

# Imagine tomorrow, then change today: Communicating climate for a new social contract”

Eva-Maria McCormack<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Talking Hope gUG

<sup>1</sup>mccormack@talking-hope.org

**Keywords:** Climate<sup>1</sup>, Hope<sup>2</sup>, Social Justice<sup>3</sup>, Democracy<sup>4</sup>, Participation<sup>5</sup>

This paper argues that climate communication needs to look **beyond “climate”** to build more encompassing support for climate action. Narrative strategies are needed which take into account a convergence of challenges that impact on humans’ individual and collective capacity and willingness to embrace the transition from a fossil-based to sustainable lifestyles and socio-economic models. These challenges revolve around individual and collective experiences of **(self-) confidence, social justice and civic participation** – or rather the lack thereof – in the sustainability transformation. They are further aggravated as they unfold in the liminal stage of the climate transition.

Ample sociological research suggests that, in the wake of today’s polycrisis<sup>12</sup>, many people feel more powerless today and therefore more inclined to cling to the status quo even if it harms them.<sup>3</sup> Especially young people suffer from anxiety and a perceived lack of self-efficacy not only, but especially on climate matters.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the climate transformation – according to sociologist Steffen Mau itself the biggest distributional challenge of our time<sup>6</sup> – unfolds against a backdrop of rising inequality in many countries.<sup>7</sup> Public controversies around climate measures illustrate that climate policies are frequently perceived as elitist<sup>8</sup>, while the climate movement itself carries an inherent social bias as it is driven by – the rather more affluent – academic and urban communities in many countries.<sup>9</sup> These factors enhance concerns about equality and social justice especially among socially disadvantaged groups. They are aggravated by the fact that disadvantaged groups participate less in public discourses and political decision-making on climate for the simple fact that they are often occupied with even more immediate existential concerns due to their disadvantage and resulting psycho-social identity.

Communications aimed at widening the consensus on climate action need to be more critically aware of these challenges. This is especially the case as support from communities less involved so far – chief among them those socially disadvantaged who will be impacted more by the costs of the transition – is vital to advance the climate transition. I argue that this demands a drastic shift of perspective. A strategic understanding which approaches the challenges and opportunities of sustainability, social justice and civic participation in an integrated fashion will offer new opportunities for impactful climate communication – especially if it combines this understanding with narratives of empathy, hope and empowerment.

The NGO [Talking Hope](#) works as a “transformation manufactory” of professionals in the areas of strategic communications, public engagement, social transformation, political education and social work. Based on psychological and behavioral, sociological, (climate) communications, transformation, and opinion research, we offer a positive vision of sustainability, which focuses on the opportunity for a new social contract that is afforded by the need to address climate change and actively shaped also by groups currently marginalized in the public debate on climate. Our claim is “*Imagine Tomorrow. Then Change Today*”: Hope, collaborative imagination, self-efficacy and a peer-led communication of alternative future scenarios are at the heart of our project work. In this paper, I am presenting our methodology and examples from our work.

## References

---

- <sup>1</sup> Tooze, Adam. "Welcome to the world of the polycrisis." (28.10.2022) *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33>.
- <sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum. The Global Risks Report 2023, 18<sup>th</sup> Edition. Retrieved from [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Global\\_Risks\\_Report\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Van Der Toorn, Jojanneke, Matthew Feinberg, John T. Jost, Aaron C. Kay, Tom R. Tyler, Robb Willer, and Caroline Wilmuth. (2014). "A Sense of Powerlessness Fosters System Justification: Implications for the Legitimation of Authority, Hierarchy, and Government." *Political Psychology* 36 (1): 93–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12183>
- Hickman, Caroline, Elisabeth Marks, Panu Pihkala, Susan Clayton, R Eric, Elouise E Mayall, Britt Wray, Catriona Mellor, and Lise van Susteren. "Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: A global survey". *Lancet Planet. Health* 2021, 5, e863–e873. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3)
- <sup>4</sup> Lancet, None. 2022. "An Age of Uncertainty: Mental Health in Young People." *Lancet* 400 (10352): 539. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(22\)01572-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(22)01572-0)
- <sup>5</sup> Hickman, Caroline, Elisabeth Marks, Panu Pihkala, Susan Clayton, R Eric, Elouise E Mayall, Britt Wray, Catriona Mellor, and Lise van Susteren. "Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: A global survey". *Lancet Planet. Health* 2021, 5, e863–e873. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3)
- <sup>6</sup> Mau, Steffen, "Soziologe Mau: 'Die Klimafrage Ist Die Größte Verteilungsfrage.'" 27.02.2023. Interview mit Lisa Nimmervoll, *Der Standard*. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000143947133/soziologe-mau-die-klimafrage-ist-die-groesste-verteilungsfrage>. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000143947133/soziologe-mau-die-klimafrage-ist-die-groesste-verteilungsfrage>
- <sup>7</sup> Chancel, Lucas, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman. *World Inequality Report 2022*. World Inequality Lab, 2023. <https://wir2022.wid.world/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Meakeam, Allison. „How a German energy Law Became Part of the Culture War“ (01.09..2023) *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/01/germany-heating-law-building-energy-act-greens-afd-habeck-climate-change/>
- <sup>9</sup> Wahlström, Mattias, Piotr Kocyba, Michiel De Vydt, and Joost de Moor (Eds.) (2019). "Protest for a future: Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European cities". <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XCNZH>