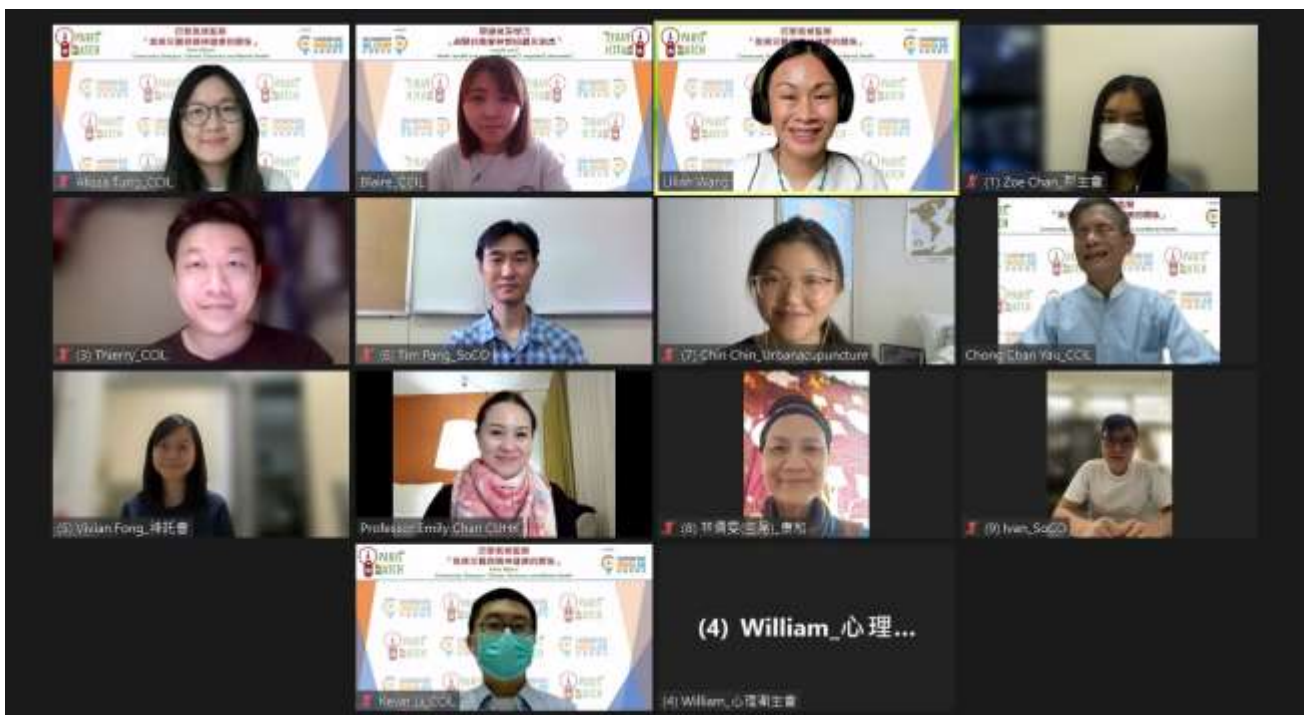


Social challenges and climate action #5:

## Combining research and community action to support people with mental illness in tackling climate change

By Kevin Li

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*Since the CarbonCare InnoLab's Paris Watch Programme was launched, six community dialogues have been held so far. The first five dialogues were focused on the residents of subdivided housing, the welfare and the community health care sectors, outdoor workers, and the persons with disabilities. This time we are focusing on people with mental illness who are facing the impacts of extreme weather. Experts participating in this community dialogue shared with their peers the threat extreme weather poses to people with mental illness, reviewed current measures and services, and identified their needs. Climate change can easily induce mental health problems, all of which are supported by scientific data, but Hong Kong society generally lacks understanding of the relationship between both. At the same time, people with mental illness lack*

*simple and easy-to-understand guidance in their daily lives, and lack relevant technology to receive information on climate disasters, leaving them without proper support. This community dialogue explores related issues.*

An important part of the CarbonCare InnoLab's Paris Watch programme is to, through community dialogues, promote a deeper understanding of all walks of life and enhance their ability to deal with the climate crisis. These dialogues put the concept of "just transition" at the core, and advocate that the interests of citizens who may be affected by unemployment, economic restructuring and rising prices must be taken into account during the transition. The principle of "just transition" also emphasizes the participatory and inclusive climate adaptation process. The participation and voices of various stakeholders, who are facing the impacts of climate change, must be guaranteed and respected.

Adhering to the principle of "just transition" throughout the first five community dialogues, CarbonCare InnoLab has held the sixth community dialogue with 14 participants of the persons of mental illness<sup>1</sup> on 12 April 2022. Participants discussed everything from the impact of extreme weather on people with mental illness, to how government should support them in tackling climate change. This dialogue connects groups and researchers concerned with mental health and lays the groundwork for future community actions.

## **IPCC report points out that climate change affects mental health, awareness and action need to be improved**

The Working Group 2 report (WG2) of the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on 28 February highlighted the impacts of climate change on mental health. The research results of Professor Emily Chan Ying-yang and her team<sup>2</sup> from the Jockey Club School of Public Health and Primary Care, Faculty of Medicine, The Chinese University of Hong Kong are cited, which just echoed the theme of this community dialogue. We are honoured to invite Professor Chan to share her research results and experience with the participants. She got three points of experience to share: awareness needs to be enhanced urgently, scientific

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<sup>1</sup> For the full list of participants, please refer to the Annex at the end of the article.

<sup>2</sup> Chan EYY, Lam HCY, So SHW, Goggins WB, Ho JY, Liu S, Chung PPW. Association between Ambient Temperatures and Mental Disorder Hospitalizations in a Subtropical City: A Time-Series Study of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2018; 15(4):754. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15040754>

research must be combined with action, and references to foreign community mutual aid practice, in fact, this is also the voice of most of the participants.

Research by Professor Chan and her group found that the higher the temperature in Hong Kong, the more people with mental illness needed to be hospitalized. They also found that both medical front-liners and community workers were less aware of the impacts of climate change on mental health. Front-line doctors did not consider extreme weather as a key factor when making diagnosis and formulating. Community workers at the meeting also reported that they lacked relevant research data, and were unable to recognize the relationship between the two and provide relevant support in advance.

On the other hand, the participants were eager to learn more in-depth research on the impacts of climate change on mental health, and they proposed measures to support people with mental illness in coping with climate change. Participants reflected that the current government support services for them, including psychological and emotional emergency support, as well as community centres and the business sector did not have enough understanding of mental health, let alone the impacts of extreme weather.

### **Community mutual support helps people with mental illness fight climate change**

One of the biggest challenges is the digital divide for the people with mental illness. Even if they receive government funding to buy a smartphone, they are afraid to use it because the functions are so complicated that they cannot receive extreme weather alerts and related information in a timely manner.

In addition, like other vulnerable groups, many of the people with mental illness are elderly, and/or are subdivided housing dwellers. Due to their weak awareness of taking the initiative to seek help, they often fail to obtain the necessary supplies and resources in time under extreme weather, and build awareness of climate change.

Most of the participants were community service workers, and they all hoped to do their best to support people with mental illness, such as providing mental health first aid courses, online and offline counselling services, teaching them how to use mobile phones to obtain relevant information, and even replicating the Care-on-Call Service for them.

### **Combining research and awareness raising to drive community action and policy improvement**

Some participants suggested that in addition to the above-mentioned support services, district-level support networks could also be organized to focus on emergency response plans under extreme weather, and to strengthen the training of relevant service providers. Increasing the support of mental health professionals can also solve the urgent need. The participants also agreed with the importance of scientific research and hoped to continue in-depth research on related topics, including the collection of district-level data and research on action intervention.

There are already some mental health-focused social service platforms that we can leverage to enhance awareness of climate change impacts and related services. Participants also hoped that raising public awareness of climate change and understanding its impact on mental health would be helpful in implementing relevant support measures.

In the end, the participants believed that this community dialogue was a rare opportunity to bring together colleagues who are concerned about the topic. Professor Chan's research was an eye-opener for the participants. It has been confirmed by scientific research that the impact of climate change on people of mental illness is accessible for the participants. It is necessary for everyone to unite and strengthen mutual assistance, at least to fill the insufficiency of existing policies, and hope to raise awareness of the problem in the future. We should proactively share related information with colleagues at home and abroad, and encourage people with mental illness to seek assistance actively, so as to promote the improvement of relevant policies.

### **Project Team** (in no specific order)

Dialogue Designer and Chief Facilitator: Lilian Wang

Deputy Facilitator: Blaire Ho (Programme Officer), Thierry Leung (Senior Social Worker, Programme Manager), Alissa Tung (Programme Director)

Project Advisor: Chong Chan Yau (Co-founder & CEO)

### **Author's Profile**

Mr. Kevin Li is the Researcher for CarbonCare InnoLab.

### **Annex**

CarbonCare InnoLab invited different groups and experts in Hong Kong to participate in the sixth community dialogue (in no specific order):

- Concord Mutual-Aid Club Alliance
- New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association
- The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong
- The Stewards Take Your Way Clubhouse
- Society for Community Organization
- Urban Acupuncture Hong Kong

## Links

1. [Social challenges and climate action #1: Empowering residents of subdivided houses in Hong Kong](#)
2. [Social challenges and climate action #2: Extreme weather hit hard welfare and health care workers and the vulnerable people](#)
3. [Social challenges and climate action #3: Legislation is the only way to relieve outdoor workers' suffering from extreme weather](#)
4. [Social challenges and climate action #4: Our society must include persons with disabilities in tackling climate change](#)