How to Encourage Collective Climate Action [1, 2]

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INTRODUCTION

Tackling climate change relies on everyone – households, businesses and governments – working together to reduce emissions. For individuals, climate action involves, for example, adopting energy-efficient technologies, reducing use of petrol and diesel cars, and switching to low-emission products, including food. While these actions often benefit the individual as well as society, changing behaviour takes effort. Individuals are often willing to take on a cost for the benefit of the larger group, but this kind of "cooperation" is far from guaranteed and can easily unravel. A large body of evidence in behavioural science explains how people make decisions when faced with collective problems, and what drives cooperation. This study explores what matters for cooperation and applies these lessons to climate behaviour in order to draw policy implications.

METHOD

The study uses two types of literature review. The first is a narrative review: it gathers and analyses the most important evidence from the behavioural science of collective action in general. The second is a more specific systematic review, involving searching scientific databases for studies on how people behave in collective action problems that are specifically concerned with climate change. We reviewed 272 such studies.

[1] This Bulletin summaries the findings from: Martin, L., Timmons, S., & Lunn, P. D. (2024). Encouraging Cooperation in Climate Collective Action Problems. *Environmental Protection Agency Behavioural Insights Series No. 3*. Available at: https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/encouraging-cooperation-in-climate-collective-action-problems.php

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FINDINGS

The narrative review first establishes that most people tend to cooperate if they recognise that cooperating is better for everyone and they believe that others will cooperate too. Factors like fairness, trust, communication, and strong leadership make a big difference. Groups with a strong shared identity, fair systems for making rules, and consequences for those who don't cooperate are more successful in collaborating towards a common goal.

The systematic review shows that similar factors matter in the context of climate action, but that there are some challenges specific to climate change. These include the multi-level nature of the problem (i.e., that local action is required to meet national or international goals), uncertainty about the risks and impacts of climate change, the fact that consequences of today's decisions will be most strongly felt by future generations, and the need to overcome psychological biases (e.g., status quo bias – a preference for things to stay as they are, even if the alternative is better). More evidence is needed on other climate-specific features of the problem, such as the requirement for different groups of people to take different forms of collective climate action (e.g., people living in urban areas to switch to public transport, people living in rural areas to switch from burning solid fuels).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Cooperation in collective action problems is likely to be encouraged by ensuring that what is asked of people is perceived as fair, communication is clear, and leaders lead by example. Showcasing success stories may help to inspire action. Using multiple, smaller-scale initiatives instead of one large strategy may help foster cooperation by aligning goals with local identities and benefits. Local actions, like Ireland's community-level projects, may help to build trust, boost participation, and achieve visible results, complementing broader national targets.