# Messaging guide for community activists protecting the local environment from polluting projects

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# I. About the guide

This guide supports activists working at the local level to grow support in their communities to resist environmentally damaging projects. As such, it is narrower in scope than a guide intended to build support for systemic changes at the national level, such as the transition to renewable energy or a green economy. Nevertheless, the messaging in this guide is consistent with those broader changes and may still be of interest to staff working in organisations promoting those goals.

The recommendations in this guide are based on an analysis of Hungarian public opinion on (local) environmental protection and message testing. These were carried out through social listening over Facebook (June - July 2024) on selected Hungarian language pages as well as focus groups with residents of Gyor and Debrecen, two cities where polluting projects have received media attention (September 2025).

Section II will briefly highlight certain messaging habits of environmental NGOs that may need reviewing. Section III will then outline how to create a persuasive message, or narrative, and give examples of how to execute this, including creative materials for use in social media campaigns. This is largely based on the results of message testing in focus groups.

# II. A review of current messaging habits

There are certain habits among NGOs working on environmental protection that communicators should be aware of and consider changing. This section will identify these and offer guidance.

## A. Focusing on the harm you're fighting

Campaigners tend to put too much emphasis on the harm that they're fighting in their messaging and the imagery they use. Images such as flooding, cracked earth, wildfires, property developments and industrial sites are common on environmental NGOs' social feeds. This probably stems from the assumption that if your audience isn't yet on board, it's only because they don't know that the problem exists or how serious it is. While it is sometimes true that your audience needs to be made aware of a problem, more often this isn't what's stopping them from showing their support. And putting too much emphasis in your communications on the harm you're fighting can be counter-productive. It can spur your supporters to action in the short-term. But for most people, it will inspire a feeling that the problem is too big to solve and paralyse them with fear.

It's not that we can't talk about the harm or the challenges we face. On the contrary - this is one important element of a persuasive message. But this needs to be balanced against other elements of a persuasive message, such as giving your audience a reason to care about protecting nature, giving them a vision to fight for, and creating a feeling that your audience can succeed by joining together with others to call for change. These other elements are explored in detail in Section III.

## B. Focusing on protecting nature for nature's sake

When environmental campaigners give their audience a reason to care about protecting nature, they tend only to make the argument that nature deserves protection because it is beautiful and cannot defend itself. In our focus groups, people responded positively to this messaging. However, it is possible to add a wider range of reasons that your audience also finds persuasive and mobilising, which often add to the 'nature is beautiful' argument. This can include highlighting how nature is something that allows families to bond and relax, that it provides inter-generational connection, or that it is part of our heritage to safeguard for the future. The guide elaborates on these in Section III.

## C. Not talking about who is responsible for the problem or why it's happening.

Often activists point to the harm they're fighting, but don't explain who is responsible or why it's happening, beyond the scientific causes. It's important to help your audience understand who is responsible for the harm in question so that they can see that the situation can be solved. When your audience understands that the harm is occurring because of a choice made by people, they can more easily accept that people can remedy the situation by making a different choice. Our focus groups and social listening reveal that most Hungarians think that polluting projects near them end up being authorised due to incompetence or because the authorities have failed to consult locals. They also accept that corruption plays a role, but they do not seem to see corruption as a determining factor. That is, they seem to view corruption as such an integral part of politics that it isn't the reason that polluting projects are chosen over 'green' projects.

## D. Talking about policy and technical solutions, but not vision

Environmental campaigners often have solutions to the harms they are fighting, which is a good thing because your audience needs to know that the problem can be solved in order to be motivated to join your cause. However, most people are turned off by talk of law, policy and technical measures.[1] These are important for talking to policy-makers. But when talking to a non-specialist audience, you should instead focus on your vision. Name your policy solution, but then tell your audience what the world will look like once the solution is in place. What does your solution deliver for your audience? For example, your solution might be the protection of marshland against development because this helps with water management. And the vision this delivers is that our homes are protected from flooding during heavy rains and our crops are protected during periods of drought.

## E. Direct contradictions.

It's common for campaigners to respond to attacks against them or misinformation by contradicting it directly. But it's been shown that doing so is likely to backfire with people outside our supporters. This is because the way our brains remember information is through repetition, and because we're not good at processing negatives. So if you are accused of being 'anti-job' for opposing a new factory, or of being 'criminals' for blocking a construction, it's a mistake to respond by directly contradicting and saying 'we're not anti-job' or 'we're not criminals'. Instead, you should follow the guidance given in Section III for responding to smears and attacks.

## F. Overly sophisticated language and technical terms.

[1] e.g. that EU funds aimed at helping farming should be redirected to restoring rivers and marshland, that the government should introduce water conservation measures, that the authorities should protect biodiversity or protect forests, that a body should be established to monitor water levels.

People outside your supporters, who follow your work closely, tend not to have expertise or a deep understanding of environmental issues. During focus group discussions, participants only used plain language and tended to have only superficial knowledge of the issues raised. If campaigners use terms that their audience doesn't understand, then they can't get their message across. It's been shown that when your audience doesn't understand you, they become frustrated and tune out, feeling like they don't have the required knowledge to take part in the discussion.[2]

| **Examples of terms that are too sophisticated or technical** | **Examples of what to use instead** |
|---|---|
| CO2, NOx, PM, methane | Dirty air, polluting gasses, polluted air, air that's dangerous to breathe, gasses that heat up the planet. |
| Oxidative stress, cell and tissue damage | Damages your health / your skin / damages your body on the inside |
| Water resilience / water management | Making sure we have enough water to grow food, to drink, for trees, plants and animals to live / we can stop floods even if we get heavy rain / |
| Sustainability | Keeping our land, air and water clean and healthy for our children |
| Reproduction damage / damage to the unborn child | Harmful / dangerous for pregnant women and their babies, causes damage to women's bodies, means women can't have babies |

## G. Using mainly negative slogans

Since campaigners are focused on talking about the harms they are fighting, rather than other things like the vision they're fighting for, or the reasons that people should care about nature, it's to be expected that our slogans tend to be phrased negatively. For example, 'stop battery pollution' or 'say no to plastics'.

If we use only negative slogans, it focuses our audience only on the harms we're fighting. This can create a sense of urgency and mobilise our supporters. But for most people, especially to nurture longer-term support, it's important to give your audience a vision of a better future to fight for. You can do this by focusing on what your campaign will preserve or prevent your audience from losing, and painting an image of what things will look like if you win.

[2] See Schulman, H., et al., 'The effects of jargon on processing fluency, self-perceptions, and scientific engagement', Journal of Language and Social Psychology (2020); Oppenheimer, D., 'Consequences of erudite vernacular utilised irrespective of necessity: Problems with using long words needlessly', Applied Cognitive Psychology (2006).

Try shifting to positive slogans or at least balancing negative slogans with positive ones. For example, instead of ‘stop polluting gases’, try ‘for healthy air’; instead of ‘no more battery factories’, try ‘for clean land and water’; instead of ‘ban logging’, try ‘keep our forests safe’.

# III. Sample messaging and creative assets

Part III explains how to structure a persuasive message and gives examples of how to execute this, including through creative content, before covering how to respond to misinformation.

## A. The structure of a persuasive message

Research and practice on public attitude change show that there are several common barriers that can prevent your audience from lending their support. These include: not seeing how the cause you are promoting delivers something that they find important; having an inaccurate understanding of why the problem is happening (leading them to support the wrong solutions); not having a vision to inspire them to action; and thinking that change is too difficult to achieve (referred to as fatalism).

Communicators can overcome these barriers by developing messages that follow a particular structure in a particular order. This type of three or four-part message is referred to here as a 'narrative':

1) Values statement: tell your audience how the cause you are advancing delivers something that they find important for themselves, people they care about or people whom they consider to be like them.

Aside from caring about nature for its own sake, focus group testing revealed that it's possible to appeal to many other reasons that will make people care about their local environment. These include things linked to the beauty of nature, such as the responsibility to protect our natural heritage for future generations, nature as a means through which older and younger generations connect with each other, nature as a place where families can bond and relax, as well as nature as a protection against the consequences of extreme weather and nature as a form of protection for our food supply.

2) Explain the problem: show your audience that the things they care about are at risk or aren't being delivered. Set out who or what is causing the problem and why.

The suggested narratives point to the authorities (national or local) as the person or entity responsible for the problem, since it's they who have the power to authorise new projects. The narratives put the responsibility on the authorities rather than businesses because even if businesses are key players, research in Hungary shows that most people react badly to blaming businesses. They acknowledge that businesses do damage to the environment for profit, but they just see this as a 'normal' part of capitalism. Rather, they blame the government for not establishing the appropriate regulations to stop businesses from causing these harms.

When it comes to giving readers a reason for why the authorities are failing to protect nature, the narratives try to avoid using potentially polarising or divisive language. This is because Hungarian audiences are fed up with conflictual, finger-pointing rhetoric in public debate.

Pointing out that local or national authorities have authorised a polluting project because they are incompetent or because of corruption is likely to turn off most Hungarians. This does not mean that campaigners shouldn't point out where a project has been authorised because the public has not been consulted, since this is more a question of fact, and your audience does think that consultation of the local population is important. A further reason for not pointing to corruption explicitly is that our audience seems to think that corruption is so pervasive that it is not really part of the problem. Put otherwise, they seem to think that whether politicians are authorising polluting projects or green projects, there will be some corruption involved.[3]

Thus, for the most part, the description of the problem in the narratives points to the authority that has taken the decision to authorise the polluting project and then offers one of two possible reasons for why. Either because the authorities are not listening to the desires of the local population, or because they are deciding to prioritise the interests of businesses above those of ordinary people. Although we did not test how our audience might react to a different way of explaining the problem, it does strike a balance between pointing out who is responsible and why, and refraining from being confrontational.

3) Explain the vision your solution delivers: tell your audience what the world will look like if your solution is put into practice. This is often a call-back to the substance of the values statement. Do name your solution, but don't dwell on the policy details.

The narratives tend to present the solution as ordinary people coming together to force the relevant decision-maker to stop the planned project. If it's relevant to your context, campaigners should also mention other solutions, such as holding a public consultation or ordering a scientific study of the environmental impact of the project if these were not carried out. Your vision of what this solution delivers should relate to the values that you chose to begin your message with, for example, feeling safe in our homes, being able to enjoy nature with family, and passing on our natural heritage to future generations.

4) Show your audience that change is possible by reminding them of past positive changes, and tell your audience what they can do to show their support for your solution.

The sample narratives do not include a call to action, since this is something specific to a given campaign. When people take action to support a cause, it helps create a 'social identity' for them, for example, as 'someone who wants to protect nature'. This in turn makes them more likely to remain engaged and take further action in future.[4] This is important if you're trying to expand your group of supporters to mobilise in future campaigns. A call to action can range from something very easy for your audience to do, like sharing or responding to your social media content, to something requiring more effort, like joining a protest or donating.

[3] Of course, this does not mean that activists should give up on talking about corruption. It's important to change the way Hungarians think about corruption. But this is probably beyond the capacity of campaigners working on local environmental issues, so the guide does not explore the issue further.
[4] See e.g., Bamberg, S. et al., 'Environmental protection through societal change: What psychology knows about collective climate action - and what it needs to find out', in Psychology and Climate Change (2018).

Research also shows that even when you convince your audience to agree with you, they can still be reluctant to do things you ask of them because they have a sense of fatalism and feel that 'nothing changes'. Pointing to past examples of positive social change can help overcome this.[5]

In practice, reminders of past successes can get merged into the explanation of the solution, because it makes the message less repetitive. Ideally, you should pick examples of other campaigners who have had victories in their efforts to protect their local environment. But you can also refer to examples of other kinds of successes, even outside the field of environmental protection. The narratives include the following past successes: stopping the Nagymaros dam, blocking a luxury hotel on Lake Oreg, blocking a gravel mine in Pilismarót, and getting building work on Fertő tó and plans to expand the industrial park in Győrszentiván brought to a standstill. Activists have only had partial success in the latter two examples, and the situation remains uncertain (and in the case of Fertő tó, considerable damage has already been done), they remain situations where activists have been able to stop damaging projects for now. We did not test these particular past successes in focus groups. However, we did test materials on a different topic, which confirmed that most Hungarians tend to feel like they don't have the power to make big changes, but that it is possible to make them feel empowered by pointing to historic and contemporary examples of ordinary Hungarians coming together to push for social changes.[6] It may be that it's enough to refer to one or two of the examples in the list, rather than all of them.

Following these three or four steps in the order given has been shown to be the most effective structure for a message that shifts your audience's attitudes towards your position and mobilises them to take action to show their support for your cause.

## B. How to use the four-part narrative structure

Follow the four-part structure in full as often as you can. Some formats make it possible to use a full narrative, or allow you to add to the narrative with more detail, statistics, storytelling elements, or hooks for the media. For example, press releases, speeches, lines to take in an interview, or a video script.

Of course, it won't always be appropriate or possible to deliver the narrative in full every time. Sometimes you will be using communication formats with limited space. In this situation, it's fine to use only part of your narrative. Think about which part of the narrative your audience needs to hear most at a given stage of your campaign. For example, if you want to make the argument that the local nature that's under threat protects residents from the effects of extreme weather, you may first need to educate them about this. Sometimes,

[5] For an example of how fatalism affects your audience seecommunication: NEON, NEF, Frameworks Institute & PIRC, 'Framing the economy: How to win the case for a better system', (2018).
[6] See this video showcasing how NGOs have brought people together on various causes over the years to bring about changes, or at the least to make their views public. Participants reacted positively to this material and it lowered their sense of fatalism.

the format you have available only allows you to summarise the essence of your narrative, such as when you develop a campaign slogan and image or hashtags.

Look at your campaign materials in the round and ask: are there enough products carrying the whole narrative for my audience to see it; do my communications products either remind my audience of the overall message or help them understand it? And don't forget, you don't need to deliver all your message using words: still images and videos are often more powerful. Work with a creative person or agency who has some experience of narrative change work and has worked on social justice-related causes with non-profit organisations to convert your narrative into creative assets for campaigning. Examples are included below for inspiration.

## C. Sample messaging

The sample narratives are based on a situation where the relevant authorities plan a particular development, such as a factory, mine, power station or building that risks destroying or polluting nature locally. Where we tested a creative product (social media post or video) corresponding to a particular narrative, this is included with that narrative. Campaigners using the guide should feel free to adjust the narratives to fit their situation and swap elements between the narratives as appropriate.

In the focus groups, for the most part, we weren't able to test whole narratives. For the most part, we tested the values statement, which took the form of a social media caption, accompanied by a visual. We were able to test the 'protection from extreme' weather narrative as a complete narrative in the form of a video. Having said this, based on what we discovered in the focus groups and the body of evidence that already exists about persuasive messaging, we are confident that the following narratives would be persuasive. Further testing would be needed to establish whether one is more compelling than the other or whether some work better than others with certain demographic groups.

<u>Intergenerational connection</u>

*Of all the things we want to leave our children and future generations, the natural beauty we explored and discovered when we were children with our own parents and grandparents may be the most important.*

*But instead of listening to what local residents like us want, our minister / mayor / council is giving the go-ahead to [insert as relevant a new mine / factory / power station] that's going to destroy / pollute / damage [insert the name and type of nature that's under threat].*

*It doesn't have to be this way. When we come together, we have the power to protect the creatures, forests and waters we grew up with. Just like in the past when we blocked the Nagymaros dam, or like ordinary citizens today who have brought building work on Fertő tó to a standstill. Today, we can join our voices and force the mayor / council / minister to protect [name the site you want to save] so we can pass the wonders of nature on to our children and grandchildren.*

[+call to action]


A legfontosabb dolog, amit ráhagyhatunk a gyerekeinkre és a következő generációra, az az egészséges környezet, ahol a saját gyerekeiket nevelhetik majd.

This post was very well received in the focus groups.[7] Readers will notice that the social media caption text that we tested is not quite the same as the narrative, since it also talks about wanting to pass on a healthy place to future generations. However, participants completely ignored the health aspects; an issue we will return to, below. What they really liked about the post was the idea of one generation passing on knowledge about nature to the next. They were touched by the representation of a grandparent striving to protect nature so that their grandchildren could enjoy the same things they grew up with. And the image of the salamander provoked a positive sense of nostalgia among some participants. Because of this, we have revised the wording of the narrative to focus only on the importance of nature for intergenerational connection. Campaigners could consider developing further visuals and videos showing different generations exploring nature together, but alter the social media caption text to be more in line with the narrative as it now stands.

Natural heritage

*For many of us, natural beauty is our oldest form of heritage and a source of pride. It's been handed down from past generations for us to enjoy today and protect for our children in the future.*

[7] English translation: 'Wildlife every generation can still experience' ; Of all the things we want to leave our children and future generations, a healthy place for them to raise children of their own may be the most important.

*But today the mayor / minister / council has given permission for a mine / road / factory / hotel that will destroy / poison [name of the site you want to save]. Instead of putting ordinary people first and preserving the history and culture we value, they are prioritising the profits of a handful of businesses.*

*We can do things differently. When we come together, we have the power to protect the natural beauty left to us by past generations. Just like ordinary citizens elsewhere who blocked a luxury hotel on Lake Oreg in Tata and a gravel mine in Pilismarót. Today, we can join our voices and force the mayor / council / minister to protect [name the site you want to save] so we can enjoy our natural heritage with our families today and preserve it for future generations.*

*[+call to action]*


Sokunk számára a természet szépsége a legrégebbi örökségünk és a büszkeségünk forrása. Az előző generációk hagyták ránk, hogy ma is élvezhessük és megőrizzük azt gyermekeink számára.

Research suggests that Hungarians are very proud of their natural heritage, and this was confirmed by the positive reaction of participants in the focus groups to this post.[8] Participants felt that it reflects 'family values', which they liked.[9] In particular, they reacted positively to the argument that nature is important because it's something that allows us to bring our families together. They also liked the term 'natural beauty' and how this is described as part of our 'heritage'. And the use of the word 'still', since it indicates to them that we have not yet lost the opportunity to save it.

[8] In a 2024 survey, Hungarians were asked to spontaneously mention the three most positive and negative things about their country. The top-ranked positive answer (given by 20% of respondents) was 'beautiful landscapes'. Hungary's climate, culture and food were next on the list.
[9] English translation: 'A countryside families can still enjoy' ; For many of us, natural beauty is our oldest form of heritage and a source of pride. It's been handed down from past generations for us to enjoy today and protect for our children in the future.

Family time

*Most of us want to protect nature in our area because it's where we relax and recharge our batteries with family and friends. Some of our most precious memories are the ones we've made spending holidays by the lake, relaxing with friends, growing up or with kids of our own.*

*But today the mayor / minister / council wants to sell off [name the lake where land will be sold] to property speculators so they can build hotels with private beaches. Only those of us who can afford to pay will be able to spend our days at the lake.*

*We don't have to stand for this. When we come together, we have the power to make sure our lakesides remain free for all of us to enjoy, no matter what's in our wallets. Just like ordinary citizens elsewhere who blocked a luxury hotel on Lake Oreg in Tata and brought building work on Fertő tó to a standstill. We can join our voices and force the mayor / council / minister to protect [name the site you want to save] so all of us have a place to rest and make new memories with our families.*

[+call to action]


A legtöbbünk szeretné megóvni a környezetet, mert itt pihenünk és itt töltődünk fel családunkkal és barátainkkal. Itt születnek legszebb emlékeink.

Participants agreed that Hungarian waters should be protected so people can swim in them, and liked that the post linked this to spending time with family. Several participants commented that they would have been more moved by the post if it concerned a body of

water close to them, since none of them lived near the Danube.[10] This underlines how people tend to be more concerned about environmental protection when communicators can point to local problems. Presumably, campaigners would not face this problem, since if your campaign concerns protecting a local body of water, then that would be the water that appears in your visual materials.

Research suggests that most Hungarians think it's important that they should have free access to natural waters for bathing, and that this is coming under threat from property speculation.[11] This is the scenario that the narrative is based on, and it's likely that a variation on the above post, where the threat to local waters comes from property development rather than pollution, would also work well.

Protection against extreme weather

*We all want our families to be healthy and feel safe in our homes.*

*Today, extreme weather like [pick those that are relevant] floods, forest fires, extreme heat, storms and drought are already causing health problems like strokes or breathing problems, damaging our homes, cutting off power and threatening our food supply.*

*Nature protects us from these threats. Rivers, lakes, swamps, forests and the animals that live in them, just like [insert the name of the site you want to protect] soak up pollution, cool temperatures, clean the air and store water. But instead of protecting the nature that keeps us safe, our minister / mayor / local authority is allowing it to be destroyed by [insert name the project you're fighting]. This makes us more vulnerable to [insert specific danger that the endangered nature protects against].*

*We can make a different choice. When we come together, we have the power to protect the nature that protects our health and homes. Just like in the past, when we blocked the Nagymaros dam, or like ordinary citizens elsewhere who brought plans for more factories in Győrszentiván to a standstill. We can join our voices and demand that our minister / mayor / local authority protect [name the river / lake / forest / swamp] so that it can protect us.*

*[+call to action]*

The vast majority of Hungarians have personal experience of the damage caused by climate change and pollution.[12] But our discussion in the focus groups suggests that many people

[10] English translation: 'A clean Danube we can swim in' ; Most of us want to protect nature in our area because it's where we relax and recharge our batteries with family and friends. It's where some of our most precious memories are made.

[11] In a 2021 survey, big majorities also agree that beaches and bathing in natural waters should be free of charge, that it's currently (very) expensive to access beaches and 40% say that in the last year they've lost access to free beaches and bathing. They've also heard that people close to Fidesz have started buying up land around natural waters and that this is not OK.

[12] 90% of Hungarians (10 points above the EU average of 80%) have experienced at least one extreme weather event in the last five years. 67% have suffered from extreme heat and heatwaves, 45% have experienced severe storms or hail and 41% have faced drought. 80% of Hungarians (12 points above the EU average of 68%) have suffered at least one direct consequence of an extreme

are not aware that local nature can mitigate the impact of extreme weather. And this lack of knowledge was the determining factor in whether they liked or disliked the following social media post.


A víz tárolásával, a szennyező anyagok felszívásával és a levegő tisztításával a tavak, folyók, erdők, mocsarak és azokban élő állatok csökkenthetik a szélsőséges hőség, viharok és aszályok hatását.

To participants in the women's focus group, this was not a novel concept.[13] They said that they had heard that trees in cities were capable of bringing down temperatures during the summer. This made it easy for them to accept that nature acts as a protection against extreme weather more generally. Women participants also liked how the message conveyed a potentially complicated scientific process using simple language in a short space. However, participants in the men's group had not heard of this, and it led them to misunderstand and dislike the post. During the course of the discussion about this post, its meaning was clarified to the men. It's likely that filling this gap in their knowledge was key to them reacting positively to a video that carried the same 'extreme weather' message later in the session.

This video is an example of how to transmit (almost) a whole narrative through a creative product. Participants were very positive about the video because it contained 'everything' in 17 seconds: it showed different kinds of nature, explained the problem and how people should work together to solve it. Readers will hopefully notice that the imagery is balanced between showing the harm and positive images showing the vision. They may also notice that much of the message is conveyed through images and not just words, which audiences

weather event. 32% were impacted by power cuts or energy supply issues; 30% by health issues like heat stroke or respiratory problems; and 24% by property damage (such as roof damage) due to flooding, landslides or soil erosion. European Investment Bank, 'Nearly two-thirds of Hungarians respondents recognise that they will have to adapt their lifestyle due to climate change, EIB survey finds', 2024.

[13] English translation: 'Protect the nature that protects us from summer heat!' ; By storing water, absorbing pollutants and cleaning the air, lakes, rivers, forests, swamps and the animals that live in them can dial down the impact of extreme heat, storms and drought.

also appreciate. This confirms a refrain repeated by experts in the field of persuasive messaging: ‘show, don’t tell’. Participants were enthusiastic about the imagery of people coming together to protect nature. As noted, Hungarians are fed up with division and polarisation and are prone to fatalism. Images of ordinary people unifying around a worthy cause are a welcome and powerful antidote to this. These images even met with the approval of participants with right-wing views who had earlier repeated negative frames about NGOs as foreign agents interfering in politics.

Importantly, the reaction of men to the message about nature protecting us from extreme weather had completely changed relative to when they saw the above social media post. This suggests that short messages or conversations can be enough to fill gaps in knowledge that would otherwise prevent your audience from agreeing with your message. An example of a short message along these lines could be: *If we don’t protect the natural world, it can’t protect us. A healthy environment soaks up pollutants and acts as a buffer against extreme weather like flooding and drought.*

Food and family

We did not have time to test a piece of content that we had developed that linked nature to the production of (traditional) food, which bonds families at meal times. However, some focus group participants pointed out spontaneously that a ‘stable food supply’ was an important reason to protect nature that we had not mentioned. The sample social media post offers you inspiration on how you might execute this argument.[14]


Amikor megvédjük a környezetünket, akkor teszünk a szeretteink egészségéért, az ételeinkért és a hagyományainkért is.

Pollution and health

[14] English translation: ‘Nature that feeds us our favourite vegetables’ ; When we protect local nature we protect the health of our loved ones, our food and our traditions.

In the focus groups, we tested the argument that our audience should protect nature because nature helps to clean the air and water we rely on for good health. It did not perform well, probably because the explanation is convoluted: we should protect nature from pollution because nature protects us from pollution. If our ultimate goal is to stop a polluting project, then the best argument is probably to make a more direct argument about health, and then explain how nature supports our health, rather than opening our narrative by saying we should protect nature and then explaining that it is important to our health. Although the logic is the same, the shift in focus places the emphasis on health rather than nature. Research and testing, including in Hungary, suggests that arguing that your audience should care about pollution because it threatens their health is more effective at engaging them than arguing that it threatens nature.[15]

*All of us want air that's safe to breathe and water that's clean to drink, especially for our children and older relatives whose health is most at risk from pollution.*

*But instead of listening to what local residents want, our minister / mayor / council has given the go-ahead to [insert as relevant a new mine / factory / power station] that's going to poison our kids' bodies and damage their lungs.*

*We don't need to accept this. In the past, we have protected the nature we rely on from harmful projects. We blocked the Nagymaros dam, a luxury hotel on Lake Oreg in Tata and a gravel mine in Pilismarót. And citizens like you have brought building work on Fertő tó and plans for more factories in Győrszentiván to a standstill. Today, we can come together again and force [insert relevant authority the mayor / council / minister] to give our families a healthy future.*

*[+call to action]*

Below are visuals campaigners could use for inspiration taken from a campaign in London called 'Clean Air Wins'.[16]




## D. Messaging for responding to misinformation

[15] See this research on Hungary, this summary of academic research and this messaging guide.
[16] You can see more on their Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/cleanairwins/.

It's likely that at some point in your campaign you will have to deal with attacks designed to weaken you, such as smears against campaigners to discredit you directed at people in the community, or attempts to split the community by labelling you as anti-job.

As discussed, as communicators you should generally avoid directly contradicting your opponent's messages, even if this is to correct misinformation. To contradict a claim, you need to repeat it, and repetition makes information stick in the brain. To neutralise your opponent's messaging, you can either reframe the topic on which you're being attacked, or use a 'truth sandwich'. A truth sandwich follows the same narrative structure. The main difference is that the 'problem' part of the narrative focuses on explaining why you've been attacked. It's important not to repeat the attack against you, merely allude to it.

1. Values: rather than directly contradicting your opponents, begin by reminding your audience why they find the cause you are promoting important. Instead of directing attention to your opponents' message and letting them set the agenda, this allows you to bring your own cause back into focus.

2. Explain the problem: expose your opponents' malign agenda; why are they attacking your organisation, the causes you promote or the groups you work with? Allude to your opponent's lies but don't repeat them.

3. Your vision and solution: return to the cause you are promoting by talking about how we can bring the situation into line with the values you outlined in the first step.

4. If this is part of a campaign, remind your audience of past successes and ask them to do something to show their support. This was explained further in Part III of the guide.

Depending on the context, the space you have available and whether you need to pay attention to political sensibilities, you may choose a short reframe or a truth sandwich. For example, in the context of an interview or a debate, you may respond to misinformation with a truth sandwich, and then use a short reframe to rebut a follow-up attack.

Reframing works by a) avoiding repeating the misinformation and b) giving your audience your alternative frame as a different way of understanding the issue. In a 'truth sandwich', the audience is, in addition, c) also prompted to let go of the misinformation by the revelation that the source of that misinformation is not trustworthy because they have an ulterior motive. In the context of an interview or a debate, you may respond to misinformation with a truth sandwich and then use a short reframe to rebut a follow-up attack.

Below are some examples of what (longer) truth sandwiches can look like, as well as (shorter) reframes in response to common attacks or misinformation relating to your work.

**Attack**: *you're anti-job*

**Truth sandwich response:**

*All of us want a future where our communities are thriving, our families earn a good living, and where the land, air and water we depend on are healthy and beautiful.*

*[Insert person or organisation that has attacked you] wants us to think we have to choose between jobs or the nature we rely on. But this is because they put the interests of a few wealthy businesses above ordinary people and our natural heritage.*

*We can choose to create different jobs that give us a decent income, and don't harm our environment or health. [Pick an appropriate example or use these for inspiration to develop one that is closer to your situation] Like creating a local windfarm or installing solar panels on our homes and businesses / Like jobs that protect the rivers, swamps, lakes and forests and the animals that live there and keep our farmers' crops safe from drought and disease. / Like jobs improving public transport that give us a traffic-free commute and create paths and the clean air we need to walk or use a bike in our towns and cities.*

*When we come together, we can demand that any new projects deliver both good, stable jobs and protect the local nature that we rely on.*

**Shorter reframe response:**

*Our leaders can choose to create decent jobs that don't harm our environment. Whether that's supporting businesses to put solar panels on our homes or to upgrade our buses to be modern and clean. They should put ordinary people and the nature we rely on first instead of prioritising the interests of businesses that harm our environment and our health.*

The focus groups aligned with other research in Hungary, which shows that most people do not understand what terms like 'green jobs', 'the jobs of the future', or 'industries of the future' even mean. The same research also suggests that to the extent that Hungarians have an idea of what 'green' jobs are, they regard them as a vague promise and are sceptical that a transition can be made to green jobs without massive financial cost or some people losing their jobs. It's for this reason that the truth sandwich contains fairly specific examples of what green jobs could look like. Arguably, what's needed is a large scale campaign in Hungary to fill this gap in their knowledge and help them realise that the transition is feasible, but this is beyond the capacity of most NGOs working on local issues.

**Attack**: *you're criminals / radicals / leftist activists*

**Truth sandwich response:**

*Most of us agree it's important to preserve the beauty of our natural heritage and wildlife for our children and grandchildren to enjoy, just as we did.*

*But the mayor / council / minister has given the go-ahead to [name the project you're fighting], which is going to destroy [name the site you're protecting]. Instead of doing what's best for ordinary people and the nature we rely on, they decide to put a handful of rich businesses first. And now they see people uniting to demand better, they try to divide us by spreading distrust.*

*We're not going to fall for it. All over the country, people like us are protecting the nature we love. Local communities blocked a luxury hotel on Lake Oreg in Tata and a gravel mine in*

*Pilismarót, and brought building work on Fertő tó and plans for more factories in Győrszentiván to a standstill. When we come together, we have the power to demand that our council / mayor / minister puts us first and protects natural beauty for our families and future generations.*

**Shorter reframe response:**

*Instead of doing what's best for ordinary people and protecting the nature we love and rely on, the mayor / council / minister decided to put the interests of a handful of rich businesses first and allow them to destroy [name of the site]. They see people uniting to protect our environment, and they're afraid of that, so now they're trying to divide us by spreading distrust.*

# E. Messengers

One thing to keep in mind when developing creative assets is your choice of messenger. Who does your audience see in your visuals or videos carrying your message? This can affect whether they continue watching or believe what you're saying. Your audience should find your messenger credible, likeable and not self-interested. In the social media posts we tested all the messengers could be called 'ordinary people' (whom your audience would identify with) who are enjoying nature in different ways. Case studies of successful campaigns on other topics suggest that the following people may also make credible messengers:

- people with personal experience of extreme weather like storms, droughts, extreme heat and heatwaves speaking about that experience and how they want to protect local nature because it acts as a buffer to lessen the impact.
- farmers who are seeing an increase in drought or disease.
- people with children / pregnant people and / or elderly relatives, either who have health problems due to pollution or whom are afraid they will develop problems because of it.
- people working in green jobs who were retrained from polluting industries / trade union representatives of workers from polluting industries who want to be retrained
- health professionals speaking about the impact of pollution or extreme weather
- scientists speaking about the kind of pollution that can be expected and what it will do to the air, water and land.
- people who like to keep physically active outside, e.g. dog-owner, people who walk / run to keep fit.
- campaigners themselves to show they are just ordinary people like your audience who are part of the local community and have the same goals (this could help to counteract allegations that they are fake activists or radicals).

# Annex: Summaries of public attitudes

## Summary of audience attitudes: focus groups

This summary is based on focus groups carried out with participants from Debrecen and Gyor as two cities affected by environmentally damaging projects, who were probed on their attitudes towards protecting their local environment. The groups included participants with varying political views, though most were right of centre. Focus groups were split between men and women.

Women tend to have a more immediate connection to nature than men. When asked to think about their 'environment', women were more likely to talk about the natural world while men were more likely to refer to their immediate surroundings.

Both men and women, across political lines, feel strongly that the government should protect nature from damaging projects such as polluting mines or factories. They do not agree that nature can be sacrificed for the sake of the economy or job creation. Rather, they think politicians should find a way to both create good jobs and protect the environment.

However, their solution for this does not include a green transition or green jobs. The focus groups aligned with other research in Hungary, which shows that most people do not understand what terms like 'green jobs', 'the jobs of the future', or 'industries of the future' even mean.

Rather, their solution is that a) polluting projects should never be allowed in protected areas, b) local populations should be consulted before such projects are allowed and c) where it's necessary to create polluting projects, these should be carried out in places that do not harm nature.

Only a minority of participants suggested that polluting projects should be banned altogether. Some suggested that instead we should invest in sectors like food processing, which they believe do not cause pollution, or reorganise the economy to reduce inequalities and reduce poverty.

When asked about why they think that polluting projects are allowed to proceed, most participants say simply that the authorities are making 'bad' decisions. Sometimes this is due to incompetence, sometimes due to a lack of consultation with the local population. While people acknowledge that corruption is also present in decision-making this is not seen as a determinative factor. Put otherwise, they either believe that eliminating corruption isn't possible, or wouldn't solve the problem.

This audience cares about nature for its own sake. That is, they think it is worth protecting simply because it is beautiful, vulnerable and in need of protection. However, when given other reasons to care about nature, they also respond positively, as set out in the messaging guide.

This audience is tired of conflictual and polarising messaging and is likely to be put off by messages that take this tone.

## Summary of audience attitudes: social listening

This summary of audience attitudes focuses on the attitudes of moveable middle audiences towards environmental protection in Hungary more generally - as opposed to the protection of the environment in one's local community. It is based on information from a social listening report carried out in 2024 and other publicly available research into how Hungarians think about environmental protection more generally. It is safe to conclude that people seem more enthusiastic about protecting their local environment than environmental protection more generally.

Relative to other concerns, protecting the environment is not among Hungarians' top concerns. A 2024 Eurobarometer survey shows that top personal concerns in Hungary are mostly about material conditions: 1) cost of living, 2) health, 3) financial situation of your household, 4) economic situation of your country, 5) pensions.

Moveable middle audiences do care about nature. But they think that protecting the environment can get in the way of creating new or keeping existing jobs and the economic growth needed to address their material worries.

If faced with a choice between a damaging project and protecting the environment, it comes down to how it affects them personally. Focus group research in Hungary carried out with moveable middle audiences in 2023 showed that of the focus groups carried out in six regions, the only one opposed to the closure of a coal power station was made up of people living close to it, and they said that it was because the site employed a lot of people locally who would not be easy to retrain. Whereas for other focus groups, they were more concerned about the health impact of air pollution.

The middle seems sceptical about the argument that we can retrain people currently working in fossil fuel industries over to green jobs and find the promise of future green jobs too vague. It needs to be more concrete.

This probably means that it's easier to oppose damaging projects that aren't yet real because the promise of new jobs is still abstract, and we could argue in favour of environmentally sound projects as an alternative.

When people oppose polluting projects it is for different reasons: a) wanting to protect nature / quality of life linked to nature b) the fact that there's a lack of consultation of locals about projects c) they don't mind the projects per se, just not in their community d) the economic benefits of projects don't go to the communities where they're located - they flow to the richest in society.

The things that make them want to protect the environment are that:

- They think that Hungary's nature is beautiful and should be protected. It seems that this is partly national pride - people want to protect Hungary's natural heritage. And it's partly because people value nature as a place for rest and relaxation: 'where are we supposed to go to escape if you build stuff everywhere?'

- They want clean air and water, and recognise that this is threatened by pollution - and they connect this to safeguarding health. In particular, protecting children and older people from respiratory illnesses. There's also recognition that polluting projects threaten food security.

- They want to pass on a clean and healthy environment to future generations.

When damaging projects get approved, they blame it on the government more than on businesses. They blame corruption, pressure from corporations and government incompetence. They also say that the government is manipulative - presumably that it lies to local populations to persuade them to accept these projects.

They do recognise that businesses are responsible for pollution and that they pollute in order to make profits, but they don't really cast them as being at fault. They think that businesses are just doing what businesses do - trying to make as much of a profit as possible while acting within the law. They think that it's the responsibility of the government to make rules that regulate businesses to do the right thing.

They seem to be put off by messages that frame businesses as maliciously hurting Hungarians so that they can make a profit. The reasons they give are that it reminds them of government propaganda - they're fed up with constant conflict and threats from made-up enemies.[17] The middle don't like government propaganda, which frames everything as a conflict against malicious actors purposely trying to harm Hungary. But they don't react badly to messages that point to who is responsible for the problem and the solution.

[17] In a 2024 survey which asked Hungarians to name the three most positive and most negative things about Hungary, the top negative things were the state of the health care system and division / discord in society. The third negative thing was related to politics - politics per se, corruption, propaganda, lack of democracy. Unpublished survey research from 2024 also shows that the top concerns among Hungarians are being healthy, their income / salary, feeling safe and enjoying life.

## Civil Liberties Union for Europe

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) is a non-governmental organisation promoting and protecting the civil liberties of everyone in the European Union. We are headquartered in Berlin and have a presence in Brussels. Liberties is built on a network of national civil liberties NGOs from across the EU. Unless otherwise indicated, the opinions expressed by Liberties do not necessarily constitute the views of our member organisations.

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