Met Office

Conversations

Climate security roundtable summary:

How can climate science help inform planning and policy?

On 11 May 2011, the Met Office hosted the first in a series of conversations under Chatham House Rule to get key influencers talking about shared issues. The roundtable on climate security is summarised here, under topic headlines phrased as questions. Each paragraph ends with an outcome.

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How is climate change perceived as a threat for the UK?

The event opened with recognition that climate change is a big issue for the UK, but one that may not be taken seriously enough by politicians, policymakers and the public alike.

In a recent poll by The Economist, only 4% of those surveyed had identified climate change as a big issue. The newspaper suggested that people had afforded climate change lower priority because of the recession. But there was agreement around the table that the issue is more complex than this.

Outcome: The Met Office can do a lot to restore the credibility, objectivity and authority of climate science as a highly regarded, national and international organisation.

What have politicians done to encourage action on climate change to date?

For politicians, climate change is not seen as a problem that needs immediate action in the way that crime, health, immigration and the economy do. Instead, climate change is seen as something that will affect the next generation, rather than a problem for today.

On top of this, climate change predictions have tended to be of the very big kind: Africa will become a desert; permafrost will melt sufficiently to grow grain crops; mass migration will occur; and Asia will face a disproportionate number of climate-change related natural disasters. It isn't always easy to understand what this really means for the UK here and now.

Outcome: The political implications of climate science shouldn't be an excuse to scare scientists away from engagement. The relevance of climate change for the UK response needs to be more clearly articulated by scientists.

How well is climate change understood in strategic planning and policymaking?

While the risks of climate change are well understood, some of the hard scientific facts are difficult to translate due to the terminology used. For example, 'uncertainty' means something different to climate scientists, policymakers and the public.

The complexity of the science and the difficulty in talking about future events in definite terms, makes communicating the impacts of climate change a challenge. The key is to develop a narrative that speaks clearly to planners and policymakers. If climate scientists can tailor information to address the specific issue of climate security, then it becomes possible to extract the value from the science in the way most meaningful to the security context. Part of this is involves climate scientists speaking in a way that is useful and accessible to the security community, which might include, for example, referencing the impacts of recent weather events to illustrate the consequences of climate change.

Outcome: Climate scientists should work hard to communicate their work clearly and unambiguously, with climate projections tailored to the issues being addressed.

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How can science and policymaking join-up more effectively?

The Copenhagen conference in 2009 was an event of historical importance. It showed that the world needs integrated knowledge to ensure global security and that the world's population – 9 billion people by 2050 – have access to sufficient food and water. This takes climate change beyond the scientific agenda and into public policymaking, both here and internationally.

In general, policymaking in the UK has become much more interdisciplinary, particularly when it comes to climate change. But, because climate change is much more than what the Met Office does, there is scope to take this further.

Outcome: Interdisciplinary coordination is needed among experts in social science, economics and global security. Using a common language, experts can better help in the formulation of a joined-up and meaningful response to the effects of climate change on UK security.

How can climate change move up the political agenda?

To date, politicians have mistakenly framed climate change as a problem for future generations when, in fact, we're already living with changes in climate.

Instead, politicians need to treat climate change as a problem of today and afford it the same priority as other big issues such as global security, crime, health, immigration and the economy, based on the best climate science available.

By joining up different models – such as climate, politics, economics and natural disaster planning – we can look for integrated long-term impacts, rather than isolated effects, and develop joined-up strategies to tackle them. But, at the moment, the different agendas of departments across Whitehall mean that climate change issues are prioritised very differently: national versus international, adaptation vs. mitigation, top secret vs. open.

Outcome: Politicians need to be equipped with a greater understanding of climate change issues and the different levels of detail needed for different audiences, giving them confidence in the evidence to deliver a compelling message.

What else can be done to inform adaptation policy, here and internationally?

Working together, we need to challenge the thinking of the British Government: for example, by looking at the impacts of climate change on countries of strategic economic importance to the UK. By helping these countries adapt to climate change we, in turn, would reduce the threats to our national interests. This means developing the science, wherever it's not sufficiently clear, so that sensible policy decisions can be made. At the same time, this has to be on the understanding that we will never have all the details.

The way organisations interact on climate change issues also needs to change. It's not enough just to engage Whitehall. The private sector, international development organisations and governments across the world equally need to be onboard. The necessary expertise, consensus and commitment all exist. We just need to find a way to integrate it.

Outcome: A wide range of players need to be involved in climate change discussions, informed by climate science that has been translated and is meaningful to them.

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Key questions for discussion at future roundtable events are currently:

- **How can the aviation industry perform efficiently while coping with increasingly adverse weather?**
- **How can the UK prepare for natural hazards?**
- **How can risk and uncertainty be communicated better?**

For more information on climate security issues, please call Kirsty Lewis, Principal Climate Change Consultant, on 01392 885830 or email kirsty.lewis@metoffice.gov.uk

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