

We seem to have a lot of trouble in coming up with the right name for what's happening to the world's climate. We started with "Global Warming." But that seemed too narrow, because the changes don't just relate to temperature, and too innocuous, because warming seems like a gentle process. So scientists shifted to "Climate Change." That's accurate but doesn't say much about what's changing, in what direction, and why it might be a problem. More recently, people have tried alternatives to the word "change": "disruption," "crisis," and "emergency."

This is more than a branding issue. It also reflects something deep about the nature of the climate problem.

One reason we have so much trouble naming the problem is that it really isn't like anything else that we've faced. Adding the word "global" captures some of the difference: we've faced few problems that impact the whole world and require global cooperation to address. But the climate situation is distinctive in other ways. First, it is caused by the continual addition of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, not by a distinct triggering event. That's one reason the word "emergency" doesn't seem quite right.

Second, it's not a one-shot event. It's not that climate will change once and then we're done. It will change and then change again as more carbon is added to the atmosphere and as various feedback loops play out. So crisis doesn't seem quite right, since it implies things will settle down after the crisis. Even disruption seems to imply there's a "normal" that we might get back to. Third, the impacts of our activities will extend over centuries, far beyond the normal kinds of policy decisions (let alone personal or business decisions) that we usually face. And fourth, what is most important is not the change in the average temperature or precipitation — what we normally mean by the word "climate" — but changes in the extremes, such as more frequent and more severe storms, floods, heat waves and droughts.

You probably remember the story of the blind men trying to describe an elephant: one touches a leg and thinks it's a tree trunk, another the nose and thinks it's a snake, and so forth. We're not in quite that position. We can see that it has four legs like tree trunks, tusks like spears, a nose like a snake, a body like a boulder. But never having seen an elephant before, we have no name for the entire creature. I guess we could call it a "huge animal with four tree trunks, spears, and a snake," but that doesn't really capture the actual elephant. Based on this metaphor, I thought about titling this post "Naming the Elephant," but that seemed to be a bit too obscure.

Similarly, with climate change, we *could* call it the "irreversible human-caused global

intensification of extreme weather events.” That’s a bit of a mouthful, however. I think I’d lean toward Global Climate Destabilization, but I don’t expect that to catch on either.

From a policy point of view, climate change is also unique, because so many different countries are involved in producing substantial emissions, because the impacts are also global, because the time span is so enormous, and because solutions involve reengineering major sectors of the economy. No wonder it has been called a super-wicked problem. And no wonder it’s hard to come up the right name for something that’s so big, so exceptional, and so threatening.