

Heleen de Coninck on the value of activists to spur policymakers

Nov 18th 2021

7-9 minutes

The future of climate activism

Heleen de Coninck on the value of activists to spur policymakers

Climate campaigners sometimes overstate the science, but they serve a valuable role, says an IPCC lead author



IN 2000, as a young natural scientist, I found myself in an email exchange with a Dutch climate sceptic who frequently published scientific nonsense in op-eds for quality Dutch newspapers. I sent him numerous studies that disproved his claims: that Earth's temperature had not risen, that human emissions could not be responsible for the greenhouse effect and that more carbon dioxide was "greening" the world.

But none of it worked. He would not be convinced. Frustrated, I started to think about why. I realised that facts are not enough to convince people if it's not in their interests. In the era of fake news, this observation sounds obvious. But it was an insight that has shaped my career. I realised that more certainty on attributing climate change to human actions was not going to persuade people. Knowing more doesn't necessarily lead to action. So my focus changed to devising solutions, not analysing problems.

I bid farewell to the atmospheric-science lab and started working as a researcher in international climate policy. For nearly 20 years I've contributed to reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), most recently as a co-ordinating lead author. Yet the work does not end once the reports are published: IPCC authors often act as national ambassadors of climate research. We are regularly invited to give talks and controversially, advice. We are asked about our personal views, even when we are invited to communicate the research. This sometimes pulls us away from science and towards politics.

If scientists and policy researchers face challenges from climate sceptics who play loose with the facts, there is another difficulty on the other side of the political debate: how we interact with climate activists, whose hearts may be in the right place and whose policy positions might align with the science—but who at times exaggerate the research results. This presents us with dilemmas similar to those we face when dealing with climate sceptics.

In 2019 I was invited to speak at a climate march of around 35,000 people in Amsterdam, organised by environmental groups including Friends of the Earth. It was a chance to enrich the activism with findings from science—but it also required a balancing act. Speaking would mean that I would be associated with the environmental movement that, according to some, is extreme and associated with the political left. Should I do it?

I eventually agreed to frame the speech as a “mini-lecture” by an “invited guest” and that I would not participate in the march itself, to maintain my independence and credibility. Yet many climate scientists would make a different choice. After years of seeing their research celebrated by scholars but barely acted on by policymakers, many are becoming activists themselves. They're joining Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Scientists for Future (S4F); they're taking to the streets and chaining themselves to government buildings.

Scientists are also citizens and thus entitled to protest. They might even be more inclined to do so, given the direct access they have to data that are deeply disconcerting. But holding back their personal views is part of the credibility and independence of science. In their closed community, this might be considered logical but outside of it, people have difficulty understanding the difference between scientific findings and opinion. Although the public may believe that scientists are voicing mere opinions on climate policy, they are usually in fact stating scholarly conclusions—such as that targets need to be more ambitious and that transformative societal changes are needed to achieve net-zero emissions and to limit warming to 1.5°C. It sounds activist, but it is the inescapable truth and the result of research.

Scientists are on shakier ground when they make claims that are not clearly scientific or still open to debate in scientific circles, such as the compatibility or incompatibility of economic growth and mitigating climate change. Scientific models are unable to reflect the full complexities of the economy and society. Likewise, estimates on the number of future climate refugees vary widely. The claims by activists are often based on simplistic assumptions, but are widely cited as a call to action. And then there is the problem of experts in one domain (such as extreme weather attribution) who voice views in other areas (like energy transition).

As for activists, they amplify scientific results, which of course is great. Yet some overstate the case, suggesting that the end of humanity is near or that “nature” will not survive. Although there are humanitarian and ecological reasons to limit warming, it is doubtful that preaching doom will spur sustained action. Then there are the activists who reject every option for mitigation—finding fault with every technology, be it wind, solar, biomass, carbon-capture to say nothing of nuclear energy. Every technology has disadvantages; there will always be a wide spectrum of views on how to respond to climate change, and scientists themselves differ on what needs to be done. But the naysayers make the perfect the enemy of the good and end up prolonging the carbon-emitting status-quo.

Still, as a scientist and an IPCC author who is inside the tent of international policymaking, I am thrilled with activism, from youth movements to “grandparents for climate” groups, whose actions are motivated by a genuine concern over future generations.

As the transition to a green economy accelerates, conflict and polarisation will increase too. Even on this, however, science has something to offer. It has methods to continue a conversation under tense circumstances, and to organise peace and reconciliation processes. Climate activism would engage more people and wield more influence if it embraced this type of science and used it to its advantage.

The pressure that activists place on business and political leaders is indispensable for climate action. Policymakers must feel supported to act decisively, and the dramatic and non-dramatic activities by activists strengthen the mandate given to politics to make the systemic changes that are needed.

Heleen de Coninck is a professor of socio-technical innovation and climate change at Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands. She was a co-ordinating lead author of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s special report, “Global Warming of 1.5°C”, in 2018, and is a co-ordinating lead author of its “Sixth Assessment Report” in 2021.