Why do individuals seem to be so unwilling to change their behaviour when they readily accept that global climate change will affect us?

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The mere manner in which we talk about issues immediately frames the way we think about the possibilities for action. In that simple first sentence lies the root of some of our problems. The question is posed as if it is a problem of individuals. Of course, it is. Some of us are consuming and damaging far more of the planet’s resources than others. And often, it is the ‘others’ who pay the price. Often we do not see this damage; it is far removed from our everyday consciousness. We know from research that people think that global environmental problems are more serious the farther away from them they are. People may be concerned, but if the dangers seem far away, they are less likely to feel inclined to do anything about them. Equally, because climate change is seen as happening elsewhere, how can people here be held responsible? This same research has also shown that people are more likely to feel responsible and have control over environmentally damaging actions when they are local; they feel powerless when global environmental problems are discussed (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2009).

We are often told climate change will affect us in the future. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) projects a rise of 4°C by 2100. For most people, this is meaningless if not irrelevant to their daily lives. In times of uncertainty, when lives are unpredictable, jobs are precarious – people think short-term. Even in good times, people find it difficult to think what they will be doing in 5 years. Framing the issue in terms of how it will affect your children’s children does not help either–for many this is too abstract.

Referring to global warming and global environmental change only serves to encourage people to feel powerless, because how can they influence global processes? After all, what influence do they have over other global processes which affect their daily lives and livelihoods, such as when TNCs move their production to another part of the world leaving whole communities without work? Moreover, even at the local level (although perhaps determined at the global) grievances such as, level of pay, working conditions, health and safety are often met with fierce resistance and result in little change. We have to support people in believing that they can change things – the Arab Spring is an inspiration.

Most government explanations and policies to address climate change focus on the individual (Halpem et al, 2004; Sustainable Consumption Round Table, 2006; UNEP,2008). They assume that if only the individual would see the world and act differently, then we would solve the problems we face. We won’t. Governments seek to bring the public onside by means of education, persuasion, laws and incentives, assuming that what, how, where and when people consume is a product of their own free will and choice. But, climate change is a collective set of problems requiring collective solutions. Changing behaviours is also about changing the conditions which encourage, or even force people to engage in environmentally damaging actions. The attitudes and desires, which lead to environmentally damaging action are embedded, nurtured and emerge from social contexts, such as class, gender, ethnicity and indeed the socio-cultural environments in which we live. It is these contexts that need to change if behaviours are to change.

Trade unions are well-placed to tackle climate change issues because they are collective organisations and have the power to press for social and cultural changes. They are also at the centre of production. Different forms of consumption require not only behavioural change but also different products. Production that uses different forms of energy (i.e., renewables) but also produces other products that are socially useful and not damaging to the environment will make all the difference. Those who are best equipped to change production processes are workers with their
experience, skills and knowledge. Taking workers and their knowledge as the point of departure for change, is also a means to overcome the sense of powerlessness that many feel in the face of the huge global transformations happening ‘elsewhere’. Instead of being objects of education, workers need to become the actors for change. Trade unions have a key role to play in mitigating and adapting to climate change (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2011).

References


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