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Inequity, Transformation and Talking Hope: Towards a New Discourse on Sustainability and Climate Change

McCormack[a], Eva-Maria, Jenny Bischofberger[a] and Godfred Bonnah Nkansah[a,b]

a Talking Hope gUG, Berlin, Germany Email mccormack@talking-hope.org
b Corvinus University, Budapest, Hungary

Introduction

The challenge of food inequity and insecurity, and the need for climate action to ensure sustainable living conditions entail an interdependent dynamic: The climate crisis is exacerbating inequalities in food security. At the same time, current food systems make up 32% of the global greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al. 2021), due to both direct actions such as the increased use of fertilizers, animal manure production, and livestock rearing, and indirect actions such as the use of farm machinery, fertilizer production, and the use of pesticides (Zurek et al. 2022).

Given this interdependency, the need to transform food systems can, in many ways, stand pars pro toto for the challenge of achieving the more encompassing transformation required to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. With ecological and social problems intertwined, the ecological transformation required is an inherently social one (Kluwick 2013). In the processes of social innovation involved in this transformation (Young 2011), communications equally is a social, rather than merely an information enterprise, as it plays a crucial role in negotiating change with stakeholders, specific target groups, and the public at the heart of this challenge (Melloh et al. 2022; Orr 2023).

However, although concern about the climate crisis has reached high levels globally (Leiserowitz et al. 2022), science communication to date has remained largely ineffective in building the public support required to realize the goal of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement of keeping global heating within 1.5 degrees. Both dissociation and dissonance are key factors, with target groups rejecting both policy regulations as well as personal behavioral changes, often out of concerns over the social impacts of the sustainability transformation (Bergquist et al. 2023).

This paper argues that an intersectoral communications approach is required to mobilize broad-based social support for policies on climate change as well as food systems inequality. This approach should address policy impacts on social justice issues and democratic engagement, and avoid discursive patterns that jeopardize social acceptance. We assert that a key quality of such an alternative discursive approach should be the departure from prevailing narratives which portray the climate story as a fight against catastrophe. Based on research into the limits of fear appeals, we argue that communications need to transcend paralyzing and polarizing narratives in favour of attractive future scenarios that foster self-efficacy and inclusive public engagement for the sustainability transformation (Ruiter et al. 2014).

We propose a new climate narrative built on hope, the participation of disadvantaged groups, and the intersectionality of climate, social justice, and democracy issues. Such a communications approach, which derives the need for climate action from a commitment to social justice and democratic participation, offers new potential for increasing the social mandate for sustainability. Since engagement is inspired by the view of a more equitable tomorrow, this discursive shift can hold significant policy implications for food systems security.

Objective

The objective is to develop a new narrative on climate, which is (1) anchored in the principles of social justice and inclusive democratic participation, (2) highlights the social benefits of sustainability, and (3) mobilizes more broad-based support for the sustainability transformation across sectors and socioeconomic groups. To achieve these objectives, any new discourse on sustainability and climate change will have to overcome discursive patterns and practices which have proven to jeopardize the engagement of stakeholders, target groups and the general public on issues of sustainability and climate change, including the role of food systems.

Challenges

These currently prevailing, discursive patterns as well as sociocultural factors impede the broader social acceptance for the sustainability transformation:

Fear-based discourses

Fear-based discourses which frame climate action as a battle against catastrophe mobilize audiences only to a limited extent. Dissociation and defeatism are frequent outcomes instead (Ruiter et al. 2014; Herr 2022).

Focus on costs

Discourses primarily focused on the costs of climate action pit intra-societal, intergenerational, and international stakeholders against each other in conflicts over distribution (Bliuc et al. 2015).

Focus on technology

Discourses which primarily frame climate issues in scientific and technological terms marginalize their interdependency with and impacts on social (in)equity and democratic participation. (CRED 2009; Hayhoe 2018)

Focus on cognitive instruction

'Pedagogical' discourses which are primarily focused on communicating climate knowledge and fact-based, cognitive instruction are at risk of being rejected as elitist (Shi et al. 2016; Anderson 2021).

Socioeconomic bias and disintegrative impact

Since the climate movement is predominantly made up of people of academic, urban and higher socioeconomic status, it carries a socioeconomic bias that disadvantages people of lower socioeconomic status (Goodbody 2021). The effects of polarization and socioeconomic bias undermine social cohesion and democratic participation, as socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are inequitably represented and engaged due to psycho-social determinants (Contera 2021).

Climate Communications: Toward a new story on climate

The new discursive approach proposed by this paper places psychological and social justice considerations at the core of climate communications. Based on psychological, sociological, communications, and transformation research (Badullovich 2023; Boykoff 2019; Gagné et al. 2021; Melloh et al. 2021), this narrative approach overcomes the challenges listed above and offers better potential for increasing broad-based and diverse social support for the sustainability transformation through three key elements: engendering hope, embracing the participation of disadvantaged groups, and integrating climate, social justice, and democracy goals through an intersectoral perspective.

Engendering hope

Within this new approach, the concept of hope is defined by the expectation of a better tomorrow, and the recognition that change is possible and can start with any individual's personal engagement. Hope is thus conveyed as both an emotion and a mental state that is superior to fear and not passive like fear (Bloch 1996). To instigate and partake in change from the bottom-up, fear is transcended by offering attractive, alternative visions of the future, thereby overcoming false perceptions of inevitability that lock in the status quo. Histories of transformation showcase that bottom-up social change is not only possible but has, in fact, prompted all large-scale social transformations in the past (Appiah 2011; Solnit 2019). These can be used as the basis for solution-oriented storytelling that conveys self-efficacy and empowerment.

Embracing the participation of disadvantaged groups

The new discursive approach suggested here also differs from established climate communications by positing inclusivity and diversity not just as normative values but as factors crucial to the sustainability transformation. To mobilize hitherto disengaged, socially disadvantaged communities, any future scenarios evolving from the transformation must be attractive also for these communities and actively embrace their participation in shaping the future. As a result, communication strategies should themselves be focused on participatory engagement and peer-led approaches in order to be credible and convincing in inviting behavioral change (Bergquist et al. 2023). Crucial to mobilization and engagement is the opportunity to experience self-efficacy (Orr & Powell 2023).

Integrating climate, social justice and democracy goals

The third key element to the approach suggested here is an integrated approach to climate, social justice and democracy goals. Communicating sustainability is defined as a social enterprise that goes beyond merely "engineering" climate goals to also include visions of social fairness and equitable participation that are equally worth fighting for. As populist tendencies in countries across the world highlight, failing to address the dynamics between climate action, social justice concerns and the need for a robust democracy will also torpedo the climate transition. As such, the shift in climate discourse suggested here also recognizes the increasing academic literature on the need to address social inequities and shortcomings in democratic governance in the early 21st century (Mau et al. 2023; Rosa 2019).

Conclusions

Given their interdependency, an intersectoral communications approach is required to effect broad-based social support for policies on climate change, including food systems inequality. This approach needs to recognize the role of communications as not merely an informational but a social enterprise. It needs to avoid discursive patterns that jeopardize social acceptance, and it, crucially, needs to address the impacts of climate policies on issues of social justice and democratic engagement.

The new approach suggested here holds demonstrable potential for increasing the social mandate for sustainability. Anchored in the premises of engagement through hopeful future scenarios, the full participation of disadvantaged communities, and an integrated perspective on climate, social justice, and democracy concerns, this approach offers pathways for engagement through positive empowerment and a broader social purpose for sustainability. By deriving the need for climate action from a commitment to social justice and utilizing an intersectoral approach to achieve sectoral and systemic change, it overcomes the limitations of established discourses on climate and sustainability. It offers a template for increasing public and more inclusive engagement that can also advance the food systems transformation through better communications.

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