



# Group models of pro-environmental behaviour change

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Typically, approaches to pro-environmental behaviour change are aimed squarely at individuals as consumers (e.g., the UK government's flagship ACT ON CO2 campaign). On one level this makes complete sense – after all, it is individuals that choose whether or not to take a flight, which model of car to buy, and the amount of water to put in a kettle. Targeting pro-environmental messages at individuals in the hope that they will reduce the amount of energy they consume has become a standard tactic for policy makers and campaigners alike. However, there are many barriers to engaging in pro-environmental behaviour, and some of these barriers exist at a *social* rather than an individual level (Lorenzoni et al, 2007).

Examples of social barriers to engaging in pro-environmental behaviour include:

- The perception that some individuals are 'free-riding' while others make sacrifices
- Powerful counter-messages competing with pro-environmental messages – campaigns aimed at reducing consumption are overwhelmingly outnumbered by commercial advertisements promoting increased consumption behaviour
- A lack of visible signals that 'something is being done' – with the vast majority of people not visibly engaged in pro-environmental behaviour (even if they are taking steps to reduce their carbon footprint), motivating people to change is hard
- The perception that individual action in the face of such an overwhelming social challenge is futile.

Clearly, there are structural (e.g. no public transport) and financial (e.g. public transport too expensive) barriers to engaging in pro-environmental behaviour too. But it seems important to explore approaches to promoting pro-environmental behaviour that embrace (rather than suppress) the powerful social processes and dynamics that act as the catalysts for so much of our everyday behaviour. Promoting pro-environmental behaviour at a group (rather than an individual) level may offer a method of circumnavigating some of the social barriers listed above.

What follows is a short summary of some of the more successful approaches to group-based pro-environmental behaviour change that have been pursued in the UK. It is not an exhaustive list, as it includes only those projects that have been documented or evaluated in a systematic way. For each project, two simple questions have been posed: 'How does it work?' and 'What are the pros and cons?' The summaries draw heavily on the project evaluation reports.

- Ecoteams
- COIN action groups – also mentioning the climate solidarity groups
- CRAGS
- WI/WRAP

## 1. EcoTeams (Global Action Plan)

### How does it work?

Ecoteams has been running since 2000, involving over 3000 households, through 36 different local authorities and organisations. Ecoteams focuses on multiple measures of environmental behaviour (waste production, water use, transport and energy) but doesn't involve participants calculating their 'emissions' reductions in terms of CO2 explicitly.

Three versions of the groups have been trialled – fully facilitated (full time professional facilitator), semi-facilitated (member of local community/organisation trained to be group facilitator) and stand alone (non facilitation). The semi-facilitated version was found to deliver the best results in terms of CO2 reductions (and also cost less). Semi-facilitated Ecoteams report a 16.6% CO2 reduction on average – a substantial reduction in the carbon footprint of a household.

Groups of individuals are provided with detailed information packs and workbooks, and meet monthly to discuss progress in pro-environmental behaviour. Group leaders are selected from one of the participating households, and tend to be ‘keen greens’, although the team members are not necessarily of this demographic. However, almost all participants have ‘prior green intentions’, and “the programme is most successful in encouraging participants to do more within the general categories of green activities they engaged in prior to joining”

### What are the pros and cons?

Burgess & Nye (2008) interviewed participants from different Ecoteams projects, with a view to establishing what people were responding to in the groups (i.e. what were the drivers of change). There were two distinct mechanisms – the group meetings, and the weighing/measuring of waste and energy. People commented that it worked well with small groups, and that they enjoyed the social aspect of it. Groups that were established within an existing organisation (e.g. a church) liked the social cohesion it brought – suggesting “the potential value of recruiting for team-based interventions within established organisations and amongst pre-established social ties”. They state that ‘communities of interest’ are much more effective than ‘communities of geography’ – that is, people need to share some common purpose: “The group offers a complimentary mixture of social support and pressure for making changes, and deliberative space for the diffusion and exchange of information and ideas for change.”

This suggests that mixing with likeminded people is an attraction – but equally, the small group and deliberative setting meant that it provided a ‘safe space’ for people with different pre-existing levels of environmental behaviour to exchange thoughts. The group setting seemed to encourage ‘joined up thinking’ – rather than taking isolated actions, participants started to view many different aspects of their behaviour as related.

Interestingly, the weighing and measuring provoked more mixed responses. The people who did like it identified ‘being more in control’ and ‘being more aware of energy use and waste production’ as the key factors, but for some the process of weighing waste and recording figures was unpleasant.

## 2. Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN) Action Groups

### How does it work?

Climate Action Groups use a flexible and self-directed learning approach to bring together people who endeavour to ‘*share thoughts, ideas, feelings and concerns on climate change and to then take decisive action within their local communities and/ or networks*’. Action Groups themselves can be composed of individuals, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, trade unionists or work colleagues. Action groups can grow out of existing organisations or larger groups.

COIN works with a local individual or group to set up a “matchmaker meeting” in which they use facilitating techniques to enable people to form groups around particular topics or issues that they want to work on. The matchmaker meeting takes place over a 2.5 hour period normally during an evening or weekend. From a single matchmaker event, several Climate Action Groups are formed on issues ranging from lobbying local government to do more to reduce emissions to promoting green technologies in the home.

The groups arrange a subsequent meeting in which they agree the overall aim of their group, an action plan and regular meetings (at least one per month) to take the action plan forward over a six month period. Actions are then carried out as each group works towards its goals. A meeting for all action groups is held at one month and three months after the matchmaker meeting. Action Groups are encouraged to report back and share experiences on their actions as well as to seek support and guidance from COIN and other Action Groups.

At the end of the six month period, Action Groups meet to evaluate their action plan and to decide whether or not they will continue with their existing project, take on a new challenge or disband altogether. A final meeting for all Action Groups is held to evaluate the project as a whole, celebrate successes and help individuals to strengthen either their projects or get more involved in other initiatives.

### What are the pros and cons?

The use of Climate Action Groups as a way of mobilising communities to take action against climate change is generally seen by those participating and facilitating as a successful strategy. The majority of participants strongly believed that the CAGs really worked and provide a supportive outlet for shared ideas to coalesce into something effective and productive.

The facilitation by COIN is also highly valued, especially in terms of maintaining momentum and infusing the team with positivity at times of apathy. Without the CAGs as a spark, meeting point, and foundation, individuals with an interest in climate change activities would be less likely to pursue some sort of action. What is more, a very great proportion of participants intend to fully remain a part of the climate change movement, representing a sound degree of community mobilisation.

However, the general consensus of a number of participants was that those without a pre-existing knowledge and experience of climate change issues were at a disadvantage both in terms of their ability to carry out actions, and their confidence within the group. It was also of concern that no formal carbon-cutting targets were set or measured using this format (the focus is on more participative and motivational approaches).

## 3. Carbon Ration Action Groups (CRAGS)

### How does it work?

CRAGS involve groups setting up and agreeing personal carbon allowances – or carbon rations – which people must not exceed. In some instances these have been traded, sometime financial penalties ensue; other schemes have had the limit enforced on a purely social basis (i.e. disapproval of other CRAG members!).

Most groups started with an aim of a 10% year-on-year reduction of the ‘average’ UK footprint. Each member of each group does their own ‘accountancy’, either by using a converter on the CRAGS website, or by using an online footprint tool.

The average reduction in carbon footprint was 27% in first year – but this seems inextricably linked to who was taking part – lots of people reported already making the changes, and so the concept of a carbon budget in and of itself isn’t necessarily doing as much work as it first appears to be.

### What are the pros and cons?

Capstick & Lewis (2008; see also Howells, 2009) evaluated CRAGS, and noted that the ‘structured yet social’ nature of CRAGS is appealing to people. The act of forming the group was perceived as important by several participants, who saw it as a way of ‘demonstrating what was possible’ to policy makers considering carbon rationing as a policy.

Capstick & Lewis reported that the physical meetings were very important to the process of making emissions reductions – people ‘energised each other’ at them. The act of declaring the pro-environmental behaviour they were engaged in was reported to be a crucial aspect of maintaining motivation. Saying out loud what progress had been made, and hearing others do the same was a key element of achieving personal emissions reductions.

However, CRAGS has only been tried with middle class, pro-green, self motivated groups, and Capstick & Lewis (2008) concluded that: “It is impossible to argue that the types of experience of CRAG found here would be generalisable beyond individuals with strong pre-existing pro-environmental beliefs...that said, the various benefits of CRAG processes, such as learning and social support processes are not necessarily exclusive to any small elite. As such, it is recommended that elements of the scheme be incorporated into future research.”

## 4. Women’s Institute/ Waste Reduction Action Plan

### How does it work?

The Love Food Champions project aimed to change behaviour towards food waste by offering groups of households practical advice and guidance from WI members, as well as exchanging ideas within a group of like-minded non-WI individuals from the same area. Each Love Food Group, consisting of a Love Food Champion and 6-8 other individuals in their community, met once a month for four months to discuss a range of topics to do with reducing food waste such as shopping, storage, portion sizing, meal planning and how to use leftovers. The project was set up to provide the Love Food Champions with a range of materials, resources and guidance notes to help them set their own agenda for their meetings. The project involved group discussions and encouraged group members to set goals for themselves to reduce their household’s food waste.

The Love Food Champions targeted, in particular, women and men from households with school age children and young working people as these were two groups identified by WRAP to be high food wasters. A Workbook was developed and provided by NFWI to the Love Food Champions to use and distribute amongst their groups (a downloadable copy of this document is available online at [www.lovefoodhatewaste.com](http://www.lovefoodhatewaste.com)). The book contained material to be covered at each meeting and offered hints and tips, plus useful information such as an explanation of the date labels on packaging, a selection of recipes to accompany the meetings, and links to websites which participants could use to help build on the meetings. Groups were also invited to complete an activity at each meeting, related to the topic being discussed. The Love Food Champions adapted the activities and content of the meetings to fit with each group and what their particular participants wanted to do.

By the end of the project when participants were asked how often they would say edible food is thrown away during mealtimes in their homes; 62% believed they wasted food less than once every two days compared to 37% at the start of the project.

### What are the pros and cons?

The meetings were very informal and that seems to have been something that participants particularly enjoyed about them. There was also a great deal of enthusiasm for swapping recipe ideas, and the opportunities that meetings provided to share and learn from other members of the group.

The method achieved impressive reductions in food waste – although only one aspect (i.e. food) of pro-environmental behaviour was focussed on.

By the end of the project, participants felt that they had gained valuable skills and confidence not only in being able to reduce food waste but also to prepare meals from basic ingredients and some even started growing their own fruits and vegetables. Participants suggested that meetings could

have been reduced in number, perhaps making each session longer so that the same amount of information could be accommodated, and that there could have been less paperwork.

It is also worth noting that the project received *substantial* funding from WRAP – would it be replicable without such financial backing?

## References

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