

## COMMENT OPEN



# Unpacking symbolic policy-making for the first Global Stocktake under the Paris Agreement

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The first ever Global Stocktake is scheduled to conclude during COP28 and aims to assess progress on climate change mitigation, adaptation, and the means of implementation. However, the Global Stocktake runs the risk of overestimating progress by overlooking the symbolic dimensions of climate change adaptation policy.

*npj Climate Action* (2023)2:50; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44168-023-00090-1>

Current adaptation tracking approaches are designed to represent process, output, and outcome indicators for specific policy goals and targets<sup>1</sup>. And whilst adaptation tracking scholarship recognizes a number of strengths and weaknesses in current approaches, existing frameworks fail to account for the symbolic dimensions of adaptation policies. The study of symbolism in public policy emphasizes the discursive and political intentions and meaning in policy texts, reports and other forms of communication. Explicit attention to these dimensions is lacking in recent adaptation tracking approaches, which largely emphasize instrumental dimensions of policies and convey a rational view of the policy process. This undermines how accurate the results of the Global Stocktake are and raises questions how useful its findings are for increasing and accelerating countries' ambitions and actions.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS OF POLICY

There is a long-standing scholarship that studies the positive and negative influence of symbols and symbolism on governmental efforts to solve complex societal problems. All policies have symbolic dimensions, which are recognized as powerful means to shape public discourse, set political agendas, and communicate both new and competing ideas, principles, and values<sup>2</sup>.

On the one hand, symbolic dimensions of policy often set the stage for innovative changes in substantive policy-making, and even though it might have limited practical impact, it can be highly effective on a socio-political level. The inclusion of the 1.5°C target in the Paris Agreement, for example, formally recognized the existential risks facing highly vulnerable socio-ecological systems at even low levels of global warming<sup>3</sup>. This encouraged the adoption of accelerated emissions reduction pathways to meet stricter carbon budgets. Highly symbolic policies can also be an outcome of political contestation, providing an opportunity for compromise among different competing interests. Finally, symbolism can play a role in maintaining continuity and support for new policy goals, which will be essential to building stable pathways that lead us toward decarbonization and a climate-resilient future.

On the other hand, symbolic policies can constrain the tangible realization of goals where policymakers use them as substitutes for meaningful policy action<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, some policies are not intended to directly achieve outcomes of societal interest<sup>5</sup>. For example, symbolic policies can embody “performative

seriousness” satiating public demand for action on an issue without demanding significant behavioral change<sup>6</sup>. They also carry the potential to create a false sense of accomplishment that results in public cynicism and erodes public trust in government where policy outcomes do not match the scope of the rhetoric that surrounds them. Moreover, Howlett<sup>7</sup> argues that policy-makers may be driven by “malicious or venal motivations” and therefore set policy goals and targets that are geared towards actions such as free-riding or rent-seeking to obtain special advantages.

## ASSESSING THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF POLICIES

Different approaches and perspectives exist to study the symbolic dimensions of policy, many informed by social constructivist and others by a more positivist approach. Constructivist approaches recognize, for example, the intractability of symbolism in policy dynamics, the role of symbols and language, the social construction of its performative function, and the impact it has on for instance perception and legitimization of political action. Such research often revolves around questions about why certain policy choices are made, understanding the underlying norms, value, and motives for setting certain policy targets, analyzing which political strategies are used, or unpacking why symbolic policy-making is so appealing to politicians<sup>8,9</sup>.

Research on symbolism in the positivist tradition helps us to understand the relationship between policy goals and instruments, the role of interests and institutional design in shaping policy choice, and the effects of symbolism on policy outcomes. Policy design studies, for example, tackle questions about the conceptualization of policy mixes, measuring longitudinal changes in the composition of policy mixes, and attributing changes in key outcomes to policy action<sup>10</sup>.

The symbolic dimensions of policies have received some attention in the broader environmental policy and climate mitigation literatures, which identified examples like greenwashing, formulating “distraction” policies and other delay tactics, emissions accounting schemes, and national climate change legislation<sup>11–14</sup>. However, how symbolism translates into global stocktaking is hardly explored.

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## BRING SYMBOLIC POLICY INTO THE GLOBAL STOCKTAKE

There are several important reasons for explicitly including symbolism in the Global Stocktake and climate change adaptation tracking more broadly.

First, understanding the symbolic dimensions of policy goals and instruments helps to understand and explain the gap between policy adoption and progress (or lack thereof) on achieving key outcomes like vulnerability reduction or resilience-building. It sheds light on whether the adaptation gap is driven by good or bad intentions of elite politicians (i.e., symbolic policy-making), is a consequence of lacking resources to implement ambitious policies, or more broadly implementation failure. Such understanding is critical to explore more effective ways to close the gap.

Second, there is the challenge of accountability. Existing tracking frameworks tend to give credit to climate actions that have little tangible ability to reduce climate vulnerability and risk. Furthermore, the earliest generation of adaptation tracking research largely treated different types of adaptation policy instruments as equivalent with respect to goal implementation, for example, giving equal weight to regulatory changes and public awareness campaigns<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, intentions of policy actions are often included in measurements of actual on-the-ground progress<sup>16</sup>. Portraying an inflated picture of progress in the midst of rapidly worsening climate change impacts is dangerous, undermines public confidence in the international climate regime, and questions about the usefulness of the Global Stocktake.

Third, exercises like the Global Stocktake offer an opportunity for critical reflection and learning about what works and why<sup>17</sup>. Confronting the consequences of symbolism in adaptation policy, and understanding its positive and negative influence, is essential for this type of reflection and learning.

Given the political sensitivity of symbolism, however, developing a strong independent research focus on identifying and explaining the symbolic dimensions of adaptation policy is essential for a more critical perspective on adaptation progress. Centering the topic of symbolism in adaptation tracking governance and policy research programs would contribute a much-needed political lens on adaptation tracking. Such research could also inform future scientific assessments, including the IPCC AR7 cycle.

Clearly, symbolism will play a crucial role in the context of the Global Stocktake and should be acknowledged and considered seriously in efforts to track progress towards the Global Goal on Adaptation, as well as other national, regional, and local initiatives to track progress. Symbolic dimensions of adaptation policies are not only relevant because of the performative and symbolic nature of the Global Stocktake itself but also because of its intended role in generating heightened ambition for countries to adapt.

After all, climate impacts and risks continue to outpace the current rate of adaptation, and evidence of maladaptation, adaptation limits, and failed adaptation actions is emerging across the globe. Consequently, governments, civil society, and the scientific community are increasingly calling for more ambitious and transformational adaptation to start closing the adaptation gap<sup>18</sup>. But if we continue to fail to understand the role of symbolism in climate change adaptation policy, its drivers, and effects, these calls run the risk of being met with mostly symbolic action that fails to close the adaptation gap.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

No primary data was collected for this paper.

Received: 4 October 2023; Accepted: 22 November 2023;  
Published online: 26 December 2023

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Dutch Research Council (NWO-VIDI "High ambitions, (s)low implementation? The politics of tracking adaptation to climate change" Grant number VI.Vidi.211.132) supported the work of R.B.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors contributed equally in the conception, design, and writing of the paper.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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