

Associations, Chapters & Climate Change ...

Climate change has been covered in many ways (*though perhaps not enough since we seem to be stalled*) but what's different about this white paper, [*The Time Is Now: Association Resilience and Adaptation and the Anthropocene Climate Disruption*](#) by [Elizabeth Weaver Engel, MA, CAE](#), and [Shelly Alcorn](#) is that the question: ***what is the role of associations in the climate conversation?***

And one surprising observation is that **strong chapters are essential**.

In what ways? For starters, chapters can more effectively convene critical conversations and working groups to be responsive to local conditions.

Next, chapters often already have a culture of gathering in person and thus have the logistics of doing that already figured out making associations more agile to experiment with innovative models for education.

And finally, chapters can be a bulwark against single points of failure. If an association has a robust network of healthy chapters that have a significant degree of autonomy and authority, and something either climate change driven or climate change intensified happens that takes out the national office for a while, the association can continue to function while the national office comes back online.

These are just a few insights shared by Engel and Alcorn as they explore how climate disruption can affect associations and those they serve as well as offer steps to help associations become more resilient and able to adapt to the changes.

To learn more, we spoke with the two authors regarding some of their key discoveries.

Mariner: *In your research, what was one fact you found surprising?*

Engel: I don't know that there's any one fact that surprised me in our research. Climate change isn't any one thing – it's ALL the things. Too much water in some places. Not enough in others. Deaths directly from heat, like we're seeing in India, and in Saudi Arabia during this year's hajj as I write this in June of 2024. Increased numbers of wildfires, with increased intensity. Spread of zoonotic diseases. Increased sunny day flooding and associated climate migration, which is happening not just "over there" (wherever "there" is), but in the US. It's a systems issue.

Alcorn: Every time I review the literature, I find something new. However, I was surprised by two things. One is the thoughtful and detailed work being done by the US military about the national security implications of climate change which we mention in the paper. The second was the fact that human deaths caused by wet bulb temperature (i.e., the combination of ambient temperature and humidity) within a few hours of being outside was interactive. What I mean by that is the temperature can be something as low as 90 F with a humidity of 70% is considered a dangerous category, but a jump to 95% humidity is categorized as extreme

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danger. As climate change continues to create more moisture in the atmosphere, more humidity will become routine in most parts of the world so we will experience these conditions more frequently.

Mariner: *Should an association have a climate impact statement? Should chapters?*

Engel: Sure, if your leadership and membership are open to it. But it's really not necessary, can waste valuable time on over wordsmithing and unnecessarily politicized battles, and can fool people into thinking they're *doing* something rather than just *saying* something. It's likely more useful to follow the lead of the US Department of Defense, stop arguing about causes and the exact wording of statements that make us feel good but don't ultimately accomplish anything in and of themselves, and get to work addressing the effects that we're all clearly experiencing. To quote a [recent article](#) in *The Atlantic*: "The Earth's carbon cycle—which has not witnessed such a rapid increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide in the past 50,000 years—is without ideology. The carbon goes into the atmosphere, and everything that follows follows."

Alcorn: I agree with Elizabeth that it isn't necessary. To be honest, your organization should have done that in the 1990s to give yourselves time to have that kind of policy debate, but at this point, you are running out of time. You can use your strategic plan to formulate the kinds of responses you need in the name of risk management, adaptation, and resilience then communicate effectively with your volunteer leaders and members without having to directly engage in what is essentially a battle over optics.

Mariner: *I'd like the focus to be on chapters/components and volunteers. On chapters, how should an association think differently about chapters in light of this conversation?*

Engel: Shelly and I have an entire section in our whitepaper on **localization**, which we believe is critical to both resilience, or the ability to bounce back after a crisis, and **adaptation**, the ability to change the ways we live, work, and play in the face of global warming that we can no longer stop but can only seek to mitigate. For associations, chapters are the locus of localization.

Alcorn: Strong chapters are essential. I have been a vocal critic of chapters in the past because of the governance challenges inherent in them. However, after learning what I have about climate change, I have done a complete 180. Your chapters could not be more important to your long-term survivability and your ability to serve members in ways you never dreamed of as conditions continue to destabilize.

Mariner: *In the developing resilience section, you mention localization enables innovation ... how might an association draw its geographic components into innovation?*

Engel: Chapters are critical to an association's climate change response plan. Different areas are experiencing different effects. For example, the US East and Gulf Coasts are experiencing greater sea level rise than other coastal areas, so the businesses in those areas have to deal with different climate change effects than, say, businesses located in the desert southwest, where they're rapidly depleting their aquifers and groundwater. A national-level plan to try to help businesses adapt will not be as useful to those businesses as a plan that's responsive to what's happening in their individual communities. Chapters can more effectively convene those conversations and working groups, responsive to local conditions, than their "parent" national organizations.

Alcorn: Local is the key. Although we use global average temperature as a benchmark, each area will experience different effects. The good news is there are lots of tools available to help you quantify those impacts. For example, this map <https://projects.propublica.org/climate-migration/> allows you to search down to the county level in the United States to see what projected impacts will be under different emissions scenarios.

Mariner: *As we want to increase in-person learning opportunities and reduce carbon footprint, how might associations think differently about say its annual conference or – thinking more strategically – about its approach to education?*

Engel: The [American Association of Geographers](#) case study is instructive here. Some associations have experimented with a hub-and-spoke educational model, where all the original content is presented at the “hub,” and people gather in person to watch education sessions and then discuss at dispersed “spoke” locations. AAG took it a step further. When they returned to an in-person annual meeting in 2023, they moved to a “nodes” model, where they had multiple sites with live education sessions being presented. This was a result of a member-led effort to reduce emissions from their annual meeting by 45% by 2030. 2023 was an experiment. In 2024, they’re expanding it. Chapters often already have a culture of gathering in person and thus have the logistics of doing that already figured out. They’d be an obvious place to experiment with AAG-style conference “nodes.”

Alcorn: You should be adding climate-related content to your professional development programming and focusing it on the potential disruption to your members' industry or profession in small, easily digestible bites that include downloadable guides with suggestions on how to deal with the issue. For example, extreme heat waves are causing Chinese manufacturing facilities to shut down for extended periods of time, causing continued disruptions in the global supply chain, which in turn affects the availability of products and materials. Your members need to be informed about those practical impacts on their operations and develop appropriate workarounds.

Mariner: *Beyond chapters as a channel for member value, could chapters also be partners in helping the association share its philosophy and commitment to being part of the climate solution? Thinking here about how associations can support chapters in their commitment to a sustainable world. Localized advocacy? Community engagement in climate action events or educational workshops? Chapters awards for implementing sustainable practices?*

Engel: I love the idea of a chapter award focused on sustainability! One of the main reasons people *associate* in the first place is to solve problems that have proven to be otherwise intractable. Chapters, being smaller in scope, are a natural and less risky place to try out ideas. When they discover something that works, chapter leaders SHOULD already have an easy and regular mechanism for sharing those ideas with each other. Your chapter leaders do have that already, right?

Ideas for responding to and adapting in the face of climate change should be no different, and an award for sustainability would bring further attention to the good work chapters can do in this area.

Alcorn: I second all of the above, plus associations are extremely skilled at coalition building and leadership. A wicked problem requires a trans-disciplinary response with many organizations gathering together at the ground level to share ideas and vet solutions. Your chapters are a key part of your being involved in those discussions and in providing key intelligence to share with others.

Mariner: *In some ways that previous question begins to get to the localized governance and the ongoing fraught relationship. Is this a call for action to national associations to address their chapter program? Is climate change the catalyst for us to figure this out?*

Engel: Interestingly, Shelly and I see chapters as a bulwark against single points of failure, so yes, one could definitely read our paper as, among other things, a call to action to national associations regarding their chapters. If an association has a robust network of healthy chapters that have a significant degree of autonomy and authority, and something either climate change driven or climate change intensified happens that takes out the national office for a while, the association can continue to function while the national office comes back online. If not, well, not. That to me seems like a strong incentive to invest the necessary resources to figure this out.

Alcorn: I think we need to get real with ourselves here and our community. Chapters don't die because of lack of time or revenue. Nobody has ever had enough time or enough money. They die because of a lack of vision and an inspiring call to action. Nobody wants to spend their time reading reports of what "National did this time" and collecting dues on National's behalf. People do, however, want to feel engaged and see that the time they invest is worthwhile. The more we ignore issues that actually matter because, God forbid, they create controversy, the more fake those chapter meetings feel.

Mariner: *When read the "Think Vertically" section, my thought was how can we engage members (think volunteers) and components (like SIGs, etc., not geo) in meaningful work around those four points. Does this issue provide associations an incredible opportunity to draw our members into a project and into an issue where they use their SMEs differently?*

Engel: Just to recap for readers, the four elements of thinking vertically that Shelly and I highlight in the whitepaper are:

- Identify the risks of Anthropocene climate disruption that are specific to your profession or industry, or that will have effects specific to your profession or industry, so you can collaboratively work on steps you could take to mitigate them in advance.
- Think through the elements of an emergency plan that might be unique to your profession or industry.
- Detail any special capabilities or resources your profession or industry can bring to bear on immediate and long-term disaster response.
- Map out any particular needs your profession or industry will have to have met in order to resume operations.

All of those things represent potential new volunteer jobs and new ways for association staff to support volunteers doing that work. This is an opportunity for the association to act as the convenor and facilitator of

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these types of conversations and projects, while also remaining humble in admitting that we, the association staff, are not the experts in understanding the unique climate vulnerabilities of the professions and industries we serve nor of their unique capabilities to respond in the event of climate change-driven disasters. We can create the “containers” in which those conversations and action planning can take place, and provide resources you identify, like information on foresight and scenarios to inspire thinking. But the real work, in many cases, will have to be done by people with relevant expertise: our members.

Mariner: *Perhaps the final question for you, so many of my direct readers are mid-management. Changing component strategy is a senior management role. So, how do we take your white paper and provide actional ideas for mid-management and give them the “messaging” for how we should act to senior management?*

Engel: To paraphrase the movie Ratatouille: “Not everyone can come up with a great idea, but a great idea can come from anywhere.” There are people at your association – fellow staffers, members of your board, committee chairs and members, chapter leaders, rank-and-file members – who also recognize the existential risk climate change represents. Find them. Start small. Go rogue if you have to. Measure what happens. Make your case. Nothing persuades like success, like measurable impact. Most of all, quoting another familiar source of wisdom: “*Let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*”

Alcorn: I feel like our “roles” are another myth we tell ourselves. Change always comes from the bottom up or the outside in. The more senior the manager, the more risk averse they get. I don’t believe major change ever comes from those whose economic security and social standing both depend on preserving the status quo. Do your homework. Find articles, studies, and videos to share. Keep it focused on the member, not the politics. Find volunteers who care and see if they want to set up a task force. Look into the international sphere and see the work being done in your industries and professions outside of the United States for inspiration because the rest of the world is way ahead of us in terms of adaptation strategies. Last but not least, I have this saying on my wall: “*Don’t tell them what they want to hear, tell them what they need to hear.*”

Summary:

While the [white paper](#) makes a compelling argument for action, knowing where to start can be confusing.

Their advice: Start small. Do your homework. Find articles, studies, and videos to share. Keep it focused on the members, not politics. Find volunteers who care and see if they want to set up a task force.

Or maybe just join with Engel and Alcorn in their work to create an association community of practice to assist in these efforts. Their goal is to provide a space for association executives to share insights into the conduct, actions, and practices they are undertaking. Visit [Association Climate Action Coalition](#) for more.

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