

Where the action is

Community-led health and climate justice.

Andrew Paterson @SCDC_Andrew

A bit of personal testimony to start with...

I'm sure that for many of us in community-led health, the growing climate emergency has led to an increasing sense of anxiety. In common with many others, I am concerned about the number of flights I've taken, my petrol-guzzling car and my inactivity in terms of climate action. Work-wise, it doesn't sit right with me that I've spent the last decade working from a value-base of social justice and fairness while doing very little work directly addressing what is among the most pressing issues humanity has faced – and one that will be hugely unfair, both to the least affluent in our world and to future generations.

In this CHEX briefing, we make the connections between climate activism, community-led health and community development more widely. In summary, we argue that in order to work effectively in community-led health we need to also be working to address climate change, and vice versa. We go on to highlight a new [Communities Call for Climate Action](#) that CHEX has been working on in partnership with other organisations – we urge you to sign up to this to help strengthen the Scottish community sector's role in pushing for the major change needed to stop climate catastrophe.

Climate change is part of health and wellbeing

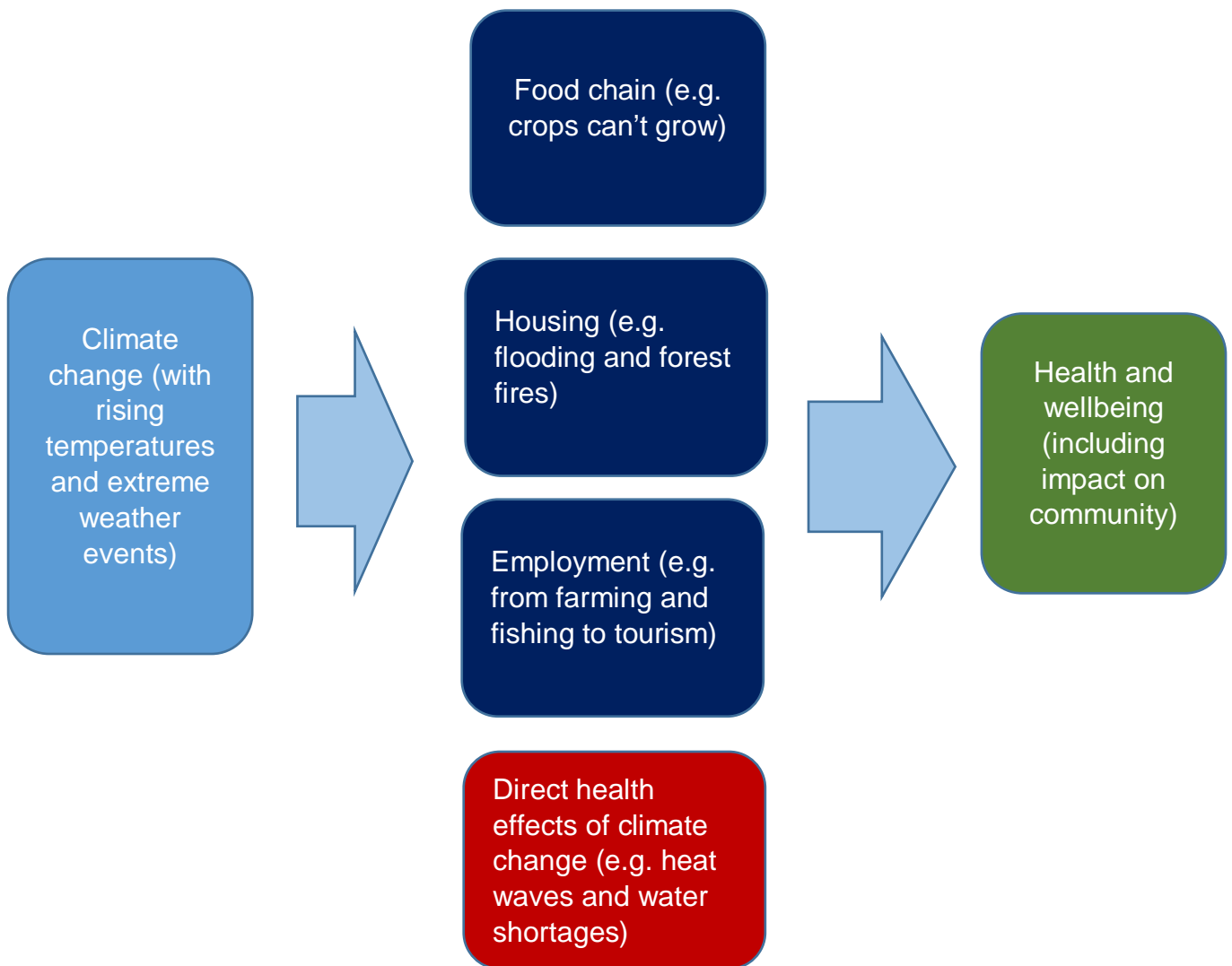
The social model of health recognises that our health and wellbeing results from factors including work, education, housing, leisure and the way we organise

ourselves as a society. As the following diagram shows, climate change can be seen to have a bearing on many of these factors and, in turn, on health and wellbeing.

Take the food chain for example. The changing climate will have a major effect on the kinds of food we are able to grow, farm, import and produce. Any shortages and associated rise in cost will make it harder to have a healthy diet. Drought will contribute to food shortages as well as affecting our health more directly if clean water is in short supply. In this regard, the diagram also highlights how climate change has a direct bearing on health and wellbeing, and the immediate health effects of rising temperatures are another example of this.

Climate change also has an impact on communities, and how different communities respond will determine whether this has a positive or negative effect on health and wellbeing. Communities can take a lead role in addressing the climate emergency and its effects, demonstrating the best of our communities. Often, it is local people in communities that are first to respond and support each other in crisis situations such as flooding. Community activism addressing the causes of climate change is also strong. Through these activities and more, community organisations can bring people together around a common cause, with spin-off benefits in terms of health and wellbeing. We return to this later on.

Connections between climate change and health and well-being



Climate justice

For the sake of simplicity, the model above links climate change to health and wellbeing with no mention of the power, wealth and social inequalities that exist at both global and local level. In reality, the impact of climate change will be much worse for those who have the least wealth and power. Many countries in the global south already experience higher levels of drought, famine, flooding and hurricanes. And it tends to be people living in extreme poverty that are worst affected. As our climate warms, these events are becoming even more devastating for people and communities who are least equipped to cope.

This is the basic idea behind ‘climate justice’ – a term which also recognises how unfair it is that the people who will experience the worst impact of climate change have the smallest carbon footprints.

Climate justice doesn't only apply to the unequal impact of climate change across the world. It is concerned with how the adverse effects of climate change will be worst felt by already disadvantaged and excluded groups in our own society as well. Less affluent communities in Scotland are unlikely to be as resilient to extreme weather events as wealthier communities are. For example, they will have fewer financial resources available to help recover from local flooding.

Climate change and health inequalities

There are clear connections between climate change and health inequalities.

Firstly, we have shown above that climate change has a direct and indirect impact on health and wellbeing, and also that this impact will be distributed unevenly, with already disadvantaged communities being worst affected. As we are well-aware in community-led health, health inequalities follow a similar pattern. They are rooted in the unfair structure of society and reflect wider social and economic inequalities. **As another challenge that disadvantaged communities have to face, climate change (and its wider impact) is therefore likely to contribute to widening health inequalities.**

Secondly, climate change and health inequalities share the same root cause – our unsustainable economic system. It's interesting that climate change has made it easier to say that we urgently have to radically change our economy and society. We're so familiar with global capitalism, the endless pursuit of economic growth and the massive wealth accumulated by the few that many of us have become resigned to it. You could be forgiven for thinking: "It's the world we live in so let's operate as best we can within it and ameliorate its worst effects". Well, this is no longer a viable option for humanity – and we were mistaken to think it ever was.

Given these connections, climate justice should now take its place alongside social and economic justice in our work. Another way of saying this is that we can't address one of these without the other.

The role of communities

Community activism around climate change is already strong in Scotland.

Traditionally, many community organisations have focused on environmental issues, often with a focus on local green spaces. Examples within the CHEX network include [Community-Led Environmental Action for Regeneration \(CLEAR\)](#) which has been working in the Levenmouth area since 2007 to improve the local environment and encourage civic pride and local engagement. Another CHEX network organisation, [Urban Roots](#) works across the Southside of Glasgow to empower local people to make choices and lifestyle changes that are beneficial for them, their communities and the environment.

There are also many community groups in Scotland who focus on addressing wider climate change. Examples include [Transition Network](#) groups, local [Extinction Rebellion](#) groups and other groups not affiliated to any larger networks. A good place to find examples of a range of community-led action on climate change is the website of [Scottish Communities Climate Action Network \(SCCAN\)](#).

CHEX often makes the case for why community-led approaches to health are so important, and the same arguments apply to addressing the climate emergency.

These include:

- Community development brings people together to understand and have more influence over what happens in and to their communities.
- Community-led organisations know and understand their communities and are well positioned to reach seldom-heard people and groups within the community, i.e. those most likely to suffer the effects of climate change.

- The participation of local communities, and communities of interest and identity, in addressing the issues that affect them increases social capital and community resilience which, in turn, increases the ability of people to influence what happens in and to their communities.
- Furthermore, stronger, more influential communities will be better able to challenge the unequal power relationships underlying our most pressing issues.

Communities therefore have a key role in making the case for, and actively influencing, a fairer economic and social model that doesn't pursue growth for the sake of it. This will benefit health and wellbeing as well as help address climate change.

A lot more needs to happen in addition to community action. Political leadership is required that tackles multinational companies, some of whom are the worst polluters and who also actively maintain the political and economic system to suit their short-term interests. But support for political decisions, in turn, requires wider awareness of climate change, as well as its causes and solutions. We need to start with communities.

Climate pledge

And that's where the new [Communities Call for Climate Emergency](#) comes in. Working as a member of the [Scottish Community Alliance](#), CHEX has contributed to the development of this statement demanding that the climate emergency is prioritised and that the role of communities is recognised and supported.

The call for action

“We need Scottish Government both to lead and to enable others to take action. In particular, we call on Scottish Government to address the following key issues:

- Support for Community-based Climate Action: Establish a long-term strategy setting out how government will involve and empower communities to plan and take climate action.
- Renewal of Local Democracy: Rebuild local democracy from the bottom up by ensuring that local decision-making and sufficient resources are shifted irrevocably towards local people and away from the existing institutions of power.
- Prosperity without Growth: Place climate resilience, climate justice and the well-being agenda front and centre of Scotland’s economic policy by embracing a new economic paradigm of prosperity without growth.”

[Read and sign up to the full Climate Statement here](#)

Related developments

Other recent developments worth drawing attention to are:

- The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019, which commits the Scottish Government to a 75 per cent cut in carbon emissions by 2030. [Follow this link to see the legislation as passed at the end of October 2019](#). The Act also sets targets for Scotland to become a net-zero carbon emitter by 2045.
 - The new Act also requires the Scottish Government to establish a Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change to make recommendations on how a net-zero transition should be achieved.
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Next steps

CHEX will be promoting the Communities Call for Climate Action through our [website](#), [social media](#) and [e-bulletin](#). We encourage you to sign up to it and would like to hear any ideas and suggestions from you regarding future work around the climate emergency and climate action.

Contact: Andrew Paterson, CHEX Policy and Research Officer

Tel: 0141 248 1924

Email: andrew@scdc.org.uk

Links to further information

- [Sign up to the Communities Call for Climate Action](#)
- [Sign up to Scottish Communities Climate Action Network \(SCCAN\)](#)
- [Community Energy Scotland, a nationwide charity working with local people to help them make the most of their renewable energy resources.](#)
- Stop Climate Chaos is a climate change coalition of more than 100 organisations and their 11 million supporters, working together for positive action. [This link takes you to the Scottish website.](#)
- [Keep Scotland Beautiful, a national environmental charity that is committed to making Scotland clean, green and more sustainable.](#)
- [Sustrans Scotland provides advice, support and funding that makes it easier for people to walk and cycle for everyday journeys.](#)
- [The UN's webpage on climate justice.](#)

