



Original research article

## Strategic narratives in climate change: Towards a unifying narrative to address the action gap on climate change



Simon Bushell<sup>a,\*</sup>, Géraldine Satre Buisson<sup>b</sup>, Mark Workman<sup>b</sup>, Thomas Colley<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Energy Futures Lab, Imperial College London, Exhibition Road, London SW7 2AZ, UK

<sup>b</sup> Grantham Institute for Climate Change, Imperial College London, Exhibition Road, London SW7 2AZ, UK

<sup>c</sup> Department of War Studies, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK

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### ABSTRACT

There is a significant 'action gap' between what scientists argue is necessary to prevent potentially dangerous climate change and what the government, industry and public are doing. This paper argues that a coherent strategic narrative is key to making meaningful progress. It does this by first analysing a number of narratives which have been used to try and create audience buy-in on the need for action on climate change, and those that argue that no action needs to be taken. A framework is then proposed for how compelling and unifying strategic narratives on climate change might be constructed. It is suggested that the unifying strategic narrative could address the complex range of actors who need to be engaged, provide a coherent explanation for government strategy, and harness the drivers of behavioural change needed to meet the challenge. Research into climate change strategic narratives is nascent, but the authors believe that there is much to be gained from pursuing and intensifying this research.

### 1. Introduction

In 2013, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that: "It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century." [1]. In December 2015, the Paris Agreement was signed by 197 countries. It includes Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), engagements which each country has agreed to undertake to mitigate their impact on climate change.

In spite of these major international scientific and political achievements, there remains a significant gap between the globally accepted targets for limiting global temperature rise to "safe" levels (2 °C target, 1.5 °C ambition) [2] and the sum of the contributions by individual countries. The NDCs are likely to realise temperature rises of 2.7–3.7 °C [3]. There is a further gap between these declared contributions and the policy measures that are currently in place [4] (see Fig. 1). This so-called "action gap" presents a serious challenge to policymakers and to humanity [5].<sup>1</sup>

In democracies, creating "buy in" (in other words, the acceptance of an idea by the public as worthwhile) is fundamental in providing the appropriate policy space for more ambitious climate measures to be introduced, and later for the development of greater policy traction on

climate initiatives. There has been significant progress in climate communication. The field has become more refined, moving away from a tendency for techno-centric solutions towards seeking to understand in depth how publics perceive the problem [7]. However, there has been little exploration of the role of an overarching mechanism – one which brings together and utilises this increasing understanding of how societies can be better engaged, in order to address this action gap.

This paper suggests that this action gap exists due to a number of related sociological, psychological and political problems. Two reasons are particularly notable. The first is the absence of credible national-level strategy for addressing the problem. In the UK, for example, there has been a vast array of different roadmaps, targets and plans to tackle climate change, but without a clear, coordinated strategy. The second is the failure to agree on and articulate the complex range of solutions, and the need to implement those solutions, in a compelling way [8]. This paper specifically focuses on the latter. This is because any strategy, and the policies subsumed by it, have little meaning unless communicated effectively. It is argued that the key to this process, and to coordinating and unifying the multiple actors involved in addressing the action gap, is a unifying strategic narrative.

Narratives are, for the purpose of this paper, defined as stories which can explain the situation, define a problem that disrupts the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [simon.bushell13@alumni.imperial.ac.uk](mailto:simon.bushell13@alumni.imperial.ac.uk) (S. Bushell).

<sup>1</sup> This action gap should not be confused with the "value-action gap", or more formally the "attitude-behaviour inconsistency", which describes the difference between an individual's stated concerns about climate change or other environmental issues and their behavioural response to the problem [107,108].

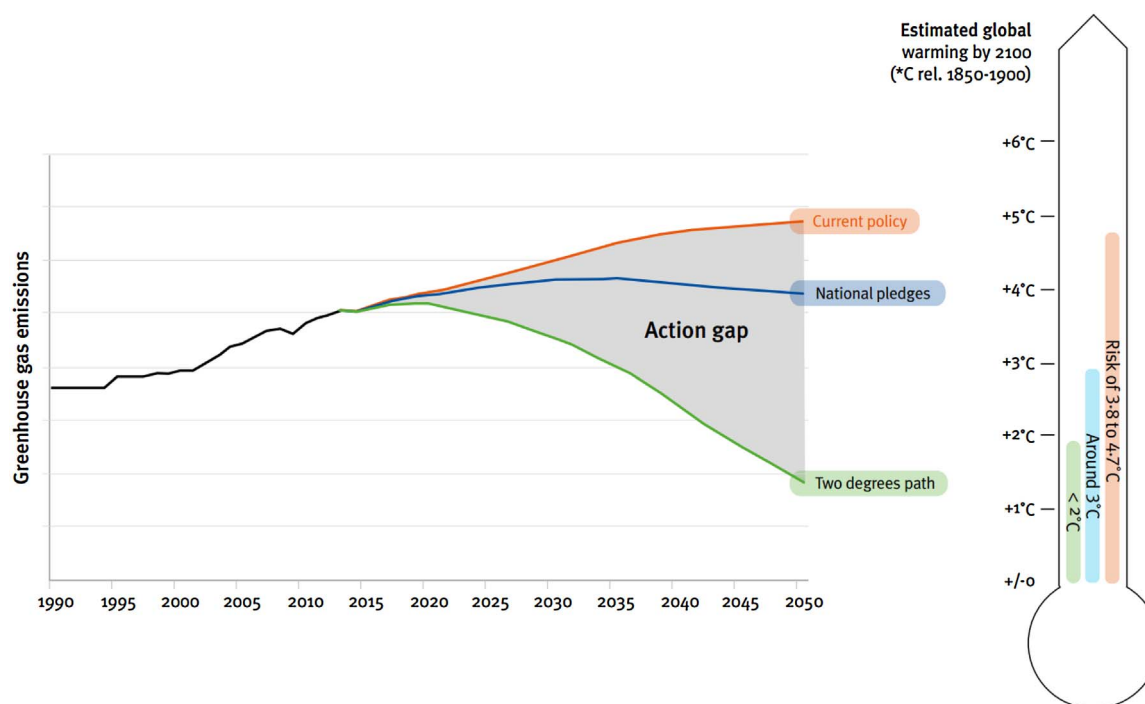


Fig. 1. The action gap on climate change.

Adapted from the Grantham Institute for Climate Change Briefing Paper 16 [6].

order of the initial situation and then provide a resolution to that problem, which re-establishes order [95]. This paper begins by laying out the nature and complexity of the climate change problem, explaining why this presents a significant communications challenge (Section 2). In Section 3, the paper seeks to establish what narratives are and how they can be used to provide context and meaning for action on climate change amongst audiences in order to achieve policy goals.

Section 4 then explores the different narratives that have so far been used by scientists, policymakers, environmental organisations and other interest groups to either support or hinder action on climate change. These are assessed as to why they have failed to stimulate a policy response consistent with scientific recommendations or, in the case of climate change counter-narratives, why they have been effective at engaging audiences. Narratives are assessed drawing from a diverse literature from psychology, sociology and International Relations. Section 5 then takes the concepts identified in Section 4 to develop a framework which could be used to construct an effective strategic narrative on climate change. The section then justifies the need for a unifying narrative around climate change and how it might mobilise audiences, thereby creating the policy space for more ambitious targets around how to address the action gap.

This work is timely for two reasons. Firstly, there is growing divergence between the rhetoric surrounding climate change targets and the action needed to attain those targets, especially with the 1.5 °C goal set in Paris. This undermines the credibility of the international UNFCCC process which is essential to develop co-ordinated action and share best practice around addressing the causes and effects of climate change. Secondly, the means by which narratives might be developed and tested on the scale suggested here are not only becoming increasingly available but are also being adopted, albeit slowly, by researchers in the environmental social sciences.

## 2. The nature of the climate change problem

Climate change is a “super wicked problem”. These problems have certain key characteristics that make them extremely difficult to

address [9]. These characteristics relative to climate change are outlined below in the following section.

### 2.1. Climate change is a long-term challenge requiring action now

The climate system is prone to both inertia and lags between changes and results. This means that the effects of an increase in CO<sub>2</sub> concentration may not be seen for a number of years, and that even if drastic reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were made immediately, certain effects will continue to be seen. CO<sub>2</sub> is also invisible, so one cannot see the increasing concentrations of it in the atmosphere.

This presents a challenge because, among other reasons, individuals are inherently sceptical when there is a lack of immediate evidence for carrying out a certain action, or immediate and measurable consequences for that action [10]. Individuals are also prone to hyperbolic discounting: overwhelmingly higher importance is given to events or effects which will take place in the short term compared to the long term [11]. In government the long-term nature of the problem and solutions can also be a challenge: with a (typically) five-year election cycle in liberal democracies, politicians spend significant amounts of their time in office worrying about getting re-elected within the current electoral cycle rather than focussing on long term problems.

### 2.2. The climate is a public good

Climate change is a problem that affects every person on Earth. The interdependencies between the “actors” in the climate change space – from governments to businesses to individuals – and their contributions to both the causes and solutions of climate change are unprecedented. The vested self-interests held by certain actors has also had a significant impact on the climate change debate.

### 2.3. Decarbonisation needs to happen on unprecedentedly rapid timescales

In order to mitigate climate change, a rapid and far-reaching energy

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