

From Global Solidarity to Local Action: Co-designing Environmental Initiatives with Faith and Community Groups in the UK

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Background

How can we engage diverse communities on climate policy? Environmental organizations have been criticized for not being 'diverse' enough, especially in terms of feeling inclusive to working class and Black, Asian and minoritized communities (Bell and Bevan 2021; Saunders et al 2020). Some studies have also shown that the environmental sector is one of the least ethnically diverse (Policy Exchange 2017; SOS UK 2022).

From a perspective of faith, when organizations make an effort towards the inclusion of different faith representatives, research has shown, for example, that Muslim faith-based actors often feel included only instrumentally, to tick 'inclusion' boxes, rather than actively expected to contribute substantially to campaign activities and policy discussions (Tobin et al 2023). This is compounded by existing structural, importantly economic, inequalities.

Some initiatives are seeking to address the lack of diversity in the climate movement. One such example is Climate Reframe, an organisation that provides "a list of environmental and climate justice activists, experts and advocates from racialized minority backgrounds" with the aim of increasing their presence in media spaces, an important step towards greater recognition, which in turns helps address bias and inequalities in the environmental sector as a whole.

There are two interrelated reasons why widening and diversifying the climate movement should be a priority. First, the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are not distributed evenly and tend to impact vulnerable communities disproportionately more than others. Second, diversity is essential towards the generation of "tactics, messages and solutions" that "reflect the interests" of historically "marginalised communities" (Bell 2021: 4).

The project

For the past two years, I have been working with Zero Hour – the campaign for the Climate and Ecology (CE) Bill - to develop a plan to widen and diversify engagement with climate policy by focusing on creating meaningful engagement opportunities for individuals and community groups that do not consider themselves involved in climate activism. The resulting engagement programme seeks to provide a gentle introduction to the CE Bill, starting from what people know about climate change, nature restoration and emissions reduction on a personal level and then gradually moving towards thinking collectively about policy, systemic and societal change. My research seeks to understand different faith and grassroots communities' perspectives on (and ways of reasoning about) climate change to identify entry points and barriers to engagement on climate issues and the role that practical everyday knowledge, heritage and faith can play in climate policy conversations.

The program involves three elements:

1) **Outreach** – Through snowball sampling, I identify and invite to participate in the programme community groups that do not consider themselves engaged in environmental activism. I prioritise areas in the UK that have higher-than-average demographic characteristics that, as research shows, are underrepresented in the climate movement (e.g., scoped using census data on employment, income, education and/or ethnic diversity indicators).

2) **Education** – In collaboration with the Zero Hour team, I developed a set of illustrated materials, “Letters from the Global South” (several posters and a booklet), to explain some of the scientific principles behind the CE Bill in mostly jargon-free language. Drafted by experts and supported by two hundred scientists, the CE Bill seeks to lock nature and climate targets that the UK has agreed to at the international level into domestic law. These include the UK’s commitments made at UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow and at UNCBD COP15 in Montréal. Additionally, the CE Bill, if made law, would require the UK to take responsibility for its overseas footprint, both ecological and emissions related (Climate and Ecology Bill 2022). To illustrate some of the principles of international fairness embedded in the CE Bill, the posters and booklet also include several ‘country profiles’. These were developed in collaboration with Muslims Declare (a voluntary group of faith-based activists) and other campaigners, schools and organizations from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Rwanda, the UK and Zimbabwe. The posters highlight the differences in carbon and ecological footprint that exist between (and within) countries as well as how climate change and environmental destruction cause and/or exacerbate problems faced by vulnerable communities around the world. The materials use illustrations, maps, quotes, images, letters and drawings to convey these concepts (Letters from the Global South 2023).

3) **Workshops** – Whilst the educational materials speak about the science of climate change and climate (and other related) vulnerabilities around the world, the workshops that accompany these materials seek to facilitate the collective sharing of ideas related to 'nature restoration' and 'emissions reduction' (two key elements of the CE Bill) with the aim of co-designing environmental initiatives that are relevant to local communities in the UK. Co-design allows for people in different localities to express their own unique views, challenges and responses related to climate change, whilst highlighting the need for science-led and people-centred legislation that can facilitate the necessary change at the local and regional levels within the UK. The idea of encouraging conversations about climate change among ordinary people is partly inspired by a clause in the CE Bill that calls for “a Climate and Nature Assembly (...) comprising a representative sample of the United Kingdom population”, which the Government would commission to consider relevant expert advice and to subsequently devise recommendations for measures that would be considered for inclusion in the Government’s overall strategy (Climate and Ecology Bill 2022: 3).

Impact activities

The Early Career Impact Fellowship provided an opportunity to run pilot workshops to explore the potential benefits of this programme and refine the workshop template based on the feedback received. To date, I have conducted four workshops in three different venues: two mosques and a women’s well-being centre in Birmingham and Leicester. Fifty-five people attended these workshops and thirty-nine of the workshop

participants provided feedback. No workshop was the same, partly because the co-design process gives space to participants to choose the direction they want to take and therefore tends to reflect participants' interests and priorities, but partly because I tweaked the workshop slightly on each occasion to test more or less structured ways to facilitate discussions and provide information to participants as well as to ensure we could complete the workshop within the timeframe.

Measuring impact

Of the thirty-nine people who filled out the feedback form, about half (52%) had never participated in environmental campaigns in the past. About half also considered themselves moderately knowledgeable of climate change, while 30% considered themselves slightly knowledgeable, 15% very knowledgeable and 2.5% not knowledgeable. The ethnic makeup of the groups was predominantly Asian (60.5%), followed by white British (21%), Black African (5.3%) and Black Caribbean (2.6%). The data so far suggests that our approach to outreach seemed to be fairly successful in terms of widening reach by engaging with people who do not consider themselves activists and diversifying engagement by focusing on regions with demographics that are underrepresented in the climate movement.

What did participants say they liked about the workshops?

Most commonly, workshop participants mentioned that they enjoyed the opportunity to socialise and interact with people. Some described the workshop as providing a "relaxed," "comfortable," and "safe space." They enjoyed the informal nature of the workshops and many mentioned liking the fact that it was "interactive" and/or "informative." The feedback mentioned that participants liked "exchanging views," hearing from "different people with different backgrounds and perspectives," being listened to and "learning from each other." Participants mentioned, for example, that there was a "good exchange of knowledge" and that they had "learned a lot from the discussion and activities." When asked what they liked about the workshop, one participant explained "I was given the chance to explain my experience with climate change." Participants also mentioned they liked the idea of "brainstorming together" and "bringing different ideas together." Some participants also mentioned that they appreciated being able to take home the educational materials we prepared alongside the exhibition.

What is one thing people will take away from the workshop?

The feedback form asked participants to describe "one thing that they will take away from the workshop." I divided the responses into three categories. The first tells us what people feel they learned during the workshop, how they gained a better awareness of the problem and the roles of government and activism in climate change mitigation:

- "New connections with others, greater awareness of issues, ideas to push for positive change."
- "I learned about the role of the government in climate change."
- "Realization of the emergency of climate change and the importance of acting now."
- "To be an activist and get people on board on this topic."
- "Time to plan and follow up on action plans."
- "More practice and have more information to pass on."

Some mentioned how they now valued local expertise:

- “Everyone has something valuable to say, and there is vast knowledge and expertise in communities.”
- “The experience and group working, drawing on the niches of local experience.”
- “The need to get together and think about issues, enjoy company and be activists.”
- “Communicating with others and listening to their ideas and concerns.”
- “Different community ideas and the demonstration of potential through community energies.”

Other answers seem to suggest a personal commitment to act in a more localized or individual fashion, while some suggested potential for action starting from the individual but moving to a broader scope for change:

- “Do something about local litter and rodents’ infestation.”
- “Local links, enthusiasm and action to reduce the carbon footprint and clean the local environment.”
- “Showed that individuals can make a difference in various areas to improve and take responsibility.”
- “I will question what I can do personally.”
- “I can make changes in my own life and have building blocks for action.”
- “I will recycle more and think more about the environment.”

The workshop aims to bring people on a journey from thinking about the environment as an act of individual responsibility to a matter of collective action and systemic change. It also aims to connect people’s own everyday life and experiences to the global and more abstract concept of climate change and nature loss. Feedback from participants suggests that some people are more receptive to the concepts of collective action and climate change, whilst others seem to be more focused on local issues and/or individual lifestyle change. It is to be established whether this is a limitation of the workshop design or there is another explanation for this. Nevertheless, the workshop seems to bring together people with a broad set of interests and experiences.

What’s next

The feedback from the workshops and the materials shows that there is more work to be done to be more inclusive, especially regarding language barriers. Some participants did not speak English fluently, for example, while others did not know some of the terms used (such as “fossil fuels” and “greenhouse gas emissions”) and felt embarrassed to ask. This suggests the need to develop strategies to overcome these critical barriers to engagement, by finding community members who are willing to act as translators or developing simple cards explaining key concepts in English and other commonly spoken community languages. Furthermore, more needs to be done to explain the different elements of the project (i.e., making more explicit connections between the exhibition and the workshop) and/or simplifying the template so people do not feel too much information is being provided in a short space of time. Participants also mentioned they would have liked the session to be split into several sessions over multiple days. This is something that we could develop as an online option in the future.

For more information about the project, visit www.lettersfromtheglobalsouth.org

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