

A predictable outcome?

The Make Poverty History coalition upstaged the G8 meeting using a combination of simple demands and broad support base. Will the same tactics work on climate change? Simon Hodgson asks Ashok Sinha, the Director of the newly formed Stop Climate Chaos coalition.

You haven't heard of Stop Climate Chaos? Its swirling orange logo has already punctuated a series of full page Greenpeace ads designed to shame manufacturers – and presumably drivers – of 4x4 vehicles over their carbon dioxide emissions. The BBC website covered its formation, as did ENDS, and a Google search brings up 22,000 mentions on sites ranging from Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream to the Socialist Review. Friends of the Earth describes it as “a powerful new coalition that will generate unstoppable political pressure for change”. Not bad, for an organisation that's only a month old.

New, yes, but it's familiar territory for Ashok Sinha, the coalition's director. His last job was at the Jubilee Debt Campaign which started the avalanche of protest against un-payable third world debt. As well as co-ordinating the campaign, he helped it team up with just about every other relevant NGO in this year's Make Poverty History (MPH) coalition. So he's been in coalitions, and coalitions of coalitions. Sinha staggers me when he reveals how it worked. “Make Poverty History has only one paid post,” he says. “The work is being done by representatives of the organisations that are part of it. Some staffers in some organisations have effectively devoted the entirety of their time to it.” So despite its tiny structure it worked through hundreds of member organisations to have an enormous impact: millions sported the iconic white wristband, and the campaign produced essential background support to events at Live8 and G8.

So what's the plan? Is Stop Climate Chaos going to do for climate change what Make Poverty History did for third world debt? Sinha hopes so. “Our message will be: to Government ‘live up to your obligations’ but it will also be to individuals to say ‘signal to Government that you support changes to public policy’ ... so that we can say to Government ‘this is territory into which you can move’,” he explains. “The idea of coalition working on climate change has been around for a while. It was born of a concern that the campaigns that had been run by individual organisations – while creative and passionately supported – hadn't shifted public policy.”

There are important differences though. Make Poverty History was an easy thing to say ‘yes’ to. “The basic proposition was that it wouldn't cost us very much,” explains Sinha, “and there was no real need to talk about lifestyle changes. This time around, we are the emitters.” It will place greater demands on

the public and the goals are more complex. So as a first step, Stop Climate Chaos has set some simple, easy to understand targets. “We need to try and keep global warming below 2°C on average,” says Sinha. “That means we need to stabilise global concentrations of carbon dioxide at 400-450 ppm.” Yes, but what does this mean for me? “Global greenhouse gas emissions need to have peaked and be on an irreversible decline by 2015,” Sinha states directly – giving an essential ten year window. He acknowledges the uncertainty around these numbers, but maintains that the science backs them up. “Two degrees Celsius is the broad temperature rise after which we get into some of the really serious impacts: extreme weather events, very serious potential sea level rise, very serious potential increases in disease, and lack of access to water. Beyond 2°C we will not be able to get a grip.”

But take a look at the current membership list of Stop Climate Chaos, and you could be in for a surprise. Greenpeace – yes – and WWF and Friends of the Earth too. But it also includes Oxfam, Tearfund, Christian Aid and even the Women's Institute.

Why are all these non-environmental NGOs interested? “Climate change is not a green issue, and shouldn't be boxed up as a green issue,” explains Sinha. “It is the gravest moral and political challenge that we face. We are very clear about the threat that climate change poses to the people of developing countries and the fact that it is likely to undermine all our initiatives to eradicate poverty.” This is a major change; a shifting of the tectonic

plates around the old ‘environment versus people’ arguments of the past. Sinha sees no conflict any more. “The best protection for the environment is to support people's ability to prosper in a sustainable way,” he says. “We shouldn't underestimate the keenness that many people would have to change if they could see the benefits.” For example? “A lot of people would like to walk with their kids to school; they'd like their kids to be able to play out in the street. That's not possible because we haven't got to grips with traffic. Tackling traffic would bring its own benefits as well as delivering on greenhouse emissions.”

This coming together of international development and climate science could have been designed for Ashok Sinha. He did a PhD in renewable energy and worked as a climate researcher, before making the break into campaigning through two years with Forum for the Future. That took him into the Jubilee Debt Campaign, which really established his international development credentials. But even as a scientist, he had a long standing interest in the field. “I was a member of Third World First, and I'd been on the board of Amnesty International in the UK,” he explains. “I had a lay and professional background in economic justice, and it's been an ambition of mine in the long

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term to have brought together these two concerns. I guess it was a trajectory I was always on and I'm very glad to do this."

I am struck by the intensity and the urgency of the arguments that Sinha makes. When I ask him about his view of the climate in thirty years, he tells me that he seldom thinks that far ahead. "It's what we do now in the next five years that will really establish the pattern of the next thirty years and beyond." Everything about him suggests that he sees this problem as even more pressing than the global poverty agenda that motivated MPH. The clear implication is that if we don't act now – this year, this month – it will be very much too late.

It's powerful stuff this: the combination of dodging environmental catastrophe, delivering social justice and doing it all with individual lifestyle benefits to boot. It is no wonder that organisations are queuing up, and that they range from development and environmental NGOs to faith based and community charities. And Sinha intends to take full advantage of the scale and reach that this gives him. "The initial task will be to work with our membership, their members and supporters - that's millions of people," he says. "They will be the people best able to reach out into communities to gain political support and talk about lifestyle changes. We shouldn't underestimate the reach that ten per cent of the population can have."

Ashok Sinha has been in this job for only a month, and it fits him very well. The message is cogent and hard hitting, and there are millions of activists lining up to fight under one single

banner. Will we look back on this as the point at which public opinion really solidified on this gaseous topic? 'Stop Climate Chaos' is coming soon to a community near you.

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IAIA launch in Ireland-UK

The Ireland-UK Branch of the IAIA is to be launched on 19 December at the University of East Anglia. Speakers include John Glasson, Judith Petts and Stephen Tromans. The event is open to members of the IEMA. For further information visit:

www.uea.ac.uk/env/inteream

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