"Climate change can bring us together, if we have the wisdom to prevent it from driving us apart"*

Many wonder why, in the face of one of the most important global issues of our time, people are still struggling to respond effectively to climate change, and to curb their own greenhouse emissions. After all, the scientific evidence is becoming more and more obvious and immediate.

We could explain it away with the T.S. Elliot quote that 'humankind cannot bear too much reality', but that would be giving in to our human foibles too easily.

Over the past decade or so, much research has centered on why climate action is such a challenge to us. One of the explanations is that the issue is intangible – you can't touch it, hear it, or feel it. No- one can predict exactly how it will affect you, me, or our families and local communities. Although some of its effects are playing out right now, it is often described as being something that will happen in the future.

Faced with this, the human mind is ill-equipped to respond effectively. It has evolved to prioritise the present over the future, and to worry about the known over the unknown. Uncertainty puts us off, we can be unrealistically optimistic, and if something is too hard to take we are quick to slip into denial.

Moreover, climate change is a challenge to how we live our lives, and, in particular, to the notion of economic growth, and spiraling resource and energy consumption. Many fear that cutting greenhouse emissions will involve pain, sacrifice and unacceptable lifestyle changes. What used to be 'wants' are now 'needs' that people are reluctant to give up. We appear to be 'locked-in' to routines and patterns of behaviour that are resistant to change.

Social creatures, social norms

Human beings are social creatures. And whether we admit it or not, we are influenced by social norms and social practice. We do what we do because we do it, and because everyone else is doing it too. We don't like stepping away from the herd and we worry about being judged by others for doing something different. Like children in the playground, we fear being shunned, isolated or ignored.

'Climate change has emerged as a phenomenon which poses challenges on an unprecedented scale. But it is not a problem waiting for a solution. It is an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon which is reshaping the way we think about ourselves, our societies and humanity's place on Earth'
– Professor Mike Hulme, founder of the UK Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research

Policies on climate change have tended to reflect the rational choice model, which focuses on the provision of information, as demonstrated by the 'Power of One' and 'Change' campaigns, and the offer of financial incentives, such as grants for home retrofitting and the purchase of electric vehicles. While these may work for the early adopters and environmentalists amongst us, progress is slow.

It is now more widely accepted that we need to look beyond the individual, and to the influence of social practice, peer groups, social and cultural norms, and to institutional and systemic barriers.

New, flexible and more creative policy approaches are beginning to emerge, which not only attempt to address the problem of greenhouse emissions, but also play a wider role in helping to change how governments and policy makers interact with citizens, and how they make decisions.

Working collectively on community energy

Working with people collectively has more impact, and out of this thinking has emerged an interest in community energy.

Community energy is a broad term which allows for different interpretations, but it includes local ownership and participation in the generation of renewable energy, and in energy efficiency initiatives. Community energy projects are facilitating the spread of sustainable energy awareness and knowledge, and the promotion of energy saving behaviour. It is also hoped that involvement will help develop people's understanding and acceptance of renewable energy in general, and that a degree of community ownership and financial gain will foster approval for local renewable installations.

If it works, community energy can be a win- win situation for both policy makers and the community. Proponents stress that local benefits can include lower energy costs, job creation and investment, the fostering of a sense of engagement and civic duty, the strengthening of social networks, and the development of social capital, cohesion and resilience.

The promotion of energy efficiency measures and small scale renewable energy production is an obvious next step for national energy policy, if statements, like the following, from the 2015 White Paper on Energy are to be taken seriously:

'The transition will see the energy system change from one that is almost exclusively Government and utility led, to one where citizens and communities will increasingly be participants in renewable energy generation, distribution and energy efficiency'

To support this ambition, welcome steps have recently been taken by the Sustainable Authority of Ireland (SEAI) to expand their Better Energy Communities grant programme and to develop and support a network of Sustainable Energy Communities.

Challenges for Community Energy

However, there are significant challenges to the roll-out of community energy projects across the country. How a group emerges, who sets it up, the task it sets itself, the support it gets along the way, and the local context, can all determine the outcome.

A community energy practitioner needs staying power and the ability to respond to whatever hurdle comes their way. The topic can seem to be overly technical and complicated – we much prefer energy to be invisible, rather than presented to us in the form of kilowatts and joules. Sometimes, the group will face local apathy, disinterest or opposition. As with other volunteer activities, fatigue and burn-out can be a problem.

Outside agency support is key to the successful development of the sector, and it needs to be consistent and for the long-term. Substantial practical, technical and financial supports are required to help bridge experience and knowledge gaps.

However, over and above these requirements, community energy is unlikely to develop in any significant way, or to help address our national renewable energy and energy efficiency targets, if the current key barriers are not addressed.

According to community energy advocates, these include:

- priority access to the electricity grid for community owned renewable energy projects,
- changes in the planning laws to allow for their appropriate siting, and
- a local feed-in tariff so that communities can benefit financially from the energy they produce.

Moreover, it is felt that policy makers shouldn't expect miracles from volunteers. If community energy is to have any meaningful impact, funding needs to be made available for the employment of people with community co-ordination and development skills, and with the relevant practical and technical expertise.

So, while community energy, as a grassroots-up response, cannot be seen as the silver bullet or cheap solution, it can, if given the appropriate supports, contribute to the energy efficiency challenge.

However, it will not flourish if there is not also an appropriate and visible response from the top down. For people to become interested in local energy initiatives, they need to see that the government, the local authorities and businesses are also playing their part. We also need to know that our leaders, politicians and policy makers are making the required behavioural changes within their own lives.

For this to happen there needs to be a national narrative on the energy transition and a clear and practical vision, which demonstrates to people what they are being asked to do, and what others are already doing. We need to know that the train has left the station, and that, if we don't hop on, we'll be left behind.

After all, no-one likes being left behind…

Article by Clare Watson, Energy Policy Modelling Group, Environmental Research Institute and MaREI, UCC.

* The title of this article is a 2007 quote from former British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett.

Clare is a PhD researcher on the EPA-funded interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research project 'Climate Change, Behaviour and Community Response' (2015-2017). The research is focusing on the behavioural, social and institutional drivers of, and barriers to, climate action, and especially on the role played by community energy groups and intermediary organisations.

https://www.catchments.ie/climate-change-can-bring-us-together-wisdom-prevent-driving-us-apart/