

Building public understanding of 'climate change' to mobilise action

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The general public (and many others) are confused and not yet engaged by 'climate change'.

In part, this is because several issues are 'conflated' or oversimplified in many fora into one issue: 'climate change'. It is tempting to do so.

The concepts or words 'climate change' are often used interchangeably, in part or whole, with any of the following:

- (i) emissions (typically measured as a rate);
- (ii) concentrations (typically measured in parts per million or mass per cubic metre);
- (iii) air pollution or air quality (that may affect people more than the planet in the short-term with notable exceptions such as black carbon);
- (iv) greenhouse gases (that may affect the planet more than people in the short-term with notable exceptions such as tropospheric ozone);
- (v) 'carbon' or 'carbon dioxide' or CO₂ equivalent;
- (vi) 'carbon neutral', 'decarbonisation' or 'carbon offsetting';
- (vii) global warming;
- (viii) decades of global warming ahead, with inevitable consequences, from current concentrations of greenhouse gases caused by historic emissions;
- (ix) changes in the climate or weather;
- (x) 'cross-cutting' issues that interact with different environmental themes differently e.g. air, land, oceans/marine, freshwater, biota/biodiversity;
- (xi) mitigation; and
- (xii) adaptation.

The above conflation or confusion has (had) many serious consequences, past and future. In addition to confusing or not engaging the general public, it has resulted in or contributed to the proliferation of win-lose policies (e.g. encouraging diesel over petrol, 'carbon neutral' wood burning, decentralised power plants causing local air pollution, a focus on carbon neutral/emissions trading/carbon offsetting instead of pursuing zero air emissions at source and a lack of attention on important greenhouse gases such as tropospheric ozone (O₃), nitrous oxide (N₂O) and fluorinated gases with a high global potential). We cannot afford to let this situation continue.

UN Environment's sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO6) has sought to bring greater clarity to all the above issues by treating each of them with the respect they deserve. It has done this principally by:

1. treating 'air' or 'atmosphere' as a single environmental theme that is subject to drivers, pressures, state and trends, impacts and responses in the same way as water, land or biota. It includes local air pollutants and greenhouse gases;
2. adding 'climate change', that is embedded and will continue inevitably for decades or hundreds of years as a result of current atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases caused by historic emissions, as a 'driver' of environmental change for the first time; and
3. addressing 'climate change' altering weather patterns under 'Changing environments' in the 'Cross-cutting issues' section. This section looks therefore at impacts of 'changes in the climate' on the environment, economics and society.

GEO6 brings clarity to all the above issues by addressing separate issues separately and together in an holistic manner. Doing so has required clear thinking and hard work by many people over more than four years.

The opportunity ahead is to build understanding of 'climate change' and many other related issues among the public and policy makers and lead to decisive action sooner on all of them.

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