

THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISINFORMATION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. *As environmental challenges intensify, **environmental disinformation** has become a major obstacle to the implementation of **sustainable development policies**. Disinformation campaigns undermine trust in scientific data, polarize public opinion, and hinder the adoption of necessary environmental measures. As a result, the implementation of climate initiatives slows down, posing risks to achieving the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** within the established timeframe.*

Keywords: *Environmental disinformation, manipulative strategies, environmental risks, public opinion, data falsification, sustainable development, climate skepticism.*

Introduction. In the context of sustainable development, the problem of environmental disinformation acquires particular significance, as the distortion of environmental information leads to the formation of public doubts about the necessity of environmental protection measures and hinders the implementation of sustainability strategies.¹ Research shows that the systematic spread of disinformation directly impacts the pace at which environmental initiatives are adopted. In particular, active disinformation campaigns create barriers to decision-making in the field of environmental protection, resulting in significant delays.² According to expert assessments, negative informational influence can postpone the implementation of environmental measures by several years, thereby weakening global efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).³

The relevance of the problem is confirmed by the growing volume of environmental disinformation, which has a multi-level impact on social and political processes. Disinformation campaigns aimed at distorting the environmental agenda shape false perceptions of the environment, which in turn affect the public's understanding of ecological issues, political decision-making, and the economic strategies of states.

The aim of this study is to analyze the impact of environmental disinformation on public perception of sustainable development. The research is based on the hypothesis

¹ Sustainability Directory (2023). Disinformation Tactics in Environmental Communication. Retrieved from sustainability-directory.com.

² Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. (2020). The Conspiracy Theory Handbook. George Mason University.

³ United Nations (2023). Disinformation and Climate Policy: A Global Challenge. Retrieved from un.org.

that environmental disinformation significantly distorts public understanding of ecological problems by forming misleading narratives.

Methods. This study is based on a case study approach. Representative examples were selected from disinformation campaigns on social media. One case analyzed involved the viral spread of a fake news story about a “new environmental threat”—such as false reports of wild animals appearing en masse in cities. The study examined the pathways of disinformation dissemination, the audience engagement, and the measures taken to debunk the hoax.

Results. The results of the study demonstrate that environmental disinformation has a significant impact on public opinion, often hindering support for sustainable development policies. Manipulative narratives exploit cognitive vulnerabilities of the audience, contributing to the formation of false perceptions of environmental issues and intensifying the polarization of views.⁴

One of the key consequences of the spread of disinformation is the erosion of trust in official data and scientific experts. Constant exposure to contradictory information—from complete denial of environmental threats to conspiracy theories—leaves the public in a state of informational uncertainty.

Our analysis confirmed the findings of previous studies that systematic exposure to disinformation leads to the so-called “freezing effect”: citizens become cynical and passive in the face of environmental challenges, as they are unable to form a clear stance on key issues.⁵

Analysis of empirical data also showed that the level of disinformation exposure directly correlates with public attitudes toward environmental initiatives. In particular, surveys revealed that respondents who regularly consumed conspiratorial content about environmental issues were significantly less likely to support initiatives aimed at reducing emissions and preserving biodiversity. These findings confirm that disinformation not only distorts the perception of ecological problems but also directly influences citizens’ willingness to engage in environmental initiatives, thereby creating barriers to the implementation of sustainable development policies.

The research identified a clear correlation between the intensity of disinformation campaigns and the distorted perception of environmental risks. During periods of active dissemination of climate-related fake news, a noticeable decline in public concern about climate change was observed, along with an increase in the number of individuals who perceived the issue as exaggerated. For example, an analysis of social survey data showed that during peaks in climate skepticism in the media space, the level of concern

⁴ PMC (2024). Cognitive Vulnerabilities and the Spread of Climate Misinformation. Retrieved from [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

⁵ Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. (2020). The Conspiracy Theory Handbook. George Mason University

about global warming decreased on average by 15% compared to periods when fake news did not dominate the information landscape.⁶

An additional factor exacerbating the situation is political polarization, in which different segments of the population interpret the same information differently depending on their ideological beliefs. Disinformation narratives, disseminated through ideologically aligned media channels, shape alternative perceptions of environmental threats, making it more difficult to achieve public consensus on implementing environmental protection measures.

The impact of disinformation is also evident in the political process. False narratives can foster public resistance to environmental reforms, which is often taken into account by populist politicians during the decision-making process.⁷ A striking example is the myth that the “green economy will destroy jobs.” This narrative has been actively used by opponents of climate policy in political rhetoric, leading to the weakening or postponement of certain environmental legislative initiatives. International analytical reviews confirm that distorted information about climate initiatives reduces public demand for the adoption of adaptation measures and climate mitigation strategies.⁸

The analysis of specific case studies confirmed the impact of disinformation on sustainable development. In particular, the study identified an instance where an active disinformation campaign on social media led to increased public skepticism and complicated the government's process of adopting new emission reduction targets. The disinformation strategy included the spread of fake news about “manipulation by climatologists,” which triggered distrust in official data and provoked public backlash. As a result, state decarbonization initiatives faced resistance, and the adoption of new climate goals was delayed. Thus, environmental disinformation has a direct impact on the trajectory of sustainable development by creating barriers to the implementation of necessary environmental reforms.

This study examined the role of environmental disinformation in the context of sustainable development. The findings confirmed the hypothesis about the negative impact of environmental disinformation on public perception and the implementation of sustainability policies. The results show that systematic campaigns to spread environmental fake news reduce trust in scientific data, increase political polarization in society, and lower public support for essential environmental reforms. These processes have serious consequences for the development of environmental policy, as they create informational barriers that hinder the adoption of strategic decisions. As a result, progress

⁶ Sustainability Directory (2023). Disinformation and Public Perception of Climate Risks. Retrieved from sustainability-directory.com.

⁷ Greenpeace (2023). The Role of Misinformation in Environmental Policy Delays. Retrieved from greenpeace.org.

⁸ India Mongabay (2023). Climate Disinformation and Public Resistance to Policy Measures. Retrieved from india.mongabay.com.

slows in key areas, including climate change mitigation, ecosystem protection, and biodiversity conservation.

Furthermore, the study revealed that environmental disinformation influences decision-making at both national and international levels. The destabilization of the informational environment contributes to delays in the approval of strategies, reduced effectiveness of climate agreements, and difficulties in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the designated timeframe. Consequently, disinformation can serve as a form of “informational sabotage,” obstructing the implementation of environmental policy and posing risks to global ecological initiatives.

LITERATURE:

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