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Drawing upon Covid-19 lessons

to equip Aotearoa New Zealand to take bolder climate action

Abstract

This article highlights challenges in public discourse on climate change in Aotearoa New Zealand and explores why framing and narratives matter. Drawing on the country's Covid-19 experience, it shows how narratives can help unlock climate action (both mitigation and adaptation). It proposes improving climate communications by providing structures to support sense-making and decision making, with more specificity around societal and individual actions. This will give people, businesses and communities more agency to respond to climate change. By fostering narratives that are hopeful, practical and people-centred, and that relate to people's needs and aspirations, it is possible to build more momentum around climate action.

Keywords climate change communication, Covid-19, public discourse, framing strategies, climate narratives, climate action

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> When we centre our narratives on the better lives we can build together as we take bold action to respond to climate disruption, we can deepen understanding of what community and civic action is and increase people's willingness to engage. (Berentson-Shaw and Fairfield, 2024, p.6)

How we frame climate change, and the narratives we use, influence how people think and reason about the issue, the policies they support and the decisions they make. For the purposes of this article, framing is understood as the way information, issues or choices are presented to shape how people interpret and respond to them. It has also been described as 'the process of defining the context or issues surrounding a question, problem, or event in a way that serves to influence

how the context or issues are perceived and evaluated' (American Psychological Association, n.d.). It is not just about 'what' is being communicated, but 'how' it is communicated and by 'whom'. Tversky and Kahneman (1981) demonstrated that how you frame a situation – whether focusing on positive or negative outcomes – affects the decisions people make.

It is also important to explain what we mean by 'climate change' in this article. Climate experts, policymakers and climate scientists tend to separate strategies to address climate change into two main components, 'mitigation' (reducing greenhouse gas emissions) and 'adaptation' (adjusting to its effects). However, studies have shown that people do not make this mitigation–adaptation distinction and generally view climate change as a single issue.

This article relates to framing and narratives for climate action generally – both mitigation and adaptation – and discusses how this can influence individual action, community action and action by organisations (e.g., businesses and governments). Narratives – the stories we tell ourselves and others and how they shape our collective and personal experiences – can help breathe life into goals and strategies by relating them to matters that people care about, inspiring them as critical partners in the path to change.

How framing and narratives help shape public beliefs

Many people find climate change hard to comprehend and relate to. It involves a web of scientific, environmental, economic and social factors, and the science behind it spans numerous disciplines, such as atmospheric chemistry, oceanography and ecology, making it hard to distil into simple, digestible pieces of information for the lay audience (McClure et al., 2022).

Besides its inherent scientific complexities, climate change is also perceived as distant, or irrelevant to people's immediate concerns, making it harder for them to feel personally connected to the issue. Climate change may be experienced across one or more dimensions of psychological distance: the complexity and uncertainty of the science can make it feel abstract and less urgent to address (hypothetical dimension), and people can perceive climate change as a tomorrow problem (temporal dimension), affecting others instead of oneself (social dimension), and that it will affect faraway places (spatial dimension).

The experience of Aotearoa through Covid-19, despite the distinctions from climate change, demonstrated how people can come together around a shared purpose, in this instance to 'save lives' and minimise the impacts of the virus.

Spatial considerations of climate change are further challenged by the fact that although it affects all parts of Aotearoa New Zealand, climate impacts vary by location, as seen with recent extreme weather events in this country. As people in different regions experience climate change differently, it is hard to develop a uniform sense of urgency. Added to the inherent psychological distance of climate change is the cognitive dissonance people experience as they try to reconcile the scale of the problem with their daily choices, along with rising misinformation and polarisation of the issue globally.

Therefore, it is natural for people to feel helpless, confused or resigned (Aitken, Chapman and McClure, 2011; Landry et al., 2018), and to downplay the need for action. More productive narratives are needed to help the public engage cognitively and emotionally with climate challenges: by reducing psychological distance (Evans, Milfont and Lawrence, 2014; Vlasceanu et al., 2024), building agency, instilling hope (Figueres, 2024), and shining a light on the path forward.

New Zealand's response to Covid-19 offers a case study of how framing and narratives can shape people's responses, including their engagement with policies and strategy, drawing upon the authors' joint expertise in public engagement, communications, social science and psychology.

We recognise that public engagement and communications (including framing and narratives) is one of several levers governments and organisations have at their disposal to address climate challenges, along with regulation, data and evidence, incentives, infrastructure and innovation. However, we believe it is a lever which can be used in a more strategic and coordinated way to build public trust and buy-in. We begin by highlighting aspects of the pandemic response which were successful in building public support for the health measures required, then demonstrate how these can be drawn upon to encourage bolder climate action at both an individual and societal level.

Covid-19 case study

We acknowledge that there are fundamental differences between Covid-19 and climate change. Covid-19 was a sudden, acute, global health crisis with urgent short-term interventions, including border closures, lockdowns and, later, vaccines. Although Covid-19 affected every part of society, and intersected with many aspects of people's lives, climate change is a more complex, multidimensional challenge which affects whole ecosystems, weather patterns, food production, water and energy security and human societies, and requires sustained long-term system and policy changes across multiple generations.

The experience of Aotearoa through Covid-19, despite the distinctions from climate change, demonstrated how people can come together around a shared purpose, in this instance to 'save lives' and minimise the impacts of the virus. Those

leading the communications[1] have described an extraordinary operating environment for communicating a message, with a lack of competing outputs and Covid-19 occupying public consciousness for extended periods during 2020–22 and beyond. Thousands of lives were saved[2] and the communications approaches are widely acknowledged as an important factor in the country's success (Beattie and Priestley, 2021; Greive, 2020). For these reasons and given the significant public investment[3] in this aspect of the response, and expertise involved, Covid-19 provides useful insights for navigating through unprecedented times.

The government's vision for the Covid-19 response was to protect public health while maintaining social cohesion and minimising the impact of the pandemic on the economy and the wellbeing of people. At the core, after the initial phase,[4] was an 'elimination' approach aimed at keeping Covid-19 out of the country and reducing its spread. This was actively led by politicians, officials and community leaders and left no one in any doubt about the country's focus in the first 18 months. As the pandemic wore on, and public fatigue and apathy emerged, the vision evolved to encompass living with Covid-19 and included mass vaccination programmes and reopening of borders.

Naomi Klein's advice for responding to moments of collective trauma is pertinent: 'gather together, find your footing and your story' (Klein, 2023, p.8). The narratives threaded through the response centred on people, in particular on being receptive to their emotional and practical needs. This was not your usual government information campaign, and it set out to create a 'human response to a health crisis'. All activity was designed with this in mind and centred around people rather than the virus. The purpose was to 'save lives', navigating people through the pandemic and enabling them to act in a way which minimised impacts and supported social cohesion during a period of upheaval. This approach aimed to anticipate and address the human needs that emerge in times of extreme uncertainty and fear. The public needed to be concerned enough to act with urgency, but without slipping into panic or hopelessness.[5] Simple questions provided guard rails for the response efforts, including: 'what' is the most important action to take?; 'how' do we enable people to do what is required?; and 'why' do we need people to act in a certain way? Māori narratives added another dimension, drawing on what could be learned from the past. This was significant, given the collective memories of the flu epidemic in 1919 which had a disproportionate impact on the indigenous population.

Instead of focusing on the health threats as a way in to get people to make significant adjustments to their lives, there was a need to tap into a collective attitude that would unify people and build a team of five million active fighters against the virus.

With this in mind, there are four key aspects of the Covid-19 communications response worth emphasising.

Beating Covid-19 was a collective goal

Instead of focusing on the health threats as a way in to get people to make significant adjustments to their lives, there was a need to tap into a collective attitude that would unify people and build a team of five million active fighters against the virus. Framed as 'Unite Against Covid-19', this became a call to participate, a challenge to take on, rather than a crisis to endure with top-down directives. People were treated like teammates, both in the tone of the communications and in the commitment to be transparent, helping people make sense of a changing game plan and motivating them to stay in it. There was a need to recognise the underlying cultural codes that may be invisible but made sense to people living in Aotearoa to understand how people might receive messages and accept interventions. It was necessary to look at people's relationship with rules and authority, and willingness to act as a collective. The country is more individualistic and lower in power distance than many other comparable countries.[6] New Zealanders are thus comparatively independent, and more likely to dislike rules and being told what to do by people in authority. The following comment by Brandon Wilcox illustrates this: 'We (the public) don't want to be told what to do or be deprived of being able to do something we want to do, but we willingly adopted the concept of standing together against a common enemy. Those behind the campaign judged the mood of the nation perfectly and crafted a message that resonated' (Anthony, 2020). This became more challenging as the response progressed, and there was a need for the communications to continually adapt to address feedback and changing public sentiment, and to maintain relevance.

Making action tangible and accessible

A cornerstone of the Covid-19 communications was its aim to be useful. People needed an easy way to manage the wave of information and uncertainty. To address this, the communications were designed around two pillars: structure and empathy.

- *Structure* – this provided a way to help people organise themselves and the infodemic that emerges in times of crisis, tied to specific, concrete actions ('wash hands, sanitise, scan, bluetooth on'). Routine formats, rhythms and channels were put in place so people would access information when they needed it in the form that suited. Messaging aimed to be clear and consistent, showing where Aotearoa

was at, how decisions were being made and what the decisions meant, to help people relate to the information in their own way. An all-of-government Covid-19 website, focused on addressing public needs and separate from the constraints of individual government agencies, aimed to help reduce the mental load for people. It acted as a hub, a 'source of truth' and 'signpost', attracting millions of eyeballs per day during key moments of the pandemic.

- *Empathy* – this involved listening to people's concerns in real time (through analysis of social media commentary, research, and large online community and sector hui) and providing guidance in response to those concerns, to help them along. The core threats for people were not just the virus, but the 'problems of living', the implications of government policies on day-to-day activities.

  The communications effort sought to recognise the whole needs of people, whether they were financial, employment, mental health or travel-related. Activity was targeted to meet those citizen needs as they evolved. This led to a dynamic and agile work programme which flexed with the response.

Empower communities

The importance of local voices and local initiatives, such as community-based health responses, was demonstrated time and again through the pandemic, whether this involved dispensing food parcels to families during lockdown or delivering vaccination programmes. Local leaders and influencers needed resources, autonomy and trust to meet the needs of their communities. One example is Māori roadblocks to reduce public movement through at-risk, isolated communities. These roadblocks were often controversial, but supported by police. While there was an overarching 'Unite Against Covid-19' narrative, which provided framing and guidance, the way this was reflected in some regions required nuance and was more targeted. For instance, over time the campaign became more regionalised and less official-looking, so it was better placed to connect with people experiencing the pandemic in different ways or those who had less trust in public institutions. The level of success with this varied from place to place, depending on the relationships between community, Treaty partners, council, health providers, and local and central government. Likewise, the pandemic highlighted the need to protect groups at risk of poor physical, psychological or social health. From our experience, public health measures were most effectively communicated when inclusive narratives were drawn upon and designed to protect those most at risk.

The core threats for people were not just the virus, but the 'problems of living', and the implications of government policies on day-to-day activities.

Use compelling storytelling, connect with your audience

'He tā kākaho e kitea, he tā ngākau e kore e kitea'; a bend in a reed can be seen, but not a bend in the heart. This Māori whakataukī articulates the importance of recognising and respecting the unseen struggles that others may be facing. Finding and maintaining relevance was a priority for teams working in communities and those leading the 'Unite Against Covid-19' digital channels. People needed to know their concerns were being heard, and that others understood the challenges they were facing, rather than being told what to do. Level 4 lockdown required people to stay home and avoid activities like hunting and fishing. For some communities these weren't recreational, they were about providing kai (food) and supporting whānau. The communications needed to evolve to acknowledge and respond to people's lived experiences. During the 2020 and 2021 outbreaks in South Auckland, teams supported trusted messengers in affected communities with targeted guidance and resources (e.g., church leaders, mothers, key sports people) to enable them to frame actions in ways which resonated. The active two-way dialogue between government and citizens was made possible thanks to the network of community connections on the ground and the active digital community of more than 470,000 people (as at February 2022) following the Covid-19 channels, who provided live commentary and reaction as the pandemic unfolded. For instance, social media posts during August 2021 generated more than 63,000 comments as the public sought information about changing alert levels. Though imperfect and ever evolving, this dialogue provided opportunities to tweak government decisions in real time if policies or approaches proved unworkable.

In brief, the Covid-19 response in Aotearoa avoided many of the narratives employed to delay climate action. Take the climate delay narratives identified by Lamb et al. (2020), for example. Discourses for delaying climate action often focus on redirecting responsibility (others should act first), encouraging non-transformative solutions (disruptive change is not necessary), emphasising the downsides (change will be disruptive), and surrender (climate change cannot be stopped). These delay narratives were broadly absent from the country's approach to the Covid-19 response, and this illustrates the possibility of applying a similar approach for climate change.

Shifting climate narratives

Before articulating how lessons from the Covid-19 response can help mobilise climate action, it is important to understand past, current and emerging climate narratives. Historically, climate discourse has been dominated by science and policy perspectives, and the language is generally technical, ambiguous and

abstract (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2021). This has led to a disconnection of climate change discourse from people and the realities of their day-to-day lives. This complexity inhibits public participation, and this slows progress towards addressing the climate challenges Aotearoa and other nations face.

We don't need to persuade people that climate change is real or that it will adversely affect them. There is high recognition of and concern about the impact of climate change,[7] and public support for climate action (with conditions attached). This has been climbing steadily over the past decade, but quickly drops down the priority list when more acute, psychologically closer issues dominate (e.g., Covid-19 lockdowns, the cost of living, job cuts). (It is worth noting, though, that this salience bias also works the other way – for example, when levels of climate concern increase due to personal experiences of severe weather events (see, e.g., Bergquist, Nilsson and Schultz, 2019).)

Climate concerns compete with other live pressures and there is a disconnect between climate beliefs and action. The 'intention–behaviour gap' describes how people often express intentions to act in a certain way, whether to support the environment, improve their health or make ethical purchasing decisions, but real-world constraints, such as cost, convenience, time pressure and habit frequently prevent them from following through (for reviews across distinct domains, see Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010; Conner and Norman, 2022; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Sheeran, 2002).

The cost of climate change action and inaction

Existing framing and narratives around climate challenges are problematic because they tend to focus on cost, sacrifice and immediate needs. They are often positioned as hostile to progress, getting in the way of where the country needs to get to. Use of terms like 'trade-offs' and 'tough decisions' lead people to think about personal loss rather than the collective gains that can be made (Berentson-Shaw and Fairfield, 2024). We acknowledge that the cost of effective mitigation and adaptation in relation to climate change will be extraordinary. And Deloitte's (2023) analysis shows that the costs of not acting fast and at scale are even greater (see also Kotz et al., 2024). However, narratives about costs and sacrifice are unhelpful for engaging busy, already-pressured people. Most people do not like to make sacrifices. Covid-19 taught us that people are willing to make sacrifices in a crisis, for a short period of time, but they won't stay committed if the focus is on the cost alone. This is likely to lead to a sense of being overwhelmed or despondency, and to people 'switching off' from the issue. Instead, the issue needs to be framed in a way that is both realistic about the scale and severity of the problem and provides meaningful, achievable actions (Chapman, Lickel and Markowitz, 2017). Notwithstanding the inherent complexity of the problem, narratives can help simplify the message and make it relevant to the context and action.

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In addition, the media tend to pay more attention to 'today' issues, and indeed the public context is informed by what is happening now – the economic and social conditions, realities at a regional, community and individual level – rather than potential future impacts of climate disruption. Most New Zealanders are worried about the 'here and now', whereas climate change is viewed as a 'tomorrow problem', even if there is recent lived experience of climate-related harm. Although the case for climate action seems obvious, and there is a need to reduce cost (human, social, economic) now and into the future given the likelihood of ongoing climate-induced disruption, progress is faltering. Evidence shows climate change is a threat to civilisation as we know it. It will have an impact on economic activities, damage infrastructure and communities, and lead to loss of culturally significant places, spread of pests, increasing food shortages, etc. However, this alone is not enough. There is a need to decrease psychological distance in order to get progress towards the needed climate transition (Vlasceanu et al., 2024).

Other narratives reinforce the supposed off-ramps or easy opt-outs: Aotearoa contributes just 0.15%[8] of global greenhouse gas emissions, driving the perception that it is not a problem for the country to solve, the country is too small to make a difference; or that it is too late to limit the average global temperature increase to 2°C. This 'whataboutism' narrative (i.e., 'What about [add country]? Our climate contribution is trivial compared to that country's') is known to be strategically used to delay action (Lamb et al., 2020; Painter et al., 2023). Also, for many, the issue simply feels too hard to tackle: the alternatives are not there, nor are they easy; it is too expensive, and other priorities fill the gap.

Complicating matters further, the persistent suggestion touted through a range of channels is that climate action is detrimental to progress. This creates a tension between the need to address the climate challenges and desire for societal

improvement or the opportunities for a better life. This unresolved tension, coupled with commentary focusing on costs, sacrifices and negative outlooks, contributes to inertia and inaction. For instance, New Zealand businesses connect climate action with increased costs, and this has been increasing over the past four years (EECA and TRA, 2023).

Paired with this, there is confusion on many aspects of climate change in Aotearoa, including how to act, what advice to follow, which approach is more important, and what we are building and working towards. In addition, information about climate-related issues is spread across numerous platforms, government agencies, sectors and regions and is challenging to navigate (see Figure 1). This confusion is prevalent and, combined with the competing narratives, contributes to public paralysis and apathy.

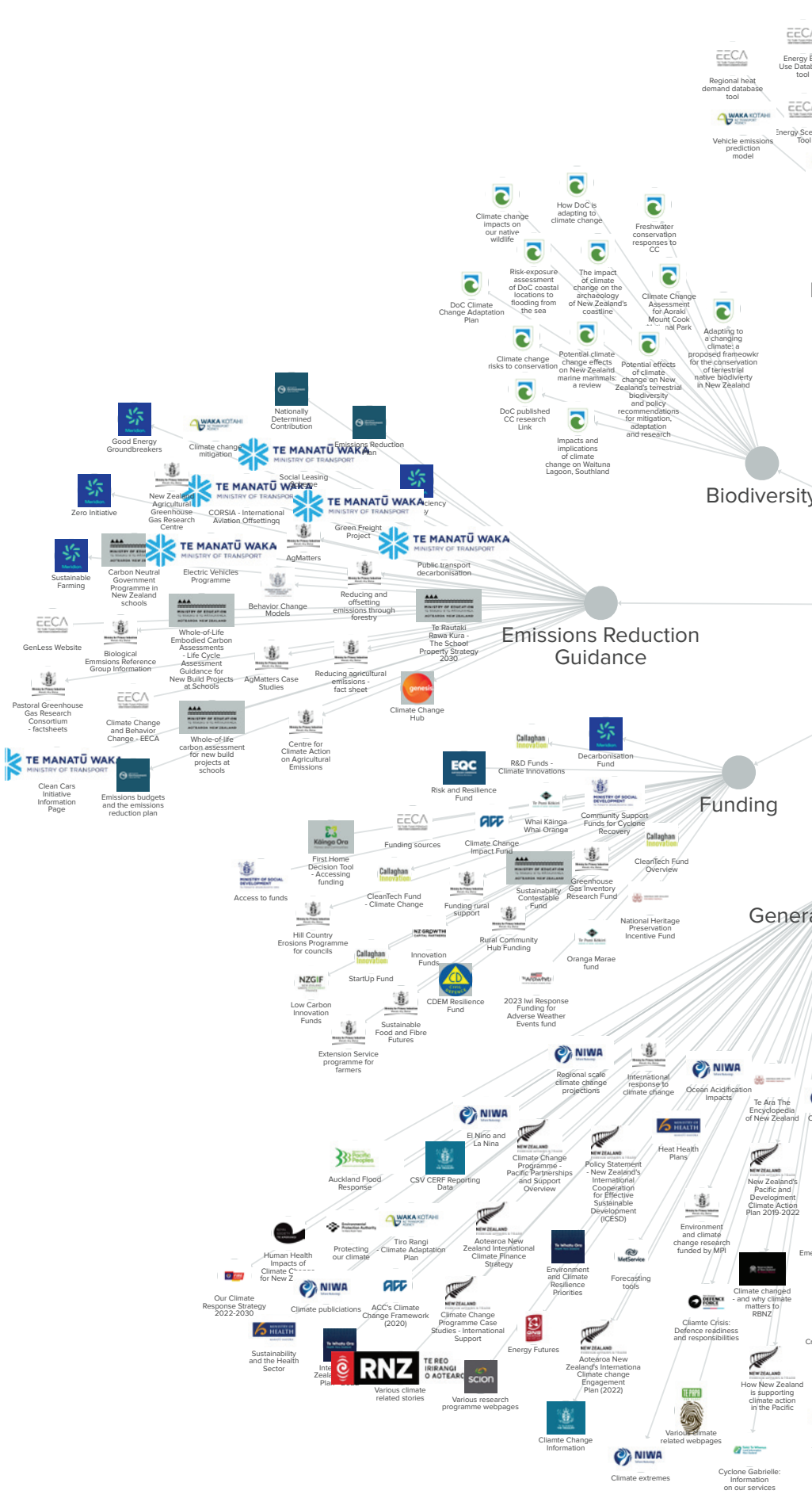
If people are asked how they 'feel' about climate change, the range of emotions that come forward tends to be negative: whether fearful or despondent, angry or over-it, confused or overwhelmed. This is compounded by doom-and-gloom language and fear-based framing. When people become overwhelmed, they are more prone to fall back on old habits, disengage and deny (Kirwan, 2021). Public morale is a key ingredient in driving climate action and motivating individuals and communities to support efforts. Individuals need to feel that their efforts, combined with the efforts of others, can lead to meaningful outcomes. Therefore, how climate action is framed significantly affects public morale.

In summary, climate narratives tend to lack relevance, focus on fear-based language, as well as cost and loss, and are overshadowed by everyday issues. These dynamics are set in a confusing information landscape, with uncoordinated data and context, and lack of practical support, making it challenging for people to navigate a way forward.

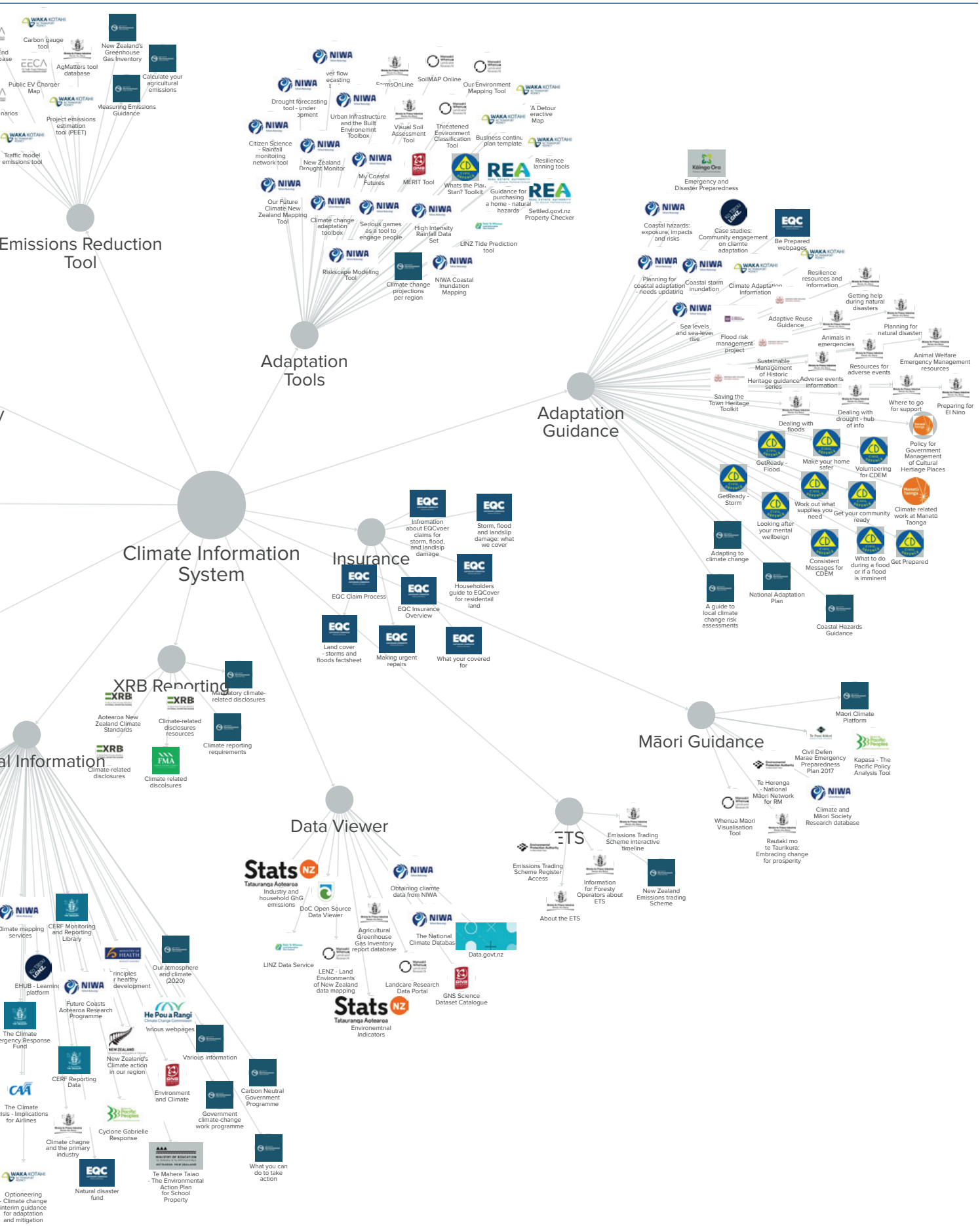
Build public morale and create a shared vision: clarifying the 'why'

Our review clearly indicates that climate discourse in Aotearoa would benefit from the articulation and execution of a shared long-term vision by our leaders, government, public and private

Figure 1: Non-exhaustive mapping of the public sector climate information system in Aotearoa New



Zealand (2022)



Source: Ministry for the Environment

sector organisations, Treaty partners, communities and innovators. This vision needs to sit beyond the language of goals ('what': e.g., Net Zero 2050) and strategies ('how': e.g., steps to meeting said goals), and articulate the 'why'. This means painting a vivid picture of the place/community/country people want to live in, tapping into deeper emotional and psychological motivations that inspire care and action. This is often referred to as the 'hearts and minds' task, encouraging people to align their personal values with the larger cause.

To succeed, such a vision needs to be reflected in a range of supporting narratives to help people make sense of it within their context and lived experience. As Noam Chomsky said, 'social action must be animated by a vision of a future society, and by explicit judgements of value concerning the character of this future society' (Chomsky, 1970, p.403). Given that climate challenges are so huge and overwhelming, people need to feel they are part of something bigger than themselves, otherwise their own efforts may feel meaningless (even if they are self-beneficial – e.g., saving money). Framing solutions through a positive future vision can inspire action (Bain et al., 2016), and imagining a desirable future helps people see the benefits of change rather than focusing only on the sacrifices, making them more open to accepting risk when needed.

The nation's Covid-19 response demonstrated that it is possible to rally people around a clear 'why': in that instance, the commitment to saving lives and protecting those most at risk to ensure the wellbeing of the entire population. This appealed to people's sense of responsibility and community and was central to securing public support for the stringent health measures in the early phases of the pandemic. Along with the 'why', supporting people to understand the 'what' and 'how' was also key when it came to enabling people to practically understand and address the impacts of the pandemic.

So how do we walk people through a new way of thinking and talking about climate action, drawing on what was learned during Covid-19? We share some relevant research and considerations below.

> A success of the Covid-19 communications was their ability to distil complex health information into a series of simple actions, repeated often, making it easy for people to understand how they could play their part, and how individual actions would benefit the collective.

Frame climate action as 'collective responsibility for a shared problem'

As with Covid-19, there is a need to develop framing and narratives that emphasise collective efficacy to help people believe that together they can make a difference. Literature in environmental psychology indicates that when climate change is framed as a societal challenge that requires collective action, people are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours as it shifts the responsibility from individual actions to a collective challenge that necessitates cooperation (e.g., see Barth et al., 2021). Collective framing also taps into social norms and the sense of responsibility towards others, which is effective in mobilising individuals to act. Berentson-Shaw and Fairfield's (2024) research showed that one of the challenges in how people talk and think about climate change is that '[i]ndividual behaviour change messages make people feel like they are being asked to do the work of addressing climate disruption when the responsibility and resources sit with large organisations which are not being asked the same' (Berentson-Shaw and Fairfield, 2024, p.8). They advocate for an increased emphasis on collective and civic action in New Zealand, although there is work to do to help people understand what community and civic action looks like and the problems to be solved.

Building on this, localised framing of issues as a community or part of a national effort can enhance public support for key policies. For instance, framing climate issues as local challenges with local benefits, such as job creation and health improvements, can reduce dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., hypothetical, temporal, social and spatial), and makes the issues more relevant, tangible and immediate. Likewise, messaging that appeals to common values such as stewardship, fairness and responsibility has been shown to resonate with broader audiences. Framing climate issues as a moral responsibility to protect others might also transcend political divides (Billet et al., in press). Such collective framing led by government and organisations might be particularly relevant for the country's context given the historical and contemporary relevance of the natural environment for our national identity (Bell, 1996; Durie, 2004; Milfont et al., 2020); although, some people might view the government's role in developing and promoting such collective framing as overstepping personal agency.

Make climate action more tangible and accessible

Studies on nudge theory show that making small actions easier and more accessible leads to greater engagement (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). People are more likely to engage in behaviour which benefits the climate when it feels manageable. As a starting point, this means framing action as a series of simple steps that people can incorporate into their daily lives: for instance, washing laundry in cold water, improving home insulation, clearing drains ahead of rain, or cycling to work. In

addition, building visibility of community actions, like waterway planting, car-free days or renewable energy projects, helps others see the benefits of climate action and normalise these behaviours. Together, this 'constellation of actions' can help build momentum around the steps required at a community level and creates demand for further change from decision makers. We acknowledge that individual actions make only a modest difference to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for climate disruption. As Chater and Loewenstein (2023) noted, impactful change comes when businesses and governments introduce smart policies, interventions and innovations which create system-level change. This is more likely when a society's culture supports those changes, and narratives and framing help 'switch on' helpful shared mindsets which support those cultural shifts.

A success of the Covid-19 communications was their ability to distil complex health information into a series of simple actions, repeated often, making it easy for people to understand how they could play their part, and how individual actions would benefit the collective. When it comes to climate change, many New Zealanders believe they need to act, and there is support for climate action. However, as noted, there is a lack of clarity and specificity around the individual and collective mitigation and adaptation actions people can take and confusion about where to get information from. In addition, although there are many community projects being led by both public and private organisations, iwi/hapū, NGOs and businesses, these often operate in isolation from one another, making it more challenging to build momentum around changes required which in turn will encourage people to become more open to solutions.

Empower communities and their trusted messengers

The need for nuanced, localised approaches was highlighted by Covid-19, and this need is amplified when it comes to addressing climate change. People are more likely to trust and act upon information from credible and relatable community figures. These messengers have more legitimacy and are generally more effective in shifting opinions and motivating change. In addition, narratives are more effective when they include culturally relevant frames and voices from diverse communities. This helps broaden engagement and make the message more inclusive. Acknowledging that climate change is experienced as a removed threat across dimensions, equal focus needs to be given to locally grounded initiatives. Partnering with local communities to co-design climate solutions ensures these are tailored to specific environmental, social and economic contexts (Harmsworth, Awatere and Robb, 2015). Such localised approaches allow communities to apply indigenous knowledge and local values to the challenge, fostering stronger community ownership and participation. Māori scientists have also emphasised the importance of integrating mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) into scientific and policy processes (Rauika Māngai, 2020). Inclusive processes that involve diverse voices, especially indigenous perspectives, enhance the legitimacy of climate actions and also counter the disproportionate impacts climate change has on at-risk groups, including Māori (Gray, Athy and Milfont, 2022).

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Use compelling storytelling

As recently noted by Nadine Hura, 'people might not always remember facts and details, but they will never forget critical information wrapped up inside a good yarn' (Hura, 2024). Hura's observation is supported by research on the neuroscience of storytelling which shows that stories activate brain areas associated with emotion and memory. Paul Zak (2014) highlights how narratives significantly boost retention and engagement compared with data and statistics. He found people are more likely to remember and be motivated by stories, as they engage empathy and 'narrative transportation'. This means people become deeply absorbed or 'transported' into a story, experiencing vivid imagery, emotional engagement and a sense of connection. As a result, their attitudes, beliefs or intentions can be influenced. The success of the Aotearoa Predator Free 2050 movement is a great example, with stories of birdsong returning to inner city suburbs, thanks to collective community trapping efforts, inspiring efforts in other suburbs and towns. When it comes to climate change, emotionally engaging narratives have been found to more effective in spurring behavioural intentions than data-driven approaches (Moser, 2016). Moving away from the abstract and complexity and presenting information through the lens of the lives people want to lead and what matters to them is critical to building connection and creating impact. Importantly, climate narratives need to lead with people's interests and what they care about, not what others want them to know.

Making climate action easier

Nothing about climate change is easy. However, the Covid-19 experience shows that there are benefits to making climate framing and narratives more human-centred, and for information to be organised in ways that are more comprehensible and relatable, rather than presented as two workstreams, emissions reductions and adaptation. Alongside this, we need to help people understand 'why' action is required and greater empathy is required towards people's approaches to climate action, without judgement. This is exemplified in the statement in Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline*: 'People don't resist change. They resist being changed' (Senge, 1994, p.140). People need to be able to maintain their own identity and ideology, while still taking action. It is important to honour the challenges that others face, whatever these look like.

From a narratives and framing perspective, there are also three practical components to 'making climate action easier' which government and organisations could consider: (1) the provision of integrated climate science, data and evidence; (2) provision of wrap-around context, information and guidance to make data and science useful to people and help them to understand the 'what'; and (3) mechanisms to enable civic and community engagement with supporting education and behaviour change campaigns. Individually, these components will not deliver the scale of change needed – data and evidence will not help people make the right choices, addressing the information deficit will not motivate change, and isolated behaviour change campaigns will not have enduring impacts. However, when these components are packaged together in support of a clear vision and strategy, and climate action is framed in ways that make intuitive sense, it is possible to engender engagement and build more momentum around change.

Building on the success of the Covid-19 response, consideration could be given to the creation of an independent national platform, free of any single government agency or organisation, with supporting digital and face-to-face channels. This will ensure that the components outlined above are presented in ways that are accessible and tailored to suit users (from central government policymakers to local government planners, iwi, businesses, communities and individuals). Such consolidated efforts will help people understand 'what' needs to be done, 'why' and 'how', in their language and stories.

Climate change should not be viewed in isolation but as a lens on every activity. It is not going away and applying the metaphorical ostrich solution to hide one's head to avoid the issue, which was dramatically depicted in the 2021 movie *Don't Look Up*, will not work.

We need to aim for simplicity and clarity, providing transparency and assurance about the impending challenges, and providing opportunities for solutions to be co-designed with iwi, communities, businesses and government, drawing upon existing knowledge and expertise. Building alliances across sectors and political spectrums can help build buy-in for those priority actions that will deliver the most benefit at both an individual and societal level, as well as driving more innovative and durable mitigation and adaptation solutions. These collaborations also signal that climate action is important.

Climate change should not be viewed in isolation but as a lens on every activity. It is not going away and applying the metaphorical ostrich solution to hide one's head to avoid the issue, which was dramatically depicted in the 2021 movie *Don't Look Up*, will not work. Aligning climate actions together under a shared vision, with supporting narratives to motivate, inspire engagement and contextualise, help people connect with the issue. Supporting people to stay hopeful but realistic about progress is also critical. Again, this is not about downplaying the truth, or the grave reality of the situation Aotearoa finds itself in. As noted by Solnit (2016), hope 'is not the belief that everything was, is or will be fine', but there are 'specific possibilities ... that invite or demand that we act'. This is *grunty* hope, not idealistic hope – accepting the truth and understanding that there will be ups and downs, but that as a nation we can and should take on the challenge. Dealing with climate change is hard and it will be important to maintain public energy and commitment, so that there is endurance for the marathon ahead. It also helps to hold some tension with inaction. It's not in the nature of New Zealanders to shy away from a challenge; instead, we must tap into the Kiwi 'can do' attitude.

To conclude, reframing the public discourse on climate change is an important factor for building public morale around climate action. It also helps build the culture for systemic change, and, in a democratic system, greater opportunity for cross-party government strategy to tackle this long-term, complex and existential threat. To quote Christiana Figueres, the former executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change:

> Faced with today's facts, we can be indifferent, do nothing and hope the problem goes away. We can despair and plunge into paralysis. Or we can become stubborn optimists with a fierce conviction that no matter how difficult, we must, and we can rise to the challenge. (Figueres, 2020)

1 The Covid-19 Public Engagement and Communications team was based in the National Crisis and Management Centre from March to May 2020, then moved to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet from June 2020 to late 2022. The wider team also included people from other government agencies and their partners, and from the private sector, such as social science experts, researchers, and creative and media-buying agencies.

2 To 31 December 2021, Aotearoa New Zealand experienced 10 confirmed Covid deaths per million of population. This compares with 91 for Australia, 769 for Canada, 1,932 for France, 2,379 for the US and 2,584 for the UK ('Coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths' (derived from WHO data from 22 March 2020 onwards; rounded to the nearest whole number), https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths.)

3 $116,603,499 spent on Unite Against Covid-19 advertising (https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/dpmc-roia-oia-2022-23-0126-gvt-spending-radio-tv-campaigns-and-covid-19%20campaign.pdf).

4 Initially the policy aim was to 'flatten the curve'; however, this was so successful that it became feasible to change the aim to elimination.

5 This compares with an Oregon public awareness campaign in the US, 'It's up to you how many people live or die' (https://www.oregonlive.com/coronavirus/2020/03/oregon-launches-stark-new-public-appeal-stay-home-dont-accidentally-kill-someone.html).

6 The Hofstede model of national culture: https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/.

7 80% of New Zealanders are worried about the impacts of climate change already seen in New Zealand and around the world (Ipsos, 2023), 70% of property owners think we are already seeing the impact of climate change (TRA and Ministry for the Environment, 2023), and belief in the reality of climate change and its human cause has markedly increased between 2009 and 2018 (Milfont et al., 2021).

8 0.15% means New Zealand has three times the global average emissions per capita. NZ is 19th in the world for greenhouse gas emissions (Gen Less, 2023).

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