



## Review

# Social mobilization on climate change and energy: An evaluation of research projects in British Columbia, Canada



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## ABSTRACT

Substantial public engagement in and support for climate action is needed to prevent the worst impacts of climate change from occurring. Efforts to boost such engagement can be collectively referred to as “social mobilization” initiatives, which can take a number of forms, from government-led planning processes to neighbourhood-scale grassroots initiatives. Such programs hold significant promise in their ability to lower perceptual barriers about climate change and increase motivation for action through various forms of engagement, learning and hands-on involvement. However, evaluations of the necessary components for the success of such programs remain scarce. To address this gap, we evaluate eight research projects that focused on developing and/or evaluating novel social mobilization initiatives on energy and climate change mitigation in the province of British Columbia, Canada. We identify the components of successful social mobilization projects and explore transferable lessons to future initiatives or programs designed to engage and mobilize citizens on climate change. Our findings indicate that social mobilization on climate change can be effectively fostered via multiple pathways. However, several barriers and limitations to effective community engagement on climate change are also identified, along with implications for other regions and researchers attempting to scale up societal responses to climate change.

## 1. Introduction

Governments around the world are initiating various measures to respond to and prevent the worst impacts of climate change, from national strategies to municipal plans. Many of these programs have focused on effecting or supporting structural changes and incentives, from energy efficiency upgrades for building codes and transportation plans, to the establishment of carbon taxes and other financial mechanisms. While these are important components of any climate action plan, there is growing recognition that they alone will not be sufficient in effecting the broad, transformative changes in our societies that are required in order to avoid significant climate warming and meet aggressive greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction targets. Substantial public engagement in and support for climate action is also needed, including support for the necessary shifts in our daily habits and practices to achieve low-carbon resilient outcomes. Efforts to increase such forms of engagement are sometimes referred to as “social mobilization” initiatives [1], the focus of this paper. Social Mobilization,

according to United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), is a “process that engages and motivates a wide range of partners and allies at national and local levels to *raise awareness of and demand for* a particular objective through face-to-face dialogue. Members of institutions, community networks, civic and religious groups and others *work in a coordinated way to reach specific groups of people for dialogue with planned messages*. In other words, *social mobilization seeks to facilitate change through a range of players engaged in interrelated and complementary efforts*”.<sup>1</sup>

However, the effectiveness of social mobilization interventions on climate change in practice has not yet been extensively studied. As such, there is a considerable need to evaluate social mobilization approaches and tools to date in order to determine their effectiveness in addressing climate and energy issues, and to identify factors involved in their success. To help address this gap, we carried out a review of a number of social mobilization projects carried out in the Province of British Columbia (BC), Canada. The Province of BC has had provincial climate change policy since 2007, when it set

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<sup>1</sup> Authors’ emphasis in italics.

emission reduction targets of 33% below 2007 levels by 2020, and 80% below 2007 levels by 2050. These targets were later followed by the release of a complete Climate Action Plan in 2008, which was recently updated in 2016. Prior to the Paris Agreement, these targets represented some of the more ambitious targets adopted by provinces in Canada. However, Canada and some other provinces have since adopted a target of 30% below 2005 levels by 2030. The most populous province of Ontario has also set a target of reducing its emissions by 80% over 1990 levels by 2050.

What also made 2007 a key year for climate policy in BC was the establishment of the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions (PICS), an institution charged with the task of developing and monitoring climate mitigation and adaptation solutions. Among the Institute's five original major research themes in the first round of funded research (2009–2014), a *Social Mobilization* stream was created to explore and foster public engagement in climate policies and/or response programs. In this paper, we review a selection of eight projects engaging communities on energy and/or climate change mitigation that were completed or evaluated under PICS' *Social Mobilization* research theme. The purpose is to explore their outcomes, strengths, and weaknesses, and identify transferable lessons for future initiatives designed to engage and mobilize citizens on climate change. Our findings emphasize that social mobilization on climate change can be fostered successfully at multiple levels, from catalyzing dialogue within communities, to improving awareness among individuals and achieving significant energy savings and carbon emission reductions at various scales. However, barriers do remain to effective community engagement on climate change, which several of these projects have begun to identify and address.

We begin our assessment in Section 2 with a review of key reasons for engaging the public on climate and energy actions, including key dimensions of social mobilization efforts that appear central to their success and provide an analytical framework for assessing these social mobilization process and outcomes. In Section 3, we further describe both the PICS program and the selection of cases that we review, and apply the framework to the evaluation of social mobilization efforts in terms of their methods and outcomes. In Section 4, we discuss the successes, failures and contributing factors across the eight cases, and in Section 5 present our conclusions and recommendations for future social mobilization efforts, both in BC and elsewhere.

## 2. Mobilizing the public on climate change

### 2.1. The challenge of climate change engagement

The need for social mobilization efforts stems from the challenge of engaging people with the pressing yet largely intangible issue of climate change. Research in climate change has pointed to a significant disconnect between what individuals know and value about climate change or sustainability, and what they actually do – what has been termed the 'value-action gap' [2,3]. This disconnect has persisted despite evidence that general awareness of climate change impacts and solutions has grown, leading some scholars to conclude the existence of a low degree of 'carbon capability' [4] or 'carbon consciousness' [5] among citizens (see also [6–8]). The low perceived salience of climate change to everyday life has also been known to foster feelings of apathy and/or the inability to make a difference, prompting many North American citizens to turn a blind eye to mobilization efforts [9–11]. Sheppard [8,1] has argued that the invisibility of carbon, as well as various climate change impacts, has exacerbated and sustained this gap. Furthermore, research in BC and elsewhere has found that while citizens may endorse broad climate change mitigation policies, they often resist their implementation via specific community and/or energy plans and policies that affect their own neighbourhoods [12,13].

### 2.2. Social mobilization as solution

Social mobilization projects attempt to address these challenges by using more engaging approaches that seek to lower perceptual barriers about climate change, and increase capacity and motivation for action through various forms of learning and hands-on involvement. Social mobilization has been defined as the "engagement and motivation of the public and multiple stakeholders to implement climate solutions, through social learning, social movements, behaviour change, community action, and policy change" [14]. The goal of such efforts is ultimately to foster a shift towards a low-carbon, more resilient society by:

- a) Building public support for climate change policies and actions designed by governments to achieve GHG reduction targets and other climate or energy goals;
- b) Building the capacity of citizens and communities to plan and carry out their own climate change adaptation and mitigation practices and projects; and
- c) Engaging citizens in co-developing and helping to implement climate change solutions supported by non-governmental organizational or institutional initiatives [14].

As applied in this paper, social mobilization efforts seek to effect change via multiple avenues (both formal and informal) and scales, from increasing support for policies at national and local scales, to eliciting commitments to changing personal habits and practices within a family. As such, social mobilization efforts embrace but reach beyond traditional characterizations of both community engagement and social movements. Community engagement, as practiced by most local governments and many other organisations, takes many forms, including one-way governmental communications programs, and more interactive consultations or cultural activities; however, these tend to have somewhat limited objectives such as education of individuals and households through informative strategies [15], or early input to planning processes [16,17]. These represent key components of social mobilization, but the point of mobilization is practical collective action on addressing climate change as the end goal.

Social movements also overlap considerably with the concept of social mobilization, in that both can contain elements of political organization, networking, and collective or grassroots action ([18]; see also [19–21]). Various aspects of social movement theory apply to social mobilization in the context of climate change, particularly the necessity for some kind of organizational structures, access to resources and communication channels, and social processes for sharing understandings and new conceptions of their world [21]. However, social movements have classically been discussed within a narrower frame, whereby informal grassroots organizations respond to perceived grievances or issues in an oppositional and sometimes disruptive stance against an incumbent institutional body, as in campaigns against fracking [22] or windfarms [13]. While these are forms of social mobilization, we conceive social mobilization as not necessarily requiring heavy political lobbying or protests, or a strong role in governance and policy issues (e.g [23]). Instead, social mobilization can take more diverse forms, including government-funded NGO initiatives (such as Vancouver's Green Bloc Neighbourhoods program)<sup>2</sup>; voluntary community-led efforts on renewable energy and local food production (such as the Transition Town movement, see [24]); and various collaborations between citizens, stakeholders and small utilities in developing 'community renewables' [25]. Social mobilization may not be associated with a specific interest group, can address multiple outcomes, and may be as much about changing the participants themselves as changing some external

<sup>2</sup> <http://greenbloc.lighterfootprint.ca/>.

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