How to explain emergency mode climate action

Relating emergency responses to climate strategy

A guide to climate emergency mode

Many of us have experienced emergency situations such as bushfires, floods or cyclones where, for the duration, nothing else matters as much as responding to the crisis. If we want to survive, or help others effectively, we don't rush thoughtlessly in, but focus on a plan of action, implemented with thought and all possible care and speed to protect others and get to safety. Everyone chips in, with all hands on deck.

Climate warming has now created an emergency situation, which is being recognised by leading climate scientists, public leaders and community activists. "We face a direct existential threat" on climate for "the emergency we face", UN Secretary General António Guterres recently said. Local government regions in Australia and the USA have recognised that climate emergency action is the only response that can fully address the scale and speed of the climate crisis. This guide provides an overview of what constitutes emergency mode to help us understand how it can be applied to developing sound strategy and policy.

Emergency threats

A threat to people, property and/or society that has the potential to overwhelm them creates an emergency situation. The threat could be a natural disaster, a pandemic, a food–water crisis, or a human-made disaster such as a nuclear meltdown, war, or climate damage.

The challenge is to stop the problem escalating out of control and return to safety. In responding, failure and major tradeoffs are not an option, because the consequences are so grave.

Action is time sensitive, because delay in responding leads to escalation and increased damage and cost.

Emergencies may be of short, medium or long duration, and their geographical impact may be local/regional, national or global.

Bushfire: local emergency

For natural emergencies, such as bushfires, emphasis is placed on anticipating how severe an event could be, not just middle-of-the road projections. People are educated about those high-end risks, and appropriate responses such as preparing property and evacuation plans. Government agencies are expected to be honest about the threats and what needs to be done.

The response is coordinated by government.

Where emergency situations are of a familiar type, plans are made well in advance for labour, equipment and logistical capacity adequate to the task. The affected population is mobilised for firefighting, support services, care of the vulnerable, and other tasks. Communities are informed and consulted.

As the event materialises, some "business-as-usual" functioning of the affected community may be suspended: schools and other facilities closed, transport rerouted, dangerous activities prohibited, and volunteers take leave from their work.

Mostly there is political bipartisanship to do "whatever it takes" and no effort or resources are spared.

War: long emergency

Many of the same approaches apply to mobilisation at times of conflict. Whilst wars are terrible events, how nations mobilise their economies give insights into responding to grave threats that require a major change in the economy. Like for a natural emergency response, plans are made for the worse that could happen, the population is mobilised in an all-out effort, and generally there is bipartisanship.

A "whatever it takes" attitude means that government plans and directs the nation's resources and capacity towards building up the war effort. This can be done at amazing speed. After the surprise Japanese attack on the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbour in 1941, the US economy was transformed from the world's largest producer of consumer goods to the world's largest producer of military goods in one year. Government directed the whole war effort, but business boomed as the national economy grew quickly. The proportions of national economies dedicated to the effort in World War II were staggering. Military outlays in 1943 as a proportion of the total economy were: USA 42%; UK 55%; Germany 70%; and Japan 43%. Japan's percentage reached about 70% in 1945.

War mobilisations are characterised by crash programs to rapidly scale up of capacity and innovate. With so much directed toward the war effort, non-essential consumption is curtailed (for example, increased taxation and the sale of savings programs such as "war bonds"), whilst the basics for everyone are guaranteed. During World War II, rationing of some essentials was accepted by the population because such action or sacrifice was understood as fair and necessary.

Emergency mode

An emergency declaration shows that the government rates the problem as very serious, that priority will be given to resolving the crisis, that we are all in the crisis together and that, officially, "business as usual" and 'reform-as-usual' no longer applies. Here are some characteristics of emergency mode:

Clarity of purpose

In a bushfire, one clear goal is to save all human life. With climate warming, the purpose of emergency action is to protect all people, societies and ecosystems. This is not the case with the present climate policymaking processes, which arbitrarily debates how much death and destruction should be tolerated.

Risk management

An emergency response starts by fully assessing all the risks and potential damage, especially the "high-end" and existential risks, which would be devastating for human societies. Special precautions that go well beyond conventional risk management practice are required if the increased likelihood of very large climate impacts are to be adequately dealt with. International and national climate policymaking has not adopted this approach, and exhibited a preference for conservative projections.

Full & frank communication

Emergency mode is a whole-of-society effort which requires an aware and motivated population. In most cases it also requires political bipartisanship. A full and frank discussion of the threat, the response and what that means for the society is critical in building and maintaining active commitment across the community. By contrast, international policymakers, most governments, and much of the non-government sector, so far, have failed to clearly communicate the real risks and responses.

Highest priority

An emergency identifies a task as of the highest priority for society for the duration of the emergency, and sufficient resources will be applied in order to succeed. Recently, Climate Councillor Prof. Will Steffen told *The Intercept* in an interview published on 14 August 2018, that "Getting greenhouse gas emissions down fast has to be the primary target of policy and economics (with) something 'more like wartime footing' to roll out renewable energy and dramatically reimagine sectors like transportation and agriculture 'at very fast rates'."

Government leadership

All very fast, large-scale transformations are characterised by strong government leadership in planning, coordinating and allocating resources. This response is backed by sufficient administrative power to achieve a rapid response that is beyond the capacity of the society's normal functioning. Only a national government has society-wide capacity to plan, direct resources, develop labour skills, provide funding from taxation, manage savings and investments, coordinate innovation efforts, and set a regulatory framework for effective emergency action. To do this, the prevailing neoliberal ideology (privatisation, deregulation, lower taxes, less government spending, and so on) must be suspended even where societies see it as the preferred approach for managing the peace-time economy.

Focus on physical transformation

More than anything else, climate emergency mobilisation is about the transformation of the physical economy at great speed, delivering an integrated package of solutions for a safe-climate economy, zero emissions and large-scale CO2 drawdown. Emphasis also needs to be given to critical research and development of solutions to close the gap between what is needed for effective protection and what is currently possible.

Fairness

We now face large-scale disruption because of global warming: either planned by way of an emergency transition to restore a safe climate, or unplanned chaos because of the social and physical system failure that will inevitably occur as warming intensifies. This dislocation requires a focus on equity — both internationally and within the nation — so that the burden of transformation is shared in a reasonable manner. Without a sense that the emergency changes are both fair and necessary, the public mandate for such change is unlikely to be built or maintained. The good news is that, even if a climate emergency were to be declared at a time of economic health, the tasks are so challenging — building a zero-emissions economy, taking carbon out of the air, and finding the means to cool the planet — that every scrap of productive capacity will be required.

Rapid economic transitions

Also relevant to the framing of a climate emergency response is understanding the lessons of recent, rapid economic transitions, such as Japan, the Asian tiger economies and China. For example, in two decades, South Korea transformed itself completely from being a poor agricultural economy to a middle-income, world-competitive manufacturing economy. These changes came with very high human and environmental costs, but they demonstrate that programs to transform the organisation of production can be implemented quickly. The challenge for climate emergency action is to figure out how to transform the physical economy very fast without the high human and environmental cost.

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