

'What actions should be taken, by whom and how fast': Discourses of Climate Delay

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The article published by Lamb et al. (2020) 'Discourses of climate delay' highlighted that the debate about climate change is no longer dominated by skepticism or outright denial of scientific evidence. Instead of rejecting the reality of climate change to reduce public and political support for climate action, arguments are made for minimal action or that action should be taken by others. They focus on negative social impacts of climate action and raise doubt that mitigation is possible, subsequently delaying any meaningful climate action. The study grouped the most commonly found delay discourses into categories that redirect responsibility, push non-transformative solutions, emphasise the downsides of climate policies, and surrender to climate change. It is important to understand the frequency these discourses are used and their contexts, in order to raise critical awareness in the public of these types of delay arguments and effectively counter their misrepresentation to support necessary urgent climate action and policy implementation.

Redirect Responsibility

One of the most common strategies in climate delay discourse is the redirection of responsibility away from systemic solutions and toward individual actions, in the form of 'individualism.' This discourse places responsibility on personal lifestyle choices, such as having shorter showers or reducing household energy use, rather than on industrial or governmental action that are driving greenhouse gas emissions. One of the most successful campaigns redirecting responsibility to personal consumption was BP's 'know your carbon footprint,' that had individuals consciously consider and calculate their own contribution to carbon emissions, and not that of large organisations such as BP themselves. Although individual behaviour can be important, the discourse obscures the role of powerful actors and organisations. Therefore, greater attention is needed on this framing to be in regards to collective action to produce normative shifts and drive regulation pressure. Similarly, the study found 'whataboutism,' to be a popular discourse in which responsibility is directed to other countries or states, or different industries, perceived to contribute more to global emissions. Arguments tend to highlight the relatively small contribution of their own, instead of larger emitters, justifying their inaction. This discourse often uses the 'free rider' excuse, suggesting that action is pointless unless all individuals undertake action, as others will continue to benefit from the actions of others. Together, these narratives remove proponents from accountability and undermine collective efforts needed for meaningful change.

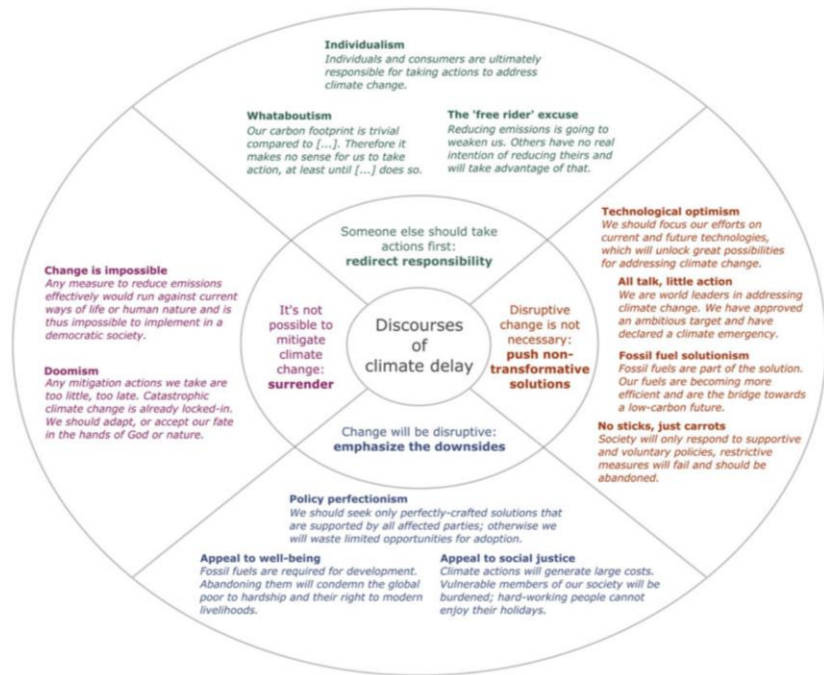


Figure 1. Discourses of Climate Delay. Source: Lamb et al. 2020.

Push Non-Transformative Solutions

The study found that delay discourse often promotes solutions that appear constructive but ultimately avoid the systemic changes required to address climate change effectively. 'Technological optimism' emphasises future innovations as the solution to climate change such as carbon capture technology. This discourse often promoting market-based incentives instead of regulation, and overstates the speed and certainty of breakthroughs. Another strategy for delay is to have 'all talk, little action' in which the definition of success is limited so that one can claim they are committed to climate action, with no real effort to achieving such. The discourse for non-transformative solutions will highlight incremental progress and frame it as sufficient, and subsequently be used as evidence of leadership, even when these efforts fall short of necessary climate action.

Emphasise the Downsides

Climate delay arguments also frequently stress the potential negative consequences of climate policies, and that this burden is greater for society than the consequences of inaction. These narratives focus on economic costs, job losses, or impacts on living standards, suggesting that mitigation efforts may harm society more than climate change itself. This may be framed as an appeal to social justice, especially for lower income communities or developing nations. Additionally, an appeal to wellbeing may be used to promote the idea that climate action and policy threaten living standards and livelihoods. By concentrating on the perceived downsides of climate action, these discourses divert attention from the long-term benefits of mitigation, such as avoided environmental damage, improved public health, and new economic opportunities. They also tend to ignore the possibility of designing inclusive policies that distribute costs and benefits fairly.

Surrender

The last category of climate delay discourses the study found is one that involves framing the narrative as one of resignation or defeat. These arguments question whether mitigation is still achievable, and that political, social or biophysical barriers are insurmountable. The 'change is impossible' discourse argues that ambitious climate policies are unrealistic and destined to fail due to the impingement on society, politics or human nature, encouraging a shift away from mitigation toward minimal or incremental measures. This often surrenders to climate change or adaptation instead of action. Another version, termed 'doomism', claims that catastrophic climate change is already unavoidable and that any efforts to prevent it are futile. This perspective can foster fear and disengagement, leading to paralysis rather than action. By promoting the idea that it is too late to make a difference, surrender based discourses justify inaction and shift focus solely to adaptation, even when mitigation remains both possible and necessary.

Conclusion

The research study conducted affirmed that climate delay discourses have a significant role in weakening support for climate policies and action. By redirecting responsibility, promoting insufficient solutions, emphasising the downsides of action, and/or suggesting that meaningful change is impossible, these dialogues create doubt and hinder progress on meaningful climate action. While they differ from outright denial of climate change, their effect can be similarly obstructive, particularly when combined with other forms of skepticism or misinformation. Recognising these patterns is important for policymakers, scientists, and advocates seeking to enact effective responses to climate change. Addressing the delay discourse requires clearer communication about the urgency of climate change, the feasibility of mitigation, and the potential for fair and inclusive policy solutions. Further research on how they influence certain behaviours and policy preferences would be valuable to develop strategies that protect the public from their intended effects, and to promote climate action.
