Climate in Common:

A Communications Toolkit for Working-Class Engagement

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green economy coalition

WCCA

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Where relevant, always confirm with groups what the relevant laws are for certain activities before you undertake them. Although it is legal in some areas to photograph/record the public without their permission, we would recommend always asking for people's permission before recording or photographing them.

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Introduction

Greenlash – the economic, social and political resistance to environmental policies, gains traction partially because climate policies seldom connect to what people actually care about.

People often assume that audiences will be drawn into our climate communications simply because the data and analysis 'adds up'. After all, this is the standard way of operating in climate politics. Yet what we must understand is that for working class communities, this data-driven approach has long been a steady source of frustration and conflict. Having long been fed streams of conflicting information and promises that our lives will improve by people from across the political spectrum, only to watch things get progressively worse, many working class people feel there is little reason to believe that no matter how compelling the data, things will never change for the better.

Additionally, mainstream climate communication often focuses on abstract goals such as carbon budgets and net zero. These are, of course, vital conversations to be had. But this often fails to connect with working class audiences who struggle to meet their basic needs: generally speaking, it is not that they lack awareness or concern about climate change. Rather, precarious living conditions often forces people to change their immediate priorities towards accessing the basic goods and services they need to get by.

All of which breeds a disconnect from broader climate spaces. This is compounded by the fact that working-class communities have long been spoken ‘at’ rather than ‘with’ by climate communicators: climate politics remains disproportionately dominated by a narrow strata of professionals who are mostly white, middle-class and concentrated in the Global North, and their vantage point sets the terms of what counts as credible problems worthy of discussion and resolution. The same rings true for many climate grassroots spaces, which have long existed as sites of hostility and exclusion for working class people.

The resulting income carries a stark irony. The world's working class – people who bear the greatest brunt of climate change's impacts, are rarely visible in shaping decision-making processes such as policymaking. This is not only a crisis of democratic participation, it is also a great loss of the rich skills, knowledge and resources that they hold and can collectively contribute to climate action. Unless we take steps to rectify these issues, greenlash will continue to thrive in our communities.

Our Approach

This toolkit is a step towards redressing power imbalances in climate communications, and in such a way that we can counter the growth of greenlash. It treats communicating climate change as a way to build bridges with the working class through participatory activities, rather than as an abstract one-way process for reaching people from afar. Of course, there will always be a need for one-way processes of communication, but so much has already been written on that topic that we felt a different approach was needed. It is vital to note that:

Participatory forms of engagement should never be treated as a replacement for working class representation.

Working class people remain grossly under-represented in climate politics, and without active efforts to place working class people in decision-making roles, this toolkit can easily slide into a top-down, technocratic way of communicating and behaving.

We must diversify the types of voices that are visible and are able to influence decision-making as best as we can, with the resources that are available to our respective groups and organisations. How best to go about it is a separate discussion in its own right, and one that, because of its length and depth, lies beyond the scope of this toolkit. However its relevance to climate communications more broadly makes it worth mentioning here – if only in passing.

Using the Toolkit

The tools in this kit vary in the amount of resources they require, to account for the fact that not all groups and organisations have the same amount of resources to draw upon. We have opted for creative forms of engagement as this provides so much space for engagement on relatable terms, and which helps to instil a sense of hope for a better future. It is also worth noting that the instructions are not set in stone, and we encourage people to be creative in how they are applied. Whilst in-person engagement is always best for relationship building, we know that this is not always possible. With the exception of Tool Number 3 (Guided Walks), all of the other tools can be used for in-person and remote engagement.

Given the participatory nature of these tools, it is important to be mindful of how much time we are asking of people, as free time is a luxury often denied to many working class people. For groups and organisations interested in using these tools within their own formal work such as research or policy making, we would ask that working class people be paid for their time where funding allows, because:

Local, community-based knowledge is as much of a specialism as knowledge acquired through professional credentials and/or formal work experience.

Greenlash in Context

Greenlash is usually framed as a problem of right wing denialists and populists. That may capture the most visible opposition, but it misses the conditions that make that opposition effective. This backlash does not just emerge from those who reject environmental policy, it is also produced within a form of green politics that claims to be progressive, whilst remaining committed to preserving the structures that generated the crisis in the first place.

Studies have found that many people distrust top-down climate plans because the decision-making seems opaque. One analysis finds that in communities hit by automation, housing crises or factory closures, “fear flows [...] from the opaque nature of political decision making,” making citizens more likely to see environmental policies as unfair.

Greenlash exploits these perceptions. Its proponents paint environmental regulations as unfairly punitive and expensive, resonating with workers’ everyday frustrations. In France, for instance, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally frames environmental policies as "fighting against the same people”, and promises to “break away from an ecology that has been hijacked by climate terrorism, which endangers the [...] living standards of the French people.”

Much of the mainstream political center has begun to echo these themes. Business lobbyists across Europe have urged rolling back environmental regulations in favour of ‘competitiveness,’ and major parties, including centre-right blocs like the European People’s Party, have pivoted from supporting the Green Deal to criticising it.

The mainstream response has often been to double down on market-based solutions and technical fixes, whilst adopting rhetoric that converges with that of their right-wing peers. Institutions like the self-described centrist/progressive The Breakthrough Institute champion this approach. They argue that environmental solutions should emphasise technological innovation and economic growth, rather than redistribution or structural change. Instead of concentrating their fire on the corporations and political forces obstructing climate action, they devote much of their energy to condemning environmentalists, with co-founder Ted Nordhaus claiming that activists demanding systemic change want “regressive taxes, restrictions on consumption, and food, energy, and transportation policies that raise the cost of living for those least able to afford it.”

Ironically, their demands for market-based solutions and tecno-fixes places them at a greater distance from what people on the ground are actually demanding. As Laurie Parsons put it in his 2023 book Carbon Colonialism:

"None of the hundred thousand marchers through Glasgow the next day [during COP26] would be chanting slogans for green growth. None of them would hoist placards demanding carbon capture. When Extinction Rebellion activists glued themselves to five London bridges in 2018, they did not do so in the name of carbon credits, nor did 4 million global climate strikers take to the streets in support of clean coal in 2019."

The people feeding the growing greenlash phenomenon do not have to invent resentment from nothing, it just needs to attach itself to a real experience of exclusion. The famous French Yellow Vest movement began as a revolt against a fuel tax hike, a climate policy perceived as another burden on the poor. In Italy and Spain, anti-windfarm and anti-solar protests have flared amongst villagers worried about local landscapes and costs. In Germany, citizens flooded the streets in 2023 to overturn a new heating insulation rule, derisively nicknamed the Green Party's 'heating ideology'. In the Czech-Polish Coal Regions, miners have defied Brussels' decarbonisation plans, claiming they would threaten their livelihoods.

This same pattern appears outside Europe, where it often takes the form of resistance to 'green' extraction itself. In Argentina, a court in Catamarca suspended new mining permits in the Los Patos River–Salar del Hombre Muerto area after a complaint by the Atacameños Native Community, which said mining had gone ahead without proper consultation and had damaged water supplies: lithium extraction in the so-called Lithium Triangle (encompassed by the borders of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile) of the Atacama salt flats has been linked to irreversible and unrecoverable loss of water, resulting in widespread opposition by the Indigenous communities of the region.

These are conflicts over whether the energy transition is allowed to reproduce old extractive relations under a cleaner name. The same is true of carbon offsets and land-based 'solutions' that promise climate repair whilst shifting control over territory. In Brazil's Pará state, 38 Indigenous and community organisations said they had not been consulted before the government signed a $180 million carbon credit deal tied to Amazon conservation, and they responded bluntly that "our territories are not for sale." If the transition requires draining aquifers, overriding Indigenous consent and treating lithium regions as sacrifice zones, it should not be surprising that people resist it.

Even the way responsibility is framed contributes to this problem. The frequent use of a collective 'we' to describe the causes of environmental deterioration obscures the unequal distribution of emissions and decision-making power. It suggests a shared culpability that does not exist in practice, placing disproportionate burdens on those who have contributed least to the crisis.

Economic insecurity and political exclusion create fertile ground for opposition, and greenlash is both a reaction to environmental policy and a product of how that policy is formulated. Shaped by the need to preserve existing systems, mainstream policymaking fails to address these underlying conditions and instead, focuses on attacking those seeking deeper change. Their technocratic and market-oriented character reinforces perceptions of elitism and injustice. Right-wing actors amplify these perceptions, translating them into organised resistance.

The challenge, then, is to reimagine environmental policy in ways that confront the systemic nature of the crisis.

That involves moving beyond frameworks that treat economic growth as the be-all and end-all of national policy, beyond mechanisms that commodify nature, beyond extractivist logics, and beyond governance models that exclude those most affected at every level. Without such a shift, greenlash will remain a persistent feature of green politics, sustained not only by opposition from the right but by the limits of climate politics itself.

1: Practice Before You Preach

Using jargon to discuss climate change is second nature to many of us. It can be easy to forget that these terminologies are unfamiliar to a lot of working class people, even terms considered to be 'basic' ones: a survey of 1,000 offshore oil and gas workers in Scotland found that only 40% had heard of the term 'just transition'.

A lack of clarity about the meaning of terms undermines climate action. For example, many media outlets have (and continue to) use 'global warming' and 'climate change' as interchangeable terms. This has led many people to believe that climate change is only a matter of rising temperatures, and that other threats such as rising floods are damaging but not catastrophic enough to justify significant investment in climate action.

That is not to suggest that jargon should be scrapped altogether. When used correctly, it enables a more precise discussion of complex issues. Rather, it is to stress that we must be mindful about the language we use when communicating to general audiences, and to not assume that everyone has the same level of familiarity with terminologies that we do.

This tool will help you to explain complex issues clearly, and help you get in the mindset of communicating in plain, everyday language for future conversations with the broader community.

Tool Instructions:

Select a piece of climate communication that is intended for a non-specialist audience such as a campaign leaflet or article on a website. This can be something already published or something that your group/organisation are due to publish.

Depending on the length of the piece, you may want to review it in its entirety, or just a section of it. Read through it carefully and identify all instances of jargon used. For each term, decide:

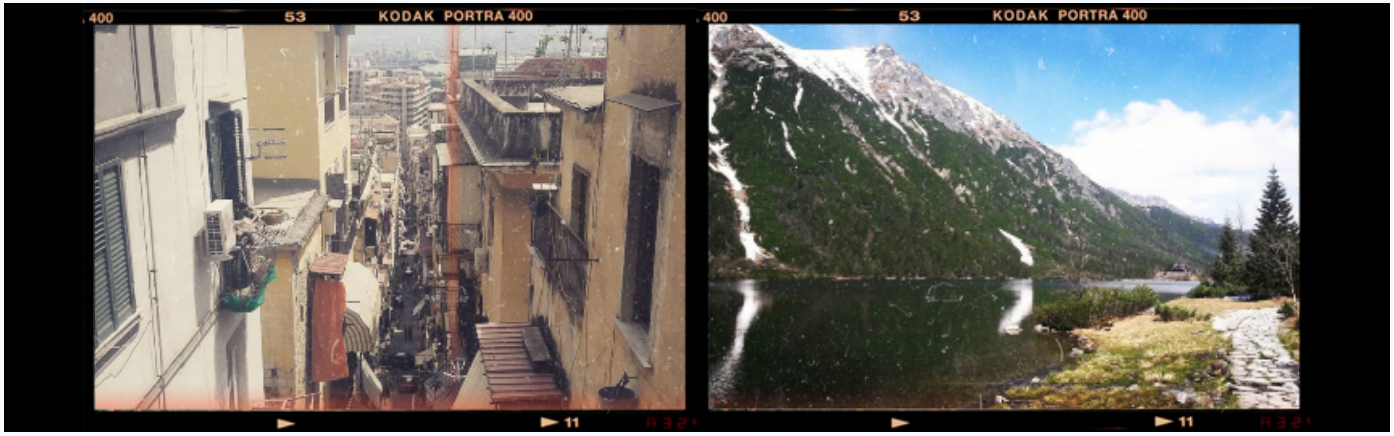
- Whether the use of jargon is necessary.
- Whether it would be beneficial to define the term(s) used in the text.
- Whether it would be better to use plain language instead of jargon.

Once you have done that, rewrite the document with those changes applied. Even if the piece has already been published and cannot be edited, it is a great way to practice communicating in accessible, everyday manner.

2: The Bigger Picture

Using photography can help to build people's confidence in engaging with climate politics as they can describe what they see, rather than feeling like they have to know the jargon to take part in climate discussions.

Showing climate change's everyday, physical impacts can also make seemingly distant problems tangible. People who live in areas that are yet to experience the most severe impacts of climate change often underestimate the threat that it poses. In some instances, this underestimation can dampen support for certain climate policies.



This tool uses photography to ground climate issues in lived experience, building on the everyday knowledge that people already have.

2: The Bigger Picture

Tool Instructions:

Present a photograph to the group that depicts environmental destruction (such as flooding or a polluted city). Ask the group to reflect on the following questions:

- What is the problem shown here?
- Who or what is responsible for it?
- What needs to happen to solve it?
- What skills, knowledge, and resources would be needed to solve the problem(s)?
- Between the group, what of the needed skills, knowledge and resources do we collectively have?

Once all of the questions have been answered and shared, together, you can explore the following discussion point:

In order for meaningful change to happen, we must all come together to share whatever skills, knowledge and resources that we can offer. No single group, organisation or community can do it by themselves. From working class communities to policymakers, all of us have something of equal value to give. ***So how can we get there – what can we do to build bridges between the community, civil society and climate movement?***

3: Guided Walks

Walking is a way to gather knowledge about an area in its own right. Our bodies and senses naturally pick up information about an area as we move around it, such as the smell of the air, the sound of birdsong or traffic, and how the ground feels as we walk over it. Because of this, guided walks are naturally well-suited to being used as a communications tool.

Grounding conversations about climate change in people's local areas shows that it is not just the concern of certain groups and communities, but is something that touches every community and every place.

Taking people's access and material needs into consideration is key. For example, not everyone has clothing or shoes that would be suitable for certain terrains and weather conditions, and/or they may have a disability or condition that makes it challenging to walk certain distances and routes. It is therefore important to have an open discussion with groups beforehand about the feasibility of the length and location of the walk, in order to accommodate people's needs as best as we can.

Tool Instructions:

A guided walk is exactly how it sounds – taking an individual, or group of people, on a walk around a location. It is not something that can only be done in more natural spaces such as a local park or woodland, it can be used in urban areas too.

This tool can be used to educate communities about local environmental issues such as polluted waterways or congested roads, sites of environmental action such as community vegetable gardens, or even the types of wildlife and habitat that exist in their local area.

Conversely, this tool can be used to learn from the community by asking them to lead the walk themselves, to help your group or organisation explore the questions you are working on. For example, what environmental and material problems are they living with that they want resolved (such as poor air quality or poorly maintained roads)? What local sites of environmental action are they already involved in?

4: Where Did it Come From?

Overall, awareness about the environmental impacts of our purchasing habits is at an all-time high. Despite this, it can be tricky to have meaningful discussions about consumption with the working class. This stems, in part, from working class people having long been shamed for their consumption choices, even though more ethical alternatives are often too expensive and time consuming for them.

This does not mean we should shy away from the topic altogether. Rather, we should explore ways of doing so that avoids individualising the drivers of climate change, and situates our purchasing habits within the broader structural and economic conditions that shape them.

This tool facilitates discussions about mass consumption and its relationship to broader, systemic inequalities including the structural barriers that price many people out of more ethical alternatives.

Tracing the connection between mass consumption and global issues builds the internationalist thinking and solidarity that is needed to countering greenlash. By showing how the problems working class communities face at home are bound up in global exploitative systems, we are able to reframe seemingly local grievances as symptoms of a worldwide system of injustice.

4: Where Did it Come From?

Tool Instructions:

You will need a commonly purchased item such as a pair of shoes or a piece of clothing, as well as a world map. With the group, work through several questions and mark out on the map the item's journey from source to shelf, adding locations, people, and impacts as they go. Ask the group to guess the answers before sharing the actual information.

Some questions you could ask are:

- Where were the materials sourced for this item?
- What has the extraction of these materials done to the land, water, and wildlife in that area?
- Who owns the land where these materials were sourced, and who profits from it?
- Who made this item and how much were they paid?
- What are the labour rights and working conditions like for retail staff in your country?
- Whose responsibility is it to make the goods we consume affordable and accessible, and what would it take to hold them to that?

5: Mutual Aid Mapping

We must continue to draw attention to global inequalities, however a balance needs to be struck. All too often, communicators have defined working-class areas by what they lack at the cost of highlighting the rich diversity of skills, knowledge and lived experiences that are present within these communities. This has reinforced the stereotype of working-class people as being incapable and in need of 'saving' – a characterisation they are acutely aware of and frustrated by, and one that feeds a broader sense of feeling as if they are looked down upon by wider society.

This tool provides an alternative avenue for engagement by shifting focus from what communities lack to what they already have. It involves mapping existing networks of mutual aid, skill sharing, and resources within the community, and exploring how these connect to, and can strengthen climate action.

Making local social networks and resources visible both identifies what communities can draw on as part of climate action, and helps working-class people reclaim and promote a sense of pride in their areas. It also creates the foundation for relationship building with the broader community, by connecting people who may not have previously known one another or known about these resources.

5: Mutual Aid Mapping

Tool Instructions:

Together with a group draw or annotate a map of their community. Mark out sites of mutual aid, places where environmental activities take place, natural or community resources, and anywhere else the community comes together to support itself. For example, community gardens, green spaces, credit unions, worker-owned businesses, food banks, tool libraries, repair cafes, community centres, places of worship and local trade union branches.

After that, translate knowledge into action by having a discussion about:

- How people first found out about the mapped sites and how others can access them.
- Why the things they have mapped matter for building a more just and sustainable way of living.

6: Root Cause Analysis

People are generally good at identifying problems and their impacts, whether it be an economic problem such as the rising cost of living, or a climate issue such as increased flooding. Misconceptions tend to emerge when discussions shift to questions of who is responsible and what solutions are possible. Much of this stems from misinformation deliberately sown by politicians, public figures, and the media to obscure who is actually responsible, scapegoating minorities and marginalised groups to deflect attention from society's elites, whose actions are the root cause of both climate change and wider societal inequalities.

This tool works by asking groups to identify their most pressing concern, and working with them to trace these problems back to their structural roots, making the systemic inequalities that actually drive them visible and identifying those truly responsible.

Tool Instructions:

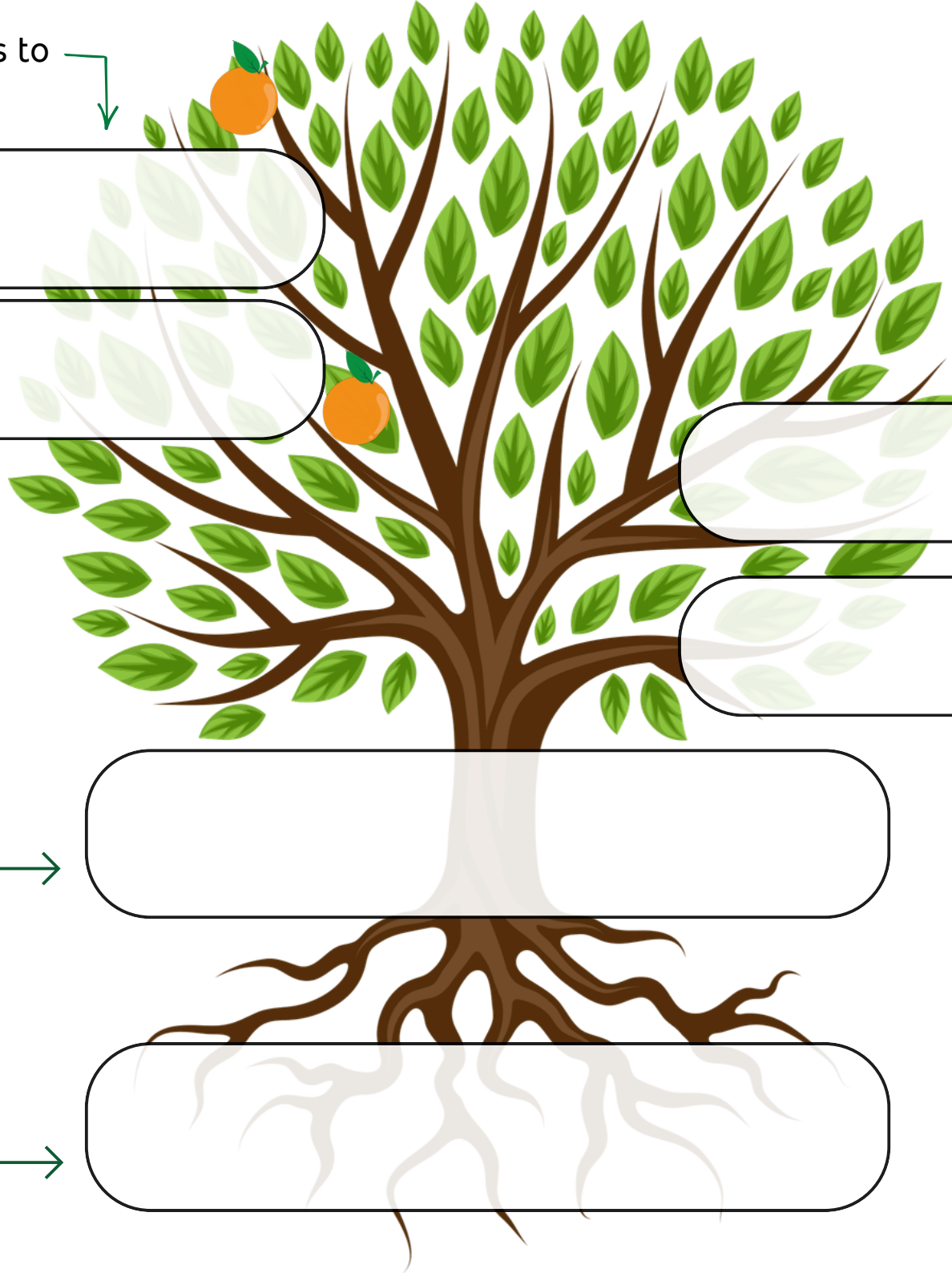
Draw a tree (or use the template that we have created for you on the following page), using its different parts to map out the problem being discussed. Fill out each section by answering the prompts below:

Roots = what is the problem?
Trunk = who and what are responsible for the problem?
Branches = what are the impacts of the problem?
Fruit = what are the solutions to the problem?

Ask people to fill in each part of the tree themselves. Once they have done that, go through each answer together, offering further information or corrections where needed so misconceptions can be addressed as you go along.

What are the solutions to the problem?

What are the impacts of the problem?



Who and what are responsible for the problem?

What is the problem?

7: Values in Common

Societal divisions erode a collective sense of relatability amongst each other which makes it difficult – if not impossible, to have even the most basic of conversations with each other. Adopting a values-based approach can help to (re)build bridges within our communities, because we share much more common ground with each other than some might think. Research has consistently shown that populations' fundamental values are broadly aligned, even when our political beliefs are vastly different from each other.

This tool is centred around discovering what values we share with the people we are trying to reach, before exploring how those values are impacted by climate policy. Doing so provides scope to make the case for climate action on terms that feel personally meaningful.

Tool Instructions:

Give the group a set of cards each naming a value such as fairness, dignity and wellbeing. Ask each person to rank the cards by what matters most to them personally, then share and compare their choices with the rest of the group.

Once everyone has shared their choices, ask each person to select their highest ranking one.

Once everyone has selected their value, ask them to explore how it is affected by climate change. For example, someone who chose fairness might connect it to the fact that communities in the Global South bear the worst effects of climate change despite having contributed the least to causing it.

Have everyone share their answers with each other, to build a collective picture of how climate change is a direct threat to the things they already care most about.

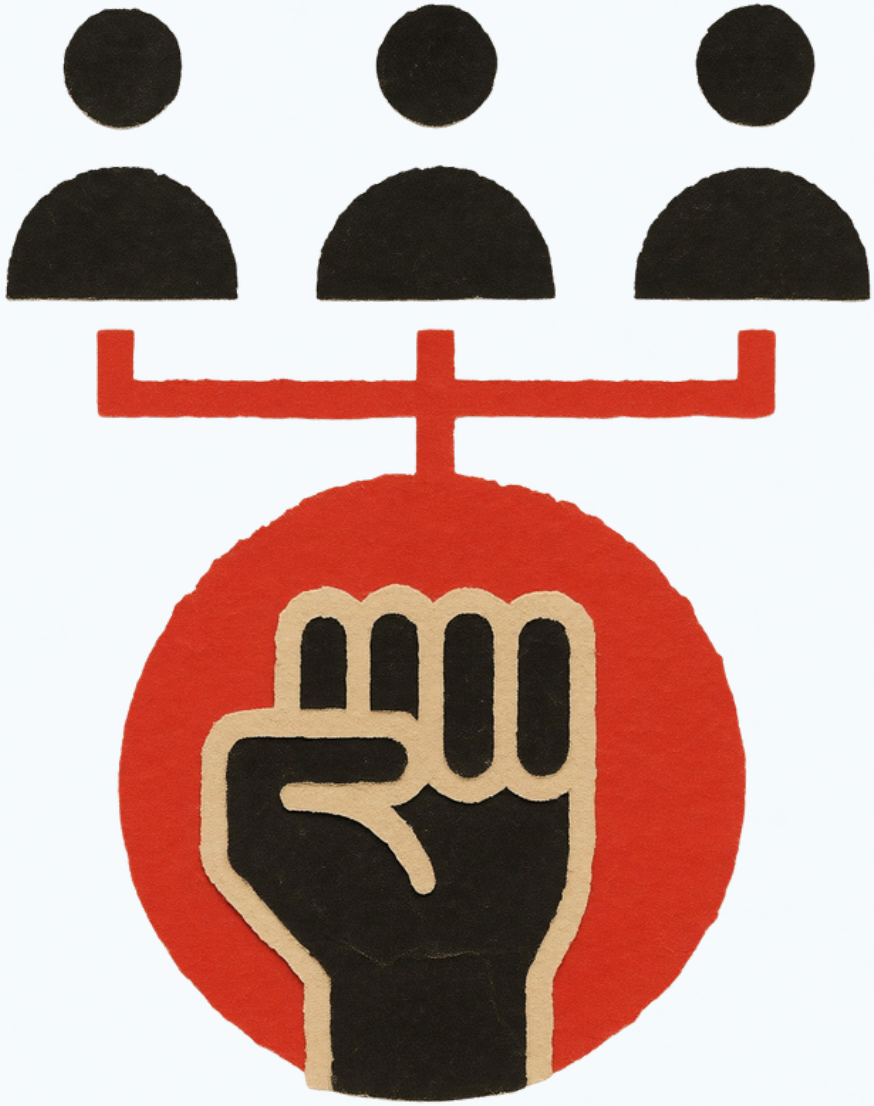
8: Stakeholder Power Mapping

Who has power over the decisions affecting our communities, and how do we reach them?

Being able to identify what is wrong and what needs to change is all very well, but without a clear sense of who has the power to change things and how to reach those people, this information can feel overwhelming: research has uncovered a link between a sense of powerlessness and support for greenlash-aligned policies.

This tool helps groups to convert awareness into action by mapping decision-makers and institutions that hold power over the issues a community cares most about, such as local councillors, politicians, planning committees, charities, and civil society groups, and then exploring how they can be influenced.

This process also helps groups to build a sense of collective capacity and solidarity with the broader community, as it shows that progressive change has can only be achieved through organised effort rather than individual action.



8: Stakeholder Power Mapping

Tool Instructions:

Have the group decide on an aim they would like to achieve, such as developing a community green space. Once they have decided, place their community at the centre of a sheet of paper.

From there, map outward to individuals, organisations and institutions that have power over policy decisions affecting their community. For example, a community could map out to local politicians, charities, university departments and trade union branches.

Each one is then labelled as an ally, neutral, or opponent, based on where they stand in relation to the community's aims. Allies actively support those aims and can be called on for help. Opponents work against the community, whether through opposition or competing interests. Neutrals hold no fixed position and can be influenced to support the group's aims.

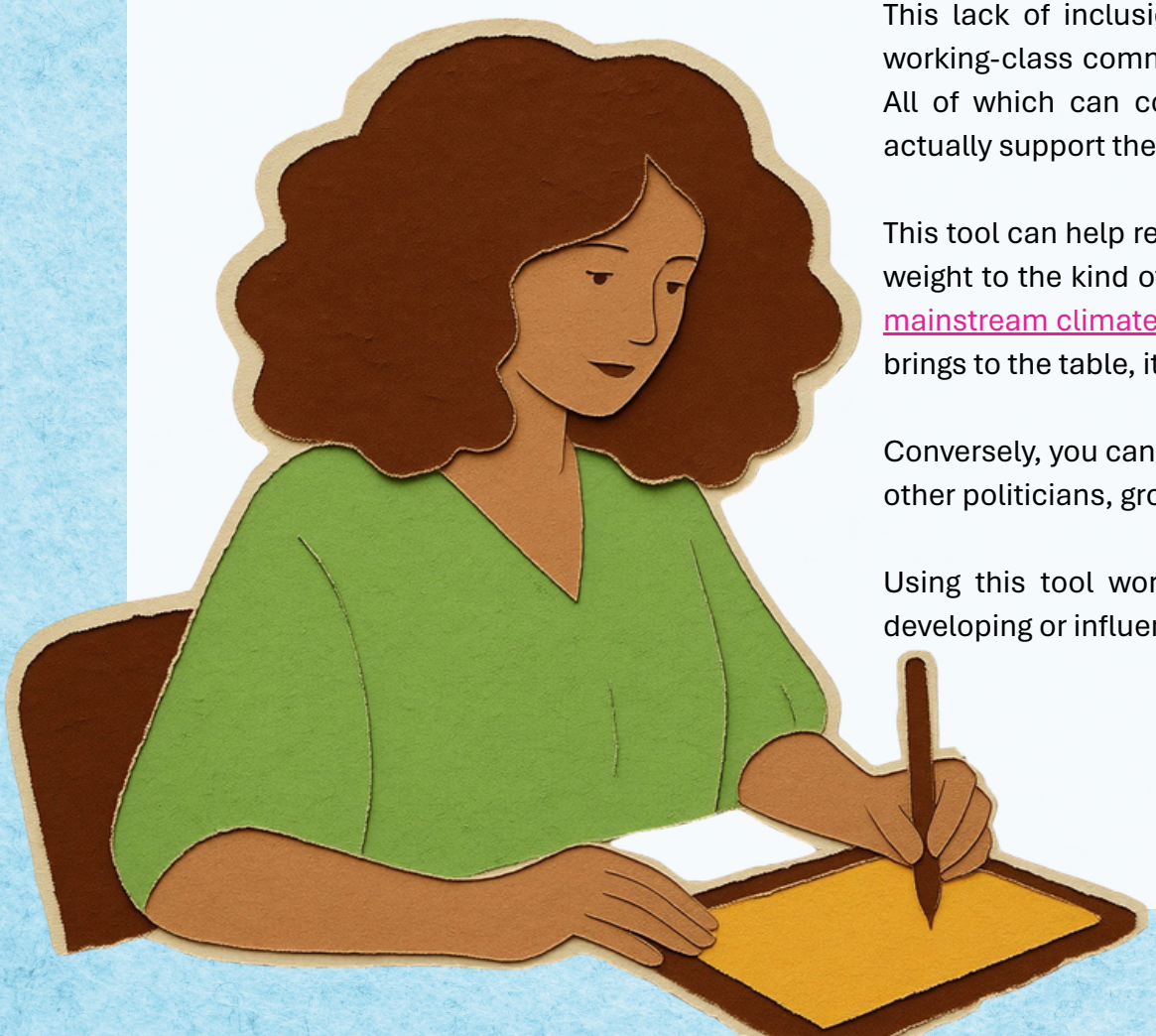
Ask two questions for each person/organisation etc. on the map:

1) What does this person or organisation actually care about?
2) How can they be influenced by the community?

For example, a politician who cares about economic development might be influenced by evidence that a community green space would attract local businesses, rather than by environmental arguments alone.

You can then work together to choose one ally or neutral to focus on, and decide how to influence them towards the goal. This might mean writing to a politician to ask for support, or building an alliance with another community group already campaigning on the same issue.

9. Community Evidence Gathering



Generally, policy decisions are made without meaningful input from working-class communities. This lack of input means that we lose vital local knowledge about what their communities need most. Yet without working class perspectives, policies can compound existing inequalities or create space for entirely new ones to emerge.

This lack of inclusion breeds the sense that policies are something imposed upon working-class communities, rather than processes they have any meaningful stake in. All of which can contribute to policy resistance – even in instances where groups actually support the proposed change(s) in principle.

This tool can help redress the unequal power relations that shape policy making, giving weight to the kind of local, community-based knowledge that is routinely dismissed in mainstream climate politics. Used alongside the data-based evidence that civil society brings to the table, it ensures that decisions are shaped by everyone affected by them.

Conversely, you can use this tool to oppose harmful policies that are being proposed by other politicians, groups and/or organisations.

Using this tool works best when your group or organisation is actively involved in developing or influencing a real policy, or set of policies.

9. Community Evidence Gathering

Tool Instructions:

Present the group with a policy proposal or set of proposals that your group or organisation are hoping to implement. Begin by discussing the proposed changes with the group, inviting feedback, addressing initial concerns, and asking for recommendations on alterations to the policy/policies based on their lived experience.

From there, move into community evidence gathering. Give the group a clear timeframe to gather their own evidence in support of the policy, and establish what evidence they are to collect. There are many forms of evidence that you can ask people to collect such as written accounts, photographs, video recordings or citizen science.

Collate the evidence gathered by the group alongside any data that your group or organisation has gathered, to build a comprehensive case in support of the policy.

10. Follow the Media

Tool Instructions:

Spreading climate scepticism, denial and resistance to policies is a well-oiled business. With so much information that we encounter each day through the news, social media and other sources, it can be difficult to work out which outlets can be trusted.

A lack of trust in the media can contribute to people avoiding the news altogether, or turning to untrustworthy sources that perpetuate illiberal beliefs and actions, making media literacy an essential tool for building informed, resilient communities.

This tool helps to improve media literacy by mapping who funds greenlash, tracing the connections between fossil fuel interests, right-wing think tanks, political donations, and media ownership.

Before the session, prepare a set of cards naming different media and social media outlets. On the back of each card, note down who owns it, who funds it, and any relevant connections to other cards in the set.

Have a ball of string or wool to hand. Lay the cards face up so only the names of the media outlet show. Ask the group to pick one and discuss what they know about it. For example:

- Who is the outlet funded and owned by?
- Does it share an owner, funder, or any other links with the outlets already on the table?
- How might its owners and/or funders shape what it chooses to report?

As links between cards appear, use the string to connect them on the table, building a web that grows with each card turned over. Once all of the cards have been turned over and the connections mapped out, ask the group to reflect on what they are seeing as a whole. Some questions you could explore are:

- Which outlets share the same funders and owners?
- What vested interests do the funders and owners have?
- How might these vested interests and shared ownership shape what the group reads and watches each day?
- How can we check for ourselves who owns and funds media outlets?
- Which outlets can be trusted and why?

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