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WHOSE FUTURE?

SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION AND ITS MISSING ADDRESSEE

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I. Who have we been talking to?

Let me start with a confession. I have been sitting in rooms like this one for many years. And for most of that time, I have quietly wondered who exactly we thought we were talking to.

Because we have been talking. We have been talking a lot. Just imagine: If PowerPoints could capture CO₂, the problem would be solved.

We have talked about catastrophe, and about technology. We have talked about what people need to understand — and then explained it again, when they did not seem to have understood it the first time.

It increasingly made me wonder: When was the last real conversation I had about climate with somebody who does not work in this field? Not a family argument at Christmas. A conversation where I did more listening than talking.

Do you know the feeling?

II. The listeners nobody chose

Somewhere in all that talking, we made a decision without ever really making it. **We decided who our listener was:** Someone with the time to take in information. Someone

¹ Conference: https://www.umweltrat.de/SharedDocs/Termine/EN/2024_2028/2026_09_Trafo.html; Abstracts: https://www.umweltrat.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/06_Background_Information/2024_2028/2026_09_Collection_of_conference_abstracts.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=9

secure enough to think in decades. Someone who reads a graph without flinching – and who has enough control over their own life to act on what it tells them.

Nobody ever sat in a meeting and said: let us leave the others out. That listener was never deliberately chosen. He emerged through a thousand reasonable judgements about how to be effective.

I should say what I mean by “we”, because there are at least four different rooms sitting in this one.

- For those of us in **campaigning**, it was the choice of channel and messenger;
- for those of us in **research**, it was which questions counted as researchable, and whose knowledge counted as evidence;
- for those of us in **ministries**, it was which participation formats got written into the process and which got written out;
- and for those of us **who fund this work**, it was what a fundable outcome was allowed to look like. How much time it was allowed to take. And how it should be measured.

Four different professions. The same imaginary listener at the end of all of it.

But here is the thing about people. They can tell when a message is not meant for them. We all can smell it a mile off.

Let me give you one example of how quietly exclusion happens: Earlier this year, researchers reviewed all 1,172 articles published by The Lancet Planetary Health since its founding. They were looking for engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems – the traditions that have understood the connection between land, water, air and human health for millennia, the traditions which planetary health claims as part of its own inheritance.²

More than eleven hundred contained no Indigenous perspective at all. Nineteen engaged meaningfully. Nineteen.

Nobody had set out to exclude anybody. It accumulated, one reasonable editorial decision at a time, in a field whose entire founding premise is interconnectedness.

If it can happen there, it can happen anywhere. And I am not standing outside this. I grew up in a coal-mining town, in a working-class region. My parents worked in textile

² Stone, K., Perkins, J., Plank, S., Bates-Eamer, N., Albert, J. & Castleden, H. (2026): “Radical, transformative, or decolonial? A systematic review of The Lancet Planetary Health’s progress on embracing Indigenous Peoples’ knowledge systems.” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 10: 101476. – Of 1,172 articles published between April 2017 and October 2025, 1,137 contained no Indigenous research features or perspectives; 19 were categorised as meaningful inclusion. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanplh.2026.101476>, accessed 04.10.2026

factories before they retrained. Later I was a single mother for many years – in good jobs, better off than most, and still never quite without worry about tomorrow.

I also admit openly that, for a long time, I did not entirely feel at home in the climate movement either. I used to think that was a private matter. I have come to think it is a structural one.

And before anyone concludes that this is about “other” people: On climate policy specifically, the emotional rejection of those who think differently is strongest in Germany among two groups. Supporters of the AfD, and supporters of the Greens.³ So my first thesis in this talk is:

Thesis 1

**We are not failing to reach these people because of who they are.
We are failing because of who we are.**

III. The “disengaged”

Let me give some of the missing listeners a face. I choose young adults here, but I could equally cite sources for middle-aged and older generations in Germany.

- There is Sofia, an apprentice, who has stopped reading the news because she cannot take the daily drip of bad news anymore.
- There is Ahmed, a young tradesman, who thinks climate matters a great deal, but who can make neither head nor tail of the activists from Fridays for Future.
- And there is Andreas, who is unemployed and has the distinct impression that everything is going down the drain anyway – and that nobody really gives a toss about his future.

These are not inventions: They come out of a Talking Hope study with 1,503 young adults, focused especially on non-academic, rural, East German and migrant backgrounds.⁴ Here’s one quote from a young woman in one of our focus groups:

³ Vorländer, H., Herold, M., Hormig, F. & Otteni, C. (2025): *Political Polarization in Germany 2025. Polarization Barometer*. Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM), TU Dresden. – YouGov, spring 2025, eight EU member states; c. 4,400 respondents in Germany, quota-based representative. On climate policy, affective polarization is strongest among supporters of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and of the AfD. Across all fifteen issues the study revises its own 2023 findings: higher affective polarization among respondents aged 60 and over, among men and among lower income groups, with no notable differences by education, urban–rural residence or East–West. <https://forum-midem.de/>, accessed 04.10.2026

⁴ Talking Hope (2025): *Was können wir schon tun? Junge Erwachsene, Klimakrise und soziale Zukunftsgestaltung*. By McCormack, E.-M. & Metje, F. Funded by Stiftung Mercator – Representative online survey of 1,503 young adults aged

„What are we supposed to do anyway? You don't listen to us.”

Despite this frustration, however, these young people were not at all uninterested in climate. Nearly four in five (78%) said they talk about politics with friends and family, and climate is a key priority for them.⁵ Research by DEMOKON on who shows up and who doesn't for the energy transition echoes our findings⁶: Two thirds of the disengaged (65%) actually do support the energy transition, and nearly as many (62%) say it is going too slowly.⁷

But what our research also showed is: These young people don't feel welcome in the climate movement, and they don't believe that politics will solve the climate crisis.⁸

That gap is exactly what I want to explain rather than explain away.

The most interesting finding for us was: The young people we see as disengaged actually see themselves as capable at home, at work, in their neighbourhoods. Where they feel totally powerless is in politics and society.

This means: **Caring with nowhere to put it is not hypocrisy. It is what a person does when no route seems open.**

German inequality research calls this **political deprivation** – not objective disadvantage, but the experience of being pushed to the margins by political actors. And it correlates systematically with low political trust and with anti-democratic attitudes.⁹

This is what I mean by the **addressee problem**: The public is already there, but it feels – and is – excluded.¹⁰

18–25, 12–22 July 2024, plus a review of more than 90 studies, digital mapping of 113 posts, four focus groups and four stakeholder interviews. [https://talking-hope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Studie - Junge Erwachsene Klimakrise sozialer Zukunftsgestaltung.pdf](https://talking-hope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Studie_-_Junge_Erwachsene_Klimakrise_sozialer_Zukunftsgestaltung.pdf), accessed 04.10.2026

⁵ Talking Hope (2025), as above

⁶ Kerker, N., Kuhlmann, L., Marg, S., Mokros, N., Küpper, B., Teune, S. & Michel, M. (2022): *Die Unbeteiligten in lokalen Energiewendekonflikten*. DEMOKON Research Paper III, section 3.1. Funded by Stiftung Mercator. <https://demokon.de/>, accessed 04.10.2026

⁷ Kerker et al. (2022), as above, Table 1 and section 4.1. – 65 percent of non-participants support the Energiewende (77.6 percent among the active). 62.3 percent of non-participants say it is proceeding too slowly to protect the climate effectively; 26.2 percent say too fast. Fieldwork 2019–2022.

⁸ Talking Hope (2025), as above.

⁹ Spannagel, D. (2025): *Mehr Ungleichheit – weniger politische Teilhabe*. WSI-Verteilungsbericht 2025, WSI Report Nr. 108, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, p. 14, citing Kiess, J. et al. (2024): *Leipziger Autoritarismus-Studie*. https://www.boeckler.de/data/p_wsi_report_108_2025.pdf, accessed 04.10.2026

¹⁰ Vorländer, H. et al. (2025), as above – 48.4 percent in Germany prioritize economic growth over climate protection, against 37.1 percent across the other EU member states surveyed; almost one in six fully agrees that growth should always come first. On climate measures themselves opinion is near-evenly split: 41.6 percent say current policies do not go nearly far enough, 39.6 percent that they already go much too far.

Let me tell you an anecdote: When I founded Talking Hope about four and a half years ago, I was talking to a senior consultant at an international climate NGO. I argued, with some passion, that we need to pay far more attention to socially disadvantaged groups in this transition. His answer was: *“Yes, morally I agree with you. But are they strategically relevant?”*

By now, few would ask that question out loud. Our election results have answered it.

My second thesis:

Thesis 2

**The allegedly disengaged are not disengaged.
They are excluded – and they know it.**

IV. The ground we left empty

We often hear people saying political leaders have stopped offering a vision of the future. That is not true. And the truth is worse.

Before the 2024 European elections, voters were asked what the campaign should prioritise. Poverty and social exclusion came first. Climate came sixth. In 2019, climate had led in seven member states, including Germany.¹¹

Into that space, something else has moved: The most narratively confident account of Germany’s future right now comes from the extreme right.

But the AfD did not talk its way into the centre of our public life by winning arguments. It walked into a space the rest of us vacated – after 2023, when most of the democratic spectrum concluded that talking about the green transition was electorally dangerous, and retreated into target years and cost tables.

But you cannot beat a story with a containment strategy.

When my team analysed the narratives around the German heating-law debate in 2023, we found the same AfD moves again and again:

- fear, with the transition cast as a driver of poverty;

¹¹ European Parliament (2024): *Spring 2024 Eurobarometer*, EB 101.1, Executive Summary, question QA14ab. – Fieldwork February–March 2024, 26,411 respondents across the 27 member states. Fight against poverty and social exclusion 33 %; public health 32 %; support for the economy and jobs 31 %; EU defence and security 31 %; action against climate change 27 %. Climate was the leading campaign priority in Sweden only; in 2019 it led in Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/spring-2024-survey>, accessed 04.10.2026

- technology, turned into a question of personal liberty;
- cultural division between young and old, city and country;
- and class, with controlling elites on one side and ordinary people on the other.¹²

What the AfD offers is patriarchal disrespect dressed up as protection: Their message is: “You are the underdog. And we will protect you.” What it doesn’t admit is that that protection comes at the price of handing over your voice. Their party programme shows that it is precisely the Sofias, Ahmeds and Andreases – the disadvantaged – who will suffer most from their tax plans.

What the AfD does do, however, is one thing that we fail at: It supplies an addressee.

It speaks to a specific person about that person’s own life, and it tells them who and where they would be in the future it describes. It talks of Heimat and security, about safety and self-reliance.

And we? We offer numbers, 1.5 and 2045, measures and a list of who pays what.

I used to think that was simply cowardice on our side. I have changed my mind.

What the success of extreme-right narratives shows is that there is a very strong need to give more weight to the hardships of the people who are alive now. In that context, **our future-dated offer of sustainability arrives as a claim on attention that the so-called disengaged cannot spare.**

We could say that the worries of Sofia, Ahmed and Andreas don’t count because their parents – and the parents and grandparents of many other young people – simply think that they can’t afford to think that far ahead.

What all this means: To reach and engage these groups, we cannot look at climate alone.

If people don’t feel heard or respected, if their social concerns today are not taken into account, when they feel their self-efficacy has disappeared, and their expectation to

¹² Talking Hope (2023): *Discursive analysis of narrative patterns in the German public debate on the heating law (Gebäudeenergiegesetz/GEG) 2023*, conducted as part of the organisation’s heating-law media campaign 2023, unpublished manuscript.

See also Jost, P., Mack, M., & Hillje, J. (2024). *Aufgeheizte Debatte? Eine Analyse der Berichterstattung über das Heizungsgesetz – und was wir politisch daraus lernen können* [A heated debate? An analysis of media coverage of the heating law – and what we can learn from it politically]. Das Progressive Zentrum. <https://www.progressives-zentrum.org>, accessed 04.10.2026

Loschke, C., Braungardt, S., Keimeyer, F., & Rosenow, J. (2026). Heating up the headlines: How tabloid framing reshaped Germany’s Buildings Energy Act. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 138, Article 104832. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2026.104832>, accessed 04.10.2026

On the use of social-policy appeals by nationalist parties see also Howe, P. J., Szöcsik, E. & Zuber, C. I. (2022): Nationalism, Class, and Status. *Comparative Political Studies* 55(5), 832–868. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211036033>, accessed 04.10.2026

have a say in decision-making processes is ignored – then we might as well give up on climate action. My third thesis therefore is:

Thesis 3

**Climate alone will not reach the missing addressees.
Climate, social security, democracy as well as dignity and
resilience are one question – or they are none.**

V. The majority that cannot see itself

Now let me give you a piece of genuinely good news: In 2021, the research institute DEMOKON asked people in German wind and coal regions: What do you yourself think – and what do you think your neighbours think? And interestingly, in the wind regions, 48 percent assumed a majority opposed the wind farm; whereas in fact, just over 20 percent actually did. In the Lausitz, six in ten assumed their community rejected the coal exit; but only a third actually did.¹³

People orient themselves by what they believe others think, and such misperceptions feed themselves.

If you believe half your town is against something, it becomes much harder to say you are for it – or even unsure. Meanwhile, the opponents speak louder, because they feel carried by a majority that does not exist.¹⁴ I would put it to you that this is a **communication failure**. Which makes it our failure.

Here is my fourth thesis:

Thesis 4

**There are more people with us than we think.
They just cannot see each other.**

¹³ Teune, S., Rump, M., Küpper, B., Schatzschneider, J., Reusswig, F., & Lass, W. (2021). *Energiewende? – ja! Aber... Kritik und Konflikte um die Energiewende im Spiegel einer Bevölkerungsbefragung* [Energy transition? Yes! But... Criticism and conflicts surrounding the energy transition as reflected in a population survey] (DEMOKON Research Paper No. 2). Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. <https://doi.org/10.48485/pik.2021.005>, accessed 04.10.2026

¹⁴ Teune et al. (2021), as above.

See also: Kerker et al. (2022), section 3.4, on perceived views of friends predicting respondents' own position; and Reusswig, F., Lass, W. & Bock, S. (2021): *Energiewende, Konfliktkultur und Populismus*, DEMOKON Policy Paper I, Kernbotschaft V, which makes countering the perception of majority opposition a core recommendation.

VI. Why consent is the structure

Some of you will be thinking: does any of this really matter for delivering the transition? We have solved enormous environmental problems without asking the public. Montreal. Leaded petrol. Acid rain.

That is a good objection. Here is what I think the difference is: Nobody ever felt the refrigerant in their fridge change. Petrol was still petrol. Sustainability is different: It reaches into our heating, our cars, our food, our working hours and our holidays.

I have a bolthole in Mecklenburg, in a tiny village in Eastern Germany. When I told one of my neighbours about this talk – she is a farmer and the former mayor – she said: *“I feel completely taken for a ride when I think about fuel prices. Even after the fuel tax rebate last week, the diesel I wanted to order this week cost more than the stuff at the petrol station.”*

Where the costs seem invisible, experts can simply get on with it. Where the costs land in somebody’s home, consent is the entire structure.

So what interventions and transformations have worked before? Regulating tobacco. Seatbelts. Banning drink driving. Or the big ones: ending slavery, allowing women to vote, workers’ rights. Each took decades. And in none of them did the law come first – it came at the end, not at the beginning.

What carried these changes was slow work in the social fabric.

That fabric is not an abstraction. It is the conversations people have with their neighbours, at work, in the club, across the garden fence. It is where a thing stops being a crazy demand and becomes something normal. My conclusion – and thesis number five:

Thesis 5

**If the social fabric is what carries changes,
then the fabric is what we have to build.**

VII. From managing resources to governing relationships

Building this social fabric is not a communications add-on; it is a constituent part of the task that is required. So let’s think about **communication and building consent as infrastructure rather than just the end of a messaging campaign.**

The hosts of this conference have said something close to that themselves: The German Advisory Council on the Environment’s paper on sufficiency argues that cohesion under polarisation matters, that sufficiency is a collective question, and that a broad social debate about viable prosperity is overdue.¹⁵

My question is why that debate still has not happened.

We keep treating communication as something to do after analysis and policy design – rather than as part of the infrastructure that analysis and policy design depend on.

We have become very good at managing resources, and at regulating the implementation of technological innovation.

But what we have barely begun is governing social innovation, and that means the relationships that allow people and places to hold together while so much around them changes.¹⁶

This requires fostering, funding and staffing the social processes that enable change, and writing them into policy even if these processes take time or do not fit neat KPIs. Here is my sixth thesis:

Thesis 6

Consent cannot be retrofitted.

Either the conversation happened before the decision, or it did not.

VIII. What communication has to become

What does this mean for communication? **My argument is that communication has to become something other than what our job descriptions say it is.**

¹⁵ German Advisory Council on the Environment. (2024). *Sufficiency as a “strategy of the enough”: A necessary debate.* https://www.umweltrat.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/04_Statements/2020_2024/2024_06_Sufficiency_as_a_Strategy_of_the_Enough.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5, accessed on 04.10.2026

See also: Michaelis, J., Vogel, B., Strunz, S., Lucht, W., Dahms, H., Dornack, C., Geissler, A., Hertin, J., Hoffart, F., Kemfert, C., Klein, M., Köck, W., Lage, J., Marquard, E., Schmalz, S., Settele, J., Sommer, B., Weiss, S., & Wiegand, S. (2024). Sufficiency as a “strategy of the enough”: Curbing ecological crises and injustices: A summary of the German Advisory Council on the Environment’s discussion paper. *GAIA*, 33(3), 275–281. <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.33.3.3>, accessed on 04.10.2026

¹⁶ See also Mbah, M., Kelly, R., Friese, S., Krieger, S., Marschall, J., Uhlig, I., Vogel, M., Weber, A., Weith, A.-K., Weith, T., & Wingenbach, M. (2026, April 30). *Shaping the regional energy transition together: Cooperative planning and implementation of the future energy system* [Policy brief]. PlanTiefen / Öko-Institut, ILS, IKEM. https://www.oeko.de/fileadmin/oekodoc/Plantiefen-Policy-Brief_EN.pdf, accessed on 04.10.2026

Much climate communication still rests on the information-deficit model: if people fail to act, they must lack information and our job is to transmit more of it, more clearly and more often.

Research evidence has long shown that this model does not work.¹⁷ Yet many of our institutions are still built around it — our press offices, our campaign budgets, our evaluation forms. So let me put out the following alternative as my seventh thesis:

Thesis 7

Communication in a transformation is not the transmission of a message. It is the organisation of a relationship.

Three important conclusions follow from that, and each one costs us something.

The first is listening: listening that can change the plan, not listening as a courtesy before we say what we were going to say anyway.

The second is the product: Communication stops being a campaign and becomes a room. A space where people can talk about something that matters to them.

The third is us: We stop being the ones who speak. That is the hardest part, because speaking is our whole job description. Our new job is to build the room in which somebody else talks.

This is the approach we take in our work at Talking Hope, currently especially in our Social Climate Project, funded by the Mercator Foundation¹⁸, and our experiences show it works.

Other research echoes our findings, maybe more precisely than is comfortable: Two American political scientists, Joshua Kalla and David Broockman, reviewed forty-nine field experiments to ascertain what actually changes a political opinion.¹⁹ They found

¹⁷ Suldovsky, B. (2017). The information deficit model and climate change communication. In H. von Storch (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of climate science*. Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.013.301>, accessed on 04.10.2026

See also Kahan, D. M., Peters, E., Wittlin, M., Slovic, P., Ouellette, L. L., Braman, D., & Mandel, G. (2012). The polarizing impact of science literacy and numeracy on perceived climate change risks. *Nature Climate Change*, 2(10), 732–735. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate1547>, accessed on 04.10.2026

Cook, B. R., & Overpeck, J. T. (2019). Relationship-building between climate scientists and publics as an alternative to information transfer. *WIREs Climate Change*, 10(2), e570. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.570>, accessed on 04.10.2026

¹⁸ <https://talking-hope.org/en/mercator-ii/>

¹⁹ Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2018). The minimal persuasive effects of campaign contact in general elections: Evidence from 49 field experiments. *American Political Science Review*, 112(1), 148–166. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000363>, accessed on 04.10.2026

out that ordinary campaign contact – leaflets, phone calls, canvassing – hardly makes a difference.

Then they ran their own comparative experiment with trained canvassers who went to people's doors on a contested social issue²⁰: In one version they made the argument; in the other, they also talked about their own lives and asked the person about theirs, without judging the answer.

The result: The conversations built on argument – I could also say the **“rational approach”** – changed nothing.

But the conversations that included a personal exchange – **the talks that built relationships** – produced changes that were still measurable months later. They even survived the other side campaigning against them.²¹

So the active ingredient is not information.

It is being spoken to with respect by somebody genuinely willing to listen, in a conversation where you are not expected to turn up with the right opinion ready.

IX. How to build the room: Five principles

So how can we build the rooms for dialogue, in which change becomes possible?

Five principles keep returning in our project work – and they are backed by the findings of others, for instance by More in Common.²²

One. Go to where people already are. Go to them: To the market square, the sports club, the waiting room – even the filling station that replaced the village pub or the corner shop. And by the way: guess what the AfD has been very good at doing in Eastern Germany? Exactly that.

Two. Do not make debate the price of entry. A format built on the pleasure of argument selects for people who enjoy arguing. The young adults in our survey say

²⁰ Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2020). Reducing exclusionary attitudes through interpersonal conversation: Evidence from three field experiments. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 410–425.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000923>, accessed on 04.10.2026

²¹ See also Broockman, D., & Kalla, J. (2016). Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing. *Science*, 352(6282), 220–224. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aad9713>, accessed on 04.10.2026

²² More in Common Deutschland & Initiative Offene Gesellschaft (2023): *Mehr Erreichen. Mit Beteiligung. Impulspapier*.

that they feel intimidated by public debates.²³ More in Common’s research results are similar: The disengaged avoid discussions.²⁴

For our work, this meant: We stopped starting with the topic. We don’t open with climate. In our work with young people, we always start with people’s lives and their lived experiences: what works where you live, what does not, what annoys you, what do you like? Nobody has to arrive with an opinion or leave with one. But out of that openness, things start.

Three. Borrow trust. Local clubs, sports clubs, welfare organisations, teachers and other everyday figures have trust across dividing lines that climate organisations and the traditional parties simply do not have.²⁵

So, we work through people and organisations that already have relationships. We bring content and methods; they bring trust. What we also do, is focus on peers: the young people who get interested while involved in a project – and who can become social pioneers among their own.²⁶

Proximity is the key word in all of this. In this context, let me also quote a large second-order meta-study of 2023, which looked at the results of 430 individual studies on what makes people change their environmental behaviour.²⁷ What was most effective, it showed, was peer exchange and social comparison. In other words: the chat across the garden fence.

Four. Arrive before the decision, not after it.

Here we come back to genuine listening. DEMOKON’s recommendation for reaching those who stay away is exactly this: approach people proactively ahead of local projects rather than stage consultation once the plan exists. And take their criticism seriously rather than morally pre-judging it.²⁸

²³ Talking Hope (2025), as above

²⁴ More in Common (2023), as above – 53 % of the “Pragmatic” and 61 % of the “Disappointed” say they avoid discussions with others wherever possible, against 36 % of the “Established”. The paper proposes considering whether it is acceptable in a given format simply to listen, e. g. from the edge of the market square, or by video.

²⁵ See also More in Common (2023), as above.

²⁶ Talking Hope (2025), as above - stakeholder interviews and research review.

²⁷ Bergquist, M., Thiel, M., Goldberg, M. H., & van der Linden, S. (2023). Field interventions for climate change mitigation behaviors: A second-order meta-analysis. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(13), e2214851120. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2214851120>, accessed on 04.10.2026

²⁸ Kuhlmann, L., Kerker, N. & Marg, S. (2022): *Die Energiewende gemeinsam gestalten. DEMOKON Policy Paper III*. The paper suggests low-threshold formats including doorstep conversations, approaching non-participants proactively ahead of local projects; taking criticism seriously rather than morally pre-judging it; explaining and re-justifying continuously; addressing procedural, distributive and recognition justice explicitly.

Five. Build the future together – instead of announcing the target.

We are called Talking Hope for a reason. We start with future work and visions for tomorrow rather than doomsday scenarios: “What matters to you? What do you want your life and this place to look like in ten years?”

This is why hope for us is a political force, not a feel-good factor, as we propose in our *Manifesto on Hope*, which we published last year: Hope for tomorrow changes today. It is the source of change, just as hopelessness cements the status quo.²⁹ Once somebody describes a future they want, the practical questions follow: what would have to be true, what stands in the way, who can be our allies, and what can we start doing on Monday?³⁰

In our workshops something happens that we don’t have to engineer. Because once somebody has described the life they want, the next question arrives on its own: how do we keep that going? That is sustainability – and nobody had to introduce the word.

X. The hard part: Ceding power and trusting open processes

Now I want to name the thing that makes all of this difficult. Not because it is difficult for the people we are dealing with, but because it is difficult for us. And this is: An open process means we do not know what will come out of it. If we genuinely take people seriously, we cannot promise in advance how they will respond or what they will decide. If we could, we would not be asking.

Everyone in this room who works on climate hears a clock ticking while I say that. I hear it too. The instinct is to say we do not have time for open processes. But were we really faster when we skipped this? Or did we help build the current backlash by treating inclusion, participation and fairness as something to handle afterwards?

The conversation that changes a mind is not the one we design with a target in view. In fact, it is often the one nobody scheduled.³¹

Which means, our task is to create the conditions for these conversations, not to script and run them.

²⁹ Talking Hope (2025). *Hope. A Manifesto for New Beginnings*. By McCormack, E.-M. https://talking-hope.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/Manifest_A6_ENGLISH_WEB.pdf, accessed on 04.10.2026

³⁰ See also Robinson, J. (2003). Future subjunctive: Backcasting as social learning. *Futures*, 35(8), 839–856. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287\(03\)00039-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-3287(03)00039-9), accessed on 04.10.2026;
Robinson, J. B. (1982). Energy backcasting: A proposed method of policy analysis. *Energy Policy*, 10(4), 337–344. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0301-4215\(82\)90048-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0301-4215(82)90048-9), accessed on 04.10.2026

³¹ Kalla, J. L. & Broockman, D. E. (2018), as above.

That has consequences for funding too. If I have to promise how people will respond, I have already decided for them. A pre-specified outcome is a pre-specified addressee. My eighth thesis:

Thesis 8

**Social innovation requires trust in open processes.
A pre-specified outcome is a pre-specified addressee.**

XI. Calls to Action

These are my calls to action:

Fund listening, dialogue and participation as infrastructure, with the time horizons infrastructure needs. Remember this is not about being nice; it is about making consensus possible. The sustainability transformation requires social innovation, rather than just engineering the 1.5-degree goal. This requires ceding power and extending trust to the people who have been missing from the conversation.

None of this is new: In fact, the international community has signed up to it in Article 12 of the Paris Agreement, which commits parties to strengthen public participation, awareness and access to information.³² The UBA's own implementation concept for Action for Climate Empowerment spells out what that means in practice.³³

Put the communication question inside policy design, not after it: who will hear this, from whom, and early enough to have a say? Don't just include a "social check"³⁴, but also treat communications as infrastructure – and remember that this means a different understanding of communications than just prettying up press releases.

Include a socially inclusive communications strategy from the outset – one that focusses on not just transmitting messages but on the social processes that are

³² United Nations. (2015). *Paris Agreement*. Article 12: "Parties shall cooperate in taking measures, as appropriate, to enhance climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information, recognizing the importance of these steps with respect to enhancing actions under this Agreement." https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/parisagreement_publication.pdf, accessed on 04.10.2026

³³ Dasch, S., Rauber, J., Thorun, C., Schrader, C., Mohn, C., & Jenny, M. (2026). *Action for Climate Empowerment in Germany: From public concern to a climate-ready society* [Interim report] (Climate Change 39/2026). Umweltbundesamt. https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/system/files/medien/11850/publikationen/2026-09/39_2026_CC.pdf; Umweltbundesamt. (2026). *Implementation Concept for Action for Climate Empowerment in Germany: Enabling society to protect the climate* (Climate Change 40/2026). https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/system/files/medien/11850/publikationen/2026-09/40_2026_CC.pdf, accessed on 04.10.2026.

³⁴ Knopf, B., Verspohl, I., Schaffert, A., & Zeller, M.-L. (2024). *Eine sozial gerechte und klimaneutrale Zukunft sichern: 11 Thesen für eine Klimasozialpolitik*. Zukunft KlimaSozial. https://zukunft-klimasozial.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Zukunft-KlimaSozial_11-Thesen-fuer-eine-Klimasozialpolitik.pdf, accessed on 04.10.2026 - Thesis 8 proposes a "Sozialcheck", a distributional assessment of every climate policy measure before introduction, with monitoring afterwards.

needed to foster dialogue, relationship- and consensus-building. Talking Hope has developed a Framework for Socially Inclusive Communications to facilitate this.³⁵

And embed what you build. Participation with no route into policy and administration will leave people feeling more disappointed, more betrayed and with even less confidence in democracy than before.³⁶ More than eight in ten people in Germany regularly think about the country's future, and a similar share want more say in it.³⁷

XII. Back to the three faces

People are not tired of improvement. They are tired of being talked at.

Let me come back to where I started. The Sofias, Ahmeds and Andreases, who stand for so many of the disengaged: *"What are we supposed to do anyway? You don't listen to us."*

That is not a communication problem in the sense of a message that failed to land. It is a communication problem in the oldest sense of the word — something that was meant to be shared, and was not.

Not: how do we explain planetary boundaries better? We are already good at that.

But: who is in the room when we deliberate and decide what the explanation is for?

Sofia, Ahmed and Andreas – and their parents and grandparents – are not merely a target group. They are part of the majority this transformation needs. And they are not the problem. They are part of the solution.

Thesis 9

Climate communication works.

But not by talking at people. By making room.

THANK YOU.

³⁵ McCormack, E.-M. (2025). Von „Klimakrise“ zu „Zukunftsgestaltung“: Herausforderungen und narrative Strategien für einen neuen Gesellschaftsvertrag [From “climate crisis” to “shaping the future”: Challenges and narrative strategies for a new social contract]. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 61(1–2), 59–68. English version under: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7372224249710931968/>

³⁶ Disselkamp, L., Wipfler, B., Wehden, S., & Pfeffer, J. (2025). *Gemeinsam voran: Machbarkeitsstudie deliberative Beteiligung in der Klimapolitik* [Moving forward together: Feasibility study on deliberative participation in climate policy] (S. Hirsch & T. Lissner, Eds.). Robert Bosch Stiftung; Klimamitbestimmung e.V., p. 14 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15878513>, and https://bosch-stiftung.de/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/2025-06/Machbarkeitsstudie%20RBSG-KMB_digital_0.pdf, accessed on 04.10.2026

³⁷ More in Common. (2025). *Begegnungsradar: Wie begegnen wir uns? Worauf es ankommt* [Encounter radar: How do we meet each other? What matters?]. <https://www.moreincommon.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/more-in-common-magazin-begegnung.pdf>, accessed on 04.10.2026

