How Local Governments Respond to and Communicate About Climate Change

Jessica Reid  
Adviser: Dr. Kathleen Gray  
Readers: Dr. Miyuki Hino and Ms. Lauren Thie  
Senior Honors Thesis  
UNC Chapel Hill Environment, Energy, & Ecology Program

Research Questions

1. How do NC local government employees describe the ways they communicate with residents about climate initiatives?  
2. To what extent do NC local government employees seek and respond to resident input about climate initiatives?  
3. How do NC local government employees describe successful climate initiatives with public engagement?

Methods

• IRB review and exemption  
• 12 semi-structured Zoom interviews with sustainability professionals from local governments in NC

Introduction

Scientific consensus from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): climate change is happening and caused by humans (IPCC Summary for Policymakers, 2018)

Recommendations from Climate Outreach’s guide for IPCC authors to communicate findings (Climate Outreach’s Principles for effective communication and public engagement on climate change, 2018):

• Be a confident communicator  
• Talk about the real world, not abstract ideas  
• Connect with what matters to the audience  
• Tell a human story  
• Lead with what you know  
• Use the most effective visual communication

Findings

Question 1

• 7 participants (58%) reported using framing to appeal to audiences - ex. saving money and improving public health  
• 2 participants (17%) mentioned partnering with community leaders to overcome mistrust of local government

Question 2

• When asked how they respond to residents who want to support climate initiatives, 4 (33%) mentioned transportation and 3 (25%) mentioned waste  
• 3 participants (25%) heard few or no misconceptions about climate change  
• 9 participants shared misconceptions expressed to them about climate change

Question 3

• Factors that participants identified as leading to successful initiatives responding to climate change with public engagement: funding options (50%), metrics (42%), and partnerships (25%)  
• Barriers to these initiatives: COVID-19 (75%), money (67%), and utilities (17%)

Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPCC Strategy</th>
<th>Number of Local Governments</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk about the real world, not abstract ideas</td>
<td>10 (83%)</td>
<td>The two local governments not included were large/central and small/coastal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect with what matters to your audience</td>
<td>7 (58%)</td>
<td>All were in western or central regions of NC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the most effective visual communication</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>This local government is in the central Piedmont region and the smallest local government in study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations for Local Governments

• Follow IPCC communications strategies, like using visual communication  
• Partner with community-identified leaders to overcome mistrust  
• Have dedicated funding, metrics to show progress toward goals, and community/state partnerships to implement successful climate initiatives

Contact: jcreid@live.unc.edu