

IDEAS:

Calling all change agents: Let's solve the problem of climate change together

Inspired by change agents

For over 25 years, Metropolitan Group (MG) has been fortunate to work with an amazing diversity of change agents spanning the intersecting issues of human, environmental and economic health and social justice. Every day we learn from the different perspectives of the clients we serve as we travel alongside:

- *A seasoned community organizer who believes that no one should live in poverty. And so she organizes a campaign to help under-resourced communities access good-quality jobs generated by new investments in clean energy and green infrastructure.*
- *A savvy entrepreneur who believes that communities will be most happy and secure if they can feed themselves. And so he sets out to transform our nation's grocery store industry to focus on regional food economies.*
- *An inspired public servant who understands that peace depends on finding new ways of sharing natural resources over the long term. And so she commits to navigating the world to understand the greatest needs of people and places over the next century.*
- *A talented woodcarver who understands how his people survived thousands of years of environmental change in Alaska through their own innovation. And so he dedicates his life to helping Alaska Natives share their wisdom and worldview through art.*
- *A courageous public health advocate who sees the lost tradition of Black women walking resulting in increased health disparities among African Americans. And so she starts a new nonprofit to help Black communities become active again by getting outdoors.*
- *A passionate environmentalist who knows that we cannot afford to encourage other countries to use our outdated technologies to achieve prosperity. And so he launches a campaign that challenges America to abandon fossil fuels altogether in favor of powering our lives with 100 percent clean energy.*

The community organizer, the entrepreneur, the public servant, the woodcarver, the public health advocate and the environmentalist—



Metropolitan Group

the power of voice

come from very different backgrounds and see themselves belonging to very different causes. But climate change brings them together by affecting each of their communities in profound and urgent ways.

These leaders, and the grassroots constituencies they each serve and influence, seem to be in widely different places when it comes to the climate issue. While many recognize climate change as a concern, it is not a top priority motivating action at the level needed to address the challenge. We need to understand why.

This essay is intended to elevate all voices in a conversation on obstacles standing in the way of climate action, and to uncover opportunities that could dramatically accelerate the pace of change. We seek to bring together the wisdom, voice and power of diverse causes in a way that illuminates possible solutions waiting to be seized. We offer it not as a prescription, a strategy memo or a treatise. Rather, we put this forward as grist for the mill and an invitation to spark other ideas.

What's getting in the way?

We believe that there are at least three factors standing in the way of allowing a diverse majority of this country to prioritize climate action as mission critical:

1. Climate action has been framed as anti-American lifestyle.
2. Too much emphasis is placed on the complexity of the climate problem.
3. Issues of race and class continue to be pushed to the edges of the climate response.

Not only are these weaknesses halting substantive progress on climate action, they are being used quite successfully by the opposition to deepen commitment to the status quo.

Climate action framed as anti-American lifestyle

People cherish the American lifestyle—or what they aspire to have as their American lifestyle. Many appreciate the right to drive anywhere in the country on gas that is cheap and ever-widening roads to relieve traffic. People in small urban rental apartments often dream of owning larger homes in sprawling suburbs. The expectation is that smart devices can be plugged in anywhere—at home, at work, in the car, in a restaurant, even on a plane. Most want electricity to be pervasive and always on, and few want to be bothered with tracking where it comes from or what makes it possible.

The American lifestyle is about working hard and being rewarded with safety, stability, and plenty. It is easy to imagine that people fear losing these things with the advent of



climate change and enhanced environmental regulation surrounding the climate crisis. Efforts to remove parking in favor of public transportation, establish growth boundaries for cities to prevent land conversion for new homes, and increase charges for basic sanitation services to force recycling and composting are all good things—and they also contribute to a false narrative of loss.

A scarcity frame advanced by certain environmental groups adds to this false narrative. Environmental messages such as “humans play recklessly with precious and finite natural resources” or “it is necessary to limit individual consumption for the sake of the collective and longer-term good” typically simmer under the surface of climate change advocacy. And while these messages ring true to committed environmentalists, other constituencies tune out, fearing that loss and “takings” will result from efforts to address climate.

The opposition has much more effectively framed the debate in their favor. They put core American values at the heart of their strategy for engaging people, pairing values-laden messages such as “American independence and ingenuity” and “I’m an energy voter” with an argument for a continued all-of-the-above approach that perpetuates reliance on fossil fuels. With this frame combined with massive advertising budgets, it is not surprising that big oil has been able to co-opt public opinion in its favor.

While the opposition may be effective, it is also true that in poll after poll we find a growing majority of this country cares deeply about the environment and wants to hand a healthy, natural world to the next generation. In this data, we see the argument to put *people* at the root of the solution, rather than at the core of the problem.

Placing too much emphasis on the complexity of the problem

The current narrative makes the climate problem seem so big that many assume it is a losing battle disconnected from their own, more tangible efforts to improve lives. Climate change is often framed as “the biggest problem our planet has ever faced,” “a crisis that can only be solved by national governments sacrificing their own goals for the sake of the larger planet,” “a threat mandating coordinated global action the likes of which our world has never seen,” and “to change anything, we must change everything.” This way of describing the magnitude of the challenge makes it feel like a downward tailspin—a high-stakes poker game that most people will lose. And no one wants to be on a losing team.

Moreover, this way of framing causes many people to miss the connection between how their work on community-level issues can be



designed to address climate change. Take, for example, initiatives to make streets safer for walking and public transportation, efforts to replace food deserts with locally grown food, or advocacy to improve community schools—each of these can be overtly designed to spur climate action. Unfortunately, often this does not happen because the issue of climate change is made to feel insurmountable, complex and unrelatable. For people to act on climate change, it needs to be connected to the issues that they have already prioritized as most relevant and urgent in their lives.

Issues of race and class pushed to the periphery

While many well-intentioned advocacy organizations recognize the injustice felt by under-resourced communities and communities of color when it comes to climate change, this has not been translated into nearly enough progress on more equitable approaches to advancing climate action. More often than not, communities of color are simply invited to join in addressing an environmental group's existing priorities. While environmental groups are working hard to examine the issue of insufficient diversity in their own organizations, most have placed only limited emphasis on connecting with and investing in the priorities of communities of color.

For example, in national research we conducted in under-resourced communities and communities of color, we found that

parents and child care providers agree that children under the age of 5 need to be more physically active. However, they do not want that activity to take place outdoors. They expressed concerns that children may not be safe in playgrounds or basketball courts in many neighborhoods. Fears swirled about debris such as broken glass and run-down play equipment with sharp edges, the "wrong" people hanging out at playgrounds, gangs and snow that is no longer clean enough to eat. How many groups working on climate change have also made it a priority to work on addressing these kinds of immediate community concerns?

To make matters worse, those advocating for progressive climate policy are often too quick to support changes that may advance solutions to the climate challenge, but negatively impact communities of color and/or people experiencing poverty. Take, for example, proposals to increase the gas tax—a climate-friendly move that can also compound barriers to job access and income equality for people struggling to make ends meet. Rarely do we see a gas tax proposal that directs the funding to communities to spur progress on fuel-efficient vehicles, mass transit or reinvestment in affordable housing near jobs and transit.



It's about health, social justice *and* the environment

To move beyond obstacles that limited climate action, we need to rethink why the issue matters in a much broader context. In Metropolitan Group's work across diverse sectors, we increasingly see addressing climate change as a potential *shared* cause for public health, social justice and environmental leaders and stakeholders alike.

Health

Across our country and beyond there has been tremendous focus on improving access to quality health care, and an increasing recognition that we must also increase the health of communities where people live, work, worship and play. Increasingly, the debate is framing health as a right and not a luxury. If we unpack the notion of "health as a right," we quickly discover that health is a core value for many. It motivates every aspect of people's behavior—how they eat and drink, where they spend their days and with whom they spend their time.

It is well established that vulnerable populations—communities of color, the elderly, youth, people living in poverty and those living in developing nations—experience the greatest climate-related health impacts. Malnourishment, asthma and heat stroke all get worse with a changing climate.

What is less understood and talked about is that everyone's health is in jeopardy if the trajectory of climate change is not reversed. Tropical diseases moving northward with a warming climate do not discriminate. Food insecurity spreads as key growing regions like the California food basket dry up. Everyone's clean water supplies become threatened as algae blooms become the norm due to warming water. As extreme storms and weather events increase, the human health issues caused by natural disasters will extract a toll on lives and livelihoods. At the end of the day, if climate change is not addressed, it will become a public health crisis that touches everyone's life.

The good news is that people's relationship to their own health can be a very helpful tool to encourage learning about the root causes of climate change and what can be done about it. Diverse communities are passionate about clean and renewable energy because of health and quality-of-life concerns, even if addressing climate change is not a primary motivator for some. A large plurality is passionate about clean air to breathe and clean water to drink as basic health rights. Tapping into America's focus on health could be a powerful platform for widening interest in the climate issue.



Social justice

We are in a time of increasing awareness and concern about race, immigration and income inequality. Powerful social movements like the Fight for \$15 and Black Lives Matter are living manifestations of the fight for social justice. These movements have been sparked by increasing disparity in America, combined with millions of environmentally displaced people fleeing their homes and homelands for climate-resilient communities in the United States.

If we dig just beneath the surface of what the Fight for \$15 and Black Lives Matter are really about, we get to the hard truth that communities living in poverty—especially communities of color—have borne the brunt of head-in-the-sand policies and unscrupulous practices that have devastated their quality of life, community health and access to opportunity. Not only are these communities facing record unemployment, mass incarceration and unprecedented violence, they are also contending with the worst effects of climate change: extreme flooding, loss of clean water and air that is dangerous to breathe.

Returning to the American lifestyle premise, it is no secret that shifting the carbon economy will take huge investments of money, labor and ingenuity. Millions of jobs will be created, and billions of dollars of wealth will be generated. We can already see the

beginnings of this clean energy boom as homeowners begin to make money from their rooftop solar panels, ranchers welcome industrial wind turbines to diversify their revenues and green building companies grow because of their promise of energy efficiency. But will this boom create a *just* transition? Will the jobs, the contracts and the wealth generation all go to those at the top of the economic pyramid? Or will we—can we—design the transition to power the greatest economic equity and shared prosperity boom in our history?

Poll after poll tells us that communities of color are more committed to taking action to address climate change than their more affluent white neighbors. While some may find it surprising that communities lacking in basic needs can at the same time be so motivated to take action on a long-term threat like climate change, we believe that it is because they are on the front line, already feeling the impacts on their communities. They see a healthy climate as both a basic need and their best chance for prosperity, justice and a healthy future for their children.

Environment

While the environmental movement has certainly owned and prioritized the issue of climate change for decades, it has also been challenged to come together to build



a coordinated response that engages the full spectrum of environmental communities and potential allies. The reasons for this are many, first and foremost being the cracks and fissures that divide the movement today. For instance, there is the divide between those environmental groups that identify as “mainstream” (largely bipartisan) and those that identify more with environmental justice (largely progressive). And there is an even bigger chasm between those who self-identify as “environmental” and the many others working to address environmental issues who do not identify themselves as environmentalists.

Beyond the silos and walls that divide the environmental movement, another barrier to this movement’s success on the climate front is disconnection. We have an entire generation of children and their parents becoming disconnected from the environment. This is happening for a multitude of reasons, including a shift from rural to urban living, a 21st-century addiction to screen time replacing time spent outdoors, communities devoid of safe places to play outside and neighborhoods that have next to nothing natural left for people to care for and learn to steward. Given such disconnection from nature and natural resources, it is no surprise that so many people today do not prioritize addressing Earth’s climate as their most urgent and important issue.

Fortunately, America’s environmental movement has proven its ability to grow

beyond its ambitions of yesterday and rally the country’s attention on urgent issues of tomorrow. In the early 20th-century, environmental leaders were able to convince the nation that a country’s treatment of its land and wildlife is a measure of its character. This led to the creation of national parks, forests, game refuges, and other public lands whose natural resources would have otherwise been lost forever. When unregulated industrialization in the 1960s threatened to poison our nation’s water and air, the environmental movement was able to convince the country of the need for sweeping environmental regulations, such as the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, which saved society from itself. And now, at the dawn of the 21st-century, the environmental movement has prioritized the issue of climate change. Hope and progress is manifesting in the Paris Accord, changes to energy portfolio requirements, a Nobel Prize for Peace given to environmentalist Wangari Maathai for her efforts to plant trees, the Pope’s encyclical calling for worldwide action on climate change, innovations in energy efficiency and more cost-competitive clean and renewable energy. At the same time, these worthy advances fall far short of what is required. We see the need to exponentially increase the drive for change and the communities that expect and demand it.



A new roadmap to success on climate action

If you accept the premise that the public health, social justice and environmental sectors are all primed for action on the climate issue, then the next step is to authentically engage the potential of each of these sectors independently and collaboratively. In our effort to stimulate debate and dialogue, we offer three ideas on how to do this.

1. Empower the new American majority to act on climate

Those born into the 1960s-era environmental movement lived in a time when enough of the world cared about nature to enact sweeping reforms and protections where nature was fundamentally threatened. But our country looked very different in the 1960s. Demographics were not as diverse as they are today, and income and economic disparity not as pronounced.

The shifting demographics of the 21st-century and the shrinking of the middle class means that mobilizing 1960s-era environmentalists and their children does not amount to enough of a population to tackle climate change. The year 2016 marks the first year when a majority of kindergarteners are children of color, meaning that in only 12 years a majority of eligible first-time voters will no longer be white.

Recently, study after study has told us that communities of color are now more concerned with environmental issues and climate change than upper-income communities and Whites. It is time to stop seeing the engagement of communities of color as the right thing to do or smart politics in the face of changing demographics. Rather, it is imperative that we engage communities experiencing the most direct impacts of climate change as leaders and owners who have a unique, frontline understanding of just solutions that might fundamentally change the agenda. This is how the new American majority can drive meaningful action on climate change.

2. Create a movement of movements

It is time to help the public health, social justice and environmental movements see climate change as their common issue to hold—without feeling alone in holding the issue. Each of these movements needs to see and value the potential of other social movements also holding climate as their issue, and invest in supporting the solutions that come from these valuable and varied perspectives.

The artificial and archaic lines we draw that divide and disconnect people and issues might be the climate movement's



greatest liability. Affordable housing is an environmental issue. Renewable energy is a health issue. A post-carbon economy is an economic justice issue. Because the climate issue cuts across all these priorities, the climate movement holds the potential to be the most diverse and powerful movement for change in the world today.

To catalyze this evolution, we need to help social justice, public health and environmental groups work intentionally to see the potential they each and all have for claiming climate as their issue. This will require:

- Investment in building multicultural engagement and collective action capacity within all three sectors, so that each can see and understand the cultural contexts in which the others operate—informing strategy, communication and relationship building
- Naming and confronting unconscious cultural biases on all sides in order to build genuine curiosity, understanding and mutually beneficial relationships of trust and collaboration across sectors
- Creativity to negotiate equitable agreements that ensure that climate action agendas and objectives within any of these sectors address health, social justice and environmental needs, including people experiencing displacement and disparity

3. Build public will

Public will building is an approach to communication that drives lasting shifts in societal expectations and results in changes to policies, practices and behaviors. Unlike public opinion-based approaches, which narrow the ranks of stakeholders to the advocates and movable middle and are deeply effective at driving one-time or short-term change (e.g., advocate for X policy or vote for Y measure), public will building focuses on understanding cultural context and deeply held underlying values for broad enough constituencies to create shifts in normative community expectations. The approach invests much more in grassroots and grassroots engagement, and uses media to create a fertile environment and reinforcement medium rather than as the primary communication platform. In the end, this approach impacts the way broad swaths of society will act, think and behave over generations.

We must begin with research to uncover what closely held values cut across issues of health, social justice and the environment. With knowledge of these unifying values, we can reframe the climate threat to move more diverse constituencies to shared ownership and action around the issue for the long term. This might mean replacing a term like “climate change” with more resonant



values such as “pursuit of the good life” or “ensuring the American dream” or “shared opportunity.” When all is said and done, the right way to reframe the issue likely will not come from this article, but will emerge from the hearts and values of stakeholders engaged through research.

The right values-driven frame could serve as a magnet that attracts disparate social movements to act on behalf of our climate. But perhaps its greatest potential is to spark an entirely new way of thinking and living that is grounded in human connection, hopefulness and happiness. If other countries can do it—and they have—why can’t the United States?

Let’s do it

We hope these ideas spark other ideas that make addressing climate change a broadly shared and deeply embraced priority cause. We believe these ideas and others they spawn can bring the power of a much larger and more activated group of stakeholders to the forefront of solving the climate challenge.

We as a nation have the power to change the playing field, unleash the potential to accelerate action far beyond current limitations and fundamentally reverse the course of the climate change trajectory. We believe there is still time to save the only inhabitable home we know of in a vast universe, and efforts to do so can be the very vehicle that helps us all create a more just and sustainable world. Let’s do it.

To share your comments and ideas, send your thoughts to:

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The open-source Public Will Building Model developed by Metropolitan Group, adapted through almost 25 years of field application and adopted by change agents and social entrepreneurs across numerous causes and in numerous countries, is available to download and share at:
metgroup.com/assets/Public-Will.pdf

