

Top 5 Actions to Make a Difference in the Fight Against Climate Change

Kelly Rigg, Executive Director, GCCA | Posted: 05/21/2013

Marjan Minnesma may be the most inspiring person you've never heard of, unless you live in the Netherlands as I do. A few years ago, Marjan got fed up with waiting on governments to act. As a citizen of a small, industrialized country -- blessed with resources but riddled with challenges-- she realized that if we can't "do it" here, what hope do others have? By "doing it" she meant figuring out innovative approaches to greening energy and living sustainably, without succumbing to the old cliché that would have us shivering in the dark with the lights out. So she rolled up her sleeves and created the Urgenda Foundation (Stichting Urgenda).

Urgenda has achieved some impressive results. They negotiated a group-discount on solar panels which made it affordable for thousands of people to solarize their homes and businesses. They took a similar approach to the introduction of electric cars in the Netherlands, enticing two major cities to buy them in quantity and establish a network of charging stations to service them. And once the charging stations were there, others started buying them as well. And that's just the beginning. Urgenda has an action plan all the way through to 2050.

Her story shows how a single individual can make a huge difference. And huge is what we need right now if we are to make real headway in the fight against climate change.

The International Energy Agency says that an additional \$36 trillion must be invested in clean energy between now and 2050 to stand a good chance of keeping global temperature rise below 2° C (PDF). That's about \$1 trillion per year, although the IEA also points out that for every dollar spent, we would save three dollars on energy costs in the future:

Even if these potential future savings are discounted at 10%, there would be a USD 5 trillion net saving between now and 2050. If cautious assumptions of how lower demand for fossil fuels can impact prices are applied, the projected fuel savings jump to USD 150 trillion.

In other words, we shouldn't be fooled by those who argue it's too expensive to deal with climate change -- it will save us money in the long run.

If you're concerned about climate change, there's a good chance you're already doing many of the obvious things to reduce your own carbon footprint -- using energy-saving light bulbs, reducing meat consumption; buying locally produced food, and so on (see TckTckTck's personal action checklist of carbon reducing tips). These small steps are vital, but if you've ever had the feeling that your lifestyle changes amount to tiny drops in a very large proverbial bucket, I invite you to consider taking one of these 'Top 5 actions' to fight climate change:

1) Crowdfund Renewables

Crowdfunding is an idea whose time has come. Like Marjan's idea of bulk purchasing solar panels, there are hundreds of crowdfunding opportunities which enable people to pool their money to purchase things which would otherwise be unaffordable. Kickstarter, Kiva and Indiegogo are some of the best known fundraising sites, and clean energy projects are now springing up all around the world, like this Indiegogo project to create solar drip irrigation in South Sudan.

SunFunder is another great example. For as little as \$10 in the form of an interest-free loan, investors can help bring

clean, renewable light and electricity to people in the world's poorest countries. For example this project in Uganda which seeks to raise \$15,000 to purchase solar phone chargers and will help families earn as much as \$40 additional monthly income from phone charging services. Another platform called Mosaic allows investors to contribute anywhere from \$25 to \$50,000 for solar projects, though unlike SunFunder it offers investors a return on their investments. As their website says, "With a 4.5% annual yield, you no longer have to choose between doing well and doing good."

2) Buy Climate Bonds

The Climate Bonds Initiative reminds us that most of the urban infrastructure we take for granted -- from sewers and railways in the 19th century to the aerospace industry and highways of the 20th century -- were financed with bonds that provided safe and secure returns for the public:

Bonds allow us to borrow against future economic benefits to allow for the investment needed now to deliver those benefits.

Although the Climate Bonds Initiative is aimed at large-scale institutional investors, you can ask your financial advisor about investing in climate-themed bonds.

3) Pension and Mutual Funds

Find out where your money is going, and become a shareholder activist. Solving climate change requires us to get our money out of fossil fuels and into clean, safe renewables. Here are three ways to help ensure your collective investments are put to better use:

Share Action provides an easy tool for emailing your pension provider to ask where your money is invested, and let them know where you stand on climate change, fossil fuels and renewables.

The Vital Few an initiative of the Asset Owners Disclosure Project, also provides tools for targeting pension funds and points out that fund managers are legally bound to answer every letter from a member. Thousands of incoming letters would ratchet up the pressure and effectively force disclosure of damaging investment practices that many pension funds still use.

As You Sow is a shareholder advocacy group which encourages companies to reform their environmental and human rights practices, and are particularly concerned about the carbon bubble. As a shareholder you can participate in their actions. But even if you hold shares indirectly through mutual funds, you can still make a difference by contacting fund managers and asking them to vote for climate-friendly action.

4) Vote with your Wallet

Labeling is a time-honored tradition for helping consumers to vote with their wallets. The new WindMade label will allow consumers to identify organisations and products that rely on wind power in their operations or production. The technical standards for products qualifying for the WindMade stamp of approval are currently being finalized, so it may be a while yet before you start seeing it on the shelves.

For the smartphone generation, Forbes reported last week on a new app that allows you to scan product bar codes and "Boycott" climate destroyers such as the Koch brothers. It also helps you identify the products of companies that should be rewarded for their good policies. Due to teething problems brought on by popular demand, you might wait a couple of weeks before trying to download it.

5) Join a Climate Campaign

Since all of the ideas described above involve spending money in one way or another, I'll close with an appeal that is decidedly non-financial: get actively involved in a climate campaign. You can help spread the word about the science of climate change via RealityDrop, get your university or your state to move beyond coal, speak out against developing Canada's tar sands and shipping it via the proposed Keystone XL pipeline or tell world leaders to stop subsidizing fossil fuels and switch to renewables instead.

Visit the TckTckTck Action page which aggregates campaign news and activist opportunities around the world and discover more ways to get involved.

As carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere reached the dreaded new milestone of 400 ppm last week, we should all tear a page out of Marjan Minnesma's book. As she told me recently:

If we want to, we can make change. It's really quite simple. Just go out and act. We know what to do! Everyone who cares about climate change, about the future of our children, needs to use their enthusiasm to inspire others, and take steps forward -- as many and as fast as they can.



Creative Commons: Marjan Minnesma (center) at the opening of a new wind farm, rooftop solar panel (right).