

New Zealand Psychological Society Submission on the Emissions Reduction Plan

Prepared by members of the NZPsS Climate Psychology Task Force. November 2021.

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Introduction:

We as psychologists are inevitably involved in the response to climate change. We know the causes of climate change are a direct result of human behaviour, therefore the responses to climate change inevitably lie in human behaviour change. We also know that if we as a society are to successfully adapt and mitigate the anticipated climate breakdown, we will need to make the most radical and comprehensive shift of our history¹. As the Canadian Professor Robert Gifford has said... “Climate Change is... the result of 7.6 billion people making decisions every single day. That right there makes it a psychological problem.”² In Aotearoa/New Zealand, this could be translated to “Five million people making decisions every day that affect emissions and the climate IS a problem for psychology to address”. Psychologists are uniquely positioned to understand and help address human behaviour and attitudes, and this is crucial to a zero carbon future.

The need for immediate and decisive action is very clear. Further delay and prevarication are no longer tolerable as we have been reminded by the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, in stating that the interim report of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is “a red alert for our planet” and that 2021 is a “make-or-break year”.³ His call for immediate action to launch a decade of transformation is a stark warning of the urgent need for early and effective action by our government. The implementation of actions this Government decides are needed and the strategies it adopts must therefore commence immediately if they are to have the desired effect on emissions reduction and any chance of meeting our target commitments. A necessary and significant part of this will be thinking and planning how people can be engaged and encouraged to change behaviour (theirs and

¹ See Naomi Klein, in: *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate* (2014)

² apa.org/monitor/2018

³ See Matthew McKimmon’s ‘Degrees of Disaster’ in *New Zealand Listener*, March 13 2021

that of the organisations they are part of or can influence). The Psychological Society can help identify the sources of expertise and experience that the central government and regional/local government will have to draw on to expedite their decision-making regarding the support and information people will need to engage effectively.

New Zealand Psychological Society (explained briefly)

We make this submission as psychologists whose professional lives are centred on the well-being of people. We represent the New Zealand Psychological Society (NZPsS), the professional and scientific association for the country's psychologists. We are fortunate to have many members who have worked at the interface of people and their environment and many more, who, understanding the nature of the changes we are to navigate, are keen to be involved in the work of a just transition. In the last six years, the Society has taken steps to ensure that understanding and working with the causes and effects of climate change is a core element and responsibility of our work.

The NZPsS is a valued participant in the Global Psychology Alliance (GPA)⁴, an Alliance that enables us to be part of an extensive network of resource-sharing with access to influential decision-makers at the UN and on the IPCC with regard to human behaviour change. The NZPsS is also a member of the International Union of Psychological Science, an organisation of 82 member countries. An example of the potential benefit of our international collaboration is the support that has provided for the establishment of an Asia-Pacific sub-group⁵ to address the roles of psychology in climate issues affecting the region. This work has major implications for Aotearoa and is highly relevant to the implementation of the Zero Carbon strategies.

Our work on climate justice is informed by Society members who have expertise in the knowledge systems of Mātauranga Māori and Pacific peoples, whose plights we see as priority considerations in the development of mitigation and adaptation strategies that are comprehensive, effective and equitable. Our urgent plea is that the voices of indigenous peoples are heard and incorporated in the Aotearoa/New Zealand Emissions reduction Plan.

⁴ <https://www.apa.org/international/networks/global-psychology-alliance> and <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2019/climate-change-summit>

⁵ Includes members from Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Korea and the Western American and South American seaboard who are now seeking broader Pacific representation and collaboration.

Action on Emissions

We are seriously concerned about the delay in developing the ERP.

We are also gravely concerned to see the reported shortfall in meeting the declared and anticipated emissions reduction targets for 2030. This is totally unacceptable. We in Aotearoa/New Zealand (and in the richer nations) have been living well beyond our means and this cannot continue if generations to come are to have a future. We need to keep both carbon and energy consumption down. In Aotearoa, the profiles of tourism and farming will require massive change. Biofuels will not provide for business as usual. Flying will become expensive. Food security will be threatened... While we hope that changes will bring a deflection from environmental disaster, there will be horrific consequences for many.

So, it is time for bold action. We need the Government to be more ambitious. It will take courage. The last election gave the Government a strong mandate and the declaration of a Climate Emergency a year ago provided a degree of optimism. But there has been far less follow through than expected given the gravity of the climate challenges we now expect. We understand that Covid has taken centre stage but we have learnt from the country's response to the pandemic and we can build on this knowledge... not use it as an excuse to delay critical work on climate change. We are running out of time... and actions are all that can help us now!

Note also the very important points by Dame Anne Salmond in Tiakina te Taiao: it's time to take care of the living world...⁶

Delay is fundamentally unjust... undermining a just transition

Principles for the transition

We are concerned to see that the principles proposed to guide the development of the ERP are seriously limited. They do not include any reference to restoring/maintaining the health of the planet. For the ERP and any associated roadmap to succeed, it must centre planet rights. We must acknowledge our dependence on the planet. A principle including the need for environmental benefits and the promotion of nature-based solutions is essential but not clear enough. We are part of nature. We have gone into overshoot with regard to many resources. While the economic and social needs of our people will demand attention it cannot be at the detriment of action to ensure a healthy biosphere... our zone of life on earth.

We note that throughout the Covid pandemic the message of **be kind** helped maintain the focus of the team of five million. This was a form of principle by which we strove to live. It provided an ethical framework to guide our day-to-day interactions. Similarly, the challenges

⁶ <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/cop26/cop26-anne-salmond-tiakina-te-taiao-take-care-of-the-living-world>

of global warming will require that we learn to **be kind to the planet and people!** The continuity of this 'simple' form of ethical principle could be of immense value. But it must be prefaced/come with far more honesty and clarity from the government. The present document is disingenuous in promulgating ideas that lead to a false sense of security/safety. Our people need to be told the truth, unpalatable though that may be.

As psychologists we note that among many who know about the climate crisis there is a condition of disavowal... a knowledge of what is happening and yet life being lived as normal. It is as if the climate crisis was all going to happen in some distant future that has nothing to do with the here and now! It is so easy to do this though if our Government continues to gloss over the facts. We are heading for immense and multitudinous change. It is time for people, their communities and their organizations to be made aware of what we are heading for as clearly as possible. Only then will they be able to prepare effectively.

We note that this honesty with the populace is indeed the ultimate requirement of taking an evidence-based approach!

A systems approach: An equitable transition?

We are concerned that many of the questions posed in the ERP document deflect from the critical changes required. The report has been concerned with answering many questions of "What?" and "How?" but have come less to the deeper question of "Why?" That is, for example, we are asked what needs to happen to ensure the vulnerable are protected and how it is to be done but the question of why we have the vulnerable is not covered. An important part of ensuring a just and inclusive and equitable transition requires that we ask these questions. A systems approach to understand the cause of these problems seems important to their solution.

We are concerned about the consideration of emissions budgets in terms of GDP and maintaining growth while GDP is part of an economic model that has led to the climate crisis. Despite best intentions, economic growth has not been decoupled from resource use. It would seem we can still use the planet's resources in a way that outstrips its ability to replenish. Our experience is that many people do not understand what GDP measures and how it relates to their lives. They are not aware that the presently used economic model fails to take into account environmental and community health and wellbeing so their damage is not signalled.

While our dependence on, and use of a 'no longer fit for purpose' economic model will be a challenge (and we understand necessitate transitioning) we cannot deal with the climate crisis without addressing the root causes of the problem. A crucial element of working with and reporting on our success or failure in reaching emissions budgets will require a new framework by which to assess our progress. A progress that will reflect our ability to realign

our lifestyles in a more sustainable direction and to work in a much safer operating space within planetary boundaries that enable care of the planet.

A systems approach: The circular bioeconomy

Again, we note the importance of asking the right questions. These need to address the “Front end” issues rather than the “back end”. This incorporates the notion of seeking to **prevent rather than cure** the problems we are facing.

For example, we can agonise over our unsustainable reliance on imported coal for peak demand electricity supply OR we can look at the socio-political reasons this occurs at all - reducing demand through improved energy efficiencies and addressing the producer-driven excesses that are motivated by profits rather than service, all of which offer a more effective solution. Similarly, if the growth in the agricultural sector has created a disproportionate effect in our GHG emissions profile, maybe the focus needs to be on the assumptions underpinning that expansion rather than on the methane produced.

Furthermore, we cannot afford to make token efforts to move to a circular bioeconomy... with piecemeal product stewardship schemes. It is no use having ambitious waste plans to reduce, reuse and recycle and nudge individuals and their communities to become more effective in doing so, if there has been little effort to ensure that products and produce are (i) developed within a sustainability ethic or (ii) come into the economy without imposing an increasing burden on waste management strategies.

We agree that **nature-based solutions** must be a vital aspect of our economy but the solutions must be framed and supported within a system that centres planet rights. There are limitations.

Restoring, protecting or creating ecosystems in order to sequester carbon are a key feature of many net-zero pledges. But critics of the concept say that countries are relying too heavily on tree-planting and other fixes in lieu of reducing emissions. We cannot *just* substitute our fossil fuel energy with renewable ones and continue with business as usual. We need to do far more to deflect from the dangerous global warming trajectory and collapse of planetary ecosystems. As discussion in Cop26 has made clear... nature-based solutions are “temporary removals” of carbon and “cannot compensate” for a failure to reduce fossil fuel emissions.

A systems approach: Behaviour change

We are concerned with the emphasis on changing the behaviour of individuals. While, as psychologists there is much we can offer here it is quite a different approach from having engaged citizens with a vision of how things could be better, working together with a range of tools to achieve change. We need to be aware that the emphasis on individuals shifts the focus away from the systemic problems that exist and necessary changes to be implemented

by the government and can even undermine collective change efforts within communities. With a main focus on government change, calls for change of individual behaviour become more of a sub-focus and just one of the tactical strategies.

Kicking the consumer habit

And within this context we must prepare people for lifestyle change. At the moment discussion around the ERP is vague and the relationship of central government with its citizens regarding climate change mitigation and adaptation measures is unclear. As has been evident in the pandemic response, not all in society are willing to embrace the expectations of the government and there will be strenuous resistance to demands for changes in lifestyle. The common assumption is that “life will go on” and our own behaviour and activities can continue unabated.. until, maybe, they can’t. We expect to keep being able to enjoy our present standards of living (including the excesses) or aspire to have what others have. But those assumptions **will** be increasingly challenged over the next 20, 30, 40 years and beyond. Central government must begin to communicate what we know will change, how that will affect the lifestyles and choices of New Zealanders and what they can do to ensure personal and collective wellbeing in a world of accelerating climate change.

Consumerism’s tenets of “consumption is good” and “retail therapy is good” need to be countered. They foster the disavowal of sustainable goals. We need to address the roles our producers, marketers and media adopt in reinforcing these messages ... the blatant promotion of consumption as of right.

Community Involvement: we are more than consumers

The government has gone to great lengths to consult and to incorporate the views of many thousands of submitters (15,000 initially through the Climate Change Commission’s process) but we believe we can do more than incorporate views. We can and need to implement change processes that are based on wider social dialogue. We can **involve** people ensuring access to information and opportunities to participate in decision making processes. Economic development paths and priorities can be determined locally. And planning processes can in this way become more transparent and more inclusive⁷ while facilitating change and climate action.

Community Action/Empowerment

Climate-change resilient communities should have planning, development, and infrastructure that help the communities to adapt to climate change risks⁸. An innovative step to be adopted from an Irish outreach program includes gauging the level of citizen

⁷ After Atteridge & Strambo, 2020

⁸ After Cutter et al., 2008

support, discovering the barriers to engagement and developing ways to overcome them. They have implemented plans for ongoing public participation in which citizens can have an active and influential voice in instigating change in their community and established networks that allow local authorities to connect with community groups.

We note that such a fostering of community participation in the development of local climate change action plans can be expected to build on community resilience... increasing competence, efficacy and the ability to participate. This is about building on the sense of control people have in their lives. This is a vital step in reducing resistance to decisions perceived as being imposed on communities. While the government will readily consult, it is often when much of the thinking has been done behind closed doors. Solutions are presented as options that we, the public, can decide upon. But too often we move to solutions without people understanding and/or agreeing on the problems... yet acceptance of solutions will only follow when problems are understood!

Within the ERP document there is much written about government working with communities but the extensive disquiet in local government and key sectors re the Three Waters infrastructure revamp indicates that government needs to develop a more effective **principle of subsidiarity**... a principle concerned with empowering communities. It is **mana whakahaere**. Ensuring decision making happens at the most appropriate level so all those affected can contribute. To have flourishing and innovative communities people need to be involved, have a say and feel they have had the power to influence outcomes.

Buy in and resistance...

We need to learn from the recalcitrant response of a minority to the Covid restrictions. Despite the government's best efforts this group has seriously hampered progress.

We need to reduce the resistance and encourage, reinforce and support acceptance of the changes that are required. While there is a demand for rights many of those insisting on such freedoms have yet to make the link between rights and responsibilities. This is not to say that the concerns voiced are not valid but, often, those need to be balanced against the value of expertise and professional views that are not influenced by self-interest.

Resistance to action on climate issues exists at all levels; it is not found only in individuals or small groups. Our institutions of power (e.g. government departments and ministries, sector organisations, councils) and those with political influence and vested interests can and will exert pressure to impede or prevent effective measures being implemented. The sources of counter-action need to be identified and strategies developed and applied to address the barriers honestly and openly with accurate, clear information and rational explanations.

Building on the environmental ethic

There are many ways central and local government can influence, inspire and encourage collective community actions; some of these already exist but require substantial funding and support with resources, others are potential, new and innovative ventures. Current examples include EcoSchool programmes and collaborative projects such as DoC or local government or organisations working with or supporting communities restoring wetlands, planting forests, cleaning up shorelines, eradicating weeds/pests etc), DoC learnt many years ago that involving people in their programmes was one of the most effective ways of creating an interest in nature... We know from examples here and overseas that there are often benefits from collective community action that go well beyond the primary focus of the projects; people can inspire the involvement of others and the collaboration of people in communities often enables professionals and researchers to work alongside citizens who have an interest in promoting change, adding to the success of initiatives and policy implementation on a local, regional and national level.

Projects don't need to be momentous in their effects, they can simply be a part of incremental changes but are powerful ways of developing a shared commitment to making small (or large) differences that do matter collectively. Where these initiatives contribute to local adaptation strategies and involve climate action at local levels, they require support and (often) guidance to ensure they are consistent with overall strategies on mitigation and adaptation.

Members of New Zealand Psychological Society have the expertise and skills to assist central and local government to establish the frameworks for effective community engagement in climate action and can also facilitate the processes of communication with and empowerment of communities.

Offer of knowledge and expertise

The Society is willing to meet with Ministry officials and Government or Parliamentary representatives to explicate the points raised in this submission. We can also advise on approaches that can be employed to engage communities and assist with messaging to counter resistance and encourage acceptance of interventions and programmes.