

## OPINION

## The importance of place in climate action

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### What is place-based climate action?

Places matter when designing and delivering effective climate action. Place-based climate action (PCA) encompasses activities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance climate adaptation and resilience that are driven by the commitment, attachment and responsibilities that people have to the places where they live, work and socialise. These activities are also shaped by the specific opportunities, challenges and constraints of a given place [1]. PCA can thereby shift the perceived scale of the climate challenge from overwhelming to achievable, with tangible actions with realisable goals.

PCA goes beyond 'local' action (i.e. action scaled according to a specific geographical location). It emphasises people's association with, and the value they bestow upon, their cities, towns, neighbourhoods or streets. It blends the unique needs and attributes of a place with the priorities of the people who live and work there. PCA projects may, for example, utilise local assets for heat or renewables, support placemaking by neighbourhood retrofit, or engage communities in shared sustainability initiatives and the management of community assets.

PCA reflects place-specific needs, experiences and contexts. The UK, for example, has around 382 local administrations in different forms (e.g. local authorities, county councils, district councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan districts etc.) across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. All of these vary in size, geography, population, socio-economic conditions, budget, governance structures, political representation, environmental challenges and policy priorities. This makes their role in place-based climate action unique, complex and challenging.

### Who plays a part in place-based climate action?

PCA is not only a role for the public sector, despite local authorities often being vital anchor institutions within the places they represent. To be effective, PCA requires collaboration between public, private and third sector organisations that operate within, and for the benefit of, specific locations. Buy-in is needed from a broad set of stakeholders including: workers, communities (both geographic and communities of interest) and citizens (from universities, colleges, schools and local businesses); community-based activist groups; faith groups; rural stakeholders [2]; recreational clubs and societies; financial actors (e.g. building societies or credit unions); and specific groups such as chambers of commerce and larger private companies.

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As the momentum generated by the 2019 wave of climate emergency declarations by national and local governments has waned [3], it has become vital to create new forms of governance and democratic participation to engage this wider set of stakeholders in climate action [4].

Existing governance structures are not always best suited to cross-sector convening of this sort, but citizens assemblies and juries [5], climate commissions (such as those established by the UK Place-based Climate Action Network, PCAN) and other, similar networks [6] have begun to bring together stakeholders from across sectors and all walks of life. Coalitions such as climate commissions offer a structure to facilitate collective decision-making, knowledge exchange, peer support and collaboration around climate adaptation and mitigation priorities which may be too large in scope for a local authority to tackle alone [7]. Central to this is local public engagement and new (sometimes termed ‘experimental’) modes of building democratic legitimacy and broadening participation to include marginalised communities, such as via citizen juries and assemblies [8].

Especially where transformative action is lacking at the national level, place-based approaches are vital to the development of climate policy. They allow a diverse range of important and trusted stakeholders to develop shared understandings of the challenges of climate change; a deeper appreciation for local environmental injustices; and, ultimately, a collective sense of responsibility to act.

## Delivering climate action across scales

Among its many benefits (see Fig 1), place-based climate action can enable citizens and regional actors to fill a gap in climate action at the national level and foreground the social and environmental considerations of climate action in a specific place.

Where national leadership on climate change is weak, frustrated citizens may be motivated to take action themselves at the level they are most capable of influencing—which is usually local. PCA can therefore fill a gap left by a lack (or the scaling back) of national action. Reaching agreements at a local scale may be less problematic because people would be more likely to have a material relationship with each other beyond socio-political bubbles. This can help develop a collective understanding of the local environmental and social context, and can share experiences, perspectives, expertise on the urgency and direction of change that is required that is rooted in their daily lives.

The model of centralised public funding common in the UK can lead to actors competing for national funding on behalf of specific places, rather than collaborating for optimal effectiveness. In this way, devolved administrations and regional organisations (e.g. the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission) can often be more effective because of their convening power, especially when there is buy-in from political players with financial and decision-making sway. The regional scale also allows knowledge sharing between local authorities.

Place-based climate action provides space for multiple, systems-based approaches to minimise any inequalities, injustices and other negative unintended consequences from climate action. Even with strong national leadership, there is a need to understand and engage with uneven local impacts and capabilities. Places have specific and unique characteristics, (e.g. how the transport system operates locally, how energy is produced, transported and consumed, how the impacts of a changing climate are manifested and what previous experiences people may have had with these), along with the challenges and assets in that place, can inform the design of solutions most applicable to it. Thus, PCA provides an opportunity for people to appreciate the uneven impacts of climate change on their friends, families, and neighbours, while also understanding how climate solutions (such as distributed community solar and

## Place-specific



- People are likely to notice benefits that are tailored to a specific place
- People involved are already economically and emotionally invested
- Action addresses local needs and is responsive to local pressures

## Part of a broader vision



- Enables consideration of how to integrate mitigation, adaptation and resilience
- More likely to be considered a just transition
- Potential to share innovative forms of action at replicable scales and feed into national-level policies by scaling up case studies

## Engagement



- The scale of individual places offers a manageable entry point to addressing the global issue of climate change
- Community support and participation leads to better outcomes as people understand the local context
- Maximising the use of situated knowledge
- Reduced risk of public backlash against climate action

## Address complexity



- Manageable scale for implementing or integrating systems-based approaches to climate-related decision-making
- Intimate understanding of how different components of a system work together
- Innovative and more effective solutions

## Social co-benefits



- Health outcomes of climate initiatives helping to address inequalities
- Aesthetic improvements and renovation to local places
- Enhanced productivity, community rejuvenation and regeneration

**Fig 1. Benefits of place-based climate action.**

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wind projects) can provide new support channels for less-advantaged individuals and groups in their areas.

## What are the challenges to delivering PCA?

PCA can highlight the unintended consequences of climate action, i.e. when one issue is addressed without consideration of its impacts on others, and inefficiencies in aligning local priorities. For example, pedestrianising city centres to reduce air pollution and carbon emissions can restrict access for people with disabilities. Flexibility is essential to future-proof against complexities, otherwise climate action can lead to further issues of economic and social deprivation exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. Creating the systems-based approach that this requires can be challenging where operational capacity is limited and organisations or communities are not interested in related issues beyond their local context.

Lack of capacity and appropriate skills are a major barrier to designing and implementing PCA. The UK is again a telling case in point. Sustained budget cuts over the past decade mean that local authorities have lost much of their capacity, and the abolition of climate-related performance indicators means climate action has been deprioritised.

Similarly, understanding impact, and learning from both successes and failures, is not systematic, if it happens at all, although there is an appetite for peer learning and support. Funding for local authorities has been considerably reduced [9], exacerbating regional inequalities. Lack of awareness and/or exposure to misinformation via social media, combined with uncertainty regarding who should lead and how climate action should take place (particularly if conveyed by loud voices), can all impede investment and ambition to deliver PCA. The question remains of how better to include diverse stakeholder voices in the process.

## Making place-based climate action happen

A structured and focused approach alongside an attractive vision, supported by strong governance and leadership, are key ingredients to PCA. Local leadership with a 'can-do' approach helps to develop a shared sense of urgency about the need for action, and enables those involved to feel part of something bigger and collaborative, helping to overcome issues of national support, resource constraints and complexity within communities.

Collaborative approaches to PCA help to construct and maintain effective stakeholder networks, bringing together different partners and parties with an active interest in what happens in the place and coordinating their energy and resources. This can include active citizens and organisations, most usefully championed by (in the case of climate commissions) an individual taking on a self-appointed leadership role, helping to build trusted links between those involved. Such collaboration can help to overcome potential disconnections between the actions of local authorities at the regional or devolved administration scale.

All climate action requires sufficient resourcing. Such resources include: a range of powers to deliver (e.g. raise own finances and make connections independently from central government and have flexibility and autonomy over resources); education and expertise (i.e. accessible knowledge of climate change impacts and solutions relevant to specific places); finance and funding (to implement action) and legitimacy (e.g. through having a popular mandate with citizens).

With this considered we outline a set of key recommendations for future place-based climate action:

Recommendations for national governments

1. Put in place a coherent national framework to support local climate action (that encapsulates both adaptation and mitigation), backed by appropriate funds, evaluation metrics, resources and skills.
2. Tackle institutional and policy barriers, and recognise and leverage the agency and power of local communities.

#### Recommendations for local communities

1. Embed climate action fully into local decision-making and broader local strategies such as planning, economic development and health.
2. Adopting a partnership-based approach which mobilises the energy and expertise of private, public and third sector actors, and working with these actors to devise locally attractive, fundable project portfolios.

#### Recommendations for local authorities

1. Broaden the scope of climate action beyond emission reduction (mitigation) to create synergies, emphasise co-benefits and encompass measures to reduce physical climate risks (adaptation), tackling wider societal challenges (e.g. public health, energy security) and reducing social and economic inequalities (just transition).
2. Formalise climate action through institutional structures like climate commissions to provide an effective mechanism for evidence, advice and evaluation, generating local collaboration through a platform to connect public, private and third sector actors.

#### Recommendations for local businesses

1. Play their part in leading and supporting place-based programmes of climate action, address the climate impact of their own operations, seeing this as an opportunity for efficiencies and improvements that can help make the case for long-term investment.
2. Use their local influence to reduce area-wide emissions through their strategies, estates, investment, workforce, supply chains, logistics and procurement.

Building a strong and robust evidence base and garnering a wide, effective and meaningful participatory engagement process for place-based climate action is required to evaluate how climate change is connected with social and environmental impacts in a particular place. This can help shed light on what local priorities are and what the financial and social returns on investment might be. This can thus ensure that climate strategies resonate with local people and organisations, reflecting their needs, experiences, opportunities and challenges. In so doing, this will help to enhance appetite for place-based climate action, working with local anchor institutions and civil society groups, further helping to overcome local, regional and national policy divisions on climate change.

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