COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach is a team of social scientists and communication specialists working to widen and deepen public engagement with climate change. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, our charity helps organisations communicate about climate change in ways that resonate with the values of their audiences and builds the social mandate for climate action. We have more than 15 years' experience working with a wide range of international partners including central, regional and local governments, international bodies, academic institutions, charities, businesses, faith organisations and youth groups.

Project team

Authors

Robin Webster, Senior Programme Lead Advocacy Communications, Climate Outreach
Dr Adam Corner, Programmes & Research Director, Climate Outreach
Jamie Clarke, Executive Director, Climate Outreach
Dr Stuart Capstick, Research Fellow, Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST)

Editing & Production

Tara Clarke, Project Manager, Climate Outreach
Léane de Laigue, Head of Communications, Climate Outreach
Elise de Laigue, Designer, Explore Communications – www.explorecommunications.ca

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 crisis, as experienced so far, presents climate advocates with a situation rife with contradictions. Media coverage of the issue is falling dramatically and global levels of concern may well do so. Campaigners face a constrained ability to protest, a delayed policy process, and crucially, citizens overwhelmed by more immediate concerns of health, jobs and livelihoods.

At the same time, the changes people have lived with under 'lockdown' have altered behaviours and prompted new conversations across societies. The pandemic potentially presents a moment of reflection for society, breaking the institutional and cultural lock-in to damaging systems.

Social science explores people's responses to climate change communication and to previous periods of disruption - providing a set of insights that can aid campaigners and communicators in making good decisions.

Timing and sensitivity is paramount. Citizens who are already struggling emotionally, socially or financially are not likely to have the capacity to think about another problem. At any one time, some audiences may be experiencing trauma, while others have space for reflection.

As more immediate worries come into people's lives, **concern about climate change may go down** — in line with the 'finite pool of worry' theory. High levels of concern have reversed in the past during economic recession. This may for example make 'climate emergency' framing less salient and effective, while messages about the fragility of society may resonate better. Personal experience of one 'dread' risk (a pandemic) could also potentially increase people's sensitivity to another (climate change).

People around the world living under lockdown have been forced to **adopt different behaviours.** The evidence shows that moments of 'shift' — when habits are disrupted by major life events, like moving house or having a baby — are also moments when people are more open to changing their lifestyle choices.

Opening up a conversation about which new habits are beneficial for health and quality of life, and how government and society could embed them, could be fruitful. Behaviour is likely to 'rebound' without government intervention — or people seeing their peers continue with new habits, and forming new social norms.

Effective communications speak to people's values, rather than focusing on facts and figures. Framing that focuses on preparation and resilience resonate during times of disruption, especially when 'getting back to normal' is not an option. Concepts like balance, pragmatism and intergenerational duty are likely to be powerful.

Holding 'communal values' like collaboration, mutual support or compassion is also a strong predictor of pro-environmental behaviour - substantially stronger, for example, than someone's income. Sudden disasters tend to bring these values and altruistic behaviour to the fore in affected communities.

But crises also accentuate pre-existing fault lines in society, which can lead to more intolerance and division. Messaging that speaks to communal values will speak to a pre-existing dynamic in society, and help to oppose more divisive narratives. The Covid-19 crisis has also brought conversations related to fairness to the fore — a concept which attracts people across the political spectrum.

Research on climate engagement consistently points to the importance of efficacy as crucial in motivating action — the belief that it's possible to do something, and that doing something has the potential to make a difference.

The restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic may reduce efficacy — by affecting the ability to protest, or social tolerance for opposing governments for example. This highlights the importance of more creative forms of advocacy, and increased collaboration between civil society groups to create coherent narratives in the public sphere.

The pandemic has highlighted that people are willing to act together in response to an external threat. This could be used to build a sense of 'collective efficacy' and an awareness that individual change is a crucial part of wider systemic change.

Climate visuals showing people working together could help reinforce the concept of people collaborating in the face of a crisis. Imagery that tells human stories, highlights fragility and demonstrates the health impacts of climate change, while also pointing towards constructive solutions that build resilience are more likely to be effective.

BACKGROUND

With the arrival of Covid-19, the world has suddenly entered uncharted territory. Human societies are likely to be facing a sustained period of disruption - a health crisis, a global economic recession,[1] hundreds of millions of people facing food shortages[2] and pre-existing social problems exacerbated and brought to the fore by government restrictions.

The reality of the situation — and the human suffering it brings — is rightly the focus of politics and society at the moment. But the challenge of engaging populations around the world on climate action remains as urgent as ever. If the world is to avoid living in an unstable climate, a vast array of social, political, cultural, economic and technological changes are needed within a space of just a few years, just as they were before the pandemic.[3]

To keep making the case for urgent action on climate change, climate campaigning is also going to have to change. The social science of climate change communication and people's previous responses to periods of disruption provides insights into what effective communications could look like during the current crisis.

This report presents a series of recommendations for engaging people on climate change during this period. As these are new circumstances, it represents an initial attempt to pull together a relevant evidence base and support campaigners, communicators and policy advocates engaged in visioning and imagining the future over the coming months.

It is not possible to be sure how events will progress, and so it is crucial to keep asking questions about what is happening, reviewing and checking assumptions and evidence as they do.

A man wearing a mask returns home from grocery shopping in the UK.
Photo: Tim Dennell (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Covid-19 and climate change: crises compared

Covid-19 can feel like a sped up analogy for climate change, powerfully demonstrating the importance of good communications. Both are major health challenges, presenting a global threat to wellbeing in which the vulnerable are hit first and hardest, and personal and local action play a crucial role.

In both crises, communicators face a juggling act of competing economic, scientific and moral priorities, and 'the science' doesn't straightforwardly answer the question of how to take action in response. Converting complex scientific data into simple and engaging messaging is challenging, particularly when the problem is hard to visualise.[4] The crisis brings to the fore crucial questions of equity, economics, the role of public institutions and the different responses of individualistic and collective cultures.[5]

As with climate change, governments can't influence their populations by top-down orders alone. Behaviours change when social norms shift, people understand the reasons to act, these reasons resonate with their concerns, and they have the capacity to make the change. Building broad social consensus for action, in which the most vulnerable are protected and empowered, is therefore essential.

The same social science insights that guide communications on climate change are useful in guiding communications on Covid-19.[6] At the same time, the very different timescales highlight the difficulties humans have responding to a 'slow burn' threat as opposed to a rapidly emerging one. Covid-19 presents a more direct, obvious threat to health that is easier to understand and respond to — and so has provided climate advocates with an example of what profound, rapid change in society can look like, if not the means to achieving the same result.

"[Both Covid-19 and climate change] bring to the fore crucial questions of equity, economics, the role of public institutions and the different responses of individualistic and collective cultures."

PRINCIPLES FOR CLIMATE CHANGE ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

1 Get the timing right and consider your audience

> *Martin Brown's letter (Gazette, 12 March) demonstrates perfectly why many of us have difficulty with climate activists. Mr Brown does not express one word of sympathy for the victims of coronavirus and their families... Instead he seems to be revelling in it."*
> —Stroud news and journal, 29 March[7]

Moments of disruption create opportunities to open up new conversations, and challenge established patterns of behaviour.[8,9] People who have experienced extreme weather events — such as hurricanes, flooding, heatwaves and droughts — are subsequently more aware of the risk of climate change, for example.[10]

Research shows that there are potential pitfalls in communicating about climate change during a time of crisis, however.[11] People dealing with one crisis understandably may not have the capacity to think about another problem if they are already struggling emotionally, socially or financially.

The wrong communications at the wrong time — for example, celebrating falls in emissions as a result of lockdown or economic decline — have a serious risk of backfiring, creating a sense that campaigners are insensitive to the needs of people who are suffering.

People who have experienced a traumatic event also have a right to recover. Communities that have suffered from flooding, for example, may strongly resist evidence showing the increased likelihood of climate change causing it to happen more in the future, as it indicates the trauma may be repeated.[11]

Some people may have the capacity to think about wider issues, whilst others facing serious upheaval may be unable to — meaning it is important to consider the needs of particular audiences when communicating.[11] Responses will not be the same for different social groups and political perspectives.[12] For those that do have the space however, a 'window of opportunity' may open up where people are able to reflect what the crisis means for their life and views. One productive way to engage in this may be to open up pathways to exchange rather than seeking to "win the argument" — focusing on human connection and not proselytising.

Recommendations

Do not attempt to argue that climate change is 'more important' than other issues during times of intense stress, but be aware that a moment may open up afterwards where people have the ability to reflect upon what they have gone through, and connect their own experience with wider issues.

Be sensitive to the needs of different audiences at a particular moment.

Where possible, test messaging with different audiences who will be exposed to it - including those you may not be directly focused on, but who may react.

Having a conversation in the era of Covid-19 in the UK.
Photo: Tim Dennell (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The 'finite pool of worry' theory posits that as people only have a limited amount of attention, concern about one issue will therefore decrease concern about another.[13] As more immediate worries rise up — particularly economic recession — it is possible that social concern about climate change will go down (see box on following page).

This projection is not simple however. Going through a period of disruption also has the potential to change people's views and responses to the world. So far, the social changes associated with the pandemic have prompted a number of conversations across societies. The experience of living in a less polluted environment,[14] and, for some communities, engaging more in nature,[15] and with issues related to food supply[2] has — anecdotally — led to an increased interest in sustainability issues.[16]

Personal experience of one 'dread' risk (a pandemic) could also potentially increase people's sensitivity to another (climate change).[17] The negative emotions that can be associated with climate change – fear, anxiety, loss, helplessness – are similar to those many people have encountered in relation to Covid-19.

Negative emotional responses to external threats — whether coronavirus or climate change — are entirely valid, and can be strong motivators of personal engagement and action.[18] This means that communicators should not downplay the serious impacts of climate change — but should remain aware of changing levels of public concern, and a fluctuating ability to respond in different communities.

Recommendations

Be aware that concern about climate change may go down in response to changing circumstances. This may for example make 'climate emergency' framing less salient and effective, while messages about the fragility of society may resonate well. More in-depth research into changing trends in awareness will be needed to track what is happening.

When communicating climate impacts, give people tangible things to do to build personal efficacy so that difficult emotions can be translated into action rather than despondency, and **open up space for dialogue and sharing of personal stories**, in order to accommodate the 'emotional weight' of climate change.[19]

Will Covid-19 cause people to be less worried about climate change?

In recent years, levels of concern about climate change have been rising steadily around the world,[20,21] with large numbers of people in public surveys viewing it as a major threat to their country,[21] and believing it will have an impact on their lives.[20] In the UK and USA — two countries where concern about climate change is tracked closely — concern reached historically high levels in 2019.[22,23]

But this doesn't mean that the same trends will necessarily continue in the future. Public concern has risen and then fallen again in the past. Until the mid 2000s, for example, global concern about climate change had also been steadily growing. But from the mid to late 2000s it fell back again, possibly as a result of climate scepticism and political polarisation on the issue increasing across the developed world.[24,25]

A particular dip in concern occured in Europe and North America in 2009/10. A number of factors have been held responsible for this, including the failure of the Copenhagen conference and the role of climate sceptics, but analysis suggests economic insecurity following the 2008 financial crash played a significant role.[26] This is consistent with the 'finite pool of worry' theory, which suggests that concern about one issue will decrease as concern about another rises up.[27] A relative lack of attention by the media and politicians during the mid to late 2000s is also likely to have played its part.[28,29]

At the time of writing (May 2020), there is no evidence for a collapse in climate concern. Current polls show majorities of citizens around the world agreeing that climate change is as serious a crisis as Covid-19 and that governments should respond with the same level of urgency.[30,31] Anecdotal evidence even suggests that the lifestyle changes associated with lockdown could have increased interest in sustainability issues in some countries.[16]

But media coverage of climate change has fallen dramatically[32] and the amount of media coverage of and attention paid to climate change by politicians and other high-profile figures is a key influence on public concern.[28] Future events remain unpredictable, and a sustained period of global economic decline has the potential to seriously impact engagement with climate change as an issue around the world.

3 Speak to altruistic community values

People tend to respond powerfully to information that fits with their values and worldview, and reject information that doesn't. People's values don't change easily, but their relationship with the external world, and the values they express at different times, do.

'Self-transcendent' or 'communal' values — like compassion, interdependence, or equality — are concerned with the welfare of other people.[33] Around the world, holding communal values is a strong predictor of pro-environmental behaviour — substantially stronger, for example, than someone's income.[34]

Many people assume that they hold communal values, while others do not.[35] Crises, however, tend to bring these values to the fore. In sudden disasters — blackouts or natural disasters, for example — altruistic behaviour in affected communities increases significantly, while crime decreases.[36,37]

Research suggests that prosocial behaviour of this nature is an effective way for people to re-establish control of their lives and reduce stress.[38] Altruism itself is "contagious", and when businesses, public figures and the general public begin to engage in goodwill actions, this powerfully bonds communities together.[39,40]

But crises also bring to the fore pre-existing social dynamics. Being threatened with disease leads to an increased fear of perceived threats, potentially leading to greater intolerance towards out-groups and undermining empathy.[41,42] During the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, for example, violence broke out in some areas, with people being shot for not wearing their masks.[43] In May 2020, the Secretary-General of the United Nations said the coronavirus was leading to a "tsunami of hate" globally, and political polarisation around the world currently appears to be increasing in response to the pandemic.[44,45]

Recommendation

Sudden crises often bring out altruistic behaviours, bringing to the fore community oriented values which are also associated with taking action on climate change. But crises also accentuate pre-existing fault lines in society, which can lead to more intolerance and division. **Messaging that speaks to communal values - collaboration, mutual support, compassion -** will speak to a pre-existing dynamic in society, and help to oppose more divisive narratives.

Youth volunteers in Kenya delivering soap to families and setting up community hand washing stations.
Photo: SDG Action Campaign (CC BY-ND 2.0)

"Holding communal values is a strong predictor of pro-environmental behaviour - substantially stronger, for example, than someone's income."

4 Embed lifestyle change in the longer term

The Covid-19 crisis has brought about abrupt changes in human behaviour. People around the world have been forced to adopt different ways of living, including travelling less, taking on new eating habits and undertaking fewer high-carbon leisure activities. Many have also experienced lower levels of pollution in their immediate environment and (in some countries) spent more time in nature. A snap poll in the UK early into its lockdown found that 85% of respondents wanted to see some of the personal or social changes they had experienced continue afterwards.[46]

Behaviours and day-to-day practices are generally hard to change. Research suggests that new habits take an average 10 weeks to form, though with considerable variation across different circumstances.[47] But the evidence also shows that moments of 'shift' — when habits are disrupted by major life events, like moving house or having a baby — are also moments when people are more open to changing their behaviours.[8,9]

In lifestyle terms, the lockdown has broken the institutional 'lock-in' that keeps people tied to certain habits[48] even if they may wish to change them. This does not mean the change will be permanent however, and behaviours are likely to 'rebound' quickly.[49] The role of government is likely to be important in facilitating any longer term changes.[37] In Japan for example, energy consumption did not rebound in the wake of the crisis prompted by the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, because the government launched an energy efficiency campaign.[50,51]

New social norms also need to be reinforced and supported by people's peers. When individuals hear those with the same values and identity talking about the benefits of new activities, it shifts them from a theoretical concept to a more tangible reality. Similarly, if people see like-minded peers actively demonstrating their commitment to a new behaviour, they are much more likely to adopt it.[52]

"A snap poll in the UK early into the lockdown found that 85% of respondents wanted to see some of the personal or social changes they had experienced continue afterwards."

Recommendation

Lifestyles around the world have changed rapidly and profoundly in response to Covid-19. The new behaviours may have been adopted for long enough to change ingrained habits. But behaviour is still likely to 'rebound' without government intervention and/or if people see their peers continue with new habits, and new social norms form. **Opening up a conversation about which new habits are beneficial for health and quality of life, and how government and society could embed them, could be fruitful.**

Growing vegetables in a community garden in the US.
Photo: King County Parks Your Big Backyard (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

5 Emphasise resilience, preparedness and support rather than 'going back to normal'

After a traumatic event, there is often a strong drive to "get back to normal" and restore a feeling of security and familiarity to life. But "normal" may not be possible — or advisable — any more.

Research suggests that people from different political backgrounds respond well to a 'preparation' frame when communicating climate messages — even those who don't express much concern about climate risks.[11,53] Notions such as 'responsibility,' 'stewardship,' 'better to be prepared,' and ideas of 'protection and safety' resonate well across the political spectrum. Using a preparation frame is therefore likely to be a constructive and empowering approach to engaging communities on climate change in the current context.

The following values resonate with people from across the political spectrum:

- **Necessity** – with growing acknowledgement of the severity of climate change impacts comes a realisation that some impacts are now unavoidable, and must be dealt with through preparation and adaptation.

- **Pragmatism** (when there is a problem you deal with it) – preparedness is a key term to focus on when emerging from a period of disruption, especially with the awareness that it may re-emerge.

- **Maintaining continuity** (making planned changes to deal with the future, rather than disruption forcing change on us) – this includes validating existing values, skills and community cohesion as the basis for a response to new challenges.

- **Restoring 'balance'** – the changing climate is a sign that we're out of sync with nature and balance must be restored.

- **Belief in the idea of intergenerational duty** – 'We owe it to our children to make tough choices now'.

- **Maintaining a 'good life'** – protecting ourselves against the health risks from climate impacts improves our wellbeing.

Recommendation

Framing around preparation, resilience and support resonates across the political spectrum during times of disruption, especially when 'getting back to normal' is not an option.

6 Build efficacy

Research on climate engagement consistently points to the importance of efficacy as crucial in motivating action — the belief that it's possible to do something, and that doing something has the potential to make a difference to the problem at hand.[34,54] Frightening information about threats can lead people to change their behaviour if they feel able to deal with the threat — but can lead to extremely defensive reactions if they feel unable to do anything about it.[55]

The restrictions associated with social distancing — likely to be implemented in different societies around the world for many months to come — reduce the ability for climate advocates to engage in physical protest. During a crisis, populations also have more invested in believing in their leadership, and so trust in government tends to go up, increasing the chance that protest will be in opposition to the public mood.[56,57]

Protest movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion have used strong negative information regarding potential climate change impacts, combined with a powerful call to action to create a sense of efficacy. In an environment where taking action is not as feasible, and where day-to-day life is already disrupted, this messaging may be less effective, and more likely to prompt defensive reactions.

Recommendations

During a time period when people could easily be overwhelmed by a multiplicity of threats, it is even more important if communicating on climate change to **build a sense that there is something that people can do, and that if they do something it will make a difference**.

Traditional forms of protest are more likely to be restricted and citizens may be more supportive of their governments, presenting a particular set of challenges to advocates. This may mean **more creative forms of protest, and increased collaboration between civil society groups** to create coherent narratives in the public sphere.

"Efficacy means it's possible to do something, and doing something has the potential to make a difference."

7 Highlight individual change as a part of wider social change

One way to build efficacy could be to highlight how the response to the pandemic has shown that people are willing and able to adjust their lives to respond to a large-scale threat. One person wearing a face mask, or taking steps to avoid close proximity to others, will only have a negligible effect on the overall level of infection in a country. However, societies understand that this is required as part of a personal responsibility to tackle a communal problem. This builds a sense of collective efficacy — taking action together for a larger purpose.[58]

By contrast, climate communications has often not been clear how people's small-scale actions are part of a bigger picture and a crucial part of social and systemic change. People are motivated by the behaviour of their peers, and democratic governments are extremely unlikely to put radical policy changes — which may involve significant short-term costs — in place without an awareness of public consent, expressed through social norms.[59-61] Rather than stressing the 'individual versus system change'[62] dynamic, the coronavirus pandemic shows the need for more coherent narratives that make clear these are in fact two sides of the same coin.[63]

Recommendation

The public response to Covid-19 has highlighted that people are willing to act together in response to an external threat. This could be used to **build a sense of 'collective efficacy' and an awareness that individual change is a crucial part of wider systemic change in the climate sphere**.

"Collective efficacy - taking action together for a larger purpose."

8 Bring trusted voices to the fore

Effective climate change communication needs a trusted messenger who shares the values of and understands the needs of their audience. The stereotype of 'environmentalists' has negative connotations for many people, who often see this as a label for a particular kind of wealthy or moralising individual.[64] People who carry this reputation are therefore not the most appropriate messengers for many communities, especially during periods of high tension.

Scientists and health professionals have emerged as being amongst the most trusted voices on Covid-19,[65] and these groups are already among the most trusted voices for communicating climate change.[66] It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the links between climate change and health are not well understood in the public mind.[67]

Recommendation

Effective climate change communication needs a **trusted messenger who shares the values of and understands the needs of their audience**. Bringing scientists and health professionals to the fore may be effective as they are trusted voices on Covid-19.

A health worker on the Covid-19 frontline in Madagascar.
Photo: World Bank/Henitsoa Rafalia (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

9 Use narratives around 'fairness'

> **"The coronavirus tragedy has shown that we are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us..."** —Christiana Figueres, 2020[68]

Disruptive events compound and bring to the fore existing social vulnerabilities. During the Covid-19 crisis, people at an economic disadvantage are the most likely to be exposed to risk, most susceptible to harm and most likely to experience negative outcomes.[6]

As a result, societies have had to focus more attention on protecting the vulnerable and previously undervalued work like professional care. In addition, the virus and subsequent crises seem likely to bring compounding shocks — for example, in unemployment, trade disruptions and food supply.[69] The inequities in the global economic system are therefore being highlighted in new ways in public discussion.

Highlighting and addressing these inequities is also core to tackling climate change.[70] However, across societies, whilst people of different political perspectives respond well to messaging about 'fairness',[71,72] 'justice' is a more polarising concept. 'Justice' as a term resonates well with people who hold left-wing values, but prompts negative responses from those with right-wing values.[73]

Recommendations

The Covid-19 crisis has brought narratives related to social equity - also core to tackling climate change - more to the fore, presenting an opportunity for climate change engagement. **People across the political spectrum respond well to the concept of fairness.**

"Highlighting and addressing inequities is also core to tackling climate change."

" *"Since the outbreak started, I have looked at thousands of images from hundreds of photographers around the world. What struck me is just how much is hidden from view."*
—Jon Jones, head of photography, Tortoise Media[74]

Humans are visual animals, and photography and video are a powerful way of reinforcing climate change narratives. During the early days of the Covid-19 crisis, images of empty streets, clean canals and unpolluted landscapes helped create a media story of 'nature recovery'.[75,76] But the Covid-19 crisis has also yielded remarkably little powerful photography,[4] as the issue is distanced from everyday experience — a problem Covid-19 shares with climate change.[77]

In Climate Outreach's 2015 research into the effective visual communication of climate change, people were compelled by images that told new stories (rather than the familiar imagery of smokestacks, polar bears etc.) and also preferred authentic, everyday images over staged photographs. Posed photographs of politicians were particularly disliked.[77]

During a crisis, successful messengers empathise with the challenges people face and create a sense that 'we are all in this together'.[6,78] This makes it particularly important that images show real people, facing real problems.[77] Similarly, imagery of people working together could help reinforce the concept of people collaborating in the face of a crisis. However, in an environment where faith in government goes up as a result of the 'rally round the flag' effect,[57] imagery of climate protests are more likely to prompt negative reactions.

The hunger for images that show new and existing solutions to the climate crisis continues to grow, making this an important area for future opportunities in commissioning imagery.[79] Covid-19 'lockdown' conditions have made the commissioning or production of new film or photography extremely difficult, which may have an impact on the quality and authenticity of new illustrations.

Recommendations

Show imagery of real people doing real things, and responding to the crisis together. Avoid posed or inauthentic imagery, and take care with imagery of climate protests. Where possible, seek out new and creative imagery of climate solutions to build a sense of efficacy.

Imagery that tells human stories, highlights fragility and demonstrates the health impacts of climate change is also more likely to be effective.

Volunteers handing out free meals and schoolbooks for children whose schools are being closed in Iowa, USA. Photo: Phil Roeder (CC BY-ND 2.0)
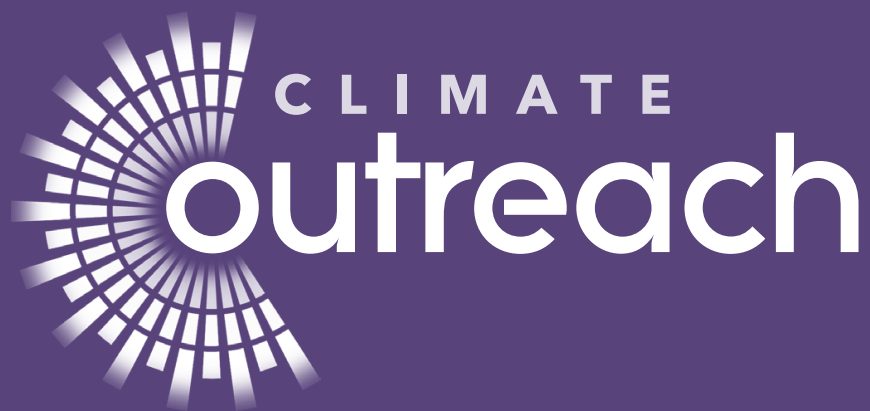
"Imagery of people working together could help reinforce the concept of people collaborating in the face of a crisis."

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