CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITION

The Role of Communication and Social Change

BY SUSANNE C. MOSER

INTRODUCTION

➤ Society faces the formidable challenge of navigating a transition to a sustainable world. Stabilizing greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations and adapting to unavoidable climate changes are important components of this transition. This societal transformation will require policy, production, and consumption changes, and ultimately involve nearly everyone in all sectors of society.

To date, the human dimensions community has directed well-placed attention on developing plausible scenarios of this transition, the role of science and technology, the necessary industrial transformations, and on the institutional dimensions of global environmental change. Much of the scholarship to date also recognizes – almost by default – the need for political will and value and consumption behavior changes in the larger populace in order to realize a transition to a sustainable world. While theoretical, philosophical and disciplinary schools differ on how in fact such political and larger societal changes can be brought about, I argue here that the human dimensions community can gain enormous leverage by complementing its well-established foci with greater attention to the role of social mobilization, social movements, and – more broadly – social change. Accepting that, questions arise as to what role communication, dialogue, and public deliberation can play in hindering or promoting it. The *Information and Communications* focus of the IT Core Project appears not to cover this question sufficiently.

Experience with past social movements suggests that to mobilize people – individual citizens to national-level policy-makers – for this important and increasingly urgent shift, requires a compelling vision, a well-communicated need for change, and useful, credible information to assist in moving forward. There is little evidence to date that the challenge, urgency, vision, or possible pathways have been adequately articulated to the public. There is thus a critical need for the HD community to focus more concerted attention on the communication/social change interface.

THE LINK BETWEEN COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Communication refers to the entire package of what is communicated, in what ways, by whom, to whom, through what channels, and how it is received and absorbed by target audiences. Social change can be broadly defined as the equally multifarious complex of processes involved in the transformation of values, thoughts, and behaviors of individuals, communities, and societies.

At least five obvious connections exist between communication and social change. Take climate change as an example. First, *what is not seen does not exist*. This constructivist-sounding shorthand is not to suggest that if we all looked away from the overwhelming evidence for climatic change that the problem would indeed disappear. Instead, it points the enormously important role of detecting and naming of a problem for public discourse – the basis for public agenda-setting. Second, *what is not understood is dismissed, denied, or polemically discussed*. Communications research on people's perception and understanding of climate change has shown that those unburdened by some basic knowledge of the causes, impacts and solutions of climate change, are more likely to dismiss the problem's existence. They can more easily revert to deeply held beliefs and misconceptions, e.g., that individuals' actions cannot have an impact on a global scale. Thus, effective communication of climate change – using helpful mental models, engaging affective imagery, strategically-ordered arguments and appropriate messengers and channels – can facilitate a more informed public discourse about the problem and appropriate solutions. Third, *how something is framed predicates the response*. Whether climate change is discussed as a scientific, an environmental, economic, energy security, sustainability, or social justice issue greatly influences who feels addressed, who gets mobilized (on the pro and the con side), what counts as convincing evidence, and how the problem evolves as a political or policy matter. Thus, framing strongly influences the development of the „issue culture." Fourth, *what is not talked about exerts no political pressure*. Political leaders repeatedly argue that they feel no particular pressure to deal with climate change without more demand and pressure from their constituents (voting or otherwise politically active citizens, businesses etc.). Thus, more effective communication to the citizenry and from the citizenry to its elected representatives can form the link between public discourse and the political stage. Finally, *without accessible solutions nothing will be done*. Solutions to global climate change will likely involve a combination of technological changes, yet-untold innovations, and behavioral changes in consumption of energy and resources. Communication plays a key role in the development, spread, and adoption of these new production and consumption patterns. As scholars of innovations, social transformations, and other tipping phenomena have found, neither barriers nor incentives and interventions are absolute in guaranteeing the arrest or spread of a new technology, policy or behavior. Instead, how something is marketed, who conveys the message, what networks of communication exist, all influence the degree to which a transformation „catches on."

Clearly, these principles point to the critical role the scientific community can play in communicating global environmental change, but also raises the question about who else might be important messengers in the sustainability transition. Moreover, beneath the generality of these statements remain many unanswered questions that call for empirical research and greater inclusion of findings in HD scholarship from disciplines that to date may have participated little in our field.

FIRST STEPS – PROMISING COLLABORATIONS

In June 2004, a group of over 40 scholars and practitioners met at NCAR in Boulder, Colorado, USA to discuss existing multi-disciplinary and practical insights and critical challenges at the communication/social change interface. The guiding question was „how to improve climate change communication in a way that helps facilitate individual and organizational/institutional change toward a more environmentally sustainable future." The first product of this three-day workshop is a forthcoming article in the December 2004 issue of *Environment*. An anthology of original papers contributed by experts in a wide range of social science fields and the humanities as well as by local, state, business, and NGO leaders will be forthcoming in 2005. For further information, see http://www.isse.ucar.edu/communication.

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REFERENCES for this article are included in the IHDP website at www.ihdp.org/updatepsych04/references.htm

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Recommended Citation:
Moser, Susanne. 2004. "Climate change and the sustainability transition: The role of communication and social change." *IHDP Update* (Newsletter of the Int. Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change) 4: 18-19.