Southern Voices
on Climate change

Framing the Debate
Messages and Communications

Climate Change Advocacy Toolkit no. 3

Framing the Debate

The purpose of this toolkit is to help readers:

- analyse the messages about climate change being used by government and other actors,
- devise new messages that shape the debate in favourable terms,
- develop a communications plan for their advocacy, and
- deliver messages in effective ways.

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The Climate Change Advocacy Toolkits

These toolkits aim to guide and support civil society actors in the South in their efforts to advocate for pro-poor climate policies. They include a mix of:

🔧   instructions on how to plan and conduct advocacy interventions,

📁   a range of case stories on how civil society works to influence climate change policy-making, and

🌐   references for further reading.

The toolkits are developed and published by *Southern Voices on Climate Change*. Since 2011, this Programme has supported around 20 civil society networks in the global South to advocate for climate policies that benefit poor and vulnerable people. The Programme is implemented by the Climate Capacity Consortium, comprised of four Danish and two international NGOs, with CARE Denmark as lead agency, and IIED as co-publisher of the toolkits. Funding is from DANIDA from the Danish climate finance envelope.

Further information on the Southern Voices networks and the Programme is available at **www.southernvoices.net**

What are frames and why are they important?

Everybody, no matter what their role in life, is bombarded with messages every day. They might come from the news, from advertising, from family and friends, or from the world around us, but all demand our attention. We don't have the capacity or the will to analyse each of these messages from first principles, so our brains make mental shortcuts to help make sense of them. We associate this new message with a set of ideas held in our memory – a frame. This frame not only helps us to interpret the issue, it also tells us how to respond.

George Lakoff, a US academic working in cognitive linguistics, defines frames in this way:

'Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality – and sometimes to create what we take to be reality ... They structure our ideas and concepts, they shape how we reason, and they even impact how we perceive and how we act. For the most part, our use of frames is unconscious and automatic – we use them without realising it.'

Frames are not neutral – they are a political tool. They are shaped by the terms that politicians, business leaders, journalists and campaigners use. They are established in our minds through constant repetition in the media and in everyday conversation. They change the way we think and act.

Whether our advocacy audiences are policy makers, political elites, the business community, international agencies or members of the public, we have to be clear what message we are trying to get across about climate change and how we can frame and present that message so that it is received and interpreted in the way we want it to be.

To do this, we have to recognise what the predominant frames are that relate to climate change and develop ways of dealing with them. These may vary from country to country, depending on how acutely the impacts of climate change are being felt, but the frames could include:

- **Tackling climate change will cost too much** – in terms of money, jobs, slowed economic growth, or standards of living. While we want to keep the focus on the human and environmental impacts of climate change, we can also point out that not tackling climate change will have a far greater economic and development cost.

- **Disaster events are 'acts of God' that will happen anyway.** It is true that disasters have always happened but we can explain that man-made climate change makes them more extreme, more unpredictable and more frequent. This implies that we need to take two courses of action side by side: slow down climate change by reducing emissions, and prepare to manage the inevitable disasters better.

- **Climate change is something that happens to other people**, other countries or other species. To respond to this, try to make the audience feel that the problem has personal relevance for them, their family or their home area. Find ways to frame what is a global issue in local terms. People tend to care more about issues like health, energy, food and water so try to explain climate change through these issues.

- **Climate change is not the fault of developing countries; therefore we should not have to do anything to limit our emissions.** The first half of the statement is manifestly true but the response to climate change needs to include a proportionate effort from everyone (`common but differentiated responsibilities…' is a principle of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – UNFCCC).

- **Climate change is responsible for all the environmental problems we are facing.** This is an attitude sometimes used to cover up mismanagement of natural resources, giving the impression that no action is possible (such as control of coastal development that destroys mangroves) until climate change is addressed.

- **Scientists disagree whether climate change is happening or what is causing it**, and so we don't need to take any action until the evidence is clearer. This is a frame that has been deliberately promoted by oil companies and other vested interests (especially in the industrialised countries of the North). To counter this frame, we have to emphasise that there is no scientific doubt that climate change is happening, that human action is contributing to it, and that its effects are being felt now.

- **Climate change is something to worry about in the future but not now.** This is another frame that is more common in the global North and among urban elites in the South who want to enjoy the benefits of unrestricted economic growth. Remind people that the effects of climate

change are already being felt, and that even if they seem manageable for now, they will get worse. Explain how we have a narrow window of opportunity to do something now to avert potentially catastrophic consequences in the future.

While responding to and challenging these negative frames, we also need to remember that:

- **Too much 'doom and gloom' can make people disengage.** Despite the dire outlook for many countries, it is important that activities to raise awareness about climate change provide hope in the form of solutions or success stories. Negativity is a major turn-off.

- **Much scientific climate change information is heavy on statistics, jargon and complicated scientific terms.** This makes it hard to remember and hard to understand. Help your audience by explaining everything carefully, even terms that you might be very familiar with such as mitigation or adaptation. This becomes particularly important for terms and concepts in global languages that are hard to translate or have no equivalence in local languages.

- **Climate change is an inexact science**, although its main conclusions are clear. It is difficult to predict accurately what to expect over short timescales and in specific locations, but in more general terms we have a pretty good idea of what might happen to sea levels, temperatures, rainfall and the frequency and strength of disaster events. Climate change means the likelihood of certain events happening will increase/decrease over time, but it is rarely possible to attribute particular weather events (like a drought) to climate change with 100 per cent certainty.

So, can we devise new frames that communicate issues around climate change in the way we want? To be effective, they have to be credible, taking into account people's current understanding and attitudes. They should also lead to the acceptance of taking meaningful action to combat climate change and its effects. It is best if you are able to construct your desired frame taking into account your particular national context and the state of debate about climate change. One suggestion is:

- **Responding to climate change is sustainable development.** Action on climate change adaptation and mitigation can reduce the vulnerability of the poor as well as benefit the whole society and the national economy.

Understanding what frames predominate and how you want to frame your messages will inform the development of a more detailed communications plan.

Communication plans

In order to focus our communications and ensure that our messages are consistent and coherent, we need to set out a communications plan within our advocacy strategy. This communication plan can have a number of elements:

- The core message that we need to get across – sometimes called the 'message proposition'.
- Guidelines on how to get the core message across, including the use of visual images.
- Parameters on what not to say or communicate.
- Protocols on who can act as a spokesperson and what sign-offs are needed on campaign communications.

Core message

Your core message or message proposition is the most important argument, idea or fact that you need to get across to your different target audiences to win support for your advocacy objectives.

The message proposition should be expressed as a phrase of no more than 8 or 10 words. Defining the message in so few words forces you to keep it clear and focused. It's not a slogan, so you don't need to worry how pretty or memorable the actual words are – it's a definition of a message that you can communicate in lots of different forms, from long speeches and reports to simple images and sound-bites. Each time we communicate, we need to be getting across the idea contained in the proposition, using the method that is most appropriate for that particular audience.

Propositions are specific to each campaign. Developing a proposition needs to take into account your preferred frame, your advocacy objective and what you see as the main barrier to achieving that objective.

An example of a proposition for a particular campaign is: *Decentralised budgets for adaptation enable effective implementation.* Campaign communications to all audiences focus on promoting this concept: sometimes just by stating it, sometimes by trying to prove it with research evidence and case studies. By this constant reinforcement, the idea becomes more established in people's minds until it is accepted as a 'fact'. Opponents then appear to be out of touch with 'normal' thinking, and action to decentralise budgets becomes more likely. The advocates can then adopt a new proposition for the next phase of their campaign.

Communication guidelines and parameters

In addition to agreeing a message proposition, it helps to set some clear guidelines and parameters for your communications:

- To ensure that your campaign is seen as credible, your communications should be accurate, avoiding exaggeration. The guidelines can set out what figures, statistics and sources of data should be used.
- To ensure that your communications are understood, the guidelines can set out what terms should and should not be used, defining these terms as necessary.
- To ensure the safety of activists, the guidelines should be clear on when and how their photos and names can be used and what the protocols are for gaining their permission for their stories and images to be used.
- To ensure the dignity of affected communities, and to promote positive frames about development, guidelines can set out how those affected communities are to be described and pictured. Terminology and pictures that perpetuate negative stereotypes or further marginalise affected communities should be forbidden (see below).

Protocols may also set out approval and sign-off procedures for printed and online communications, the use of logos, and how organisations and networks can be represented to different audiences.

How to communicate uncertainty[1]

Scientists try to understand climate change by combining current and historical data with increasingly sophisticated computer models. They look for potential feedback effects that might dampen or exacerbate global warming. This is complex and unpredictable making climate change an uncertain science. But people generally prefer predictability, and uncertainty generally makes us uncomfortable. Most policy makers naturally want to know how their constituencies will be affected by climate change, but getting meaningful scientific information for specific localities is difficult because models (apart from those relating to sea-level rise) become less accurate at smaller scales. Communicating this uncertainty is not easy, but what follows here are some tips and guidance on how to avoid some common pitfalls.

Put the uncertainty into context. Help audiences understand what is known with a high degree of confidence and what is less well understood. For example, scientists are in agreement that human greenhouse gas emissions are warming the planet, and will continue to do so for many years, but local level trends and predictions for shorter timescales come with more uncertainty.

Don't give in to sensationalism. It is better to have an accurate story with nuance than a misleading one that has a good headline. This also applies to journalists whose editors may be pressing them for a front page headline. For example, it is incorrect to say that climate change caused Hurricane Katrina, because although scientists can link the severity of Katrina to increased warming in the ocean, it is difficult to distinguish how much of that warming is due to human activity and how much is the result of a natural cycle.

Invoke the 'precautionary principle'. Scientific certainty is not needed to justify action on climate change. If 98 per cent of doctors say your son is sick and needs treatment, and 2 per cent say he is fine, it is common sense to take precautions and go with the majority view, especially if the consequences of ignoring the majority view could be dreadful. It is the same with climate change.

Make the distinction between individual weather events and climate change. Climate is the average weather over a long time. A few extreme weather events don't confirm or refute climate change and it is usually wrong to attribute individual weather events directly to climate change.

Learn how to convey risk. Climate change scientists usually talk about levels of risk. How do you convey this to policy makers or the public? The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change uses lay terms to represent probabilities of risk. For example, it states that human actions are `very likely' to be the cause of climate change, meaning there is at least a 90 per cent likelihood that this is true. Similarly, `likely' means at least a 66 per cent likelihood, and `more likely than not' means greater than 50 per cent.

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1. Source: Adapted from *Climate Change: How to Report the Story of the Century* by James Fahn (2009) on Scidev.net and also *The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides and the Interested Public* by the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions in 2009.

Telling stories

All of our communications should be telling a story: a story that supports the idea set out in our proposition; a story that engages the audience's interest; a story that moves them to action.

There are many different stories we can tell. We can share the testimonies of people affected by climate change. We can tell the stories of pilot programmes to support adaptation and how people have benefited. We can make real the scientific predictions on future impacts of climate change and what will happen if policy makers do and do not act.

We have to have a clearly constructed argument at the heart of our story, but we also need to engage our audiences at an emotional or instinctive level.

A picture is worth a thousand words

Wherever possible, we should communicate our messages visually.

Images are very powerful at shaping our understanding. Although they are immediate, they require our brains to interpret them, so opening up the possibility of changed perceptions. They also engage us at a more emotional level, cutting through some of the rational filters that we subconsciously put in the way of new ideas.

With this power, they can reinforce or challenge the dominant frames. Because of this, we have to be careful how we use them.

In particular, we should be careful how we portray the people who are directly affected by climate change right now. Are we portraying them as passive victims of a global phenomenon, or are we showing them as active in resisting climate change and its effects? Do we give them dignity in our images, or do we turn them into stereotypes?

Using images to tell a story

Using photography and film can help tell a story to the public and policy makers, and make it 'real' by showing the impacts of climate change at a local scale. A film can provide a human face to a policy initiative and translate a complicated concept into simple terms. Short videos can also provide instruction on certain climate change related tasks.

Before starting, think about how you will use your photos or film to influence key people. This outreach plan will also help you decide exactly what images to capture. Most civil society organisations post their films on YouTube (make sure your film is associated with your agency's name and logo when you do this) and embed links to them on their websites. Give some thought on how you will draw your intended audiences to view these images.

In planning your project, start by making a list of interview questions you wish to ask your subject, and use the answers they provide to write the story that will accompany your film or photographs. That will help you choose which shots to take.

Technical tips for shooting film and photos

- Don't shoot into the sun. The sun should be behind you, not your subject.
- Where possible try to take pictures in natural light. Morning and afternoon light is better than midday light.
- Use the rule of thirds to make your image more powerful. This involves drawing two vertical imaginary lines dividing the screen up into thirds, and two horizontal imaginary lines dividing the screen up into thirds. Try to place key components of your photo (like someone's face) where the lines cross each other.
- Always check the focus and try to use a tripod where possible for steady images, especially in low light conditions.
- Write down the name, age, location and contact details of your subject, especially if you are covering several people. Match these with the time code on your camera so you know which text accompanies which shots.

When developing a story using a series of photographs[2], each image should show something that tells part of a story about who your subject is, and how their life has been affected by climate change, accompanied by text providing details. For example, a series of photographs could include:

- where the subject lives (mountains, desert, coast),
- the main source of income in the subject's area (fishing, arable farming, pastoralism),
- the subject's home (near water, on a hillside),
- the subject in their environment,
- the subject with their family,
- the subject's work/school,
- the climate change challenges experienced by the subject and how they are coping (too little water, too much water, extreme weather events).

When filming, try to tell a story with each shot and get a good variety of shots. Take shots from a distance, middle distance and close-up for each item on your shot list. This will give your film context and make it more interesting. Make sure you hold each shot for at least 10 seconds to give you enough footage to use. Here are some further tips for filmed interviews:

- Check the sound is working before you start the interview.
- If possible, write a transcript of the interview to accompany the film.
- Sit next to the camera when interviewing and as close to it as possible. Ask your subject to look at you and not the camera when answering your questions.
- Make sure that when your subject answers your questions they include the question in their answer. This will allow you to edit out your questions later. For example: What is your name and age? My name is John Jones and I am 24 years old.
- Edit down longer material, such as speeches. Smaller packages or segments can be posted independently on YouTube.
- Keep your video short: 3-5 minutes is best.

Bring words to life

Clearly not all our communications can be through photos and video – we have to use words as effectively as we can to get our message across. Whether we are telling those stories in the spoken or the written word, it is our duty to make them as interesting, accessible and motivating as possible.

There is a danger in communicating about serious issues that we become boring, using precise literal language. Good communication, however, uses metaphors and analogies to make complex concepts real and understandable. Short sentences and the avoidance of jargon make our communications easier to understand. Contrasts and comparisons help audiences to realise the importance of our issues. Proverbs and maxims can support our arguments. Alliteration and rhyme make our messages memorable.

Finally, all advocates and campaigners should prepare and rehearse a short 'elevator speech' that builds on the message proposition to quickly and clearly explain the problem and your proposed solution.

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2. Adapted from The Environmental Justice Foundation *No Place Like Home: Home Truths. Climate Witness Instruction Cards. Photographing.*

Further information and resources

Common Cause for Nature : A practical guide to values and frames in conservation, by Elena Blackmore, Ralph Underhill, Jamie McQuilkin, Rosie Leach & Tim Holmes (2013). UK: PIRC. www.valuesandframes.org/downloads

The Common Cause Handbook, Tim Holmes, Elena Blackmore, Richard Hawkins & Tom Wakeford (2011). UK: PIRC. www.valuesandframes.org/downloads

Talking Climate has excellent guides for communicating climate change, climate science and uncertainty in climate science, encouraging sustainable behaviour, altering public perceptions of climate change, uncertainty and the IPCC and why people remain sceptical about climate change: http://talkingclimate.org/ Resources include a video on *How to talk to a climate change denier*, and a guide on *Visual communication of climate change*, describing how to use images as a communication tool.

350.org provides useful guidance on educating a community about the basic science and implications of climate change, about the 350 global climate movement and how to get involved in local solutions. It provides a simple, visually compelling, PowerPoint presentation that explains climate change science and impacts for a general audience, and a second PowerPoint presentation that explains the technical and policy solutions to climate change. It also provides two factsheets: one on the science of climate change and one on solutions. See http://local.350.org/projects/educate-presentation/

Climate Access provides a useful collection of resources for a broad range of climate change communication activities. It has a Resource Hub where existing reports can be accessed, a Campaign Gallery featuring examples of campaigns related to climate change and 'tip sheets' on different aspects of climate change communication. See www.climateaccess.org/

The Tree is useful for developing stories based on climate change disasters. It has lots of social media tools and a helpful list of some of the most significant climate science findings from the past year. You can subscribe to it here: http://treealerts.org/home-global/2013/09/61528/

The Carbon Brief website is a good resource for the latest climate change news, important rebuttals and information about the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report: www.carbonbrief.org/

Skeptical Science keeps the climate debate honest using up-to-date scientific data and peer reviewed papers. They have produced rebuttals of over one hundred examples of climate misinformation: www.skepticalscience.com/

The **Climate Asia** Communications Toolkit helps users to create their own climate change communication initiative: www.live.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/climateasiadataportal/article/developstrategy

ClimateBites offers metaphors, soundbites, quotes, humour, cartoons, stories and graphics to help communicators talk about climate change: www.climatebites.org/

Climate Nexus provides some background papers that put climate science and policy into clear language to lay readers: http://climatenexus.org/resources/read/

The **Climate Change Media Partnership** provides a set of examples of print, radio, video and photo stories on its website: www.climatemediapartnership.org/category/reporting/

The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public, published by the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions in 2009 provides insights into how to effectively communicate climate change issues. See: http://guide.cred.columbia.edu/

Thinking, fast and slow, written by Daniel Kahneman and published by Farra, Straus and Giroux in 2013, provides insights into what goes on inside our heads: the psychological basis for reactions, judgments, recognition, choices and conclusions.

The **Environmental Justice Foundation** provides instruction cards on how to develop stories to help people share climate change experiences using photographs (see *No Place Like Home: Home Truths. Climate Witness Instruction Cards. Photographing*) and also film (see *No Place Like Home: Home Truths. Climate Witness Instruction Cards. Filming*). The Foundation can help provide your testimonies with wider coverage through international networks and on their own website. See: http://ejfoundation.org

For guidance on making short films see: http://toolkit.witness.org/ and www.movements.org/blog/entry/how-to-create-effective-advocacy-videos/ and http://insightshare.org/resources/right-based-approach-to-pv-toolkit

A Tool for Motivation Based Communication Strategy, by Chris Rose is a useful essay on running a successful campaign. It can be downloaded here: www.campaignstrategy.org

The Irish NGO network **Dochas** have produced a code of conduct on the use of images in development www.dochas.ie/code/

These books are for sale only but are recommended:

Winning the Story Wars, by Jonah Sachs (2012). Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

You talkin' to me? Rhetoric from Aristotle to Obama, by Sam Leith (2011). London: Profile Books.

Lend me your ears: all you need to know about making speeches and presentations, by Professor Max Atkinson (2004). London: Vermillion/Random House.

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Have your say

Readers are invited to provide feedback on the Advocacy Toolkits and experiences of their use at the Southern Voices discussion forum: http://forum.southernvoices.net/categories/toolkit

Cover photo: A training session for journalists and NGO communicators to understand effective climate change messaging © Climate Change Working Group, Vietnam.

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