

Public Communication and (de)Polatiozation for Breaking the Gridlock

Learning Brief

Key takeaways

One of the main premises of the Human Development Report is that today we don't necessarily lack solutions to many of the global problems we face, but rather, we have a problem with collective action.

This session put forth ideas to overcome the challenges of collective action and explored the opportunities and limitations of public communication practices as a way to strengthen trust in institutions and promote a more constructive government-citizen dialogue.

Public Communication takes a citizen-focused approach to addressing issues of common interest. It involves ongoing dialogue, the sharing of information, and regular interactions between public institutions and citizens. The goal is to support the exercise of citizenship, ensure access to public services and information, and promote transparency and accountability.

Public communication is more than just disseminating information; it is a powerful tool to be applied by public institutions for fostering dialogue, building trust and bridging societal divides. In today's increasingly polarized world, where misinformation and disinformation often dominate discourse, effective public communication by institutions can serve as a cornerstone for strengthening democratic governance and building common ground towards key development topics.

The rapid evolution of technology and digital communication platforms has transformed interactions between public institutions and citizens, creating both opportunities for engagement and risks – such as the amplification of polarizing content. They can support the effectiveness of public communication, fostering innovation to build constructive spaces of dialogue, especially in polarized contexts.

Speakers shared examples of public communication where technology was used for deep listening to advance understanding of differences in perception, needs and sources of grievances. For example, with adoption of AI technology tools, the societal conversations can be transcribed and allow identification of patterns and themes that resonate across different groups. Creating spaces for communication and deliberation amongst smaller groups and extracting meaningful themes and messages from these small group discussions for "cross-pollination" into other group discussions also proved impactful in building bridges by exposing people into diverse perspectives with shared concerns. For effective public communication through public deliberation, it is important to invest in safe spaces for deliberation and interaction whereby people can express different opinions, visions, and values.

Storytelling and active listening are key entry points for people to connect and engage into a

conversation, reducing polarization levels. Understanding audiences based on their values, worldviews and sources of grievances is critical to build out new messages, transform dominant narratives and address the drivers of polarization.

Categorizing Audiences based on gender, age or religion may be easier way of analysing data however there are other more sophisticated indicators that will take us to unpack other categories such as politically oriented groups, stabilising groups, or low-trust groups. This can be very helpful for finding the starting points of key segments that allows us to build a more innovative and effective communications.

Guatemala's experience remarks the importance of understanding polarization as a multifaceted challenge, in which adaptive, participatory and forward-looking governance strategies need to be adapted to build stronger and more cohesive societies.

10 Lessons-learnt

- **Knowing your audience** is as important as knowing your message.
- The more we know about the people, the better message we will deliver. For this, we need to connect with people where they are and **practice the active listening**.
- More than 80% of our population is not able to understand complex information, so, **simplification and translation of the message** is crucial for deepening understanding.
- Public communication must help public institutions to be more effective, more transparent and more problem-solving.
- **Small groups and safe spaces** are critical enablers of meaningful, constructive and deep exchanges. Encouraging participants to share personal stories helps to shift focus away from polarizing opinions.
- Carefully designed conversations with set of questions create an effective environment for active listening, leading to a reduction in biases and polarization.
- **The hierarchical clustering analysis method**, which identifies similarities in public responses, can be extremely beneficial.
- Effective communication requires recognizing the diversity of public opinions and **tailoring messages** accordingly.
- Engaging with diverse stakeholders and facilitating workshops helped to promote understanding and reduce tensions during a politically charged transition period in Guatemala.
- Public communication must include dialogue, connecting with citizens, and **empowering the citizens** so they can have a more relevant role in society.

Follow-up Resources:

- [“Good practice principles for public communications responses to mis- and disinformation”](#) - OECD Public Governance Policy Papers, 20 April 2023
- [“The OECD Report on Public Communication”](#) - The Global Context and the Way Forward, 21 December 2021
- [“Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom”](#) - OECD Public Governance Reviews, 16 December 2023
- [MIT](#): Center for Constructive Communication
- [The Real Talk](#) at MIT Program
- [ABCPública](#) Brazil
- [More in Common](#)
- [Promoviendo el diálogo y la colaboración](#), Guatemala