



Making Progress Through Disagreement: Meeting Residents Where They Are on Climate Change

Hayley Elszasz

PhD Candidate, University of Virginia, Department of Politics

Keywords: climate communications, framing, advocacy, nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations

an open access  journal



ABSTRACT

While Americans do not agree about climate change, what to do to overcome this disagreement is a topic of debate. Climate communications researchers warn that messaging must overcome the challenges of communicating scientific information to lay audiences, the uncertainty of scientific predictions, and the massive scale of climate change to be effective at mobilizing a population. Such work focuses on “top-down” communication of what the scientific reality of climate change requires of citizens: how to get them in line with what needs to happen to prevent catastrophic change. In this article, I document how nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based climate organizations (CBOs) make progress on climate action by dialoguing with their constituents and building on preexisting community connections. I argue that, instead of focusing on achieving climate consensus, these organizations rely on narratives around the local experience of environmental disruption to mobilize communities.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time. As such, an array of organizations has been founded in the past decades to address different aspects of the issue for different constituencies and scales. This multifaceted ecosystem includes organizations operating from the levels of neighborhood, town, region, state and country, up to groups like the United Nations (UN) that set international climate guidelines and goals.

Despite the importance of the issue, the public’s concern about climate change appears lackluster when consulting aggregate survey data. According to studies conducted by the Yale Program on Climate Communication, only 63% of Americans reported themselves to be “worried about global warming,” and only 43% believed that “global warming will harm them personally” (Yale Program on Climate Communication, 2020). In contrast, I argue that national-level statistics on climate concern belie the still significant role the ecosystem of diverse climate organizations plays in meeting residents where they are on climate and communicating climate science, policy, and mitigation and adaptation strategies to audiences. These local climate organizations offer multifaceted opportunities for citizen engagement, using different language to frame the focus of action. Rather than using “climate change” to mobilize citizens, they highlight climate change–related events with more local resonance, including flooding, sea level rise, extreme heat, canopy coverage, conservation, housing scarcity, and instances of climate injustice. Engaged residents and activists work in their neighborhoods, cities, regions, and states to

Citation: Elszasz, H. (2023). Making Progress Through Disagreement: Meeting Residents Where They Are on Climate Change. *Journal of Climate Resilience & Climate Justice*, 1, 134–140. https://doi.org/10.1162/crcj_a_00004

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.1162/crcj_a_00004

Corresponding Author:
Hayley Elszasz
he4ns@virginia.edu

Copyright: © 2023
Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
Published under a Creative Commons
Attribution 4.0 International
(CC BY 4.0) license.



translate between communities and policymakers. Not all actors involved in the climate change fight speak the same language or use the same frames of reference or strategies; however, it is this diversity of approaches that, I argue, offers the most hope in being able to engage the diverse populations that make up the American social landscape.

In this article, I build a theory of how climate organizations act as translators to communicate the benefits of climate action. Instead of focusing on any particular outcome of their work, I document *how* climate activists and organizations do their work and conceive of their role. Statistics about the level of climate engagement among Americans suggest, if anything, that we need more avenues for people to get involved at their level in ways that make the most sense to them.

THEORY: COMMUNICATING CLIMATE CHANGE

Social movements and actors like NGOs and CBOs engage in framing issues to attract attention to certain causes, often in ways that seek to mobilize more “everyday” forms of action. In the words of Merry and Levitt (2017), NGOs “vernacularize” globalized problems via “translation within context” (pp. 213–215). They bridge the “universalism” of the globalized discourse around an issue and the “relativism” of local experiences, values, and beliefs. Merry and Levitt find that while NGOs deploy “human rights” language strategically with donors and international organizations to advance their cause, in their local work they tend to focus on more specific issues such as violence against women (p. 233). In this way, NGOs situated in particular settings play an important role in reframing and redeploying global problems—like human rights or climate change—to gain support from local audiences, funders, and other stakeholder groups.

One proposed way to improve action on climate change, which echoes what Merry and Levitt document, is to emphasize narratives about local experiences of environmental change (Adger et al., 2011; Hulme, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010). A key, but to date underexplored, theme in this emerging body of work is the central role for local-level activists and organizers to act as translators of climate change. The majority of the existing literature on environmental issue framing misses the iterative interactions among organizations, citizens, and policymakers, instead focusing on unidirectional frames originating from one particular type of actor (often, the scientist or the state). Using text analysis of organizational press releases, Wetts (2020) finds that technocratic, elite-oriented framings about climate change predominate across all types of organizations in the American context. In contrast, I use interpretive methods and find that NGOs and CBOs in my case study area often engage with the politics of climate change deliberately by acknowledging the unjust distribution of burdens associated with climate change, pushing for climate justice for their unique constituencies, and lobbying local government officials for stronger legislation and equity measures that push against the status quo. This kind of situated climate change engagement is often overlooked in studies of climate communication because it is not articulated in a globalized language of “climate change,” but instead relies on locally inflected narratives about human resilience, intersectional challenges, or individualized experiences of changing weather patterns. The ability to ground the dilemmas and uncertainties associated with climate impacts in local realities, I argue, is what makes local climate organizations powerful intermediaries and key actors in shaping climate action.

Climate Mobilization in the Bay Area

The San Francisco Bay Area (Bay Area) of California in the United States exemplifies many of the challenges facing urban regions more broadly. Here, manifold environmental pressures wrought by climate change (sea level rise, wildfires, drought, extreme heat, and flooding)

intersect with and amplify other social and political challenges like economic inequality, housing access, transportation, immigration, and racial injustice. In these ways, the Bay Area constitutes a key site for inquiring into how climate activists and organizations operate within a complex political, economic, and ecological geography of competing and connected issues.

California has a reputation as a progressive state and leader in climate action. As one of the areas of the country facing severe early impacts of climate change, California is meeting the challenge with political and financial investment. For example, the state sent its own 22-member delegation to Glasgow for the 2021 UN Climate Summit (known as COP26) (Madrigal, 2021). In 2022, California's governor proposed a budget of \$37 billion to spend on diverse climate change-related measures over the next 6 years—including investments in health care, transportation, housing, and education (Roth, 2022). Yet, to view California as already in agreement about committing to strong climate action misses ongoing debates and negotiations between actors situated in various geographic, social, and economic settings and advocating for different constituents priorities. Using the following methods, I uncover some of the important work that substate organizations are doing to push equitable climate action forward.

METHODS

My primary method is individual interviews with climate activists, organization leaders, and local government officials. I have conducted 30 individual interviews—ranging from half an hour to 2 hours in length—with individuals working in 20 different climate-related organizations in the Bay Area. The majority of the interviews were with staff at climate change or environment-related organizations.¹ Fewer of my interviews were with staff at organizations that focus on a number of community quality-of-life issues,² including environmental ones, and local government officials. The smallest organization I engaged had two staff, while larger ones like the Greenlining Institute employ 30. Among these organizations, there is variation in the scale at which they work and their intended constituencies, which are not always narrowly geographically based, but can be focused on particular demographic populations as well (such as Black or brown residents, the Spanish-speaking community, etc.) Therefore, my conceptualization of a local climate change organization includes organizations that highlight environmental concerns in their work and focus their attention on a defined, subnational community.

My interviews were semistructured. Although there were some questions that I asked all interviewees,³ I let the interviews flow conversationally. After each interview, I transcribed

¹ Including Climate Resilient Communities, Acterra, the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project, Factory Farming Awareness Coalition, Plastic Free Future, Carbon Free Silicon Valley, and the Menlo Park Climate Team.

² Including Palo Alto Forward and the Greenlining Institute.

³ My basic interview schedule included:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and how you got involved in this work?
2. What are the most important issues in your community?
3. What role does your organization play in your community? What role would you like it to play?
4. What strategies have you found successful for getting others involved in this work?
5. What other organizations/institutions do you like to collaborate with? What organizations/institutions are difficult to work with?
6. What about your setting in the Bay Area makes your work harder or easier?
7. What are the biggest challenges associated with your work?
8. Is there anything important about your work that I haven't asked you yet?
9. Who else should I speak to?

Follow-up questions flow naturally from the conversation and differ from interview to interview.

Table 1. Frame Examples: Feeling and Experience

Frame Type	Examples from Local Activists
Feeling and experience	<p>“So when you give studies that say, ‘Oh, CO2 levels go up 400, you know, 400, you know, four megatons, 400 million megatons per year,’ someone who has a job, who is just worried about, you know, two jobs with kids are going to be like, ‘What the hell does that mean? I don’t know. I can’t fathom that.’ But the people can fathom that it’s getting hotter. People can fathom that gas is expensive and people can definitely feel when there’s wildfires...”⁴</p> <p>“I don’t know a polar bear. I’ve never seen an ice cap, but like, I know my neighbors. I know my community.”⁵</p>

the conversation (as long as the interviewee consented to being recorded, which all but one did). Then, I conducted open coding using Dedoose to track major themes and narratives; the interviews that I highlight here showcase prevalent motifs that resulted from the coding process.

Activists Translating Local Experience

While climate change is a global phenomenon, it is experienced *locally* by communities under specific political, economic, social, and ecological conditions. Climate change is not only a scientific reality, but a social one as well. Reactions to environmental disruption are grounded in and activated by cultural beliefs, risk perception and tolerance, and social attributions of value (Hulme, 2009). Organizations and social movements that do climate work play an essential role in grounding scientific facts with narratives that resonate with communities and foster understanding (see Table 1).

Smaller organizations that focus on a defined constituency are able to tailor their messaging to speak to local audiences. Violet Wulf-Saena, the founder and leader of Climate Resilient Communities (CRC) in East Palo Alto explains,

We don’t go in [to the community] and say, OK, what is climate change?... It depends on the community that we’re engaging. So it may start off with the most important issues like water. We talk about droughts. Then, when we talk about droughts, then we can get to climate change and how it’s more frequent.

Wulf-Saena sees her objective as helping the community “connect the dots” between changing precipitation patterns and climate change (V. Wulf-Saena, personal communication, August 3, 2021).⁶ Organizations like CRC see their work pay off when their constituents demonstrate increased fluency around climate change. According to Wulf-Saena, “A lot of people don’t understand the term climate change... that was another big issue that I had to create a lot of programming around.” When people start engaging with CRC programming or speaking with Wulf-Saena, they may not be very conversant around climate change, but they do understand their own experiences with changing weather patterns.

Instead of expecting automatic support for climate mitigation efforts—or blaming residents for their lack of prior understanding and support—local climate organizations are

⁴ Antonio Lopez Interview, August 27, 2021.

⁵ Molly Tafoya Interview, October 15, 2021.

⁶ “Connecting the dots” is a role that many of the climate organizers I spoke with take on. It is a common objective that I heard from other interviewees in Menlo Park and Palo Alto as well.

tolerant of the different languages, expectations, and prior beliefs of community members. In fact, local climate organizations use the community's questions as the starting point for action. "There are a number of aspects of climate change that are concerning to residents or that residents want clarified," one Menlo Park climate activist told me. She continued to explain how they use resident questions as a launching point for designing their projects and communications. For example, her organization focuses on the health benefits of home electrification to get their health-conscious audience on board. The Menlo Park Climate Team focuses on reaching constituents in their city who they know come to the climate change fight with a range of beliefs and levels of experience. While some audiences are receptive to scientific information about climate change—and can wrap their heads intellectually and psychologically around the necessity to cut emissions by a certain percentage to prevent a certain amount of heating—"that's only one audience" (Menlo Park Climate Activist, personal communication, November 30, 2021).

The same activist also noted that her organization's communication strategies are not a fit for the entire region. Belle Haven is a community within Menlo Park that borders the San Francisco Bay and has a different demographic profile (lower income and more Spanish-speaking) than other parts of the city. Belle Haven has recently developed its own Climate Team to address their unique challenges and vulnerabilities to climate change. In describing the different strategies of the two separate groups, the Menlo Park activist noted, "the way that we're tackling [climate communications] from the get-go, you know, for electrifying buildings, say, and the electric vehicle transition—that doesn't resonate in the other parts of town" (Menlo Park Climate Activist, personal communication, November 30, 2021). In the two community-level climate teams in Menlo Park, we see how splintering and multiplying organization action can actually benefit the climate fight, allowing each community to focus on the issues that they prioritize.

The knowledge of community priorities and ability to speak to those needs is a reason why small-scale climate work is necessary. Rather than duplicating efforts, parallel work attracts citizen attention to climate change. In this way, activists and organizers who live and work in the same community participate in co-creating frames for action by consulting their fellow residents and responding to their priorities and perceptions (Small, 2004). This tolerance and adaptability make local-level climate actors valuable. While national-level polls and statistics rely on a binary belief or nonbelief (support/nonsupport) organizations that are more understanding of people's diverse and nuanced perspectives help move the needle.

Consistent with the literature on framing, I find that the community climate organizations I spoke with rely on leveraging hope and personal empowerment to bring residents into the fray (McAdam, 2017). Acterra, which focuses on vehicle electrification as a key pillar of climate mitigation, holds clinics to spread the word about how residents can apply for grants to cover electric car purchases. They then use these success stories to keep bringing more people into the fold. According to Wendy Chou, the Communications and Outreach Manager at Acterra, "Just hearing a story of 'this person did it, so you can too'" is a powerful motivator. People who go through Acterra's clinics are "so excited when they have a[n] [electric] car that they didn't think they could afford" (W. Chou, personal communication, November 8, 2021). Here, we see environmental communications staff building on the well-established technique of connecting climate action with *positive gains* rather than losses or deprivations (Levine & Kline, 2019).

An important part of articulating the potential positive gains of addressing climate change includes how this work can positively impact other community issues; environmental issues are highly intersectional with other hot-button problems like housing, inequality, and

Table 2. Frame Examples: Intersectional Issues

Frame Type	Examples
Intersectionality	<p>“and just bringing the point of how important it is to recognize that all fights are similar. Every single issue that our society is fighting right now, racial inequity and financial inequity, environmental crisis. All of these are rooted in the same issues.”⁷</p> <p>“I feel like many organizations working with the Latinx community are too busy with the struggle, the day-to-day struggle: paying for rent, finding food. And we, if we realize anything, is that we cannot disconnect those issues [from] environmental issues because we know the healthier the planet is, the healthier our communities will be.”⁸</p>

Table 3. Frame Examples: Personal Empowerment

Frame Type	Examples
Personal empowerment	<p>“But we also know that people need to be brought into the solution... There are tons of solutions that individuals can participate in to create change and feel hope around the future.”⁹</p>

transportation (see Table 2). A city councilor from East Palo Alto talked to me about how the housing crisis in his community is “an environmental thing too because people can’t afford to live here”—in other words, they cannot afford to live where they work, which causes an increase in carbon emissions from vehicle transportation (A. Lopez, personal communication, August 27, 2021).

Beyond material gains, there are benefits to simply bringing people into the decision-making process, which fosters feelings of efficacy or empowerment (see Table 3). According to Lauren Weston, Executive Director at Acterra, “the individual piece is still a heavy part of [our work] because policy can feel very top-down. It can feel like people don’t have agency or control, and we don’t want them to be feeling that way” (L. Weston, personal communication, September 1, 2021). With this in mind, Acterra deploys a two-pronged strategy of targeting policymakers to effect more systematic changes, while also tailoring a lot of their programming toward individual behavior change. Providing community-members with actionable measures can go far toward advancing self-efficacy and hope.¹⁰

Menlo Park activists follow a similar playbook. Sandra Slater’s organization, Cool Block, provides participating neighborhoods with action “recipes” in an easily digestible format that allows people to participate in climate mitigation. Rather than relying on the neoliberal frame of individual “citizen-consumers” whose only latitude for action is through their consumption choices (Barr et al., 2011), organizations like Cool Block focus on neighborhood connections, community accountability, and social networks to amplify their impact. Instead of only recruiting residents with a preestablished interest in climate mitigation and adaptation, Slater brings people from different backgrounds and beliefs into the fold. She explains, “the number one reason why people join is to get to know their neighbors... there’s a hunger for that kind of community-building.” And it works. Using the strategy of gathering neighbors to take action and formulate plans for sustainability and disaster preparation, she found that “we lower carbon about 30 percent per household when they go to the program” (S. Slater, personal communication, December 15, 2021).

⁷ Alejandra Warren Interview, November 9, 2021.

⁸ Alejandra Warren Interview, November 9, 2021.

⁹ Lauren Weston Interview, September 1, 2021.

¹⁰ See Acterra’s website, which includes actions that people can take by category, for example, elected officials, municipal staff, or residents: <https://www.acterra.org/code-red/#Individual>.

Another way to bring people into the fold is to call upon their memories and past experiences with more sustainable ways of life. Working with Latinx communities in the Peninsula, many of whom are from parts of Central and South America, Alejandra Warren of Plastic Free Future has found that people have cultural connections with sustainable practices. She told me, “I’m from South America, so I know the way we live our life there is a little bit different. We have a lot less access to cheap plastic because everything is more expensive there.” When she talks to fellow community members, they recognize this same feeling and say, “Yeah, that’s the way I used to live, and I can go back to that and it’s more kind to my family and to nature, to the planet” (A. Warren, personal communication, November 9, 2021). In this way, Warren builds on preexisting beliefs and experiences about disposability and environmental stewardship (Tarrow, 1994). She also confirms the value of protecting their shared neighborhood, East Palo Alto (Small, 2004). Because Warren is located within this community and has a shared background with many of her fellow residents, she is uniquely positioned to communicate the benefits of behavior change.

CONCLUSION

Behind Americans’ disagreement about climate change are diverse experiences, perspectives, and vocabularies. By highlighting the work of several Bay Area environmental activists and organizers, I demonstrate the importance of emphasizing and mirroring resident priorities. Further, I show that optimism about and, more importantly, effective action on climate change will come from fostering all types of organizations working on the issue from different angles—instead of placing our hopes mainly in the realm of the “elites.” Rather than bemoaning the lack of consensus on climate change impacts and actions, we should focus our scholarly and policymaking energies on meeting people where they are.

REFERENCES

- Adger, W. N., Barnett, J., Chapin, F. S., III, & Ellemore, H. (2011). This must be the place: Underrepresentation of identity and meaning in climate change decision-making. *Global Environmental Politics*, 11(2), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1162/GLEP_a_00051
- Barr, S., Gilg, A., & Shaw, G. (2011). Citizens, consumers, and sustainability: (Re)Framing environmental practice in the age of climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 21(4), 1224–1233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.07.009>
- Hulme, M. (2009). *Why we disagree about climate change: Understanding controversy, inaction, and opportunity*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511841200>
- Hulme, M. (2010). Problems with making and governing global kinds of knowledge. *Global Environmental Change*, 20(4), 558–564. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2010.07.005>
- Levine, A., & Kline, R. (2019). Loss-framed arguments can stifle political activism. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 6(3), 171–179. <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2018.28>
- Madrigal, A. (2021, November 1). *California delegation heads to high stakes UN Climate Summit*. KQED <https://www.kqed.org/forum/2010101886270/california-delegation-heads-to-high-stakes-un-climate-summit>
- McAdam, D. (2017). Social movement theory and the prospects for climate change activism in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20, 189–208. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052615-025801>
- Merry, S. E., & Levitt, P. (2017). The vernacularization of women’s human rights. In S. Hopgood, J. Snyder, & L. Vinjamuri (Eds.), *Human rights futures* (pp. 213–236). Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108147767.009>
- Roth, S. (2022, January 13). *Here’s how California plans to spend \$37 billion fighting climate change*. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/environment/newsletter/2022-01-13/heres-how-california-plans-to-spend-22-billion-fighting-climate-change-boiling-point>
- Small, M. (2004). *Villa Victoria: The transformation of social capital in a Boston barrio*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226762937.001.0001>
- Swyngedouw, E. (2010). Apocalypse forever? Post-political populism and the spectre of climate change. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27(2–3), 213–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409358728>
- Tarrow, S. G. (1994). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wetts, R. (2020). Models and morals: Elite-oriented and value-neutral discourse dominates American organizations’ framings of climate change. *Social Forces*, 98(3), 1339–1369.
- Yale Program on Climate Communication. (2020, September 2). *Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2020*. <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/>