

What is the role of voluntary sector organisations in tackling the ecological and climate crises?

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Introduction

Societies around the globe face an existential threat from the ecological and climate crises. The responsibility to respond is often placed with individuals, businesses, or the policy making and revenue generation powers of the state. Where then, does the voluntary sector fit into this mix?

Does it, perhaps, provide a space where debate and ideas can be exchanged, or action taken, at least partially less unencumbered by political or profit driven imperatives? Or perhaps its role is more catalytic, providing a forum through which other sectors can be influenced?

Who has contributed most to global CO₂ emissions?

Our World
in Data

Cumulative carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions over the period from 1751 to 2017. Figures are based on production-based emissions which measure CO₂ produced domestically from fossil fuel combustion and cement, and do not correct for emissions embedded in trade (i.e. consumption-based). Emissions from international travel are not included.

North America
457 billion tonnes CO₂
29% global cumulative emissions



Asia
457 billion tonnes CO₂
29% global cumulative emissions



EU-28
353 billion tonnes CO₂
22% global cumulative emissions



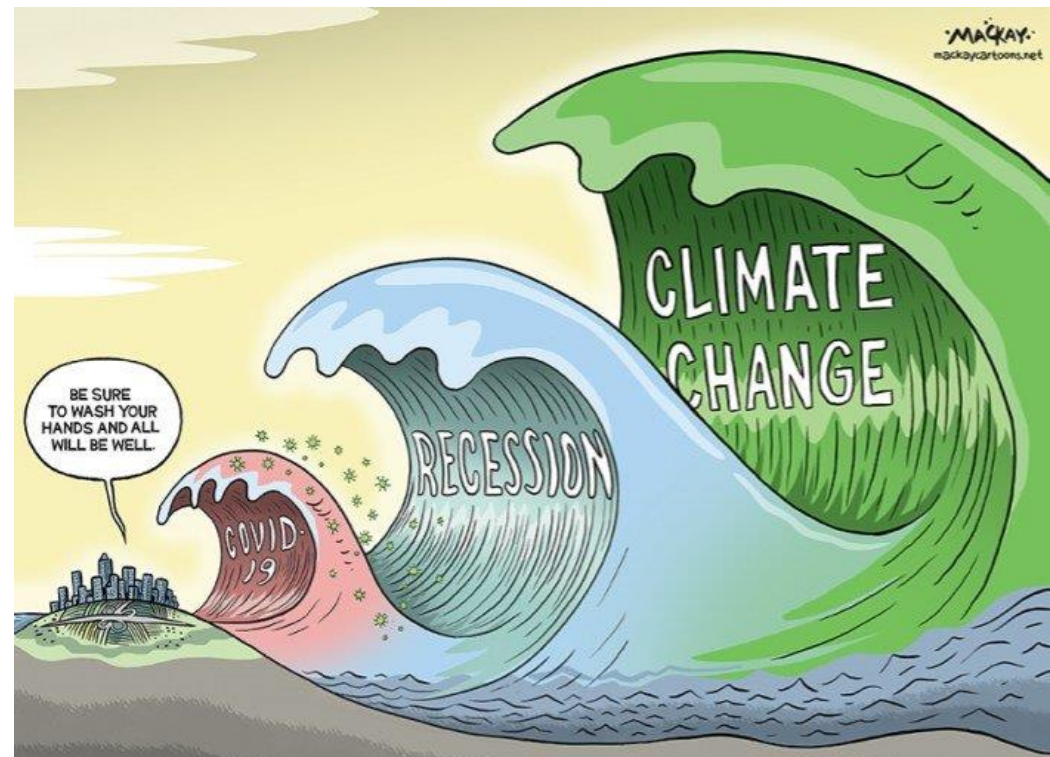
Europe
514 billion tonnes CO₂
33% global cumulative emissions

Africa 43 billion tonnes CO₂ 3% global emissions
South America 40 billion tonnes CO₂ 3% global emissions

Oceania
20 billion tonnes CO₂
1.2% global emissions

A reminder of context: where does responsibility lie?*

*treemap is based on production not consumption data



Figures for the 28 countries in the European Union have been grouped as the 'EU-28' since international targets and negotiations are typically set as a collaborative target between EU countries. Values may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Data source: Calculated by Our World in Data based on data from the Global Carbon Project (GCP) and Carbon Dioxide Analysis Center (CDIAC). This is a visualization from OurWorldinData.org, where you find data and research on how the world is changing.

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“... yet voluntary sector scholarship has not caught up to the reality of TSO action on climate change.”

Kagan and Dodge 2023

Key themes from a 'youthful field'

- Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Requires a Multi-Sector Approach
- Voluntary Sector's Role in Climate Mitigation and Adaptation
- The Voluntary Sector's Role in Environmental Advocacy
- The Role of Philanthropy in Climate Mitigation and Adaptation

Gazley and Prakesh (2023)

Background to Voluntary Sector scholarship on climate action/emergency/change

“Climate change poses important questions for voluntary and civil society scholars studying advocacy and/or service delivery as well as cross-sector organizations involving governments, businesses, and nonprofits....

... Stepping back from a focus on organizations with environment-related missions, we make a larger argument here: **the welfare of the nonprofit sector is inexorably intertwined with climate change. This is due to both the increased demand for social services due to climate change and the change in the physical and institutional context in which the voluntary sector operates.**

While as of now, only some voluntary organizations might be participating directly in climate action, *all* are potentially affected by climate change.”

What are the emergent areas?

1. **Local Focus:** “As adaptation tends to have a local focus ... the role of service delivery nonprofits will become more salient as they complement governmental efforts as well as step in when governmental efforts are inadequate.”
2. **Economic and social justice:** “there is a compelling case for a ‘whole community’, social response to climate change which also accepts where the burden of change rests”
3. **Diversity of perspectives:** “scholarship needs to look at varieties of climate activism, moving beyond the simple dichotomy of the climate movement and counter-movement to incorporate the full diversity of perspectives.”
4. **Holistic and two-way challenge:** “All voluntary sector organizations, whether in the environmental field or not, will need to expand their portfolio of activities to address climate change.... At the same time, climate science and policy scholars outside the voluntary sector field might consider the benefits of engaging with the related voluntary sector issues of economic development, social service provision, gender rights, environmental health, and social justice, to name just a few salient issue areas.”
5. **Theories of the sector:** “Climate change provides an opportunity for scholars to revisit various theories that explain the emergence, growth, and demise of the voluntary sector along with specific strategies the sector has adopted in different issue areas”
6. **A (great) unsettlement:** “does the rise in the policy salience of climate change crowd out attention and resources devoted to other policy areas—and by implication the organizations working in these areas?”

Shades of Green 1: UK Charity Sector Manifesto ([NCVO discussion paper](#)) 2023

Think Longer Term

- **support a just, equitable and green transition.** This should be embedded in short and long-term climate plans
- recognise the impact of climate change on the people charities support. **Government should support charities and voluntary organisations to prepare for climate transition**
- **ensure a 'seat at the table' for organisations who hold the expertise.** These organisations should be involved in forming and delivering climate policy
- evaluate long-term policies to understand the impact they may have on different social groups.

Allow Community Energy to Flourish

- **encourage local authorities to provide planning permission advice and guidance for community projects**
- support energy volunteers and experts to help the government's energy transition at a local level. Without this support the asset of volunteers will be lost as they find something else to do with their time
- **ensure equal access to the £10m [Community Energy Fund](#).** Guarantee ongoing partnership with the charity sector to ensure the funding supports local communities
- **invest in a nationwide street home insulation programme,** focusing first on the communities that need it most.

Connect levelling up, social infrastructure and the green agenda

- provide support for the workforce. **We need the skills to deliver net zero.** Government should create new green apprenticeships and guarantee these are accessible to underrepresented groups. For example, women, disabled people, and people from global majority communities
- **ensure local authorities have the right powers and resources to co-design solutions with the most impacted communities**

Encourage climate innovation in charities

Move away from fossil fuels

- **support a just transition to a decarbonised economy.** This should address the climate crisis while also addressing inequality and improving the quality of life for communities across the UK
- invest in onshore renewables and guarantee a permanent ban on fracking across the UK.

emphasis added

Shades of Green 2: Response of the National Lottery Community Fund Environmental Plan: 'it starts with community'

- **Be a world-class environmental funder:** supporting impactful projects that protect and improve the environment in ways that matter to local communities.
- **Improve the environmental impact of the voluntary and community sector:** we will do this by leading the way in our funding practice, supporting and inspiring our applicants and grantholders to take action to protect and improve the environment, and leveraging our position as the UK's largest community funder by starting to mainstream requirements into all our funding.
- **Lead the way in managing our environmental impact:** walking the talk, and working towards net zero, sharing our practice along the way to inspire others.
- **Demonstrate influence and leadership:** bringing stakeholders together, actively showcasing the role communities play in improving our environment. We'll also share our knowledge, evidence and learning, in order to extend the positive environmental impact we aim to achieve.

Understanding change in the sector

- **Unsettlements and disjuncture:** the disruption of the state-voluntary sector relationship (especially in the UK) (Macmillan et al 2013; Corcoran et al 2018)
- **Prefiguration, niches and ‘integrative marginalisation’** (Seyfang 2010, Dobson 2020)
- **Traps, path dependencies and institutions** (Søgaard Jørgensen P., et al 2023)
- **Polycrisis seen in a long perspective** ([Hoyer et al 2023](#); and Ambrose & Davies, Just Heat):
 - “while environmental forces may play varied and sometimes critical roles, they can never alone explain observed historical dynamics. To achieve more complete understandings there is, moreover, **a need for studies ranging in spatial focus from highly localized to regional and inter-regional levels**, in temporal focus from single events to longue durée environmental and societal (e.g. demographic, cultural) developments, and in human focus from individual behaviours to cross-cultural comparisons”

“A challenge for future research is to identify, if possible, what kind of crisis or dilemma (Bevir & Rhodes, 2012) may be productive in terms of breaking through the tension of integrative marginalisation and generating systemic change, whether through action by the state or as a response to a deepening environmental emergency”

Julian Dobson, Voluntary Sector Review (2020)

Voluntary action in the context of polycrisis

- Hoyer et al 2023: “Building on insights from structural demographic theory (SDT)... demonstrates that societal pressure rises with the combination of three central structural stressors:
 - popular immiseration, namely **declining well-being and living standards for the majority population**
 - the **elite overproduction and conflict that arises when a growing number of wealthy and powerful citizens along with aspirant elites vie for limited economic, political and social prestige positions;** and
 - **state fiscal distress and declining state function** as resources are constrained and frustration at poor conditions erodes state legitimacy and capacity”
- Lessons from history:
 - For scholars, the challenge moving forward is to **uncover ‘leverage points’ that can help shape the experience of societies facing crises away from destabilization and violence and towards stability and even positive reform.** For government officials and other stakeholders, it is imperative that new policies ‘listen to the science’ which must include not only biophysical, economic and political sciences **but also the growing sciences of culture and cultural evolution as well as insights from history and other humanities research.”**

Hoyer D et al. 2023 Navigating polycrisis: long-run socio-cultural factors shape response to changing climate. Phil. Trans. R. Soc.

“we propose that a key capacity in evolving for sustainability will be to collectively imagine new futures. Creating common narratives and stories and local versions of these here will be necessary”

Arthur WB. 2009. *The nature of technology: what it is and how it evolves*. New York, NY: Free Press; and cited in Søgaard Jørgensen P et al (2024) Evolution of the polycrisis: Anthropocene traps that challenge global sustainability. *Philos Trans R*.

Final Reflections: a challenge to established positions

- 1. Unsteady state of different 'fields':** debates around unsettlement, prefiguration, integrative marginalisation in the context of polycrisis are perhaps more useful now than 'grand theories' of the sector.
- 2. Research as a recursive and grounded process and an art:** academic Voluntary Sector research can lag front line innovation, change and simply the everyday practices of sense making.
- 3. Framing for yesterday's crisis:** are sector leaders developing inadequate responses to respond to future challenges?
- 4. Missing the target:** interesting developments and change can be at the margins of the field – from new models of philanthropy, activism in global north and global south, to local experimentation
- 5. A privileged theories of 'the sector':** voluntary action lies beyond the boundaries of established organisations; the greatest innovation and responses to the climate crisis lie perhaps in voices unheard [by governments] and privileged groups across the Global North and Global South