like actions that shut down large parts of central London. In just a year, XR put the need for global system change on the political map at the highest levels, confounding its detractors. In the United Kingdom, where XR was founded and is strongest, public support for climate action is now at record levels.

XR’s political strategy team met separately with the UK government, the Mayor of London and the opposition Labour Party. On 1 May, Parliament passed a non-legally binding emergency motion that recognized the climate crisis. A month later, it legislated a legally binding target of net zero greenhouse-gas emissions by 2050, making the United Kingdom one of the first countries to do so. The date is nowhere near soon enough, but this fast-tracking would never have happened without XR’s disruptive protests and the global student strikes on which they built, led by campaigner Greta Thunberg.

We need to value scientists and negotiators for the work they do. But we also need sustained, widespread, peaceful disruption and direct action. We as scientists need to also model the kind of behaviour change we are asking of others, but even more important is becoming more active in our profession and our local communities. Collectively, governments are way off their Paris commitments to keep temperatures well below 2°C and safer 1.5°C goal. We need to try a diversity of new tactics.

The old forms of campaigning and advocacy aren’t working fast enough. Is it any wonder that frustration is mounting?

## Youth protest

Students are leading the charge, calling young people and adults to join a global climate strike. Greta Thunberg rightly lambasted world leaders gathered at a crucial UN summit in New York City, convened by UN secretary-general António Guterres in September 2019. The UK government is not on track to meet its current legal obligations to cut emissions under the 2008 Climate Change Act. (It still subsidises fossil-fuel production and supports carbon-intensive investments in infrastructure, such as for a third runway at Heathrow airport.) This does not bode well for its ability to provide leadership ahead of the Glasgow summit.

In the United States, the global Green New Deal (GND) movement is gaining traction. It is supported by US senators Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Democrat, New York) and Bernie Sanders (Democrat, Vermont), as well as the youth movements Zero Hour and Sunrise, which share XR’s demand for a break with current politics. It is also gaining traction in Europe.

These campaigns can only succeed if more people join in – including professionals, such as scientists. It is harder to

## WALKING THE TALK ON CLIMATE CHANGE

► dismiss protests that have a broad base of support. Long-sought change can come about unexpectedly quickly under the right conditions.

Understandably, many professionals are wary of endorsing campaigns, let alone taking direct action. I still share some of their trepidation. Being an activist can be emotionally and physically draining, requiring long meetings and careful coordination of strategies, tactics and systems of support. But the same can be said of working on UN negotiations: I've lost count of the number of all-night meetings I've attended, with some negotiations turning into 48-hour marathons.

Plus, activists can risk their lives, as so many do in highly illiberal nations. And being an activist can threaten livelihoods: in law, as in science, a person's credibility rests on perceived impartiality built through offering knowledge and advice in the form of books, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports and expert testimony. Not glue and placards.

For all these reasons, I anguished for a long time before thinking about getting arrested. For me being an activist is about much more than getting arrested. It is more about taking a stance and showing up for climate justice. It means not putting my identity as a migrant, a mother, a lawyer and concerned citizen into separate boxes and silos but tapping into all those identities and standing up for justice. And that means also lifestyle changes involving food, fashion, finances and flights for holidays

### Deeds not words

The trigger for my leap into direct action was the release in October 2018 of the IPCC's grim special report comparing the impacts of a 1.5°C change in global average temperatures with higher rises. It landed during a time of personal, political and professional despair, brought about by bereavement, burnout, Brexit, Trump's withdrawal from the Paris agreement, and more.

For so long, I'd trusted that government actions are essentially evidence-based, and that our 'normal' electoral cycles are messy but ultimately safeguard long-term national and planetary interests. Like every other scholar, I'd churned out papers and policy reports in the hope that these would be used by campaigners and heeded by politicians.

On behalf of the small island states, I had worked since 2008 to get the UN climate negotiations to acknowledge that a 2°C rise was too dangerous, and that it needed to enshrine the 1.5°C threshold demanded by the world's most vulnerable countries and ecosystems. Still emissions rise; still the rhetoric is "well below 2°C"?

### Rethink and reset

What we need is not system change or personal change — it's both. Not street circus or government and industrial overhaul, but both. Not reform through revolution or the ballot box. Both.

The climate emergency we face now requires every one of us to question how we compartmentalize our professional, personal and political choices. That means acting differently in all three spheres and rethinking how to become audacious leaders in all aspects of our lives. Climate devastation demands us to be upstanders, not bystanders.

The era when we limited our jobs to researching, writing, presenting and throwing our reports over the 'policy fence', leaving it to campaigners and activists to implement their

conclusions, is over. Is working in silos and factions and fretting only about tenure, citations and the next research grant really the best we can do? Professionalism and impartiality must not require us to be indifferent to the fate of the world.

Now that I am 54 years old with considerable capital — economic, social and reputational — I have the freedom to speak out, as a lawyer, an activist and a mother. Like all parents, I'll do whatever it takes to keep my children safe. Right now, that means rebelling against a way of being that is destroying their future and by supporting activists, especially global youth strikers and frontline communities, to intensify their movements. Having power and status in the current system and refusing to challenge the rules hampers the co-creation of a better world. Building regenerative political communities — in which humans and nature co-exist — needs committed, courageous people to stand up for what they believe in, repeatedly, or a long time to come. I hope you join your local groups and set up your own 'Think and Do' space.

### Set up your own Climate Think and Do Pop-Up!

I am often asked what are the most important steps individuals can take against the climate emergency? I say: join a movement, become an activist and get involved in politics. I am setting up Think and Do spaces to enable people to come together to make individual and collective change easier.

I think people should not be guilt tripped for not being able to live a zero-carbon life in a world that is saturated by carbon. I want industry and government to take responsibility for making it easier for me to live a greener, cleaner, healthier life based on climate justice principles. Having said that, I have made lifestyle changes focusing on the four 'Fs': Finance, Food, Flights and Fashion. I have switched my pension to ethical accounts. As a family, we have cut down on leisure flights and now travel by train and ferries. We have all switched our food to a mainly plant-based diet. I love fashion but no longer buy new clothes and get pleasure from upcycling and clothes swaps. I have found it easier to do these things as part of a local community that is thinking and doing things differently.

Setting up Camden's Think and Do Climate Pop-Up is helping create bonds and projects to create a nicer and more convivial local environment. The creation of a new civic space is a direct follow on from Camden's Citizens' Assembly on the Climate Crisis held in July 2019 which resulted in 17 recommendations. At its Full Meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> October, the Council unanimously agreed to take forward all these recommendations.

Phase one of Think and Do from October to December 2019 has seen a disused café on Kentish Town Road converted into a welcoming space accessible to all, including families and school children. Around 80 events, talks and workshops, ranging from tree giveaways to clothes swaps and talks on climate justice have been held to support climate action in Camden. Phase 2 is about spreading the Think and Do model to other communities in the UK and worldwide. You can find out more at:

<https://www.thinkanddocamden.org.uk/>

*Farhana Yamin is an international climate change lawyer. She was a lead author of three IPCC assessment reports from 1994–2007 (Working Groups II and III), and a lead negotiator for the Alliance of Small Island States helping to formulate the Paris Agreement in 2015.*