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Global issues, national narratives

Globe speak

'Global' and 'globalization' carry many meanings. Politicians are increasingly using the terms in public discourse, but often in the neoliberal sense. Understanding how 'global' and 'globalization' are used helps reveal possibilities for new national policies.

By **Martin Albrow, Willemijn Dicke** and **Sabine Selchow**

How politicians frame national issues affects public policy making. Framing helps determine which options policy makers explore, and plays a recognized role in public policy. Just as framing a picture directs the viewers' attention to what we want them to see, policy makers frame issues to influence public perceptions of a problem, and what aspects of the problem get the greatest focus.

Framing is central to the work of officials and political leaders. It involves choosing what keywords and facts to emphasize. Through framing, politicians tell audiences what the issue is, how urgent it is, who are the victims and villains, what solutions exist and which governments or organizations are best suited to drive those solutions.

Since the early 1990s, politicians have increasingly used the term 'global' in public and political discourse (see box on page 21). We face 'global challenges' and we need to fight 'global poverty'. The 2004 tsunami was a 'global catastrophe' that required a 'global response'. Does this increase in what sociologist Robert Holton called 'globe talk' indicate a shift in political thinking? Or is it merely a new vocabulary disguising old ways of thinking?

There is strong evidence that 'global' and 'globalization' influence policy making and can have many different meanings. 'Global' can be framed as an opportunity, a risk or an unavoidable disaster. It can represent hope. In each case, what is specifically meant by 'global' affects the direction and scope of policy making.

What makes 'global' appealing in policy discourses? Do all politicians mean the same thing when they say 'global'? Here, we approach these questions using two issues as examples: climate change and water management. These illustrate varying interpretations of 'global' as it relates to national issues. They also show how national power structures and cultures define what 'global' means, and how the word is used for different purposes.

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Climate change

Wilhelm Viehöver of the University of Augsburg, Germany, documented six distinct narratives relating to climate change: 'new ice age', 'climate paradise', 'sunspot cycles', 'climate change as media and scientific fiction', 'nuclear winter' and 'the greenhouse effect'.

Consider the different connotations of this language. The term 'climate paradise' lacks urgency and is unlikely to lead to policy change. 'New ice age' makes climate change sound inevitable, so no effective policy change would be possible. But with 'greenhouse effect', a link is made between the habits of people and the problem. Using this term, the German government had the enormous task of combating the problem by changing consumer society.

The 'greenhouse effect' framing of the problem cast people as the villains and scientists as the heroes. But some areas of the world contributed more to the problem than others. Some countries worked hard to reduce the greenhouse effect, whereas others refused to sign international treaties to help reduce the problem. These inequalities between countries and regions set the scene for new heroes to ride to the rescue – politicians or even whole nations – to resolve some of the ideological contradictions. Their conclusion was to find alternatives to the consumer society and the damage it does to the planet.

But is it effective to develop national policies on the greenhouse effect? When the entire world contributes to the problem, what difference can just one nation make? Emery Roe, formerly of Mills College in California, warns that the word 'global' could make national and local policy making levels obsolete. The framing of 'global warming' implies that carbon emissions are not a local or regional problem, but a global one. No one is in control, and action at regional, national or local levels seems inadequate.

But there is an alternative –'climate change'. Combating climate change involves identifying which national industries are responsible for the most CO_2 emissions. Then, policy makers can identify which incentives and subsidies would best help reduce those emissions. This approach would provide concrete policy options, even at the national or regional level.

Water management

To examine how a country's culture and history affect what 'global' means at the national level, we compared water management policy in the Netherlands and the UK. We wanted to see whether

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George Bush's 'global' rhetoric

US President George W. Bush uses 'global' to justify political decisions. For example:

... We've got to get education right not only because it's a national responsibility but because we're in a global world. (Bush on 18 October 2006)

Bush speaks of 'national responsibilities' to face 'global' threats. Here, the growing economic strength of India and China justify policy decisions:

And the American people have got to understand that we're living in a global economy, and so when China and India demand more oil, it affects the price of gasoline at the pump. And therefore, it's important for us to diversify away from oil. (Bush on 28 April 2006)

Climate change appears to be the only context in which Bush uses 'global' to mean 'everybody's responsibility', yet it is often applied to justify the US non-reaction:

When you're talking about global emissions ... global means global. So everyone is emitting up into the air. And if there are no actions taken by the major developing countries, like China and India ... you're going to put the American economy at a great disadvantage. (White House press secretary Dana Perino on 2 April 2007)

the new 'global' vocabulary in the two countries had resulted in similar policies.

The management of water developed in distinctive ways over the centuries in the two countries. In the nineteenth century, the British were largely concerned with health and advancing civilization, while the Dutch were focused on national survival. Both cases were stories of progress: water management was essentially a national public good, and the nation state was seen as well suited to provide it.

More recently, both countries adopted the new 'global' vocabulary, though each put a different gloss on it. In the British case the emphasis – and the meaning of 'global' – was on the need to enhance efficiency by introducing flexible markets into the water sector. It was an explicit adaptation to the new 'global economy'.

In the Netherlands, river basin management was an important feature of water management before the global narratives were used. When 'global' was woven into the notion of river basin management, it reframed water management in a very different way from what we saw in the UK. In the Dutch context, the global narrative transformed water management from a national public good to a transnational or even global public good, the benefits of which extend far beyond the borders of the Netherlands.

Rethinking 'global'

From these examples a paradox emerges: invoking the globe may be a very national thing. In the 1980s, multinational firms adopted a 'global' terminology that had until then been largely embedded in the development of a new world order. This led to a relatively benign sense of an interconnected world that was then put to commercial use. Coca-Cola, for example, taught 'the world to sing in perfect harmony'.

More recently, globalization has become associated with the creation of global markets and with neoliberalism – liberalism that emphasizes economic growth. Here, 'global' supports the decentralization of postwar economic institutions and seeks to transfer economic control to the private sector. Policy proposals that have gained approval among Washington-based international organizations include free trade, privatization, undistorted market prices and limited intervention by the state.

Although the neoliberal idea of 'global' has recently been dominant, another shift is underway. The anti-capitalist protests at the 1999 WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle and the World Social Forum with its slogan, 'Another world is possible', reflect this shift in meaning. The movement is now known as 'alter-global' rather than 'anti-globalization.'

It is important to show the potential variety of global narratives. In doing so, we open up policy-making options. ■

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