Necessity and Impossibility – Imagining the Future in Global Climate Negotiations

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Abstract

Climate change is a governance challenge with unique temporal features. Understanding the power of the present generations of human beings to influence the wellbeing of many generations to come and to shape the speed and extent of change of all planetary systems far into the future is an awesome and unprecedented challenge. Yet, it seems to be a fundamental requirement for making ‘good’ decisions. But to what extent does the future play a role in the belief-systems of decision-makers today? And if so, how far does their thinking reach – a decade, a century? Using interview data gathered in 2012 this paper explores the cognitive limits of participants in global climate negotiations regarding scenarios of the distant future (the year 2080). I argue that negotiators are hampered by at least two cognitive obstacles when dealing with the future: a lack of imagination and a set of mental protection mechanisms that seek to keep threatening ideas at bay. Those exceptional individuals who actively deal with the distant future tend to imagine a dystopia, a terrible future that must be avoided. Their beliefs are enabled by threat perception to a strong place-based identity in the presence. I describe these cognitive patterns and their effects on the belief systems of climate negotiators and ultimately the negotiation positions of political actors. Using insights from cognitive and political science I explain with how these mental patterns – the inability to imagine the distance future, avoidance mechanisms and worst-case thinking – affect the prospects of global climate governance. I conclude with some ideas for addressing this cognitive barrier and improving multilateral decision-making.

Keywords: Capacities, Collective Action, Global Change, Governance, Decision, making, Interdisciplinary, Narratives, Resistance, Sense of Place, Transformation

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