

Climate Corner

But I'm just one person!

by Ashley Ropp

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I couldn't tell you the number of times I've heard this said: "Of course I care about climate change, but what can I do? I'm just one person!". Ok, maybe not that exact sentence, but definitely that sentiment. Many people believe that they're insignificant, and that their choices could never impact our great big world. After all, the train keeps chugging along, even after one person gets off, right? But I'd argue that our individual actions *do* matter, and those small choices are worth the effort.

As I talked about in my most recent article, the climate crisis is caused and perpetuated by our system, rather than our individual actions. It's not that someone chooses to use a single-use plastic water bottle, it's the fact that many do not have access to clean drinking water, so single-use plastic becomes their only option. So, what can we do about this? Well, climate actions are often sorted into two categories – individual actions and collective actions. Individual actions are actions taken by (you guessed it!) individuals, such as choosing to walk instead of drive, living zero waste, or eating a plant-based diet. Collective actions are actions that are taken by a group of people, rather than just one person. Some examples include protests, organizing a workshop, or coming together with neighbors to bring a shared concern to your local councillors. Collective actions often focus on challenging the system to create lasting change, while individual actions often focus on a specific person's lifestyle. Between those two choices, there seems to be a clear winner. I'm voting for lasting systemic change!

But, before you interpret this as 'your personal actions don't matter', I'd like to play a quick game with you. I'm going to describe an action, and you decide if it's an individual action or a collective action. Ready?

Alright, someone signs a petition. Simple. Collective or individual? What if they share it with their friends and family, and get them to sign it too? What if the petition is passed around at an event, and many people sign it?

Next. Someone reads an article on the environmental harms of the Fast Food industry, and they decide to stop buying fast food. Collective or individual? What if they tell their friends about this choice, and those friends also stop buying fast food? Has your answer changed?

Ok, last one. Someone hears about a letter writing campaign online, in which people write letters about an environmental concern and send them to the Prime Minister. They can't attend the events, so they write a letter on their own time. Collective or individual?

The point this game is meant to illustrate is that the line between ‘collective’ action and ‘individual’ action is not as clear as you might think. Even the most grand, large-scale actions require *individuals* to care, commit, and show up. **Collective actions are built on individual choices.** And if that’s true, I would also say that **collective change is built on individual change.**

I’m also showing that individual actions *can* challenge harmful systems. Boycotting fast food is an individual action, but it’s also challenging the Fast Food industry by taking away support and funding that is necessary for the industry to continue (in however minor a way).

So, I offer a proposal. Let’s reframe the way we look at our personal choices. Rather than taking individual action, have **an individual commitment to a collective action.** Use less single use plastic, not because you’re the centre of the universe and your choices are the only ones that matter, but instead because you know that hundreds of thousands of people are lowering their plastic use as well, and *together* we’re all making a huge impact. When we look at it this way, our actions have much more power than we previously thought.

This is **not** to say that collective action doesn’t matter. Please, get involved in community actions and events; *and* in between those actions and events, remember the power you already hold. Remember that with every footprint you leave, you’ve changed the world.

I also want to highlight a common pitfall I see: all-or-nothing mentalities. You do not need to go zero-waste to make a difference; you can go *less-waste*. You can choose plant-based meals once a week, instead of going fully plant-based. There are many actions that are not accessible to everyone, and that’s ok. In these cases, the best action you can take is the one you can commit to. Pick one change that’s accessible and sustainable for your lifestyle and stick to it! Then, next week, next month, or two months from now, you add another one. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

If you would like some ideas to get you started on your individual-commitment-to-collective-action journey, visit nvecoboosters.com, where you can find educational resources, eco-tips, and upcoming events you can take part in! To ask a question, suggest an article topic, or tell me about the action you’re committing to first, email me at ashleyropp7@proton.me. As always, thanks for reading!

