Misinformation leads to misperception, polarisation causing delay in climate action: IPCC report

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- *As social movements targeting climate change and sustainability have been rising, there has also been a rise of political conservatism and populism as well as growth in misinformation, noted the IPCC report, the largest global assessment of climate change.*
- *Public misperception of climate risks and polarised public support for climate action is delaying urgent adaptation planning and implementation, noted the report.*
- *In India, more than misinformation, it is partial or lack of information that is problematic.*

Climate misinformation can jeopardise climate action and weaken public demand for mitigation and adaptation measures, notes the IPCC's sixth assessment report (AR6), the largest global assessment of the impacts of climate change and the strategies to adapt to it.

The IPCC Working Group III (WG III) report, released last week, noted that there has been a marked increase in civic and private engagement with climate governance. But the development of climate governance is influenced by a broad group including a range of both pro-and anti-climate action groups. "Accurate transference of the climate science has been undermined significantly by climate change counter-movements, in both legacy and new/social media environments through misinformation, including about the causes and consequences of climate change," said the report. The WG II also noted that as social movements targeting climate change and sustainability have been rising, there has also been a rise of political conservatism and populism as well as growth in misinformation. "This reflects efforts to maintain the status quo by actors in positions of power in the face of rising social inertia for climate action," it said.

Misinformation, perhaps for the first time, entered the lexicon of any IPCC report, through the second instalment of the AR6, the Working Group II (WG II) report, that was finalised on February 27. Misinformation and its impact on climate action was also noted in the third instalment, the WG III report, which was finalised this month.

Speaking on the impact of misinformation and greenwashing on government's role in mitigating climate change, Diana Ürge-Vorsatz, Vice Chair of IPCC's Working Group III, said in a press conference on April 4, "Transparency, reporting, monitoring and verification are all key to implementing our ambitious climate goals and ambitious policies and we will only be

able to achieve the full impact of these ambitions if we do implement these as part of the policies and different actions that businesses take."

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a United Nations body, prepares comprehensive Assessment Reports about the state of scientific, technical and socio-economic knowledge on climate change, its impacts and future risks, and options for reducing the rate at which climate change is taking place. The IPCC has three working groups: Working Group I, dealing with the physical science basis of climate change; Working Group II, dealing with impacts, adaptation and vulnerability; and Working Group III, dealing with the mitigation of climate change.

Climate misinformation can cause polarisation

The IPCC WG II report accused "vested economic and political interests for organising and financing misinformation and 'contrarian' climate change communication". It noted that the "rhetoric and misinformation on climate change and the deliberate undermining of science have contributed to misperceptions of the scientific consensus, uncertainty, disregarded risk and urgency, and dissent."

It also noted that the public misperception of climate risks and polarised public support for climate actions is delaying urgent adaptation planning and implementation.

With reference to misinformation in North America particularly, the WG II report said that despite scientific certainty of the anthropogenic influence on climate change, misinformation and politicisation of climate change science has created polarisation in public and policy domains in North America, particularly in the U.S., limiting climate action.

The WG III report further acknowledged the role of misinformation in fuelling polarisation, saying, "Together with the proliferation of suspicions of 'fake news' and 'post-truth', some traditional and social media contents have fuelled polarisation and partisan divides on climate change in many countries."

Jennie King, Head of Civic Action and Education at U.K.-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), said in a statement after the release of the WG II report, "The latest IPCC report (WG II report) is unequivocal about the role that mis- and disinformation play in delaying climate action. We have a clear taxonomy of harm for other issue areas, including public health and electoral integrity, which have shown how such content translates into real-world impacts for both individuals and societies. While the climate sector has long argued the same, until now we have lacked recognition from key entities like the IPCC, UNFCCC and COP Presidencies on the dangers posed by a muddied, polarising information space." ISD has developed, over a year, a climate dashboard with data across climate denial, political, media, industry, influencer and conspiracy ecosystems online, as well as traditional media outlets worldwide and was part of a collective that conducted real-time analysis of climate mis/disinformation during COP26 last year.

At the COP26 last year, a coalition of organisations released an open letter proposing a definition of climate misinformation as a first step in tackling the issue. While the definition did not make its way into the Negotiated Outcome of COP26, there has been some recent recognition for the need for a definition, with a special committee in the European Union, The EU Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including disinformation, recognising the need for a universal definition of climate mis/disinformation in its report in February 2022. The report had called for "models such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to be built on to create a global code of conduct on disinformation."

Partial information more concerning in India

More than misinformation, at least in the case of India, when we see some of the climate action programmes that are implemented, it is partial information that is perhaps creating a problem, Bejoy K. Thomas, Associate Professor, Humanities and Social Sciences Chair, Centre for Water Research at IISER-Pune and contributor to the IPCC WG II report, told Mongabay-India. "For example, you see active tree planting projects across India. We've all been taught that tree planting is a good idea. But the catch is that where you plant trees, what kind of species you plant, how is it going to affect the biodiversity – all these are factors that need to be taken in to account."

Thomas highlighted the occurrence of maladaptation – which is unintended negative consequences of positive climate actions – but noted that it is not linked to misinformation but perhaps more to partial or lack of information.

An example of maladaptation outlined in the IPCC WG II report, chapter 18, shows how forest maintenance and restoration can have benefits such as food provision, fuel (wood) provision, carbon sequestration and cultural benefits among other co-benefits, while it could also lead to potential maladaptation outcomes such as non-native monocultures that lead to loss of biodiversity and poor climate change resilience, higher water demand and increased vulnerability to landslides among others.

A eucalyptus plantation in the state of Kerala. Monoculture or monodominant plantations are not as reliable at fighting climate change than natural biodiverse forests. Photo by Anand Osuri/Wikimedia Commons.

“There is partial information and lack of scientific expertise in evaluating climate change action and projects. Many general development projects are brought under the climate umbrella – these projects were anyway going on before climate change became popular,” says Thomas, recommending that to overcome these informational challenges, people working on the ground and scientists and experts should engage closely. “Often what happens is there is reluctance or there are difficulties on both sides, especially in the pace and expectations of a project. Also, often the scientists are not the people who are bound to take positions on issues – as analysts they will chalk out different pathways and suggest winners and losers and alternatives rather than arguing for one particular solution.“

Media framing of climate change information

The WG III report, in a chapter discussing media as communicative platforms for shaping climate governance, notes that increasing media coverage does not always lead to more accurate coverage of climate change mitigation, as it can also spur diffusion of misinformation. “In addition, media professionals have at times drawn on the norm of representing both sides of a controversy, bearing the risk of the disproportionate representation of scepticism of anthropogenic climate change despite the convergent agreement in climate science that humans contribute to climate change. This occurs despite increasing consensus among journalists regarding the basic scientific understanding of climate change.”

“Bad actors are using a tried and tested playbook to weaken public mandates and create confusion on the viable solutions going forward – this includes weaponising climate response within a broader ‘culture wars’ frame and conflating it with any supposed controversy, from COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccine mandates to critical race theory, trans rights or geopolitics,” said King of ISD, in a statement. “It is imperative that we remove the incentives to spread climate mis- and disinformation across social media as well as offline, and reduce the available platforms for bad actors.”

The IPCC report notes that the growth in mis/disinformation reflects that those in positions of power are working to maintain status quo against climate action. Representative photo by ECSP/Flickr.

In its reference to the challenges in North America, the IPCC WG II report highlighted that "traditional media – print and broadcast – frame and transmit climate change information and play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, understanding, and willingness to act."

A similar finding about media, including Indian media, was reflected in a separate 2021 study, that was not associated with the IPCC report. The study by Azim Premji University had found that media representations of climate change play a critical role in shaping public perceptions and knowledge of climate change. Researchers Ranjini Murali, Aishwarya Kuwar and Harini Nagendra, looked at English media discourse in India, Nigeria, Australia and United States to represent the Global South and Global North.

With regards to their Indian media-related findings, the researchers noted that the reporting on the existence of climate change in Indian media has always reflected the scientific consensus. But the most common narrative on attribution of responsibility, by Indian media, was that the Global North countries were responsible for emissions due to their historic emissions and overconsumption. "Focusing primarily on political narratives that attribute responsibility for climate change to specific interest groups, such as in the Australian and Indian media, can obscure the country's own responsibility in producing climate emissions. They can also confuse the public mind, spreading misinformation which can reduce public support for climate action," said the study.

Banner image: Misinformation is delaying climate action, notes latest IPCC AR6 report. Photo by Matt Brown/Wikimedia Commons.

Source:

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