

Climate Visuals

Towards a new
visual language for
COP22 and beyond

Supplementary report:
A comparison of images
from COP21 and COP22



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About Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach (formerly COIN) are one of Europe's leading experts on climate change communication, bridging the gap between research and practice. Our charity is focused on building cross-societal acceptance of the need to tackle climate change. We have over 12 years of experience helping our partners find their climate voice – talking and thinking about climate change in ways that reflect their individual values, interests and ways of seeing the world. We work with a wide range of partners including central, regional and local governments, charities, business, faith organisations and youth groups.

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Summary	4
Five key findings	5
1. Literal documentation of the negotiations dominated COP21 and COP22	5
2. There were few moments of emotional drama	6
3. Protest images from COP22 were less 'staged' than those from COP21	7
4. Images at COP22 tended to focus on climate impacts rather than solutions	8
5. COP22 images had a greater focus on the Southern Hemisphere, and adaptation around agriculture	9
Conclusion	10
Methodology and image analysis	11
Appendix - Climate Visuals principles	13

Summary

A narrow visual vocabulary currently determines climate change in the public mind: polar bears, melting ice-caps, smokestacks and – as the results of our [Climate Visuals](#) research show – potentially polarising images of environmental protesters. This can undermine the effectiveness of campaign messages by failing to engage audiences, and can detract from the reach and value of journalistic reporting on climate change.

This report presents results from the ongoing Climate Visuals programme, which aims to improve understanding of how to effectively engage people using visual images and ultimately catalyse a new visual language for climate change. Our Climate Visuals approach is based on 7 key principles for visual climate change communication derived from international social research (see Appendix 1 for a list of the principles).

The annual United Nation's COP meetings serve as the key annual moment in the climate change calendar and are therefore central to widening the visual vocabulary of climate change. We wanted to provide concrete, tangible and practical suggestions for how to tell more compelling visual stories on climate change at COP 22 and beyond. Initially we undertook an [analysis of imagery](#) from COP21 (Paris, December 2015). This formed the basis of a workshop with climate change communicators and journalists held in Marrakech during COP22 (November 2016). This supplementary report couples our analysis of COP21 imagery with an analysis of images from COP22, providing the opportunity to identify any shifts in the imagery being used, or determine whether the issues identified in the COP21 analysis still dominated the coverage of COP22.

The key findings are discussed below. But it is clear that when the Climate Visuals approach is coupled with influential campaigners and advocates, powerful impact is achieved. During COP22, Leonardo DiCaprio sent a Climate Visuals inspired [tweet](#) to his 17 million followers (*Image 1*) with approximately 32 million people reached through Twitter and Instagram. By bringing the evidence base on

how people engage with images of climate change to bear on the choices that campaigners make, we can catalyse a new visual language for climate change.



Image 1: This image of a farmer in Nepal tells a positive story which shows how taking action on climate change fits within people's lives across a range of social and economic challenges.

Photo: Neil Palmer (CIAT/CCAFS)

Five key findings

1

Literal documentation of the negotiations dominated COP21 and COP22

Image 2: As recommended by the Climate Visuals approach, this image shows a woman actively interacting with (rather than simply looking at) a climate solution.

Photo: © Abbie Trayler-Smith / Panos Pictures / Department for International Development



As at COP21, most COP22 images focused on negotiations inside the conference, reflecting the news cycle agenda, illustrating what was and wasn't being agreed and who was involved in those negotiations. Only a few COP22 images sought to tell 'different stories', as recommended by the Climate Visuals approach. Images that participants could quickly and easily understand were positively rated in our Climate Visuals research. However less familiar (and more thought-provoking) images can help tell a new story about climate change, and remake the visual representation of climate change in the public mind. *Image 2* juxtaposes what might otherwise be a timeless picture of an Indian woman working in her village with the modern technology of solar panels.

Image 3: John Kerry speaking to delegates and reporters during COP22. The lack of emotion, and generic feel to the image, are likely to mean the image is not an especially powerful one for engaging audiences beyond the green bubble.

Photo: IISD/Kiara Worth (www.iisd.ca/climate/cop22/enb/7nov.html)



The combination is a striking image which communicates a message which is unmistakably about responding to climate change. Compare this with *Image 3*, a photograph of John Kerry which, besides from the signage, could have been taken at any one of a number of international conferences during the previous few years and therefore does nothing to highlight the ways in which climate change connects with ordinary people's lives.

2

There were few moments of emotional drama



Our Climate Visuals research found that the authentic expression of an identifiable emotion is a powerful characteristic for a climate image to have. But capturing such moments is difficult at an event like a COP. COP21 was dominated by dry images of negotiators standing and sitting – but there were also some moments of genuine emotion (for example when the accord was agreed). With the stakes at COP22 not so high, it was difficult to find images of high drama at the negotiations. *Image 4* of negotiators sat speaking to reporters and delegates typified coverage from inside the conference hall at COP22.

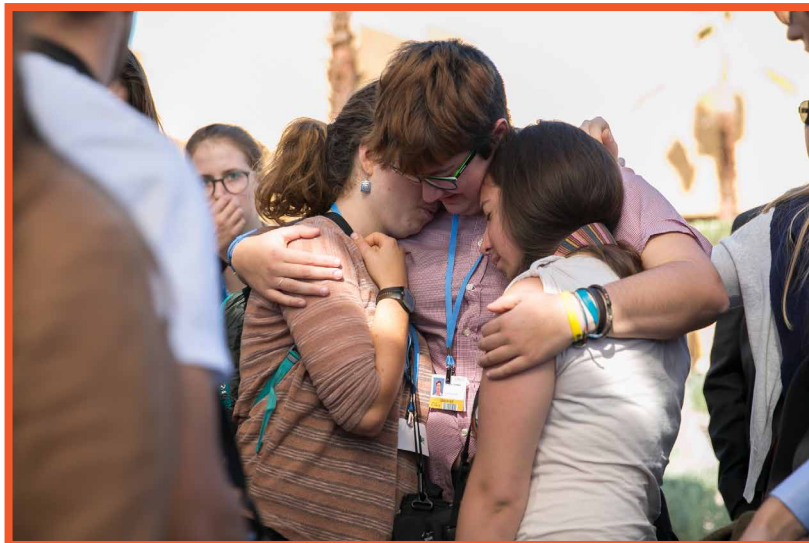


Image 4 (top): A typical image of negotiators from COP22, lacking in emotion. Identifiable individuals with identifiable expressions (which the viewer can connect with) make for more powerful images.

Image 5 (bottom): Environmental activists at COP22 console each other following news of Trump's victory in the US elections. The strong and identifiable emotion of a small number of individuals gives this images a sense of life that most images from inside the conference lack.

Photos: IISD/Kiara Worth (www.iisd.ca/climate/cop22/enb/7nov.html)

3

Protest images from COP22 were less 'staged' than those from COP21



Our Climate Visuals research showed that most people do not identify with images of 'typical Western environmentalists', and so highly-staged photographs of protests led by people from within the green bubble may not be an effective way of reaching wider audiences. Our analysis found that protest images from COP22 were less 'staged' than those from COP21. At COP22 the protest images were not as rehearsed, and there were fewer choreographed actions designed to garner media attention, using well-designed props and costumes. Instead, COP22 images were more likely to show people who had created make-shift campaigns (as in *Images 6 and 7*).

One possible explanation for this difference was a lighter presence from the major international NGOs in Morocco, perhaps anticipating that there would be less media coverage. Because the professional promotional and advocacy teams of organisations like Greenpeace and WWF were not actively engaging with the COP 'on the ground', there were fewer 'staged' protests to photograph allowing less 'professionalised' protesters to gain more attention. It may be the case that there were just as many – or more – 'authentic' protest images emerging from COP21 but if they were created or produced, they did not show up in most mainstream channels. Whatever the reason, this direction of travel follows several key recommendations from our Climate Visuals research: to show 'real people', tell 'new stories', and to connect climate change to ordinary people's lives via local impacts and tangible solutions.

Images 6 and 7: Protest images such as this – involving people directly affected by climate impacts – are likely to be seen as more authentic and therefore more compelling. Our Climate Visuals research suggests, though, that including language around concepts like 'Climate Justice' may not be readily understood by non-specialists, and the image can therefore be difficult to understand.

Photos: Hoda Baraka

4

Images at COP22 tended to focus on climate impacts rather than solutions



In our previous COP report, we argued that images of ‘solutions’ are needed to help maintain the momentum built up during 2016, following the agreement reached in Paris. Whether the election of Donald Trump as the next US President during the first week of COP22 had a negative effect on the sense of ‘momentum’ from COP21 is difficult to establish, but there is no evidence that the visual vocabulary of COP22 is keeping up with the ambition of campaigners regarding visualising positive climate solutions. Positive images of people taking action on climate change remained a marginal theme at COP22. *Image 8*, showing a father and his children using a new bike scheme in Marrakech, was a good example of the kind of visual vocabulary that follows from our Climate Visuals approach – ordinary people interacting with climate solutions (rather than standing around admiring them).

Image 8: Showing ‘sustainability in action’ is likely to be more effective than a photo opportunity showcasing a ‘climate solution’.

Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP/Getty Images

5

COP22 images had a greater focus on the Southern Hemisphere, and adaptation around agriculture



At both COP events, there were relatively few images that made a link to broader climate change questions or the ways in which people in countries and communities across the world might be experiencing (or ignoring) the issue. Some commentators argued that the Paris agreement glossed over many of the challenges faced by the world's poorest, especially in the Southern Hemisphere. Perhaps because this COP was held in Africa, we found a greater proportion of images which moved beyond just images of protestors and negotiators, showing climate impacts and various climate solutions. These included more 'human stories', both regionally from around Morocco and also further afield. In particular COP22 images had a greater focus on impacts and adaptation around farming, most commonly drought related, such as *Image 9*.

Image 9: An Indian woman walks across a dried and cracked pond as she carries buckets for drinking water to the nearest water source, 25kms away. Though images of climate impacts attract attention, as our previous research has suggested, they can also make people feel powerless to act.

Photos: NurPhoto/Getty Images

Conclusion



Our analysis showed that COP22 coverage gave greater emphasis to visual stories of climate change impacts rather than solutions. However, the analysis also revealed that while imagery of COP22 was still largely focused on negotiations and protests, there was less focus on celebrities and staged demonstrations, allowing more 'authentic' protest images to emerge. The explanation for this shift is complex, but it does illustrate that there is an audience and an appetite for the change in approach outlined in the seven [Climate Visuals principles](#) and the need to actively integrate them into future COPs.

Using the Climate Visuals programme as a starting point, we want to work together more strategically with the community of visual climate change campaigners to tell new stories about climate causes, impacts and solutions that can connect with a wider audience in the way that literal reporting of a COP does not. Is it possible to use the insights and expertise of climate campaigners, communicators, researchers, photographers and journalists to work towards a new, more diverse, compelling, and powerful visual language for climate change?



Image 10 (top): Steel industry in Benxi, China. Smoke stacks are a classic climate image – our research found they were easily recognised and associated with the causes of climate change. This particular 'smoke stack' shows how close residential flats (in the foreground) are to the filthy by-products of this steel factory, adding an important human dimension.

Photo: Andreas Habich (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Image 11 (bottom): Women learning how to use a solar cooker. Solar cookers can help to reduce deforestation and carbon production bringing cleaner air locally as well as lower carbon globally.

Photo: UN PHOTO

Methodology and image analysis

The research involved identifying the dominant images within the period of the COPs in online search engines, a selection of international online news media, and the websites of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Sources for the image search were selected on the basis that they were likely to have good coverage of the COPs, a large audience for their reports, and cover different geographical regions. This criteria was applied to news sites, climate specialist sites, campaigning groups, international NGOs and image banks. Where possible (e.g. news sites and NGO websites) we ensured the sources represented wide regional coverage (e.g. Asia, South America and Africa). The shortlist of sources analysed had at least one of the following characteristics:

- A large audience
- A leading regional media outlet
- A presence at one or both of the COPs
- Produced by or read by climate specialists

Images were retrieved from 85 separate sources. On rare occasions the search results from some sources brought back too many pages of results to search, retrieve, catalogue and analyse with the time and resources available. In this case, images from the first page of the search results were analysed. In addition, some sites had large galleries of images, which contained too many images to be catalogued and analysed. The issue of the search identifying too many images for analysis was limited to the COP21 coverage. These are excluded from the totals provided in *Table 1*.

Whilst a large number of images were analysed and discussed, there were a number of factors which meant it was not possible to retrieve all the images in circulation for the sources identified under our criteria:

- Some news sites have paywalls, limiting the amount of pages that could be viewed
- Campaign organisations often operate through media such as Twitter, rather than writing news stories or blog posts with an image, which meant that these images did not appear on their webpages

- Some of the news media in the South may have coverage of one COP but none from the other
- Sources sometimes provided COP coverage either in the lead up to or after the event ended, which meant the report was excluded as it lay outside the specified date range
- Some sources did not use images with their reports

However, even after these caveats, and after removal of duplicates, a total of 581 images were analysed.

Table 1: Number and distribution of images

	COP21	COP22
News sources with large global audiences	77	50
Image banks	61	39
Campaign organisations	52	47
Online climate news	41	18
African news media (inc. Al Jazeera)	21	41
India news media	25	30
South American news media	17	23
Chinese news media	0	3
Japanese news media	7	2
Other NGOs	21	15
Totals	313	268

A thematic analysis was used to generate image categories (see *Table 2*). In that analysis, three dominant categories of images were identified:

- Images from inside the COP, normally of delegates and world leaders speaking at lecterns or sat on expert panels
- Images in the immediate vicinity of the COP conference location, such as protestors or simply shots of people entering and leaving the conference centre
- Climate impacts and causes that were situated 'elsewhere' (e.g. photographs of climate change impacts and causes)

Links to the images, with short descriptions and a record of the source, were entered into a spreadsheet and a gallery. The project team sorted the images into the three categories above. The subsidiary categories (see *Table 2*) concentrated on what was taking place in the images. A handful of miscellaneous images did not fit into any of the categories developed. Our analytical focus was a pragmatic (rather than theoretically driven) one, providing the basis to make practical recommendations about more effective visual climate change communication.

Table 2: A list of basic categories derived from COP21 image research

A. Inside the conference hall	COP21	COP22
World leaders – individual/group shots	✓	✓
World leaders – celebrating/congratulating each other	✓	✓
Delegates – in plenaries/on panels	✓	✓
Delegates – negotiating (standing or sitting)	✓	✓
Delegates/officials sat in conference hall	✓	✓
Celebrities	✓	✗
Media scrums/working journalists	✓	✗
Delegates and others at press conferences	✓	✓
Young people at COP	✓	✓
Indigenous groups	✓	✓

B. Outside the conference hall	COP21	COP22
Scene shots – the building, pillars, infrastructure	✓	✓
Scene shots – the city	✗	✓
Protesters – clashing with police	✓	✗
Protests with iconic landmarks behind them	✓	✗
Protesters dressed as polar bears	✓	✗
Protestors with slogans/messages to the world	✓	✓
Protests elsewhere	✓	✗
Groups of indigenous people	✓	✓

C. Elsewhere	COP21	COP22
Impacts – with people	✓	✓
Impacts – without people	✓	✓
Solutions – with people	✓	✓
Solutions – without people	✓	✓
Ice sheets	✓	✓
Causes	✓	✓

Appendix - Climate Visuals principles

The Climate Visuals website (climatevisuals.org) contains a growing, interactive library of images to provide inspiration and guidance for journalists, campaigners, bloggers and anyone else using imagery to communicate about climate change. All images are categorised to reflect the different aims communicators may have and captioned with an explanation of why they were chosen, with many available to download and use directly in blogs, articles and campaigns. We are adding a new Gallery to the Climate Visuals website which contains images specially selected to not only match the seven Climate Visuals principles, but also map onto the key challenges for communication, campaigning and engagement at COP22 and beyond.

The seven key principles on which the Climate Visuals resources is based are:

1	Show 'real people' not staged photo-ops	A person expressing an identifiable emotion is powerful. But our discussion groups favoured 'authentic' images over staged photographs, which they saw as gimmicky or even manipulative. Politicians – notoriously low on credibility and authenticity – attracted some of the lowest scores (in all three nations) in our survey.
2	Tell new stories	Images that participants could quickly and easily understand – such as smokestacks, deforestation, and polar bears on melting ice – tended to be positively rated in our online survey (which captured rapid responses to images, rather than deeper debate). Familiar, 'classic' images may be especially useful for audiences with limited knowledge or interest in climate change, but they also prompted cynicism and fatigue in our discussion groups. They are effective ways of communicating to an audience that 'this story is about climate change'. But is it a story they want to hear? Less familiar (and more thought-provoking) images can help tell a new story about climate change, and remake the visual representation of climate change in the public mind.
3	Show climate causes at scale	We found that people do not necessarily understand the links between climate change and their daily lives. Individual 'causes' of climate change (such as meat-eating) may not be recognised as such, and if they are, may provoke defensive reactions. If communicating the links between 'problematic' behaviours and climate change, it is best to show these behaviours at scale – e.g. a congested highway, rather than a single driver.
4	Climate impacts are emotionally powerful	Survey participants in all three nations were moved more by climate impacts – e.g. floods, and the destruction wrought by extreme weather – than by 'causes' or 'solutions'. Images of climate impacts can prompt a desire to respond, but because they are emotionally powerful, they can also be overwhelming. Coupling images of climate impacts with a concrete behavioural 'action' for people to take can help overcome this.
5	Show local (but serious) climate impacts	When images of localised climate impacts show an individual person or group of people, with identifiable emotions, they are likely to be most powerful. But there is a balance to be struck (as in verbal and written communication) between localising climate change (so that people realise the issue is relevant to them) and trivialising the issue (by not making clear enough links to the bigger picture).
6	Be very careful with protest imagery	Images depicting protests (or protesters) attracted widespread cynicism and some of the lowest ratings in our survey. In our discussion groups, images of (what people described as) 'typical environmentalists' only really resonated with the small number of people who already considered themselves as activists and campaigners. Most people do not feel an affinity with climate change protesters, so images of protests may reinforce the idea that climate change is for 'them' rather than 'us'. Protest images involving people directly affected by climate impacts were seen as more authentic and therefore more compelling.
7	Understand your audience	Unsurprisingly, levels of concern/scepticism about climate change determined how people reacted to the images we tested. But other differences emerged too – images of 'distant' climate impacts produced much flatter emotional responses among those on the political right. Images depicting 'solutions' to climate change generated mostly positive emotions – for those on the political right, as well as those on the left.