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## Inequity, transformation and talking hope: Towards a new discourse on climate change and sustainability

EVA-MARIA MCCORMACK, JENNY BISCHOFBERGER, GODFRED BONNAH NKANSAH

*Talking Hope gUG, Germany*

### Abstract

Although the climate agenda has been mainstreamed in recent years, discourses on climate have not changed much in substance: Climate action continues to be represented as a battle against impending catastrophe, although fear appeals affect change only to a limited degree. The emphasis in public, political and media debates on the costs of climate action pits intra-societal, intergenerational and international stakeholders against each other. The focus on technical solutions neglects the intersectoral and, especially, the social justice dimensions of climate impacts and solutions. The failure to communicate the intersectoral benefits of climate action also undermines the ability to pursue intersectoral solutions to intersectoral problems, with food systems inequity being one prime example. Perhaps most importantly, the failure to focus on alternative future scenarios which convey hope, self-efficacy and inclusiveness impedes public engagement for sustainability and, especially, the equal participation of disadvantaged stakeholders in the Global South and the Global North. In light of these aspects, the current discourse on sustainability is both counterproductive and inequitable: Its conceptual bias has social justice impacts which increase socio-political polarisation and marginalise disadvantaged stakeholders even further. This also hampers the wider buy-in for sustainability solutions in national and international settings. Our paper presents a new narrative on climate, which is framed along the principles of social justice and highlights the social benefits of sustainability. Drawing on psychological, sociological, communications and transformation research as well as NGO experiences, we offer a vision of sustainability, which focuses on the opportunity for a new social contract afforded by the need to address climate change. We posit the need for narratives of hopeful, alternative future scenarios to achieve sectoral and systemic change towards Net Zero, and demonstrate that the food systems transformation lends itself well to this approach as it is an immediately human-centred issue. We argue that communications approaches which derive the need for climate action from a commitment to social justice offer new potential to increase the social mandate for sustainability. Since engagement is inspired by the view of a more equitable tomorrow, this discursive shift also holds significant policy implications.

**Keywords:** Adaption, climate change, climate communication, social justice