

Theories of Change

Introduction

This page is part of the work done by the UK Strategy Team to inform the XRUK Strategy 2025-26.

Extinction Rebellions theories of change are a complex topic, which has never been well enough explained or understood within the movement. It is important that this knowledge is shared widely.

The domain for the XRUK Theories of Change was delegated to the Strategy Team by the UK Rebel Hive in November 2023. At that time there was no agreed upon source of truth, and so the team went back to the earliest versions from 2018/19 and evaluated them through the lens of everything we have learned since.

Strategy vs Theory of Change

A strategy describes how to get there: It's an overarching plan for coherent action that, when successful, brings about this change – it delivers the goods, so to speak.

A Theory of Change explains why we think this will work: As a theory, it describes how the social reality in which the movement is active presumably works, and which mechanisms can be used to change it.

In short, a theory of change is an integral part of a strategy, it is not something that is distinct or separate to it, It is a foundational part of that work.

Where it Began

Extinction Rebellion began with Three Demands, but these demands hinted at a greater promise.

XR grew out of Rising Up! which had some catchy words for how it understood change would be created - subjectivism, voluntarism, theurgism and structuralism. Sexy. This model rose out of other work, including that by Micah White and the Occupy movement. In simplified terms, change happens when you have the four c's - consciousness, coordination, confrontation and consolidation. Confrontation in the form of civil disobedience is the ingredient that is the most likely to be missing.

The [Civil Resistance Model](#) is what many rebels understood to be our theories of change. Some people have not moved beyond this model (even as Roger himself explores [new ideas](#))

It is easy to understand the appeal. “Sit in the road until we win” is objectively easier to communicate, and a more compelling offer for people desperate for immediate change, at all costs. But it was only ever based on *one strand* of our theories of change.

What is a Theory of Change?

What is a theory of change? The term emerged in the 1990s as a new way to articulate the underlying strategic assumptions behind projects of social and political change. Widely used as a core campaign strategy and planning tool by activists and organisers, as well as NGOs, charities, and even business and professional bodies.

It is made up of the following :

- Desired Impact or Goal
- Preconditions
- Interventions or Activities
- Assumptions

For a system as complex as the one we are up against, and the level of change we are trying to bring about, our theories of change are equally complex. to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts - in very simple terms, **how we win**.

2019

The last time our theory of change was a topic of intense interest was in 2019.

The Strategy Stewardship team did significant work on delving into and expanding the model into an overarching theory of change, that could contain multiple strands, in order to identify tipping points.

Meanwhile, other circles were producing their own theories of change, increasing the confusion of rebels in the movement.

Since 2019 the theory of change has barely featured in any of the XRUK or actions strategies. Do or Die in April 2021 alluded to the idea that not everyone believes in the mass protest and arrest theory but doesn't go into any greater depth.

2022

When the first permanent Strategy Team was formed in November 2021 they inherited a challenging landscape. They had to make a choice about what they could leverage to bring about the change promised in our demands.

The 2022 XRUK Strategy was an intentional double down on one strand of the original concept. Everything was thrown at mass mobilisation, to truly test it.

That strategy stated “This year Extinction Rebellion will reignite our original Theory of Change, mass mobilising towards 3.5% of the population.”

This is important. It is vital to test theories.

And it didn't work.

Here Comes Everyone

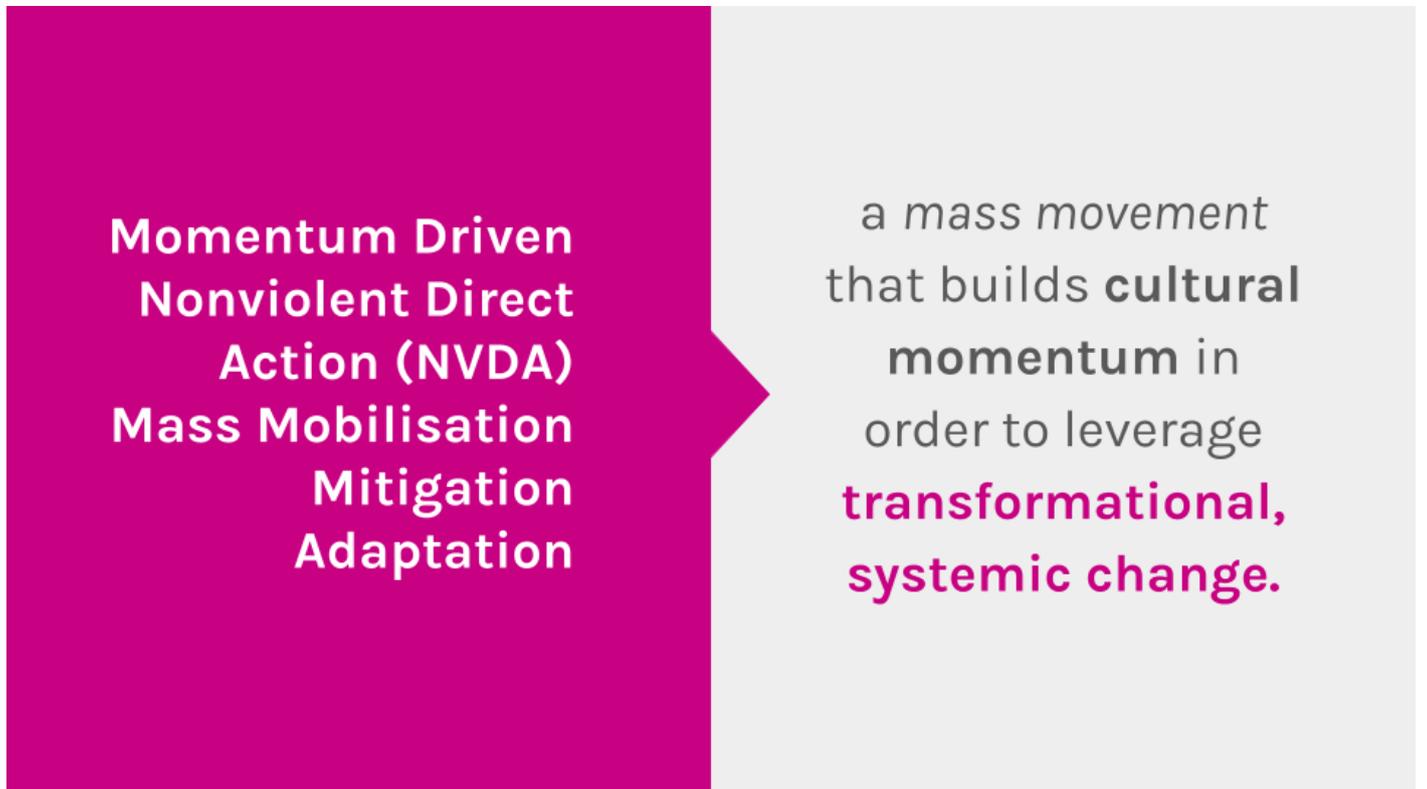
The next iteration of the Strategy Team began to explore in depth why this was, what was missing, and what we could do to create change.

The architects of Here Comes Everyone were really core group of rebels who had been rooted in the movement in different ways, since the start. They identified the ingredients of a wider spectrum of support and cultural momentum.

“We've identified that, catalysed by protest, change comes from cultural tipping points, a moment when it becomes clear to the powerful that cultural momentum is on our side. This means not just more people coming into resistance, but a wider variety of people.”

This is the core change in the evolution of Extinction Rebellion, transition from the old paradigm to a new one.

So what is our theory of change?



**Momentum Driven
Nonviolent Direct
Action (NVDA)
Mass Mobilisation
Mitigation
Adaptation**

a *mass movement*
that builds **cultural
momentum** in
order to leverage
**transformational,
systemic change.**

Momentum driven, nonviolent direct action mass mobilisation, mitigation and adaptation were the key ingredients in that original framework. They all remain an integral part of the DNA of XRUK.

Creating the world we want to see through prefiguration and contention. Our understanding of some of them has changed over time, others we still have work to do. But each remains valid.

While we have worked, so have others. There is an increasingly base of research into social movements and how to succeed.

Our principles and values enshrine the need to reflect and learn, in order to keep moving forwards as a movement and not get stuck on a certain way of thinking.

One thing it is vital to remember, and must underpin all strategic thinking, is to start from where you are. The landscape we are in, the environment around us, the reality of our movement and the ecology of movements around us, and the climate and ecological emergency as a cause. Be inspired by work done in other parts of the world, focused on other issues, but through that context.

But if we just get enough people, won't we win?

1.5 is dead and so is 3.5. Chenoweth has gone on the record and said that the 3.5 rule was never intended to apply to mature Western democracies.

Mass mobilisation may be effective for single issue campaigns, as it tends to achieve limited and specific results - the price to make you shut up and go away. We are seeking something more ambitious, on the path towards the ultimate prize - a mass movement that builds cultural momentum in order to leverage transformational, systemic change.



“The 3.5% participation metric may be useful as a rule of thumb in most cases; however, other factors—momentum, organization, strategic leadership, and sustainability—are likely as important as large-scale participation in achieving movement success and are often precursors to achieving 3.5% participation.”

-- Erica Chenoweth, [Questions, Answers, and Some Cautionary Updates Regarding the 3.5% Rule](#)

What next?

The direction of our theories of change honours where they came from, and flexing them for a changed world. Instead of mass mobilisation, we seek to build a genuine mass movement. Rather than relying on momentum driven organising to drag people out onto the street under our banner, we will build cultural momentum, a genuine groundswell of support and empowerment that is a source of genuine empowerment and hope.

A theory is just that - a theory. We need to keep testing it, adjusting and adapting to bring about the change that is needed.

[Return to Strategy 25-26](#)
