

Experts split over effectiveness of climate emergency declarations

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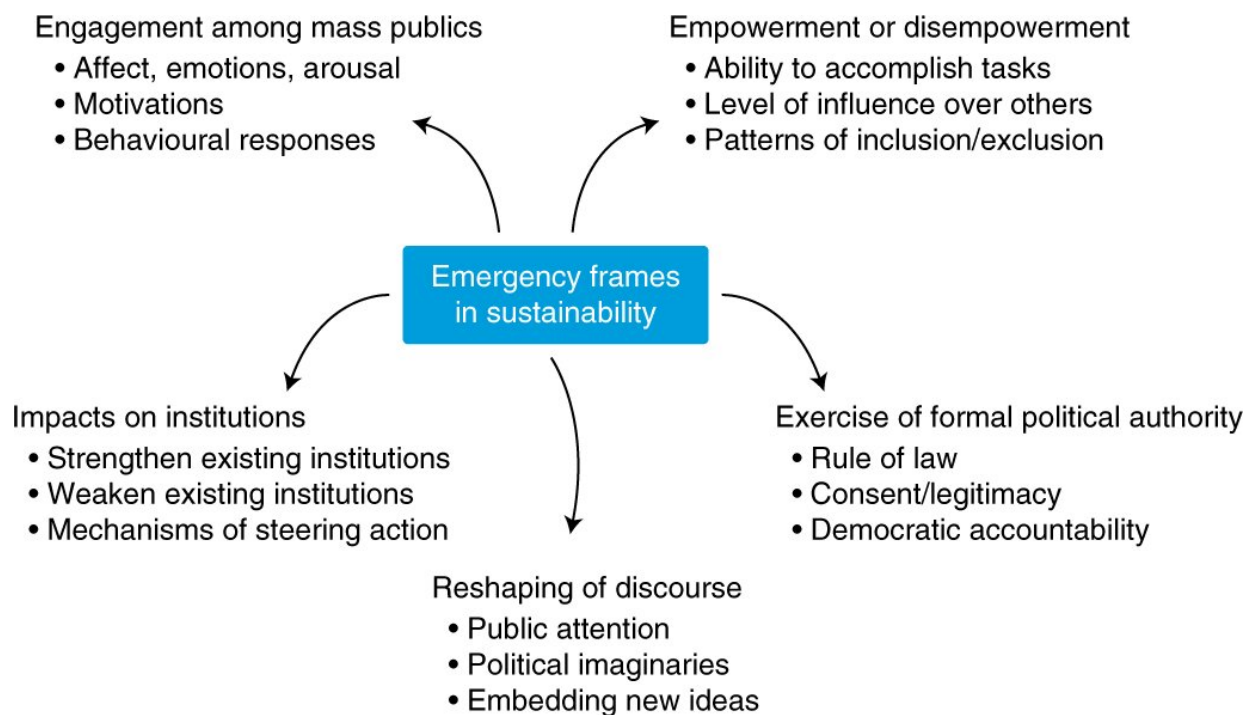


Fig. 1: Emergency frames in sustainability. Credit: DOI: 10.1038/s41893-021-00749-9

Politicians and activists should be cautious in their use of climate and biodiversity emergency declarations as their impact can be harmful as well as helpful in tackling the world's biggest problems, new research co-authored by the University of Sussex Business School warns.

The calling of a global emergency can have a number of positive outcomes but also generate unintended consequences, a review of dozens of studies and expert literature by academics at the University of Sussex Business School, Utrecht University, University of Sheffield and the University of Oslo explains.

While the study found that expert opinion into the efficacy of calling global emergencies was divided, the academics identified a number of benefits including the ability of such announcements to generate public focus and support while empowering activists. The study also noted such declarations have the potential to create a platform for new groups and voices, particularly among young activists.

The authors also noted that emergency frames can be energizing and allow feelings of inspiration, hope and a sense of efficacy to spread quickly around the world, as witnessed by the rapid and global diffusion of school student strikes inspired by the actions of Greta Thunberg.

The fact that climate emergency declarations strongly reinforce science-based and pro-action discourses as well as potentially help to build solidarity at multiple levels of governance, and demonstrate the possibilities of collaboration, were also identified as key benefits by the study.

But the researchers also warn that the calling of emergencies can be emotionally draining and induce feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, guilt and fear leaving citizens so overwhelmed that they take no action at all.

The study warns about the risk of the "boomerang effect" which has been observed in areas such as health and anti-littering campaigns, where a psychological reaction or assertions of freedom in response to a perceived limiting of individual options actually increases the behavior that the campaign was designed to reduce.

The calling of emergencies can also polarize public opinion which potentially plays into the hands of climate deniers and opponents, while the dystopic imagery that often accompanies emergency declarations appears to have limited ability to change individual actions, the authors noted.

The study also warns that while framing issues as an emergency can allow [political decisions](#) to be made faster than usual, it can also mean that quick fixes to the situation are sought that tackle only the symptoms of the problem and not the root causes.

Emergency situations can be particularly problematic in authoritarian settings, the study warns, as emergency powers may be used to curtail individual rights, debate, the rule of law and democratic accountability using the crisis as a pretext.

The authors also note that few declarations of climate emergencies adopted by governments and jurisdictions, which numbered 1,500 in 29 countries by 2019, have been accompanied by new steering mechanisms, such as plans and targets, participatory procedures, new administrative bodies, or allocation of additional resources.

The researchers advocate finding a balance; generating enough "productive friction" to hold political attention but not so much that citizens and decision-makers become overwhelmed.

Dr. Marie Claire Brisbois, Lecturer in Energy Policy in the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex Business School, said: "The overall implication is that sustainability scholars, policymakers and civil society should not be too quick to embrace nor discard the notion of emergency, as its utility may vary across contexts.

"Emergency frames can play a partial role in stimulating sustainability

action, but we should see them as just one tool in the kit, and not one on which to become too reliant as there is ambiguous evidence regarding the effect of time pressure on behavioral responses, including a risk of inaction caused by optimism bias or decreased willingness to cope with risk."

Dr. James Patterson, Assistant Professor of Institutional Dynamics in Sustainability at Utrecht University, said: "It's clear that declaring a state of emergency to solve a problem is not that simple.

"Emergency frames can bring about sustainable change and public awareness of the severity of problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss. But a key risk is that voices and needs are cut off, and quick fixes are used instead of more durable long-term changes that are really needed for a sustainable world."

More information: James Patterson et al, The political effects of emergency frames in sustainability, *Nature Sustainability* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41893-021-00749-9](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-021-00749-9)

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