

# The vital role of organisations in protecting climate and nature

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**Combatting climate and ecological change is often framed as the responsibility of either individuals or national governments. Organisations, which are intermediate in size and influence, have enormous potential to deliver effective policies. As an illustration, we consider approaches taken by UK organisations to reduce meat consumption.**

Limiting global heating to +1.5°C and protecting biodiversity will require action from all sectors and across society. Environmental action is often framed as the responsibility of either individuals or national governments (sometimes via international agreements). Particularly from wealthier individuals, some personal actions – reducing air and car travel, having fewer children, and moving to more plant-based diets – can substantially reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and change social norms, but individual actions alone are not sufficient. Even with drastic changes to behaviour in response to the COVID pandemic, fossil fuel emissions only declined by 6% in 2020<sup>1</sup> and deforestation rates increased compared to 2019. Likewise (to date) current climate policies from governments would still lead to an estimated +2.9°C of warming by 2100<sup>2</sup>. Greta Thunberg in one speech in 2019 observed: “And yes, I know we need a system change rather than individual change. But you cannot have one without the other.” Both individual and system change are clearly needed; action at the level of organisations which are intermediate in size and influence can be instrumental in catalysing behaviour change in both.

Organisations (defined broadly here as, for example, businesses, NGOs, charities, universities, schools, hospitals, local and regional governments) have long been recognised as having a vital role

32 to play in reducing environmental damage. They make decisions which influence the choices  
33 available for hundreds and sometimes thousands of citizens. Sustainability decisions taken by  
34 organisations are therefore much more powerful and influential than actions taken by one individual  
35 alone. Although they (generally) have less power than national governments, they can also  
36 (generally) act more quickly and ambitiously. Most organisations need to consider expenditure, but  
37 (democratic sub-national government institutions aside) they do not need to consider electability.  
38 Whilst current government policies do constrain organisations' ability to operate sustainably and  
39 changes to national policies are vital, organisations can often already make changes and by doing so  
40 shift social norms and put pressure on governments to do more. NGO campaigns to make  
41 businesses' practices more sustainable – particularly around sourcing, supply chains and  
42 deforestation – have long played an important and recognised role in scrutinising corporations and  
43 driving change. However, arguably there has been far less focus on pushing for internal changes  
44 within NGOs themselves (and other non-corporate organisations), on key aspects of their operations  
45 from food procurement to investments to transport.

46

47 As an illustration of intermediate-level efforts to achieve societally beneficial change, we consider  
48 shifts in wealthier societies towards more plant-based diets, and describe approaches taken by  
49 organisations to reduce meat consumption. We use the UK as a representative example of a wealthy  
50 country with high consumption of animal products.

51

## 52 [Climate change and meat reduction: individuals and national governments](#)

53 Agriculture has transformed the planet more than any other human activity and livestock farming  
54 has particularly high environmental impacts. Even the lowest impact meat, fish and dairy foods tend  
55 to have higher carbon footprints than the highest impact plant-derived foods. The UK government's  
56 independent National Food Strategy has called for a 30% reduction in meat consumption over 10  
57 years<sup>3</sup>. More strikingly, the Planetary Health Diet – recommended for feeding 10 billion people  
58 healthily and sustainably – includes an average of 16kg of meat, 10kg of seafood and 91kg of milk  
59 (including milk equivalents of dairy products) per person per year<sup>4</sup>. However current mean UK  
60 consumption (including consumer-level food waste) of meat, fish and milk is 80kg, 20kg and 224kg  
61 respectively<sup>5</sup>. In theory, all British citizens could individually reduce their meat, fish, and dairy  
62 consumption to levels compatible with the Planetary Health Diet. However, we suspect that  
63 provided these products remain relatively cheap, readily available, and embedded into British  
64 culture, such an enormous shift is highly unlikely through individual-level efforts alone.

65

66 There are many national policies which could aid the transition to more plant-based diets, such as  
67 redirecting farming subsidies towards arable and horticulture production, introducing a food  
68 industry carbon tax, mandating public food sector outlets to include more vegan and vegetarian  
69 options<sup>6</sup> and including plant-based cooking skills on the national curriculum. However, successive  
70 governments in the UK and elsewhere appear reluctant to align their policies with their own stated  
71 objectives on reducing meat consumption. This may be due to opposition from the livestock industry  
72 and a fear that such policies would be perceived as overly interventionist. Whatever the reason, the  
73 evidence to date suggests that many governments seem unwilling to take sufficiently bold action to  
74 lower meat consumption to meet even existing emissions reduction commitments. But can  
75 organisations help meet these shortfalls?

76

### 77 [Catering and retail organisations as sustainable food policy makers](#)

78 It is important to remember that decision makers in the retail and catering sectors can act as key  
79 policy makers for transitions to sustainable diets. By curating menus, designing supermarket layouts,  
80 and choosing which foods to source, when and from where, they set the parameters affecting how  
81 hundreds of customers and diners choose what to buy and eat. Indeed, animal advocacy charities –  
82 including Humane Society International and PETA – have pivoted to providing vegan training for  
83 chefs and working with caterers, rather than focusing on campaigns promoting veganism to  
84 individual citizens (C. Tarry, pers. comm.) As well as direct effects, positive spill-overs are possible:  
85 individuals might find it easier to change their own domestic dietary habits if they have experienced  
86 good vegetarian and vegan food in an organisational setting, such as a workplace cafeteria.

87

88 In the private sector, sales of meat and dairy alternatives grew by almost 10% per year between  
89 2010 and 2020 in the EU and UK, though they remain a small part of the overall market at 0.7% for  
90 meat and 2.5% for dairy<sup>7</sup>. In the UK, most pizza chains now offer pizza with vegan cheese, and many  
91 high street coffee chains offer a variety of plant-based milks. Some supermarkets have trialled  
92 placing meat-alternatives in meat aisles to encourage “flexitarian” shopping habits<sup>8</sup>. One  
93 supermarket aims to increase sales in meat alternatives by 300% by 2025<sup>9</sup> and others have  
94 committed to reducing the cost of their own brand plant-based products to price-match their meat  
95 or dairy counterparts (Wood, The Guardian, 5/5/2021

96 [https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/05/co-op-slashes-the-price-of-plant-based-food-](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/05/co-op-slashes-the-price-of-plant-based-food-in-quest-for-net-zero-emissions)  
97 [in-quest-for-net-zero-emissions](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/05/co-op-slashes-the-price-of-plant-based-food-in-quest-for-net-zero-emissions) ). However, no British supermarkets have publicly available targets

98 to reduce meat sales<sup>9</sup>. If meat alternatives do not reduce meat consumption and instead displace  
99 wholegrains, legumes, and vegetable consumption, that could have detrimental effects on both  
100 health and the environment. It is clearly more important to examine whether organisations have  
101 reduced meat and dairy sales, rather than simply increased sales of meat alternatives.

102 In contrast to the private sector, some public sector organisations have explicit meat and dairy  
103 reduction targets. Public Sector Catering – which represents the food service in the public sector in  
104 the UK, including outlets in schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons – announced their outlets will  
105 serve 20% less meat (9 million kg: equivalent to 45,000 cows or 16 million chickens) to meet the UK's  
106 Committee on Climate Change's recommendations, though they have not specified by when  
107 (<http://20percentlessmeat.co.uk>)<sup>10</sup>. One quarter of the UK population eats meals from these  
108 caterers so this change will affect millions of people. The Eating Better Alliance of over 60  
109 organisations is campaigning for halving meat and dairy consumption in the UK by 2030<sup>9</sup>. At the  
110 regional government level, mayors from 14 cities in the UK and worldwide (including London, Tokyo,  
111 Lima and Los Angeles) have signed up to the Good Food Cities Declaration, pledging to reduce meat  
112 served at public institutions to align with the Planetary Health Diet  
113 (<https://www.c40.org/other/good-food-cities>), which in the UK would involve an approximately  
114 75% reduction in meat served – by some margin the most ambitious of the schemes outlined here.

115

### 116 Delivering change in practice

117 In 2016 the Cambridge University Catering Service (UCS, which runs 14 cafeterias across the  
118 University) introduced an ambitious Sustainable Food Policy (SFP). Its four main pillars were taking  
119 ruminant meat off the menu, sourcing sustainable fish, reducing food waste and promoting and  
120 increasing provision of vegetarian and vegan food<sup>11</sup>. To encourage students to try vegan options,  
121 free samples were provided from a vegan pop-up van and chefs received training in vegan cuisine  
122 (Fig. 1). In 2019 UCS reported that since the SFP's introduction – per kg of food purchased – GHG  
123 emissions decreased by 33%, land-use decreased by 28% and meat purchases declined by 37%; gross  
124 profits increased by 2%<sup>11</sup>. The SFP has influenced the choices of thousands of customers and the  
125 report's publication made UK national news (BBC 10/09/2019 [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-49637723)  
126 [england-cambridgeshire-49637723](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-49637723)). Cambridge's SFP has won national catering awards and was a  
127 finalist in a global competition recognising transformative behavioural approaches to combatting  
128 climate change<sup>11</sup>. Other organisations interested in reducing the environmental impact of their food  
129 procurement have approached Cambridge UCS for advice and are adopting similar practices.

130

### 131 Organisations as key catalysts of change

132 There are of course many other actions which organisations – in almost all sectors – can undertake  
133 to benefit biodiversity and the climate. Interventions to reduce emissions from transport, for  
134 example, can include mandating remote video-meetings instead of flying, installing electric car  
135 charging points, subsidising public transport for employees, and providing safe bike storage and  
136 repair facilities at work. Many organisations have started redirecting employee pension schemes  
137 away from investments in the fossil fuel sector and shifted to buying energy only from renewable  
138 energy companies. Organisations can choose to manage any greenspace they oversee in ways that  
139 benefit nature: retaining dead trees, creating small wetlands, planting wildflowers and minimising  
140 mowing and pesticide use.

141 It is unrealistic – and given current price structures, choices, and infrastructure constraints, also  
142 unreasonable – to expect individuals acting alone to substantially mitigate the climate and extinction  
143 crises. Current government policies and targets are insufficient to limit climate change. We argue  
144 that interventions by organisations, as a third group of intermediate-level actors, will be pivotal in  
145 bridging these shortfalls. As well as direct effects, more sustainable practices adopted by  
146 organisations can lead to positive spill-over effects and help shift wider social norms, increasing the  
147 scale of what governments and individuals perceive as feasible. Activists campaigning for change  
148 could have more success by focussing on decision makers in organisations rather than trying to  
149 persuade individuals one at a time to change their behaviour. Activism directed at governments is  
150 also essential, and organisational change at sub-national levels can make national change more  
151 likely. For example, the Extinction Rebellion climate protests called on the UK to declare a climate  
152 and ecological emergency in 2018: dozens of local councils across the UK did so, putting pressure on  
153 the UK government which passed the declaration in May 2019. Furthermore, analyses have found  
154 that city and regional climate commitments are generally more ambitious than national  
155 commitments and could reduce GHG emissions by a further 3.8-5.5%<sup>12</sup>, which will hopefully  
156 accelerate national government action.

157 Realising the potential of organisations necessitates expanding our view of who is considered a  
158 policy maker. For many people, the term conjures up images of civil servants and parliaments in  
159 nations' capitals. But we would argue that anyone who makes decisions which other people (beyond  
160 their immediate household) then abide by – e.g. on food procurement, heating settings in a building,  
161 company transport policies – is in effect a policy maker. Just as acting on the climate and ecological  
162 emergencies requires actions from all sectors of society – individuals, organisations, national  
163 governments – we will need a diverse and wide range of policy makers to bring about the scale of  
164 change needed.

165

166 *Figure 1: The free vegan pop up hosted by the University Catering Service.*

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