

Feeling overwhelmed by climate change? Everyone can make a difference

[David Fogarty](#) and [Audrey Tan](#)

SINGAPORE - Climate change is a daunting challenge. The headlines can be scary and it might seem simpler for people to try and ignore the problem.

Except that it is a threat now, not in the future.

Simple changes to daily life can make a difference and add up to a lot of reduction in emissions.

That is really what it is all about. Cutting greenhouse gas emissions, mainly from burning fossil fuels, because these are heating up the atmosphere and oceans, leading to changes in the world's weather. It is also about being less wasteful.

What people do collectively matters because corporations, the main source of emissions, and governments, which make regulations, will take note of what people do.

"When it comes to climate actions, it's all too easy to believe that what we do as individuals doesn't matter. How could one person's deeds make even a tiny dent in the scope of global greenhouse gas emissions?" said Professor Benjamin Horton, director of Earth Observatory of Singapore at Nanyang Technological University.

He gives the example of social distancing during the pandemic, a step that has saved many lives.

"A prevailing sense of responsibility to, and pressure from, our families and communities has led to more people doing what's needed.

"Our individual climate actions can have the same effect. As individuals act, we can create a path that many more will walk on."

Climate action begins at home and in the office.

Leave the car behind, for instance. and walk and cycle more. Set the air-conditioner at 25 deg C. Take reusable bags when shopping for food, and plan your meals carefully to avoid food waste. Recycle your paper, tins, glass and plastics - if possible, try to avoid buying products in plastic packaging.

Plastics are made from oil, and the plastics industry is a huge oil consumer, and therefore a greenhouse gas emitter. Plastics are also choking the world's oceans.

"There are three things I tell people to do: use your time, your money and your voice," said Ms Amanda McKenzie, chief executive of the Climate Council in Australia.

"If you're using your time, you might volunteer for an organisation working on climate change. You might think about what is your circle of influence, so maybe your child's school or your workplace, how those bigger groups of people can come together to reduce emissions."

Speaking up and expressing your views can also help bring about change.

"I think the most important thing individuals can do is use consumer and political power to drive change in business and political leaders - make it clear that you need action on climate change," said Mr Marc Allen, technical director for Engeco, a Singapore-based management consultancy specialising in climate change strategy.

Money also talks. He suggests looking into low-carbon investment portfolios, something Ms McKenzie also suggests.

"Where are you banking? Is that bank investing in fossil fuels? Are they investing in renewable energy? If you have shares, where are

those shares? Where's your share portfolio? Is your money helping the good things or is your money helping the bad things?" Ms McKenzie said.

What are the top three things that people can do?

First, Ms McKenzie says, is switching to renewable energy, such as putting solar panels on the roof or buying green power from an energy retailer.

The second is transportation. "So can you either have an electric vehicle (EV) as opposed to a petrol vehicle or use more public transport or more active transports of walking or bike riding?"

Third, eat more [plant-based foods](#) rather than more meat. "You don't have to become a vegan. But if you're eating less animal products, that's having overall less impact (on the climate)."

Ms McKenzie adds: "There are plenty of things that people can do in their own life to make sure that they are being effective. And it doesn't mean you have to make huge changes to your lifestyle."

So how great an impact can people make?

The International Energy Agency estimates that about 55 per cent of the cumulative emissions reductions to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 are linked to consumer choices such as purchasing an EV, retrofitting a house with energy-efficient technologies or installing a heat pump.

"Behavioural changes, particularly in advanced economies - such as replacing car trips with walking, cycling or public transport, or forgoing a long-haul flight - also provide around 4 per cent of the cumulative emissions reductions," it said.

Companies and governments also need to change.

Just 100 companies have been the source of more than 70 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988, an analysis by CDP published in 2017 found.

CDP is a not-for-profit charity that runs the global disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states and regions to manage their environmental impacts.

Top polluters included listed firms ExxonMobil, Shell and BHP Billiton, as well as state-owned companies including Saudi Aramco, Gazprom, Coal India and China's Shenhua Group and Datong Coal Mine Group.

Governments must also take action. The Group of 20 nations are responsible for about 80 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Just five G-20 nations are responsible for about 60 per cent of global emissions: China, the United States, India, Russia and Japan.

Singapore is at 0.13 per cent, though it has fairly high per-capita emissions, ranking just below Japan and Germany.

Mr Allen works with companies to measuring their carbon footprint and craft strategies to cut emissions.

"Companies do indeed cause the vast majority of emissions - either directly or in their supply chains."

He said supply chains are a good start because these can span the globe. Suppliers with lower overall impact can help trim emissions.

"Any business consuming electricity should be thinking about how it can get renewable energy - either through renewable energy credits, a 100 per cent renewable energy plan, corporate power purchase agreement or even installing its own solar if it has the space," he said.

"It's really important for companies to do something about greenhouse gas emissions as they are increasingly exposed to risks associated with the transition to a low-carbon economy."

These can be in the form of policy risk, such as increasing carbon prices or border tariffs or market risk if consumers prefer a

lower-carbon alternative product. Polluting firms are also likely to find it increasingly harder to raise finance.

"There's already a lot of evidence of greener companies being able to more easily attract finance via debt or equity and investor/lender policies to exclude certain sectors."

For those right on the front line of climate impacts, it can be a struggle to find hope and take action.

"We can all contribute and reduce the impact of climate change," said Mr Joy Singhal, head of disasters, climate and crisis at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Asia-Pacific.

"I am contributing bit by bit to reducing the impact of climate change. And that's what gives me hope," he told The Straits Times' Green Pulse podcast.

"Why did the climate crisis happen in the first place? It happened because all of us from an individual level have contributed to it. And, at the same time, how can the climate crisis end? We can all contribute to reducing the impact of climate change. We have a responsibility."