

# Climate Visuals

Towards a new visual language for climate change:  
An evidence-based Briefing for COP22 and beyond



climateVISUALS

# Project Team

## Author

**Adam Corner**, Research Director, Climate Outreach; Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University

## Editing and production

**Robert van Waarden**, van Waarden Photo

**Chris Shaw**, Senior Researcher, Climate Outreach

**Anna Stone**, Project Coordinator, Climate Outreach

**Elise de Laigue**, Designer ([www.explorecommunications.ca](http://www.explorecommunications.ca))

# Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the individuals who kindly gave their time to be interviewed as part of the production of this Briefing (a full list of names can be found in Appendix B).

# 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 10 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.

✉ The Old Music Hall, 106–108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JE, UK

☎ +44 (0) 1865 403 334

@ [info@climateoutreach.org](mailto:info@climateoutreach.org)

🏠 [www.climateoutreach.org](http://www.climateoutreach.org)

🐦 [@ClimateOutreach](https://twitter.com/ClimateOutreach)

📘 [Climate Outreach](https://www.facebook.com/ClimateOutreach)

🌐 [Climate Outreach](https://www.linkedin.com/company/climate-outreach)

---

**Cite as:** Corner, A. (2016). Climate Visuals. Towards a new visual language for climate change: An evidence-based Briefing for COP22 and beyond. Climate Outreach.

**Cover photos:** Solar cooker: UN PHOTO; Indigenous leaders: Joel Lukhovi | Survival Media Agency; COP21 demonstration: Joel Lukhovi | Survival Media Agency; Shoe collection protest: Emma Cassidy | Survival Media Agency; Paris Agreement celebration: IISD/Kiara Worth; Burkina Faso farmer: jbdodane; Newlyweds: Francis R. Malasig/epa/Corbis; Logging trucks in Gabon: Ollivier Girard for CIFOR

NOVEMBER 2016

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Rapid overview of imagery from COP21</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Recommendations for COP22 and beyond</b>	<b>7</b>
1. Documenting a COP – making the most of a restricted visual landscape	7
2. Capturing authentic moments to reach beyond the usual suspects	9
3. In the shadow of COP21, tell new visual stories at COP22	11
4. How to maintain momentum after Paris	13
5. Visual stories that resonate around the world	15
6. Capturing attention in a crowded digital marketplace	17
7. Working together more strategically as a community	19
<b>Appendix A - Climate Visuals</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Appendix B - List of interviewees</b>	<b>21</b>

Despite the energy and resources our community dedicates to communication strategies for written and spoken campaign materials, the amount of research on how to effectively engage people using visual images of climate change is much more limited. As a result, an easily-recognisable climate change iconography has taken root over the past 25 years. This narrow visual vocabulary still determines climate change in the public mind: polar bears, melting ice-caps, smokestacks and – as the results of the new Climate Visuals ([climatevisuals.org](http://climatevisuals.org)) research project show – potentially polarising images of environmental protesters. This can undermine the effectiveness of campaign messages, and detract from the reach and value of journalistic reporting on climate change.

This Briefing is a response to this challenging situation.

In 2015, Climate Outreach led a team of researchers, campaigners and photographers to produce [Climate Visuals](#): an evidence-based resource for visual climate change communication. Based on research involving thousands of citizens in the UK, US and Germany, the resource centres on seven key principles for visually communicating climate change (Appendix A).

The recommendations in this Briefing are informed by a set of interviews with key voices in visual climate change communication, including campaigners, photographers, and communication strategists (see Appendix B). The interviews provided a snapshot of the latest thinking from a range of expert voices, a sense of the key talking points likely to emerge at COP22, and a range of perspectives on the recurring challenges that campaigners and communicators face in effectively conveying climate change in the visual medium. We mapped the key themes emerging from the interviews against the [Climate Visuals](#) research base and carried out a rapid review of the dominant visual themes from COP21 in Paris (see page 6), providing a comparison point for assessing visual imagery around COP22.

This Briefing has two aims. The first is to provide concrete, tangible and practical suggestions for how to tell more compelling visual stories on climate change

at COP22 and beyond. The second is to begin a dialogue among the different perspectives that comprise the visual climate change ‘community’.

Our analysis of images from COP21 found that imagery fell largely into two categories: staged protests outside of the COP and politicians/negotiators at work inside the COP. There are some structural reasons why the visual vocabulary on climate change is so stunted: at key moments in the climate calendar, such as the COPs, a predictable pattern plays out that almost guarantees that the cycle of visual communication will repeat itself. Activists often make visual choices primarily to engage their memberships (which may not be very representative of the wider population in terms of what ‘works’ for them). Journalists and photographers fight against the complexity – and sometimes abstractness – of climate change, and often opt for literal documentation of the inherently ‘dry’ process of technocrats negotiating. The limited range of climate images in many stock photography collections reflects these ‘upstream’ restrictions. And as a result, major events such as the annual COP do not generally engage the wider public in the way they potentially could.

One of the surprising findings from our [Climate Visuals](#) research was that in a narrow sense of the word, clichéd climate images (at least in the Northern hemisphere) like polar bears ‘worked’: that is, people could easily identify them as a signifier of climate change. Interviews for this project confirmed this: because climate change has such a limited visual vocabulary, there is a short-term gain from using this vocabulary in campaigns. Polar bears and melting glaciers are shorthand for climate change, and may be particularly useful for engaging existing memberships, but there is widespread acknowledgement that reliance on these sorts of images is damaging to the movement as a whole. At best, they do not do justice to the breadth and depth of climate change. At worst, they may be projecting and reinforcing a troubling message to those outside of the ‘green bubble’: this issue is not for people like you to worry about.





This means – as many of the interviewees for this project made clear – we need to think more strategically and work across sectors and professions. There is a consensus among people who ‘do’ visual climate change communication that images need to be local, relevant to diverse audiences, tell new stories and connect with people on an emotional level. There is passion and enthusiasm for more participatory methods of making and sharing images – being led by a particular audience or community, rather than a campaign organisation itself. But somehow, the visual vocabulary of climate change at the level of a general audience remains predictable and static.

Images created and shared around a COP do not need to be directly related to the COP. Just like meetings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), they offer an opportunity and a platform to say ‘something else’ about climate change. But as a community, we have tended to interpret these key moments as opportunities to document negotiators or climate protesters at work.

In the shadow of the Paris accord, Marrakech is the perfect time to reflect on how we could do things differently. Can we 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?



*Our analysis of images from COP21 found that imagery fell largely into two categories: staged protests outside of the COP and politicians/negotiators at work inside the COP.*

#### Top image

**What it shows:** Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace International, participates in a demonstration at COP21 in Paris.

**Photo:** Joel Lukhovi | Survival Media Agency

#### Bottom image

**What it shows:** Laurent Fabius (R), President of COP21 brings down the Green Gavel to signify the adoption of the Paris Agreement.

**Photo:** IISD/Kiara Worth ([www.iisd.ca/climate/cop21/enb/29nov.html](http://www.iisd.ca/climate/cop21/enb/29nov.html))

# Rapid overview of imagery from COP21

## Methods and findings from COP21 image analysis

### 1. Search methodology

Three domains were used to structure the online image search: image search engines, online news media and – broadly defined – non-governmental organisations (see Table 1).

Table 1: Online search framework

Image search engines	Online news media	NGOs
Google	BBC	AVAAZ
Flickr	New York Times	Greenpeace
Getty	Guardian	OIL21
Reuters	Washington Post	Oxfam
AFP	Independent	WRI
AP	Globe and Mail	Climate News Network
	Daily Mail	Survival Media
	NRC Handelsblad	CAN International
	National Observer	IIED
	Le Monde	World Bank
	Huffington Post (UK)	350.org
	Carbon Brief	Tcktcktck
		CERES
		HereNow
		IIGCC
		Climate Access

Initial searches used 'COP21'. This returned results weighted towards official COP21 logos. Search terms which combined COP21 with the dates of the COP (30/11/2015 – 12/12/2015) returned more varied images. Searches within organisations' own websites with a stronger focus on climate change using just the COP dates also proved an effective way of returning relevant images. In contrast to the image search engines, often the images we catalogued were those being used to illustrate a news story.

### 2. Results

A total of 293 images were identified. Images fell into three categories, described in Table 2. The vast majority of images fell into categories (a) and (b) – literal documentation of either the inside or the outside of the COP. Images of the delegates and world leaders inside the conference were approximately equal to the number of images of protesters outside the conference.

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

(a) Inside the conference	(b) Outside the conference	(c) Elsewhere
<b>World Leaders</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Individual</li> <li>– Group shots</li> <li>– Celebrating/ congratulating each other</li> </ul> <b>Delegates</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In plenaries</li> <li>– Negotiating (standing or sitting)</li> </ul> <b>Celebrities</b> <b>Media scrums/working journalists</b> <b>Delegates and others at press conferences</b> <b>Young people at COP</b> <b>Scene shots – the building, pillars, infrastructure</b>	<b>Protestors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Protestors clashing with Police</li> <li>– 'Red Line' symbolism</li> <li>– Protests with iconic landmarks behind them</li> <li>– Protests that are not in Paris</li> <li>– People dressed as polar bears</li> </ul> <b>Groups of indigenous people</b> <b>Campaigners</b> <b>Ordinary people (not NGO types)</b>	<b>Impacts</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Floods (with and without people)</li> <li>– Droughts/Desertification (with and without people)</li> </ul> <b>Solutions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Solar Panels</li> <li>– Wind Turbines (with and without people)</li> </ul> <b>Causes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Smokestack photos</li> <li>– Mining</li> <li>– Pollution</li> </ul>

The majority of images reflected the news cycle agenda, illustrating what was and wasn't being agreed within the conference centre and who was involved in those negotiations, plus images of protests outside the conference. There were very 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. This doesn't mean that there are no images being produced or created that speak to these types of questions – but they are not showing up in most mainstream channels.

# Recommendations for COP22 and beyond

## 1

### Documenting a COP - making the most of a restricted visual landscape



*Visually, COPs are unexciting and photos inside the conference may not hold much interest for an audience outside of the 'green bubble'.*

**What it shows:** A man walks past a large hashtag for COP21.

**Photo:** IISD/Kiara Worth ([www.iisd.ca/climate/cop21/enb/29nov.html](http://www.iisd.ca/climate/cop21/enb/29nov.html))

#### The problem: visually, COPs are unexciting

Our analysis of the dominant visual themes emerging from COP21 revealed a clear pattern. Images fell almost exclusively into one of two camps: literal documentation of the internal workings of the COP, or protests and demonstrations outside of the event (with the well-worn symbolism of polar bear costumes still featuring strongly).

There is clearly a need to document the COP. But as one interviewee put it, photos of the inner workings of COP are like a 'trade magazine' – great for other insiders, but not necessarily of much interest beyond the 'green bubble'. Whether inside or outside, images from COPs are often highly 'staged' – from the photo-ops of the negotiators at decision time, to the very organised demonstrations and protests.

#### Climate Visuals - what does the research say? Show real people not photo-opportunities

Politicians are not trusted in general, and our [Climate Visuals](#) research found that neither do they make especially compelling visual representatives for climate change. Our research found that overly 'staged' images were perceived as gimmicky or even manipulative: authenticity is a crucial principle for telling a compelling visual story on climate change.





## Recommendation

If a literal take on what is happening inside COP is required, capture an **authentically emotional moment**. These are rare, but the high-stakes of COP21 meant that some emotion cut through. Finding these moments at COP22 – a lower profile event – may be a challenge. But they are worth a dozen ‘day-to-day’ shots of negotiators, and help give the technocratic COPs a human face. If an image is designed to send a positive signal, the politician should be as authentic and credible as possible – doing something useful rather than posing for a photo-opportunity.



*Capturing a moment of genuine emotion, whether that is hardship, concern or jubilation at a COP can be difficult. But images like this are worth a dozen more mundane shots of negotiators (although literal documentation of a COP is never likely to be particularly visually inspiring).*

### **What they show:**

**Top image:** Christiana Figueres (C) discusses a point with Laurent Fabius (L) during the final days of negotiation for the Paris Agreement.

**Bottom image:** Celebration after the adoption of the Paris Agreement.

**Photos:** IISD/Kiara Worth ([www.iisd.ca/climate/cop21/enb/29nov.html](http://www.iisd.ca/climate/cop21/enb/29nov.html))



# 2

## Capturing authentic moments to reach beyond the usual suspects



The problem: staged demonstrations are unlikely to reach beyond the green bubble

Although the internal workings of COPs are inherently unexciting from a visual perspective, they offer a chance for activists to hold demonstrations at a time when (in theory) the world is watching. COPs offer a platform for a 'performance' of some kind, around the fringes of the event. But whilst acknowledging the important role that activists play in and around the COPs, it is essential to ask whether these 'performances' reach beyond the usual suspects.

Climate Visuals - what does the research say?  
Be very careful with protest imagery

Very obviously 'staged' photos of protesters from wealthy, high-emitting nations can trigger a problematically polarising response: images depicting protests (or protesters) attracted widespread cynicism and some of the lowest ratings in our research. Most people do not identify as an environmentalist, and so may not view images of 'typical' environmental protesters as relevant to them.



COPs offer an opportunity for activists to stage 'performances' in front of the international media. But while the role of activists at a COP is important, it is essential to ask who is watching these performances, and what they are taking from them.

What they show:

**Top image:** Activists from 350.org chanted "keep it in the ground" while bouncing a symbolic 'carbon bubble' in the air at COP21.

**Bottom image:** A 'street theatre' demonstration which sought to demonstrate that there is a clear pathway to achieving less than a 1.5 degrees Celsius increase in global temperatures.

Photos: Emma Cassidy | Survival Media Agency



## Recommendation

Our [Climate Visuals](#) research found that protest images involving people directly affected by climate impacts were seen as more **authentic** and therefore more compelling. Alternatively, consider widening the visual meaning of 'environmentalist' by showing 'unusual suspects' in images. There was a striking difference between the Keystone XL campaign imagery and many others before it: the names, faces and social and cultural identities of the people opposing the pipeline were in many ways not the usual suspects. Ranchers from Nebraska, and First Nations communities from Canada stood side-by-side, presenting an alternative representation of an 'environmentalist' to the wider public, and contributing to the sense that the campaign was about 'us' not 'them'.



*Almost all demonstrations are 'staged' in some way. But if images of protests include people who are directly affected by climate impacts, they may appear more authentic than 'professional' demonstrations.*

### **What they show:**

**Top image:** Various African and 'small islands' civil society groups demonstrate at COP21 to demand a binding agreement on the 1.5 degrees Celsius temperatures target.

**Bottom image:** Indigenous leaders from forests of Latin America, Indonesia and Africa respond to announcements of heads of state at COP.

**Photos:** Joel Lukhovi | Survival Media Agency



# 3

## In the shadow of COP21, tell new visual stories at COP22



*In our Climate Visuals discussion groups, people responded well to images that were thought-provoking or challenging, telling a 'new' story with multi-layered ideas. Did the image of the empty shoes in Paris capture media attention for this reason?*

**What it shows:** Thousands of people gathered at a peaceful protest for the climate on Boulevard Voltaire in Paris, France. At the start of the human chain, a collection of shoes were placed in the square of Place de la République. The many shoes were there to symbolise all the people that would have marched in the streets had the protest not been canceled by the French government because of recent terrorist activity in the city.

**Photo:** Emma Cassidy | Survival Media Agency

### The problem: after COP21, is anyone interested in COP22?

Our interviewees for this project were clear: COP22 will be competing for media attention with a divisive US election, and is to some extent overshadowed by the high-drama of COP21. There is likely to be much less international media coverage in Marrakech, and probably a lower level of international civil society attention too.

### Climate Visuals - what does the research say? Tell new visual stories

A key finding from our [Climate Visuals](#) research was that there is an appetite for new climate stories. 'Classic' images may be 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. In our discussion groups, participants read stories into the images they viewed – and judged them according to the narratives they produced. Images that produced rich stories, with several layers of information that didn't conflict with each other and explicitly pointed to climate change, tended to prompt more powerful reactions.



## Recommendation

With less media attention, and headlines not guaranteed, COP22 is an opportunity to experiment and trial new approaches, and a platform to say 'something else' about climate change. This might not be a literal telling of the COP, or even a depiction of the fringe activities, but something interesting, new, powerful, and inspiring that relates to key themes being discussed.

With negotiators' attention likely to be focused on adaptation finance, loss and damage, ratification and renewables, these themes provide a starting point for new visual vocabulary. Our interviewees pointed to powerful and fascinating but unheard stories in Tunisia and the North African region since the 2011 uprising - fights against fracking in Algeria; the need for a 'just transition' in the context of giant Moroccan solar farms. Vivid human stories that show climate change in the context of other pressing social issues make for powerful images.



### Top image

*During COP21, the city of Chennai experienced massive flooding. Several outlets used the opportunity of the COP to tell this story and the Indian government blamed climate change for the flooding.*

**What it shows:** A man uses a board to float through a flooded street to reach to a market place in Chennai, India, December 5, 2015.

**Photo by** REUTERS/Anindito Mukherjee

### Bottom image

*Morocco is experiencing a solar boom. Using COP22 as a platform to discuss this is an example of a non-literal but highly relevant COP story - especially if there are important social and political issues around who wins and loses from big infrastructure projects like this.*

**What it shows:** A man stands beside a solar mirror at the Ain Beni Mathar Integrated Thermo Solar Combined Cycle Power Plant in Morocco.

**Photo:** Philippe Roos



# 4

## How to maintain momentum after Paris



*'Natural' images showing solutions in action, or people actively interacting with solutions (rather than observing them) were positively received in our Climate Visuals discussion groups.*

**What it shows:** Two volunteers install solar panels in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

**Photo:** Greenpeace Africa



*Practical, 'common sense' actions like this image of loft-insulation were surprisingly well-received in our research ('real people doing real work'), even if they are aesthetically unremarkable.*

**What it shows:** A man insulating a loft in New Zealand.

**Photo:** Simon Williams (CC BY NC-ND 2.0)

### The problem: COP21 means 'job done'?

COP21 was widely interpreted and reported (especially in high-emitting and wealthy nations) as a resounding success. With ratification occurring more quickly than many had expected, and related international deals on HFCs and aviation also moving forward, there is a palpable sense of momentum among many in the campaign community. But there is also a risk that politicians (the US Presidential debates are a good example) and the global media will consider it 'job done' when in fact the work is just beginning. Plus, many interviewed for this project pointed to a continuing trend of climate 'impacts' imagery, when demonstrating solutions is a more motivating approach.

### Climate Visuals - what does the research say?

**Solutions are good, but showing people interacting with them is crucial**

Images of climate solutions tend to leave people with a more positive emotional reaction than shocking climate impacts or guilt-inducing behavioural causes of climate change. But although images of solar panels, or proactive adaptation processes are likely to be more motivating, our Climate Visuals research found that if photos are too 'staged' (e.g. children clapping and smiling by a renewable energy installation), they can be problematic. More 'natural' photos showing low-carbon lifestyles 'in action' or solutions being directly engaged with were received more favourably. For example, a relatively mundane image of a man rolling out roof insulation was preferred to more aesthetically engaging images, because it seemed to show 'real work' carried out by a 'real person', and was fairly well-received by participants across the political spectrum.



*Images that show adaptation measures in action can also play a role in maintaining momentum for action on climate change.*

**What it shows:** Building a seawall as part of the Kiribati Adaptation Program – Pilot Implementation Phase.

**Photo:** Carlo Iacovino / GEF

---

## Recommendation

Visual images that capture a sense of positive action can play a big role in helping to ensure that momentum is maintained. Whether this ‘action’ is clean energy technologies, behavioural changes, or adaptation programmes, the purpose is the same: generate a sense of diverse and people-focused momentum around climate change that shows ‘this is happening’<sup>1</sup>. What does climate change mean ‘on the ground’ in a post-Paris world?

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://1010uk.org/itshappening>

# 5

## Visual stories that resonate around the world



*Celebrations of the successes achieved at COP21 and elsewhere are important. But how are they perceived in different regions around the world?*

**What it shows:** A large scale visual message made by hundreds of people promoting 100% renewable energy and peace during the COP21 climate summit.

**Photo:** Yann Arthus-Bertrand / Spectral Q

The problem: not everyone thinks Paris was a resounding success - and climate change may slip down the political agenda

Although the agreement reached at COP21 was widely reported in the global press as a success, it did not deliver on key demands made by some Southern hemisphere governments and NGOs. The 'momentum' narrative described above could sound hollow from a Southern perspective, where there are continuing doubts about the absence of sufficient adaptation finance for developing countries. Our Climate Visuals research has so far only been conducted in three high-emitting, wealthy and Northern hemisphere nations. But in these relatively privileged places, climate change was rarely top of anyone's agenda, with other, more pressing social and political issues like refugees, poverty and the cost of housing as the major issues of concern. In nations and communities where economic and political challenges are much more acute, climate change may understandably not be the top priority.





*There is a need to visualise how climate change, and the co-benefits of acting, fit within people's lives across a range of social and economic challenges. Finding good images that communicate this can be difficult as they are often staged or lack people.*

**Top image**

***What it shows:*** 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

**Bottom image**

***What it shows:*** A woman working in the fields of a climate-smart village in Nawalparasi, Nepal.

***Photo:*** Neil Palmer (CIAT/CCFSS)



## Climate Visuals - what does the research say? Connect climate change with people's lives and hopes for the future

Whether in high-emitting or developing nations, connecting climate change to people's lives, lived-experiences and hopes for the future is crucial. When images of climate change show a culturally-identifiable individual or group of people, they are likely to be more powerful. Just as research on written and verbal communication has shown the importance of clearly spelling out the 'co-benefits' of dealing with climate change (better health, cleaner air, a higher standard of living), there is a need to visualise how climate change 'fits' with the reality of life in a globalised society where people experience a range of serious social and economic challenges.

## Recommendation

Just as for written and verbal campaign materials, there is a risk of 'brightsiding' in visual images: painting an unrealistically optimistic picture of how fast action on climate change is proceeding, or how much better life will be in a low-carbon world. But at a time defined for many by global instability, fear and political populism, there is a need to show how climate policies help with these concerns rather than exacerbate them. At worst, climate images add to the burden of despair that many feel. But at best, climate images can acknowledge the prevalent mood of crisis, and position low-carbon transport, food and industrial policies as a response that moves things in a positive direction. Where climate policies bring jobs for ordinary people, show the transition in action: local, concrete and tangible examples of how a response to climate change is also a response to the other social and political problems the world faces.





*Participants in our discussion groups were sensitive towards (and broadly supportive of) attempts to use subversion or humour in climate imagery.*

**What it shows:** Newlyweds Aljim Cabugnason (L) and Jenny (R) display their ring during wedding rites in front of a church at a village that was devastated by rampaging flood waters in Iligan City, northern Mindanao, Philippines, 27 December 2011.

**Photo:** Francis R. Malasig/epa/Corbis

### The problem: people only give an image a few seconds of their attention

Every day, thousands of images of climate change are shared around the world. They compete for our diminishing digital attention spans against dozens of other issues and distractions: most people spend very little time talking or thinking about climate change, let alone engaging thoughtfully with climate imagery. So-called 'clickbait' images (i.e. something attention-grabbing but unrelated to climate change) have a superficial appeal in this context, but our interviewees were clear that this was a false economy. When even the most carefully thought-out visual strategy is likely to receive only a few seconds of attention from each viewer, increasingly data-driven campaigns need to maximise the amount of engagement they get (whether this is measured in 'clicks' or 'actions').

### Climate Visuals - what does the research say?

In a competitive digital environment, images that 'stand out' are valuable tools. In our Climate Visuals research, images that involved humour or subversion seemed to achieve this. Although not universally loved, in our discussion groups participants were sensitive to (and generally appreciative of) undercurrents of humour or contrast in images (for example a couple in their wedding outfits in a flood-ravaged street). Juxtaposition is also powerful – which could mean a 'before-and-after' contrast, or the comparison of people with contrasting lives and experiences.



## Recommendation

A basic but important 'process' point is that images don't need to be used individually: using **multiple images together** to tell a story can allow the seriousness and significance of the problem (i.e. climate impacts) to be combined with the prospect of responding to it (i.e. solutions, actions and adaptation).

Participatory image creation and distribution among different audiences and communities is a promising approach mentioned by several interviewees for this project. When people participate in image creation or selection, it can be a transformative process. Here the aim is not to create the 'perfect picture': people interpret for themselves what climate change means. This means that the climate message can be 'diluted', or perhaps appear to be risky for big organisations with carefully constructed brands, as it means relinquishing editorial control. But blurring the lines between climate change and the other issues of our time is actually a positive step, helping shift climate change from a scientific to a social reality.



*Using multiple images together can be an effective technique to tell a story, demonstrate the significance of the problem and provide solutions.*

### Top image

**What it shows:** Prosper Sawadogo, 63 year old farmer. Prosper's diversity of agricultural production is enough to feed his family for the whole year. Birou village, Burkina Faso.

**Photo:** jbdodane

### Bottom image

**What it shows:** Logging trucks (grumiers) in Gabon.

**Photo:** Ollivier Girard for CIFOR



# 7

## Working together more strategically as a community

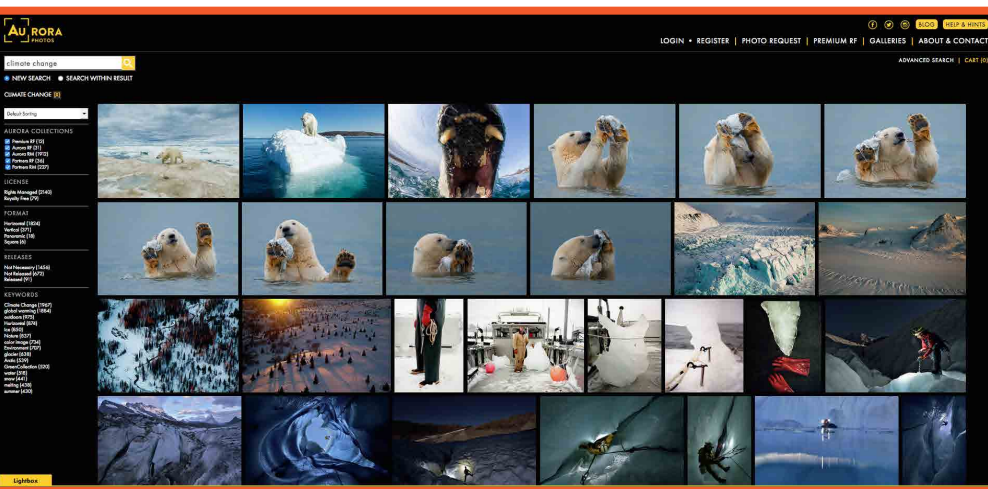
The problem: the links between research on visual communication and campaign practice are not strong enough

Social research almost always stops short of providing constructive, practical guidance for campaigners (although there are some notable exceptions – such as the work of Resource Media<sup>2</sup>). [Climate Visuals](#) was the first evidence-based, publicly available image library for visual climate change communication. In the absence of a practically focused evidence-base, campaigners rely on intuition and experience, focusing on the interests of their supporters, and the 'brand values' of their organisations to guide their visual choices. Journalists, photo-desks and sub-editors must make choices about how to illustrate their written content in a hurry, and so familiar images still tend to dominate media coverage and stock-photography collections.

**Recommendation: promote good working practices, share data & create a new evidence-based visual language**

Some campaign organisations are regularly testing their imagery, and selecting the images that work even if they are counter-intuitive or challenging to mainstream environmentalism. This kind of compromise between campaign instincts and data-driven learning is, as one interviewee put it, 'where science meets art' for visual storytelling. Could a community of visual communicators work together to share data and learning, and move things in a more progressive and evidence-based direction?

One ambitious goal would be to try and change the limited visual vocabulary available in most stock photography collections on climate change. In an initiative designed to challenge increasingly regressive and sexist imagery being returned to the search term 'woman' online, influential corporate voice Sheryl Sandberg<sup>3</sup> worked with Getty Images to do exactly this: create a more compelling and more diverse visual language around this concept. Can we do the same for climate change?



*When a search for 'Climate Change' is entered into a stock photo collection, it is often the stereotypical images that are returned.*

**What it shows:** Screenshot of a search for 'climate change' on Aurora Photos.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.resource-media.org/visual-story-lab>  
<http://www.resource-media.org/visual-story-lab/image-testing-guide-2>  
<http://www.resource-media.org/visual-story-lab/our-reports>

<sup>3</sup> [www.gettyimages.co.uk/collections/leanin](http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/collections/leanin)

# Appendix A - Climate Visuals

The Climate Visuals website ([climatevisuals.org](https://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.



# Appendix B - List of interviewees

The following people kindly gave their time to be interviewed as part of this project.

Disclaimer: the recommendations contained in this Briefing are informed by the interviews conducted, but should not be interpreted as representing the personal or organisational positions or views of any individual interviewee.

Liz Banse (Resource Media)

Max Edkins (The World Bank)

Shadia Fayne Wood (Survival Media)

Rhys Gerholdt (World Resources Institute)

Ian Keith (Avaaz)

Wilf Lytton (Sandbag)

Heather McGeory (We Mean Business)

Dharini Parthasarathy (CAN International)

Ros Pearce (The Carbon Brief)

Mona Samari (Independent journalist and media strategy consultant)

Joao Talocchi (HereNow)

Christian Teriete (European Climate Foundation & member of the Climate Visuals team)

Robert van Waarden (Independent photographer & member of the Climate Visuals team)

Shailendra Yashwant (independent photographer and campaign consultant)

Thelma Young (350.org)