

# A call to global action

**THE DOCUMENTARY ON GLOBAL** warming featuring former US vice-president Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*, was a box office hit, at least by documentary film standards. Scientists lauded its accuracy, and praised Gore for elevating awareness of an issue that they feel has not yet reached a tipping point of public action in the US. I have seen the movie three times, and agree that it uses science to make a compelling case. But, I am among the 'choir'.

But what about those who do not see the issue as urgent? Like Gore, many scientists believe that if the public could just be convinced of the science, they would take action. But, information by itself is not enough. And, because of this, the temptation is often there to emphasise dire, scary consequences to get attention. This might get notice, but it does not necessarily result in effective action. Fear, especially of a global-scale problem, is often just as likely to result in denial, apathy, despair and resignation as it is to result in feelings that we should 'do something'.

So where does this leave those who want to push for societal engagement on the issue? The first step is to move beyond debates over the science and focus debate instead on strategies for change. Accessible optimistic solutions that motivate and empower action are needed. Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Atlantic Airways, gave us a particularly extraordinary example when he announced a £10m prize for coming up with a way to remove 1bn t of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere for 10 years. But there is a role for communication that engages all of us on solutions, whether it be evaluating one's hometown emissions and participating in emissions reduction opportunities, or devising ways to ensure that communities are more resilient to the damages that are likely to result from climate changes.

Engaging in debate and moving forward with solutions is often more controversial than the more removed, heavily technical debates over climate change science. These debates are generally the domain of 'duelling experts', and exclude the public by their very nature. Debates on what society should do to respond, however, get to the essence of political process and opinions and values. This stage is a necessary, however messy, part of societal action on global warming.

Recognising the role of values brings us to a second strategy that can work to engage attention on a problem, such as global warming, that is seen as far-off and distant – linking it to more immediate, compelling issues that can have positive co-benefits. Many local governments, businesses and states that have moved forward with

policy or corporate strategies that affect global warming, through reduced emissions, for example, have done so because they also make sense from an economic or quality of life standpoint. Solutions might involve becoming more energy efficient – a goal that can save money and reduce waste, for example. Moving to alternate sources of energy may have side benefits for addressing air pollution, diversifying economic opportunities and spurring technological innovation. Improving coastal towns' resilience to sea level rise will help reduce damages by storms that already affect local economies. And so on. There may not always be a 'win-win' solution, but there is often much to be gained from seeking these opportunities that combine desirable outcomes from a short-term perspective with those from a longer-term, climate perspective.

Looking at the landscape of action on global warming, it is clear that there are multiple opportunities for communities and sectors to become engaged in this new dialogue on global warming. Moving beyond the perception that scientific information alone is 'enough' to motivate change can help us focus instead on those strategies that will engage us and bring fruitful, sustained action.

---

**Lisa Dilling** is a visiting fellow at the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Colorado, Boulder, US. She is co-editor of the recent book: *Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change* published by Cambridge University Press

---

Information on global warming is not enough argues *Lisa Dilling*, Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Colorado

