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Climate Crisis: 'Listening to the Science' Not Enough

By Sofiah Jamil

SYNOPSIS

Greta Thunberg has called on politicians to “listen to the science” and take climate change seriously. But climate communication strategies can be more effective when “listening to the science” is complemented with “listening to society”.

COMMENTARY

WITHIN A span of a year, Greta Thunberg's weekly lone ranger act of skipping school to stage a climate strike outside the Swedish parliament has spread globally into what is known as the Fridays for Future movement. Despite being at the tender age of 16 and diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, Greta's display of her commitment to the cause has been impressive.

By refusing environmental awards and refraining from travelling by air for international conferences, she has catapulted herself as a leading climate change campaigner, and earning audiences with various international leaders and politicians. Her message to them: to “listen to the science”, and also understand the acuteness of impending environmental disasters.

Eco-anxiety and Listening to Societies

While these consistent and passionate efforts by a female teenager with disabilities are commendable, it is unclear how influential Greta's call to “listen to the science” will be in getting politicians and corporations to address this “urgent climate emergency”. The Fridays for Futures movement, for now, still remains a predominantly developed-world phenomenon.

Despite an increase in the number of Friday for Future (FFF) protests in several African, Middle Eastern and Asian cities (including conflict-prone countries such as Afghanistan) on 20 September 2019, the uptake is sporadic and pales in comparison.

Additionally, despite the noble aim of highlighting the urgency of the issue and the “existential crisis” that it poses on their generation, the language of the overall campaign suffers from the weakness of several climate activists before them – a limited ability to effectively communicate climate science to a wider audience. This has given rise to what has been termed as *eco-anxiety* amongst some environmentalists.

Without discrediting the genuine concern that these young protesters have about the catastrophic impacts of climate change, one way forward would be to comprehensively understand existing societal concerns, and engage existing social movements. In other words, to *listen to societies*.

Listening to Societal Concerns

Recent events suggest several reasons why these young climate activists need to be better at listening to societies. Firstly, while there is no shortage of FFF protesters reiterating how urgent addressing climate change is, they fall short in making their demands relevant to broader societal contexts. Take for example, the Calls-to-Action drafted by the youth organisers of Singapore’s first Climate Rally, in which they argued that Singapore was not doing enough to “slash emissions”.

In particular, the document critiqued the government’s proposed carbon tax of S\$5 to S\$15 per tCO₂e (total carbon dioxide equivalent) by 2030, as being far lower than the recommended S\$185 tariff proposed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

While this may be true, the carbon tax – even at its minimal amount – is perceived by some sections of society as yet another example of rising living costs in Singapore. Indeed, addressing climate change requires bold decisions, but it is unclear whether these young protesters are prepared to bear the costs of these decisions, which for now are borne by their parents.

Elsewhere in developing Southeast Asia, the FFF movement has not found as much societal traction as other social movements. In Indonesia, for example, while FFF strikes were organised on 20 September in a few major cities, their turn-out paled in comparison to what happened a week later.

Following the passing of several controversial bills in the country’s national legislative body (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*, DPR), students from major universities in Indonesia’s main cities took to the streets during school hours. The scale of these tertiary student protests were so massive, that it drew parallels with the student protests that took place in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1998, against then President Suharto. In short, domestic issues matter.

Listening to Societal Actions

Secondly, alliances matter, but the FFF movement has yet to maximise the full potential of doing so. Forging alliances should not simply be limited to other environmental groups, but rather broader civil society groups including those that periodically organise demonstrations. Such a scenario is best suited for Western developed countries, where labour unions are strong.

The recent teachers' protests in Netherlands and Germany in early November, for instance, is one particular group that is arguably the most compatible non-environment ally for the student climate strikes. While one side protests against the inhabitable future environmental conditions for learning, the other protests against the present poor working conditions for teaching, such as low pay and burn out.

There are also potential alliances with industries that are contributors to climate change. Similar to the teachers' unions, several European airline staff have organised annual strikes relating to their workers' rights and conditions.

Farmers in the Netherlands had also initiated a demonstration in early November, expressing their disappointment at being branded by the environmental movement as environmental polluters, without fully appreciating how crucial they are in providing food security for societies.

How About a Meta-Narrative?

While these industries as a whole may be contributing to climate change, it is important to acknowledge the individuals who are trying to earn an honest living, and likely to be supporting the very households that some young climate activists live in. The concerns, whether by environmental groups or otherwise, point to the same issue: the ability to maintain a good quality of life is in jeopardy.

It may be possible, therefore to cooperate through what the Dutch environment expert Maarten Hajer describes as a *discourse coalition*. Although their respective community objectives and concerns may differ, their coordinated social movements to put pressure on governments would be potentially stronger by banding together under a meta-narrative.

How they choose to negotiate and cooperate together, remains to be seen. Indeed, the biggest obstacle to such a collaboration is whether these groups are willing to listen to each other.

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