

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO CLIMATE ACTION IN THE GLOBAL NORTH: THE POTENTIAL OF USING HUMAN RIGHTS AS A NEW PARADIGM FOR CLIMATE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the role that human rights can play not only as legal instruments to achieve climate justice, but also as practical tools to improve communication of the climate emergency. We do this by explaining how different narratives, values and emotions affect the public's perception of this vital issue. Finally, we propose effective strategies to improve climate communication according to human rights principles and values.

Keywords: Climate emergency, Human Rights, climate justice, climate communication.

INTRODUCTION

While climate change⁴ is one of the greatest challenges of our time and will have devastating effects for human rights across the globe, a general lack of policy ambition persists across regions and countries. The latest report published in 2022 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlights that global warming is already an irreversible process, whose consequences will continue for millennia. At the same time, it advises that emission reduction policies implemented in the next five years, especially by the greatest polluters, will be crucial to mitigate its worst effects. However, despite the strength of the evidence and the magnitude of this challenge, there is a general lack of ambition in the responses of states and their populations. In the Paris Agreement, signed in 2015, state parties agreed to a global commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to keep climate change within the threshold of 1.5 and 2 degrees; however, a close examination of the plans that state parties have presented forecast a rise of around 3 degrees in the next decades (Rogelj *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, *The Emissions Gap Report* published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2021 clearly shows that the lack of ambition of the national climate plans project a global warming of 2.7°C by the end of the century (UNEP, 2021). This scenario would be catastrophic for a large part of human settlements on the planet and will have devastating effects on the realisation of human rights, as well as on other forms of life in the planet.

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⁴ While the term “climate change” refers to the phenomenon of changes in Earth’s climate that can occur as a result of natural or human-induced causes, the term “climate emergency” will be used in this article as it emphasizes the urgent need for action to prevent or slow down climate change and prevent potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it (Oxford Language, 2019).

Nevertheless, this lack of ambition is not only a policy problem, but also a societal matter. Among the population of the Global North, particularly in the EU, there is a persistent action gap *vis-à-vis* this emergency: despite widespread preoccupation with climate change, most people do not act accordingly in their daily lives. In the case of the EU, the majority of the population considers that climate change is a major challenge, and that ambitious action must be taken: according to the 2021 Eurobarometer, 93% of EU citizens consider that climate change is a serious problem and 78% characterize it as “very serious”. Nonetheless, this concern does not translate into relevant action, be it through a significant change in lifestyle habits or support for political options with sensible proposals in line with the best available scientific evidence.

Of course, the magnitude of the climate challenge is enormous: fighting climate change effectively implies the need to radically transform societies, which are largely dependent on hyper-consumption of energy, especially of fossil fuels. To face this emergency, habits closely associated with the Western way of life require a profound reset, including a lesser use of private vehicles and airplanes, a drastic reduction in energy demands linked to homes, a more local diet, and a lower intake of animal products –all habits that are deeply rooted and difficult to change. Faced with these obstacles, inertia prevails and translates into inaction.

Another main reason for the action gap is that climate communication has historically faced misinformation and delaying tactics. The scientific community’s consensus on human-caused climate change has been called into question by the fossil fuel industry and its supporters, raising doubts about the necessity of taking action (Boykoff and Farrell, 2020). This strategy has aimed to protect profits by undermining science credibility: delaying tactics cultivates the idea that immediate action will have a negative economic impact, and therefore builds on legitimate concerns and fears of the public (Lamb et al., 2020). Climate change action has indeed been intentionally opposed by a small number of companies in order to make short-term gains for a few prevail at the long-term expenses of all. As Marquez (2019) explains, some companies’ activities have played an important role in altering the climate, which in turn, have an effect on the worldwide conditions for the enjoyment of human rights. Social media also play a huge role in amplifying misinformation, hindering true information to prevail.

Without neglecting the above-mentioned challenges, this work is based on the premise that a communication problem has historically contributed to this action gap. In recent decades, a relevant body of academic literature has critically analyzed how to narrate the climate emergency, taking into account the discourses that emerge from the media, activists, academia, and citizens. So far, the dominant discourse has been based on science, focusing on the global nature of climate change, and using mainly scientific statistics and facts, which measure its impact on the Earth’s systems. Thus, this body of literature has drawn attention to some of the characteristics shared by most of climate change discourses: a gloomed narrative that seeks to mobilize people by appealing to the fear of a dystopian future on the one hand, and the attempt to convince the general population with data and evidence on the other. It has often been said that the inevitable catastrophist discourse on the impacts of climate change – fully justified, and in a way,

realistic, considering the existing predictions based on the best available scientific evidence – does not seem to be the most appropriate way to engage the general population in demanding more ambitious measures; indeed, it can lead to escapist behaviors, through which people prefer not to face information that is uncomfortable or that causes them concern. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that data have prevailed over emotions in climate communication, thus facilitating the emotional disconnection of the public with this problem.

Therefore, there is considerable room for improving climate communication. In fact, to overcome these communication problems, several alternative paradigms have been proposed in recent years, based on an appropriate use of emotions, such as hope (Gomez & Coombes, 2019; Fredrickson, 1998; Salama & Aboukoura, 2017; Council of Europe, 2017; EU Fundamental Rights Agency, 2018) and an appeal to shared values (Corner *et al.*, 2014; Hornsey *et al.*, 2016; Crompton and Lennon, 2018). In addition, an in-depth reflection has taken place on aspects related to climate communication, such as the use of narrative techniques to better convey the message of the need for urgent action (Arnold, 2018; Gomez and Coombes, 2019; Rodrigo-Alsina, 2020).

Building upon this scholarly work, this paper aims to find ways to contribute to overcoming climate inaction in the Global North through a proposal: the use of human rights as a communication tool. Human rights movements have made important strides in the last 70 years, by fostering emotions such as empathy and compassion and promoting values such as equality and solidarity. Building on this experience, in the last two decades, an increasing number of organizations and activists concerned about the climate emergency have started employing the legal and political tools offered by a human rights-based approach, as shown by the increasing number of climate litigation cases at the national and international levels (UNEP, 2021).

However, the communicative potential of this framework has not been fully explored. Therefore, a specific contribution of this paper is to propose a new climate communication model that borrows from human rights narratives, emotions, and values. The underpinning is that connecting the climate emergency with the human rights discourse should contribute to solving some of the issues related to climate communication, as it would help to move away from the technical debate on climate change and place the questions of human survival, inequality, and justice at its center, without neglecting the impacts on ecosystems and other species. To do so, it explores the literature revolving around the use of narratives, emotions, and values in climate communication.

Against this background, the first section will underline the need for a paradigm shift in climate communication, as it has traditionally rested on some common misunderstandings related to climate inaction. The second section will frame human rights within the context of climate change. It will explore the role played by human rights not only as legal instruments to achieve climate justice, but also as useful communicative tools that contribute to better convey the urgency of closing the climate action gap. Finally, the third and most important section of this paper will elaborate a proposal to apply human rights-based narratives' tools to climate communication.

1. CLIMATE COMMUNICATION: THE NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

As climate communication has traditionally relied on some common misunderstandings related to climate inaction (1.1), it is necessary to rethink its premises. In this respect, three promising areas of research are analyzed: the use of narrative-based techniques, the use of emotions, and the use of values (1.2.). It is purported that these elements may help overcome people's resistance to change their life habits and to get them involved in climate action.

1.1. An introduction to climate communication: common misunderstandings related to climate inaction

Since the 1990s, scholars in the fields of psychology, sociology, and more generally in social sciences, have been researching on how to get people to think and act in response to the climate emergency (Webster and Marshall, 2019). These scholarly works analyze the processes involved in the social construction of the climate change problem, as well as the emotional components and reactions of the public. As evidenced in a literature review on how to communicate climate change by Moser and Dilling (2012), most communicators have made largely erroneous assumptions about society's inaction to fight climate change since this topic acquired political salience at the beginning of the 1990s. These assumptions are mainly threefold: the belief that information is sufficient to generate concern and action; the centrality of fear as a motivating emotion; and the idea that the same message can convince and motivate all types of audiences.

Firstly, the belief that information motivates action rests on the idea that ignorance of the climate change topic is the primary impediment to climate action. It is therefore assumed that understanding the phenomenon is the necessary condition for people to act; the corollary of this assertion is that communication based on more information and better explanations of the problem would serve to increase social action. Nowadays, it is well-known that the way in which people adopt changes in their behavior depends on the interaction of several factors, including embodied values, prioritization of needs, situational context, social structures, perceived costs, and social pressure (Meira Cartea, 2008: 67). Thus, there is now agreement upon the fact that the acquisition of knowledge alone does not necessarily imply that people will act accordingly (Peacock, 2006).

Secondly, another assumption is based on the idea that fear in the face of catastrophes and potential disasters can motivate action. However, as discussed in the third part of this paper, fear-based appeals can be counterproductive and contribute to climate apathy and inaction.

Thirdly, mass communication is believed to be the most effective tool for mobilization. However, the media have limited capacity to tailor messages to specific audiences, and such one-way widely-directed communication can be perceived as exclusionary. In contrast, it has been pointed out that interpersonal communication or communication tailored to specific groups, whether face-to-face or via the internet, can be more persuasive. Consequently, a creative mix of audience-specific messages, or "retail communication", has been identified

as more cost-effective than mass communication that does not specifically target anyone (Moser and Dilling, 2012). Therefore, better understanding the audience and tailoring messages to different audiences, a process called segmentation, can help identify the most appropriate messages that will most strongly influence different kinds of people.

In order to overcome these assumptions about climate inaction, several alternative paradigms have been proposed in the last decade.

1.2. Relevant areas of research: narratives, emotions, and values

Several authors have proposed “new” or “alternative” climate communication paradigms based on the use of narrative techniques (Arnold, 2018; Gomez and Coombes, 2019; Rodrigo-Alsina, 2020), positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998; Salama and Aboukoura, 2017; Gomez and Coombes, 2019), and an appeal to shared values (Corner et al., 2014; Hornsey et al., 2016; Crompton and Lennon, 2018). These approaches share some common elements, such as using a type of communication that puts a human face on data and predictions, and which is more focused on the concrete impacts on communities and ecosystems. The main contributions of these approaches are examined and discussed below.

The use of narratives

It is well-established that storytelling is a central characteristic of human communication. Thus, when communicating, human beings tend to transform events and perceptions into coherent narratives. Generally speaking, narratives are defined as a certain way of telling related stories or events in a manner that is intended to “form a ‘common sense’ understanding of phenomena” (Gomez and Coombes, 2019). More concretely, narratives are considered as discourses, second-order realities, that interpret certain phenomena, considered as first-order realities (Rodrigo-Alsina, 2020, p. 103). In the field of climate change, the first-order reality is the scientific consensus and the set of empirical data about its existence. The second-order reality is the discourse that interprets and communicates on such data (2020, p. 103). As a result, climate change narratives encompass denial among conservative groups, technical discourses based on scientific evidence, and alarmist discourses that compel to take action, all with very different political objectives.

According to the literature, the main benefits of communicating climate through the use of narratives are twofold. On the one hand, it makes it possible to identify the presence or absence of the typical components of a story –such as an initial situation, a conflict or complication, reactions, a resolution, and a denouement– and to identify different actors or narrative characters (heroes, villains, victims) (Fløttum and Gjerstad, 2016). On this topic, Arnold (2018) empirically studied the effects of different narrative resources on climate communication, stressing that the boundaries among roles should be permeable and thus allow for evolution from one role to another. In this way, both victims and villains can become heroes through climate action.

On the other hand, these narratives are relevant for their ability to propose powerful imaginative worlds in the form of past scenarios as well as future perspectives. This is

a fundamental aspect to overcome the reactive component often enshrined in climate activism. While it is important to react to denialist narratives or narratives that minimize the magnitude of climate change, the ability to propose responses and present viable alternatives that offer positive future scenarios in case of more ambitious climate action is essential.

The use of emotions

Abundant research has shown that data-based narratives do not necessarily fulfill their objectives and should also resort to emotions and values in order to be effective (Lakoff, 2010; Crompton, 2010; Corner et al, 2014). Similarly, according to Roeser, “emotions might be the missing link in effective communication” (2012, p. 1033) - as they are necessary to convey to the public the moral and ethical impacts of climate change, as well as to instigate motivation and, consequently, action. As Salama and Aboukoura (2017) argue, recognizing the role that emotions and feelings play in the way we understand climate change is key, particularly to better know what motivates the audience to behave in certain ways and what might inspire them to change their behavior.

However, there is less agreement in the relevant literature regarding the types of emotions that are more effective in pushing climate action. In fact, there is a vivid debate about the role that negative emotions, such as fear or guilt, can play in climate communication. According to some views, negative emotions, such as anger or fear, make people alert and therefore more aware of the issues that generate these emotions; this may also lead them to seek more information (Baron et al., 1994), to transform apathy or indifference into perceived importance, and therefore to engage them towards action.

Likewise, some scholars stress that emotions such as anger and indignation may be more efficient with some specific types of audiences. For example, Kleres and Wettergren (2017) contend that indignation and anger linked to the attribution of responsibility for climate change to the Global North are mobilizing emotions for Global South activists. Similarly, according to Knops (2021), indignation is central to the discourse of Greta Thunberg and the #FridaysForFuture movement; specifically, this author suggests that outrage towards injustices that underlie the lack of climate action and compassion for those affected can inspire mobilization.

In contrast, Salama and Aboukoura (2017) consider that the elicitation of emotions should be managed carefully, bearing in mind that these might have the opposite effect to the one intended. In fact, the intensification of negative emotions can backfire, as fear and anxiety may lead to avoidance behaviors and defensive denial (Salama and Aboukoura, 2017), pushing people to look the other way and to lose interest in the topic.

Moreover, there is an interesting stream of literature pointing at the usefulness of positive emotions such as hope in climate communication. Indeed, Markowitz and Shariff (2012) recommend that communicators base their speeches on the use of positive emotions such as hope, pride, and gratitude, rather than negative emotions such as guilt, shame, and anxiety. In addition, Randall and Brown highlight that there are more mobilizing emotions

than guilt, such as: “(T)he empathy for others, a sense of relatedness to the rest of the natural world, and a proportionate sense of responsibility” (2015: 13). Thus, the use of positive emotions must be considered when involving people in issues that challenge them and, consequently, in the social movements that promote them.

Nonetheless, it should be stressed that appeals to positive emotions, such as hope, should not fall into the so-called *hopium* (Salamon and Gage, 2020), a neologism combining the words hope and opium, which expresses the problem of confusing the hope necessary to initiate any action with blind faith that technological innovation or similar solutions will come along and save humanity. Similarly, as Crompton and Kasser (2009) observe, knowing the negative effects of using emotions such as fear does not mean that communicators should sugar-coat the scale of the multiple and devastating impacts that are expected, now and in the future. Instead, they argue that it is important to fully disseminate an understanding of such impacts, but this should probably be done in a way that is not deliberately designed to stimulate fear.

The use of values

In addition to emotions, values play a fundamental role in climate communication, as they are one of the aspects that explain mobilization and attitudes towards this challenge. Indeed, according to Hornsey et al. (2016), along with worldviews and political affiliations, values are among the main determinants of people’s responses to climate change.

Values are defined as principles that characterize something that is important for an individual or a social group (Rokeach M., 1979). Some of them have a universal character and are present in different human cultures. In this respect, authors such as Schwartz (1992) have identified several basic universal values (benevolence, universalism, hedonism, tradition, etc.), which are present in all human societies, although there are differences in how they are hierarchised. Furthermore, these universal values are closely linked to the types of motivation that explain people’s behavior (Schwartz, 1992). For example, people whose primary motivation is conservation –to perpetuate social structures and maintain their position and status within them– will attach more importance to values such as security, tradition, or conformity to group rules. In contrast, people who are more concerned with self-transcendence –that is, going beyond their own personal interests and seeking psychological well-being through doing what they believe is right– will identify more strongly with values such as benevolence or universalism and aspire to a world with greater social justice and equality.

A similar theory by Deci and Ryan (2002) is also based on the organization of a set of values considered universal into two types of motivations: intrinsic and extrinsic. According to these authors, people driven by intrinsic motivations tend to prioritize subjective aspects in their behavior, such as the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and are related to values such as personal growth, social connection, and contribution to the community. On the other hand, people driven by extrinsic incentives are motivated by external, often material, aspects that require the admiration and recognition of others, such as success, popularity, or beauty.

Of these two poles, the value category that most positively influences climate action is self-transcendent/intrinsic values, such as universalism or benevolence (Brown and Kasser, 2005; Jia et al., 2017). People who identify with intrinsic motivations and self-transcendent values are more likely to care about the climate emergency and act accordingly. Conversely, people who have more hierarchical and individualistic views –and thus identify with self-promoting/extrinsic values– attach less importance to environmental risks, and in particular to the climate emergency (Corner et al., 2014).

Therefore, this evidence suggests that basing climate communication on self-transcendent/intrinsic values may be more effective to connect with people that already identify with those sets of values. In fact, several experimental-based studies show that a type of climate communication aimed at reinforcing self-transcendent/intrinsic values (highlighting, for example, the intrinsic value of nature) are more effective in generating pro-environmental behaviors than extrinsic value-based communication (which emphasize, for example, the monetary value of environmental services) (Corner et al., 2014).

However, as always, it is also important to preach beyond the already converted, which in this case would mean to try to also reach a general audience, including the people that are not necessarily identified with intrinsic values. In this sense, beyond targeting people that already share them, it is also necessary to propose a change of values that pushes consumer societies towards sufficiency or frugality (Alcott, 2008; Roiland, 2016). This implies a behavior of restraint, i.e., consuming what is necessary rather than what is possible, assessing needs, and thus decreasing the conventional levels of consumption in affluent societies. Thus, considering that extrinsic values are central in the individualistic and consumerist societies of the Global North, climate communicators should also promote a change of values in the general population, which is not an easy task but more likely to happen under particular conditions. For instance, shifts from extrinsic to intrinsic motivations have been documented at specific periods of life, particularly during youth (Sheldon, 2005).

The possibility of societal value change is supported also by the relevant body of studies that distinguishes between “needs” and “needs satisfiers”. Building on the differences between human needs, which are universal and limited, and needs satisfiers, which are culturally and historically dependent (Max-Neef, 1991), transformative possibilities for value change open in affluent societies. Put differently, critically analyzing satisfiers in these societies can lead to finding different ways of fulfilling the real needs of people (Brand-Correa and Steinberger, 2022), without disregarding the needs of non-humans (Jolibert et al, 2011).

To sum up, examining the role of values in environmental communication reaffirms the idea that climate narratives should be rethought. As argued by Daniels and Endfield (2009), in order to be effective and to trigger changes towards sustainability in the behavior of the wider population climate change narratives need a radical paradigm shift. In the following section, the role played by human rights is examined.

2. HUMAN RIGHTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE: TOWARDS A CONVERGENCE PATH

It is now well-established that climate change represents one of the greatest threats to the enjoyment and realisation of human rights (2.1.). In response to this scourge, the evolution of human rights law should reflect the need to satisfy human basic needs while respecting planetary boundaries (2.2.). The convergence between climate change and human rights at the legal and policy levels therefore constitute an interesting development that should be reflected and debated in the context of climate communication.

2.1. Human rights in the climate struggle

International interest in the links between climate change and human rights is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has only been since the early 2000s that, in the face of slow progress in addressing climate change, several processes have been initiated to understand, highlight, and build on these links (Limon, 2009). Since then, groups affected by climate impacts around the world have creatively resorted to human rights tools.

Human rights law has integrated climate change concerns starting from 2008, with the adoption of the Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/RES/7/23. Since then, different UN bodies have published several resolutions and reports that deepen this interaction. For example, they have recognized the negative impact of climate change on extreme poverty (A/HRC/41/39), the right to food (A/70/287), the right to decent housing (A/64/255), the rights of indigenous peoples (A/HCR/36/46), or the rights of migrants (CNCDH, 2021, 8).

Moreover, the most recent developments regarding the connection between human rights and the environment now converge in the growing recognition of the right to a healthy environment, which is also understood as a means to catalyze the negative impacts of climate change on human rights. In fact, even though it is not enshrined in a universal legally binding document, the Human Rights Council resolution 48/13 –later endorsed by the General Assembly on 28 July 2022– recognised the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a human right for the first time in the international arena. This normative progress has been accompanied by an important institutional development, as the Human Rights Council also created a special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change through the adoption of resolution 48/14.

Despite this convergence, important challenges remain, as some areas still require further clarification. Indeed, the structure of human rights protection systems is not necessarily adapted to the phenomenon of climate change (Perruso, 2021: 244). Human rights are based on a specific holder, a specific object, and a person responsible, making it difficult to identify direct and clear violations of human rights due to the impacts of climate change. Nevertheless, this difficulty can turn into an advantage if these elements can indeed be identified. The victims of climate change-based human rights violations may then seek reparation, thus materializing the problem and relate it to a human face (Atapattu, 2016: 49-50). In this regard, one of the ways currently under development

consists precisely in bringing cases before the courts for violations of human rights derived from climate change –starting from the Urgenda case in the Netherlands to the Neubauer *et al.* case in Germany, while interesting cases involving the youth and elderly women are still pending before the European Court of Human Rights– thus obliging to rethink the notion of victim of human rights, legal standing, and access to justice in this context.

2.2. Human rights in the Anthropocene: limits and sufficiency

Despite the role that human rights play nowadays in the climate struggle, the classical conception of human rights as a human being's aspiration for a better life should be reconceptualized in the context of the Anthropocene, a period which is characterized precisely by the catastrophic impacts of humans on the biosphere. In fact, as human rights were developed before the current level of ecological overshoot and in a period characterized by the abundance of natural resources, there is a need to reformulate these rights and to adapt them to the present context, in line with the scholarship that studies the relationship between human rights and the environment/climate change. According to key proponents within this scholarship, human rights have the potential to “humanize” the Anthropocene and lean towards an ecocentric approach; however, to do so, it is necessary to move away from the human rights model inherited from the Enlightenment period and to adopt an approach that also includes the ecological perspective (Kotzé, 2014).

In the current context, it is particularly important to include the concept of “planetary boundaries” within the notion of limits to human rights. The international bill of human rights reached completion in the mid-1960s, before the celebration of the Stockholm conference in 1972, which marked the irruption of environmental concerns in the international policy arena. Therefore, the human rights protection system established by that bill includes some specific limits (such as public order), which can justify the restriction of rights, but excluded any reference to any kind of environmental limit that could impose constraints on human rights. Significantly, the 1966 human rights covenants precede the publication of the *Limits to Growth* report that, for the first time, tried to raise awareness about the constraints of the development process.

Much more recently, Kate Raworth's model of “doughnut economics” (2017) significantly tries to reconcile human rights and freedoms with the notion of environmental limits, conceptualized in terms of “planetary boundaries” by the Stockholm Resilience Centre (Rockström *et al.* 2009). This model aims at ensuring that no one lacks access to basic goods and services (such as food and housing, but also expressing a political voice), while ensuring that humans do not trespass planetary boundaries, including global warming (Raworth 2017). Therefore, and although this model has been criticized for being techno-optimist as well as for underestimating the role of capital accumulation and consumerism in modern economies (Spash 2021: 18), her delimitation of a “safe and just space” for humanity's development remains a very useful conceptual tool that still inspires new research in the area.

Thus, as it calls for the world's countries to achieve minimum thresholds in social welfare while remaining within planetary boundaries, this model highlights a crucial issue

in the context of climate justice debates: how to guarantee social rights while reducing emissions. In fact, expanding on this approach, further supported by subsequent empirical research based on this model (O'Neill et al., 2018), it is argued that human rights should be considered as minimum thresholds for the protection of human dignity on a planet with biophysical limits. This consideration has significant implications for climate policies, as considering the limited carbon budget, fulfilling human rights in the Global South while reducing global emissions would imply a drastic reduction of emissions in the Global North. To illustrate this, Henry Shue's distinction between "substance emissions" and "luxury emissions" (1993) may be useful, as he addressed the issue of what a fair allocation of the costs of preventing global warming would be. According to this view, energy transition policies should focus on cutting "luxury emissions" first, which are mostly associated with overconsumption in the Global North. In line with this idea, Rao and Baer (2012) have addressed the complex issue of establishing a minimum level of emissions linked to the satisfaction of minimum standards to guarantee a decent standard of living; to do so, they take into account not only individual access to basic goods or services –such as adequate nutrition, housing, refrigeration or even a mobile phone–, but also the provision by the State of basic infrastructures.

As mentioned previously, sufficiency should be included in the list of values already promoted by human rights, and combating income inequality should be put in the list of human rights-based policy tools. Actually, this paper intends to suggest that human rights can also be useful in operationalising the concept of sufficiency: in particular, economic, social, and cultural rights set minimum standards that aim to cover people's basic needs for survival, such as food, clean water, housing, health care, and education. They also cover social and cultural issues related to participation in the workplace, public services, and the proper development of family and cultural life. Thus, translating Kate Raworth's model of the doughnut economy to the human rights framework would mean that these rights form the inner ring, or the minimum threshold of basic needs below which no person should fall, while planetary boundaries form the outer ring, imposing maximum thresholds on their enjoyment. Consequently, this would imply also tackling global inequality: as Hickel recently suggested (2019), in a world where limits are being surpassed and where global growth is not an adequate strategy for ending poverty, satisfying basic human rights requires significant reductions in global income inequality. More concretely, he proposes policy options such as capping global GDP and then shifting a portion of it from the global rich to the global poor.

As a final point of thought, it is important to consider the implication of using concepts - such as human rights or the paradigm of doughnut economics - that are deeply anthropocentric, as they focus on humans needs. Therefore, including an ecocentric perspective in the contemporary human rights paradigm, as defended by Kotzé (2014), also implies going beyond the intrinsic anthropocentrism of human rights, which situates the human species and its needs as the center. Contrary to the view that lies behind the current ecological crisis, ecocentrism emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and the web of life it supports. Thus, in the context of the Anthropocene and considering the damages that human beings are doing to the biosphere, a contemporary consideration of human rights should highlight the responsibility that human beings have *vis-à-vis* the rest of the

living world (Kotzé, 2014: 256). Therefore, empathy for other human beings should be extended also to other living creatures and the ecosystems that support them.

3. HUMAN RIGHTS IN CLIMATE COMMUNICATION: A PROPOSAL

Examining further the connection between human rights and climate change may be useful too in the context of climate communication. However, even though such connection is now well-established in the legal field and the United Nations have recommended a human rights-based approach to climate action, the use of human rights language and narratives remains understudied in the field of climate communication. One example is the lack of empirical research delving into the relationship between human rights support and climate change beliefs/concern, even though it is essential to understand whether a rights-based response would indeed receive widespread public support (Athy et al, 2022).

Despite that gap, there are good reasons to think that this avenue is worth exploring. On the one hand, apart from the literature explored in this paper, the well-developed literature about framing in the area of climate change points at the need to go beyond the scientific discourse—global scale, scientific statistics and facts, and impact on the Earth's systems—and move to a social discourse—local scale, impact on humans, and connections to social, economic, and political processes—which is more likely to inspire action (Busch, 2016). On the other hand, there are already empirical studies in the field of social psychology that have established correlations between support for human rights and climate change beliefs, such as a prominent study based on evidence from New Zealand. More concretely, the evidence underlined a bidirectional relationship between support for certain rights on one side, such as the rights to food, clothing, housing, and medicine, and climate change beliefs/concern on the other (Athy et al, 2022). Therefore, it seems that the use of human rights in climate communication is, at least, worth exploring.

In order to develop the possible synergies between the human rights and the climate emergency discourse, this section attempts to explore how a human rights approach to climate communication would look like in practice. To this end, and having in mind the importance of limiting the intrinsic anthropocentrism of the human rights paradigm, the following communicative proposal is based on a conception of human rights as minimum thresholds for the protection of human dignity on a planet with biophysical limits that encompasses others forms of life that should be preserved and treasured. More concretely, this proposal revolves around four main axes: a series of narrative resources (3.1.); a set of values, such as dignity, justice, solidarity, and sufficiency, which emerge from both human rights and the behavioral restraint that would be required by living within limits (3.2.); the use of emotions such as hope and empathy with other humans and other species, as well as fostering connection with the natural world (3.3.); and a vision of a fairer future for all people (3.4.).

3.1. A range of narrative resources: victims, perpetrators, and agents of change

Human rights-based narratives present some characteristics that may be useful when communicating about climate change. First, they provide a vision of the world and

society grounded in human dignity and equality (OHCHR, 2019), which helps to establish a transformative vision of the future that both empowers citizens as agents of change and identifies injustices to be fought against.

Moreover, such narratives seek to promote human rights-inspired values and principles in a cross-cutting manner (Council of Europe - CoE, 2017). In this sense, both the ends and the means used must respect the values derived from human rights, such as the dignity of human life, equality among human beings, and the pursuit of justice and solidarity. According to the CoE, a human rights-based narrative must promote equality, respect and solidarity, the understanding of the principle of human dignity, as well as critical thinking, fair dialogue and correct information.

In addition, human rights-based narratives focus on human beings, their experiences, their needs, and possible actions to address these situations (NESRI, 2015). They tell human stories that recipients can identify and empathize with. These narratives can therefore help frame climate change as a story of human suffering and of loss of the cultures and ecosystems on which life depends. In contrast to some environmentalist narratives based on the idea of “saving the planet”, this would show that the impacts of the climate emergency are primarily a human problem, without losing sight of the impacts on other species and ecosystems. On this issue, it is important to present climate activism as a quest for justice that seeks to ensure human dignity and the balance of the ecosystems on which the lives of people and other species depend, while defending the intrinsic value of nature beyond the resources it provides.

Central to this task is telling human stories that connect audiences to realities close to home or situations they can empathize with. One effective way to overcome the uncertainty linked to the climate emergency is to effectively tell human stories about the people affected by the climate emergency (and how those people are acting to cope with it), moving from treating climate change as a scientific reality to treating it as a social reality (Corner et al., 2014). This proposal also echoes the communicative strategies developed by Webster and Marshall (2019), in which they highlight the need for storytelling, as well as explaining actions taken to address the climate emergency in order to lead by example.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, using a narrative-based perspective makes it possible to identify the presence or absence of the typical components in a story. Yet, as the roles of the different actors are permeable, villains, rather than being ostracized, should be held accountable, both morally and legally, in line with human rights values and obligations. Likewise, portraying victims as disempowered actors is to be avoided. For instance, a human-right based narrative that highlights the causes and responsibilities of the climate emergency should include a focus on how and why fossil fuel corporations have delayed and opposed climate action for years. Including such a perspective would put a name and face on those who violated human rights on a global scale by prioritizing economic gain for few Northern countries (Boykoff and Farrell, 2020; Oreskes and Conway, 2010).

In relation to their protagonists, human rights-based narratives seek to transform societies to fit the promoted project of society, thereby turning citizens into agents of

change (NESRI, 2015). People are empowered as rights holders, able to claim their rights and hold authorities accountable. People are not only victims; they are also the drivers of change. Thus, the existence of shared values grounded in a common vision of a just society can unite people in a collective action that seeks to remedy existing injustices in a given system (NESRI, 2015). In this respect, encouraging people's participation, a central element in the human rights perspective, is crucial: participation, discussion, and contribution to the formulation of responses can make the problem more relatable than it is today (Moser and Dilling, 2012).

Finally, emphasizing a common core of values as a founding element of collective action helps to foster a sense of belonging to a community, so that it is not necessary to be a direct victim in order to take action. Accordingly, human rights become tools available to anyone who wishes to improve the current situation (Gomez and Coombes, 2019). According to the findings of an experimental study on human rights narratives, the most successful and enduring narratives are based on the examples of people who have fought for human rights (Gomez and Coombes, 2019). In fact, the stories of the struggle of figures such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, among many others, were an important piece in the success of human rights movements in the XXth century. It is therefore crucial to make the struggles of people fighting against the climate emergency visible and to protect human rights in a context of environmental change and energy transition.

Consequently, human rights narratives are not limited to a 'passive' dimension of human rights as subjective rights of individuals, but they also seek to use human rights in their active dimension, as instruments that enable the desired change to be achieved (Gomez and Coombes, 2019) –for example, by holding protests, calling politicians, bringing cases before courts, etc.

3.2. An appropriate use of emotions: empathy and hope

In the context of climate communication, a human rights approach is particularly useful to put a human face to victims, to concretize its impacts on people's daily lives, and, *in fine*, to convey positive emotions such as empathy or hope.

Indeed, human rights are based, both empirically and conceptually, on the natural capacity of human beings for empathy (von Harbou, 2014). Empathy is a central emotion in human rights discourses; thanks to its universal character, it is concerned with the violations of all people's rights on the planet. At the same time, human rights narratives tell human stories both to raise awareness and to foster empathy.

Moreover, the human rights movement is underpinned by hope for a better world. In recent years, in response to the surge of authoritarian populist movements, human rights groups and organizations have shifted towards positive, hope-based communication techniques (Gomez and Coombes, 2019). Similar to the situation in climate communication, positive communication may seem quite counter-intuitive in human rights communication, which relies on denouncing injustices and abuses. However, according to Gomez and Coombes,

in the current media context, and in the face of the onslaught of authoritarian populist movements, the traditional approach of ‘naming and shaming’ has become ineffective. They therefore propose to respond to the narratives of these movements, based on fostering a climate of controversy, crisis, and social conflict, with human rights-based narratives focused on fostering hope for a better world through culture, cooperation, and community. However, as mentioned above, a communication that appeals to hope must not fall into *hopium*: hope comes through urgent action on climate change and social mobilization.

While it is a good idea to base communication on positive emotions such as empathy and hope, this does not mean that the evocation of negative emotions should be completely avoided. As mentioned earlier, the key to using emotions is the ability to adapt a speech to each audience, as sometimes negative emotions such as fear, indignation, or anger can also contribute to motivating action. It should nonetheless be recalled that, if a discourse is aimed at a general audience, overusing emotions such as fear or guilt can be counterproductive.

Similarly, in relation to guilt, rather than encouraging guilt among the audience for not doing enough in the face of the climate emergency, it may be more fruitful to focus on the concept of responsibilities, which is also key in the human rights discourse. Authors such as Escrivà (2020: 87) stress that it is more desirable to call for responsible behavior than not to try to make the audience feel guilty. According to him, it is also necessary to delimit guilt, responsibility, and moral duty, and to identify the collectives that bear the greatest responsibility due to their impact in terms of emissions –be they specific states, particular groups of people, or organized actors such as companies. Again, the human rights framework can help to pinpoint those actors who, by failing to reduce their emissions, are responsible for the human rights violations derived from climate change, while also highlighting their obligations.

3.3. Values: dignity, equality, justice, solidarity and sufficiency

Human rights-based narratives aim to establish a worldview based on shared values, which can bring about transformative change (NESRI, 2015). Human rights values rest on the concepts of universality and humanity shared by all people. These values are therefore the dignity of human life, equality among human beings, and the pursuit of justice and solidarity. This set of values constitutes a core that transcends borders and with which people anywhere in the world can identify.

Similarly, at a conceptual level, human rights express a minimum standard of morality, which implies an altruistic motivation (von Harbou, 2014). Thus, these values are shared by groups that identify with intrinsic and self-transcendent values, which, as mentioned above, positively influence the corresponding action-taking in the fight against climate change (Corner et al., 2014). This core set of common values should therefore be taken into consideration when promoting more effective climate communication strategies that follow a human rights perspective.

However, an important value should be added to this common set: sufficiency. As discussed before, with a limited carbon budget for human societies, fulfilling basic

human rights in the global South implies a considerable reduction of energy and material demands in the global North. Thus, sufficiency and frugality should be included as human rights values.

3.4. A vision of a future society

As indicated above, narratives are relevant for their ability to propose powerful imagined worlds in the form of past scenarios as well as future perspectives. In addition to the emphasis on just solutions, it is crucial to create a collective narrative in which reducing emissions is worth trying.

These values underpin a certain vision of the world, more just and egalitarian, which is used as an ideal to be achieved and predisposes to awareness. Human rights have the potential to “bring people together in solidarity”, generating a sense of belonging “that transforms a cause into something historic, transcendental and inevitable” (Gomez and Coombes, 2019). In this sense, collective action is organized around a vision of what a just society should be, rather than what is politically possible. This horizon of justice then allows to move from defensive claims to proactive claims seeking to create political space for change (NESRI, 2015). With regards to climate change, it means promoting narratives that propose a horizon where emissions reductions are not only possible, but also benefit society as a whole.

In order to achieve collective action, human rights narratives therefore put the focus on the human needs that require action by authorities, with the long-term goal of a just society (NESRI, 2015). In the context of climate change, it means highlighting the impacts of climate change on human rights, such as the right to life of present and future generations, or the rights to health, food, water, and housing. It also entails underlining the special needs of the groups most vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change, from a social and global justice perspective.

In this regard, the use of human rights narratives in the field of the climate emergency makes it possible to connect with other social movements, which are mobilized by common values (equality, solidarity, justice) such as feminist or equality-based movements. The use of these narratives that move beyond the environmental framework facilitates the dissemination of the message. Indeed, once these other social movements appropriate such a message and disseminate it on their respective platforms, they are able to reach wider sectors of the population.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to explore the potential of human rights-based narratives and discourses in climate communication. In this respect, despite the convergence of the human rights and climate change discourses in the legal and policy fields, the contribution of the human rights language and values to climate communication has been so far understudied. Building on the most relevant literature in the field of social and environmental psychology, this proposal intended to help closing this gap.

Of course, climate inaction is a problem that transcends the sphere of communication: the resistance of the population and of political and economic actors is tenacious. On this issue, it cannot be ignored that effective climate action that would drastically and rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions would imply the total transformation of the economic system, as it is based on an unprecedented energy voracity in the history of humanity. Furthermore, in a context characterized by pressure from a great variety of powerful actors to delay responses to this emergency, climate communication occurs in an environment loaded with contradictory messages and self-serving information. In this context, it is critical to communicate the urgency to act decisively and the feasibility of policy responses, but only if they are based on a substantial reduction of energy demands and a significant change in societal values; it is therefore equally important to promote sufficiency and frugality among the population. The challenge is not trivial: the window of opportunity is closing, and the decisions adopted in the next five years could determine impacts that will be felt in human communities and other living beings for generations to come.

Although using a human rights approach does not solve the many problems of climate communication, the view defended in this paper is that some of the concepts and processes underlying this approach can be useful and eventually lead to developing new common solutions. Thus, besides a series of legal tools, human rights also provide a series of concepts, emotions, and values that may be of interest for climate communication. In this sense, it seems crucial to communicate the current and expected impacts of climate change in human terms and, therefore, to give visibility to its effects on people's ability to maintain their current livelihoods and their cultures in the future. This also makes it possible to propose fair responses based on responsibility, in accordance with the climate justice framework.

On the other hand, this work further echoes the criticism of using human rights, due to the anthropocentrism inherent in its formulation, among other aspects. For this reason, in the current context, we defend the need to adequately weigh these rights and reformulate them in order to situate them in a framework in which people's subsistence emissions can be guaranteed, respecting both minimum thresholds –for guaranteeing basic needs– and maximum thresholds –in this case of emissions– that should not be exceeded. As a logical corollary to this approach, it seems crucial to place inequality and the necessary redistribution in the access to the Earth's abundant resources –particularly between the Global North and the Global South– at the center of the debate. Likewise, it is also vital to reflect on the impact of climate change on other species and extend the empathy with other affected humans to these fellow living creatures.

Finally, another conclusion of this work is to underline the extreme complexity of its object of study: climate communication is a multifaceted and complex field in continuous development, and therefore a challenging matter on which to communicate and explain. In this regard, it is fair to recognize that effective communication is not just about alternative content, but also a matter of access to the media, audience reach and, of course, the resources of the actors involved. Therefore, against this background, the role of science and academia should be highlighted, as it is necessary to advance research on issues such as the roles that emotions, values, and identity play in climate communication. More empirical studies are needed to examine the potential of human rights narratives

for climate communication, focusing particularly on how different social groups would perceive those narratives. This would help the concerned institutions, social movements, and activists to adapt their messages to each audience and frame the topics in the most effective way, enhancing and maximizing their impact.

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