#### International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

Report Part Title: Case for Effective Public Engagement on Climate Change

Report Title: Public Engagement on Climate Change Adaptation

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Countries cannot achieve their climate ambitions without bringing citizens into the policy-making processes and discussions. Without this political mandate, governments have struggled to act decisively on climate issues. Advancing climate-focused priorities in a meaningful way requires effective communication and the active engagement of the public. Without the consent and full participation of people, no meaningful societal shift will be possible, let alone be sustained over the long term. People are at the heart of addressing climate change—it is vital that they be meaningfully engaged.

Connecting with people, their values, and their lived experiences is at the heart of developing meaningful engagement strategies. The conversation itself has to be two-way, and people must be provided with the evidence they need to make informed decisions. Collective and personal action, including behaviour change, can only come from informed and fully engaged citizens. Not doing public engagement—or not doing it well—increases the risk that people will ignore or oppose strong policies on climate change.

Effective engagement therefore requires a two-way process that builds a narrative of shared values. A large evidence base asserts that traditional forms of top-down, one-way government communication do not work for climate change (see, among others, Corner et al., 2018; Fenton, 2022; Padmanabhan & Rose, 2021; and Steentjes et al., 2020). Social science shows that people require tailored narratives that recognize their concerns, embody their values, reflect their identity, and are transmitted through trusted peer messengers (Corner et al., 2018, p. 3).

Government and state institutions have an essential role to play. As with other issues that affect their citizens, governments have the responsibility to develop national engagement strategies that can reach all audiences. Climate change engagement has often been left to the news media and advocacy organizations alone. Their work is important but insufficient: these actors have limited resources and are rarely able to reach beyond their own constituencies. Most governments lack climate change communications skills and experience—a gap they urgently need to address.

Year after year, we draw closer to tipping points that will dramatically exacerbate the injustices and inequalities amplified by climate change (as well as reverse development gains) and push hundreds of millions of people further into poverty, disaster vulnerability, and, potentially, conflict and fragility (Carrington, 2022). There has never been a more critical time to take concrete, inclusive, and sustainable steps toward meaningful public engagement on the full spectrum of climate change issues and actions.

### Why Public Engagement on Climate Change Matters

Citizens want to participate in decision making about major threats to their lives and livelihoods. Representative survey evidence from a number of countries shows us that people want more information about threats and, consequently, want to be included in policy and decision-making processes (Gellatly et al., 2022; Leiserowitz et al., 2022). In turn, governments, institutions, and communities have a key role to play in gathering and sharing timely information on climate

change. The way to link these two dynamics is through participatory mechanisms that encourage dialogue and co-creation of policies and strategies.

Despite the importance of public engagement for action on climate change, it is not happening at either the scale or pace at which it is needed. Although most people in the world are aware that the climate is changing, surveys find that many still do not understand its causes or the severity of its impacts. Governments are not yet implementing public awareness programs on the scale that they routinely adopt for major health or security issues, like awareness programs for the COVID-19 pandemic.

People's identities matter. So does power. Powerful public engagement on climate change requires the active participation and leadership of people who have so far been excluded from decision making because of race, gender, or class. If their voices, lived experiences, values, and identities are not reflected in policy solutions, these initiatives are unlikely to succeed. Therefore, those in positions of power must actively work to amplify the voices and solutions of excluded communities to ensure that public engagement initiatives succeed.

Most government and state institutions lack effective public engagement infrastructure. Too few countries have developed national engagement strategies on climate change, and even fewer have built in two-way consultations and spread ownership and agency across all audiences. Governments must address this gap. To do so effectively requires sufficient financial resources, political will, a meaningful mandate, and adequate human expertise and capacity. Expertise in the special challenges related to climate communications is poorly coordinated and still concentrated in a handful of countries. Very few government communications staff or external creative agencies have adequate experience or training in climate communications, and fewer still have explored the inclusion of communicators, such as facilitators and cultural interpreters, into their national engagement processes (German et al., 2012).

As part of this process, governments must uphold their duty to enhance public awareness about climate change and to invest in climate change education. However, there is limited evidence of such public engagement happening. This is counterintuitive: people cause climate change, people suffer from its consequences, and people must be the ones to tackle it.

It is also important to recognize that policy formation in many countries remains vulnerable to shifts in political ideology. In many countries, attitudes toward climate change and positions on its solutions have become defining marks of political identity. This polarization has been exacerbated by the lack of a coherent approach to public engagement that would aim to build a broad-based public mandate on climate action.

Public engagement should not be an afterthought for governments. The Paris Agreement makes it clear through Article 12 on Action for Empowerment (ACE) that Parties to the UNFCCC have an obligation to ensure meaningful action on education, training, public awareness, public access to information, public participation, and international cooperation (United Nations, 2015). Whereas some elements of the Paris Agreement are legally binding, the strategies agreed

by governments to implement these six elements of ACE are voluntary. However, there are a number of international legal obligations on public engagement and public participation<sup>1</sup> that commit governments to carry out public engagement activities (Magniez-Pouget et al., 2022). In undertaking public engagement on climate change, countries can fulfill such obligations while building the foundation for effective, inclusive climate change action.

# Creating a Social Mandate for Action on Climate Change

The social science evidence base shows that members of the public do not form their attitudes and behaviours based directly on expert information; that is, people do not automatically make rational cost-benefit decisions based on evidence. Instead, they are influenced by a variety of factors, including ideas and concepts that "feel right" or indeed narratives that align with and reinforce the values, identities, and social norms that surround them (McLoughlin et al., 2019). Moreover, people tend to connect to stories and analyses that are presented and/or championed by people and messengers they trust.

The evidence base also suggests that people are more likely to take action when their values, beliefs, and concerns are aligned with the reasons for taking action. It is this deep level of ownership and commitment to action that will be required—across society and at scale—for the deep and wide levels of socio-economic and societal transformation that will be required to tackle climate change. Change will also emerge from the interaction between individuals and wider society, in that social norms play a significant role in dictating what actions individuals see as acceptable. This fact underscores the importance of how we communicate with our peers. It also links back to the need to ensure there is two-way dialogue (particularly for decision-makers) given the need for dialogue and connecting with people and communities on issues at their level.

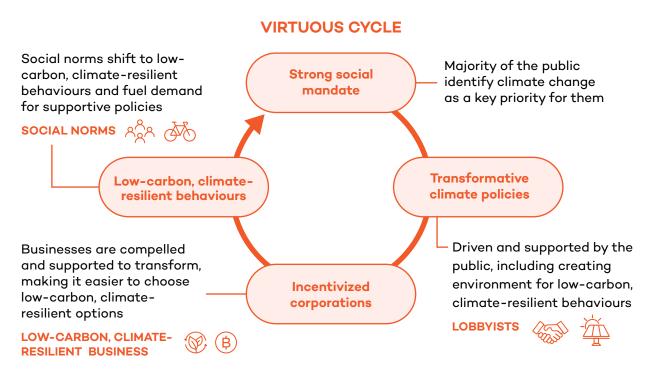
The challenge for governments and other actors is to identify specific points in the policy- and decision-making process to have two-way dialogues and to establish meaningful spaces and structures for people to participate in climate discussions. This can only be done by enabling a broad range of audiences to

- see their values, identity, and concerns in the climate change story;
- see that trusted messengers who they identify with are acting on climate change in a way that appears authentic; and
- be empowered to take actions that are consistent with their concerns, their socio-economic and political circumstances, and their community norms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "The right to public participation in environmental decision-making is well established in international law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognise the rights of everyone to take part in the conduct of public affairs. Principle 9 of the Framework on Human Rights and the Environment emphasises that States should provide for and facilitate public participation in decision-making related to the environment and take the views of the public into account in the decision-making process. The obligation to ensure public participation is widely established in international environmental treaties, including, *inter alia*, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and the Aarhus Convention" (Magniez-Pouget et al., 2022, p. 14).

Figure 1. The vicious and virtuous cycles of developing a social mandate for climate change

#### **VICIOUS CYCLE** Slow, disparate and/or minor Minority of public Weak social shifts in high-carbon, identify climate change mandate non-climate-resilient behaviours as a key priority for them SOCIAL NORMS High-carbon, Weak climate non-climate-resilient policies behaviours Lack of political mandate is barrier to creation and/or implementation Corporations not incentivized LOBBYISTS No strong incentives for corporations to invest in low-carbon, climate-resilient options or create easy low-carbon, climate-resilient choices BUSINESS AS USUAL



Source: Adapted from Climate Outreach, 2021.

## Making the Case for Public Engagement on Adaptation

The impacts of climate change are already affecting people's livelihoods, health, and decisions about where to live and work. As with climate change mitigation, public engagement has a key role to play in advancing action on adaptation.

The science is clear that adapting to climate change is urgent. The 2018 IPCC special report issued stark warnings on the consequences of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and the significant impacts on ecosystems and communities—including possible sea level rise of 1 metre by the end of the century and severe biodiversity loss (IPCC, 2018b). The IPCC's sixth assessment report on impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability reiterated the urgency of action to address the "unprecedented impacts" of climate change by building resilience in vulnerable communities and ecosystems (IPCC, 2022, p. 2488).

Climate change impacts are already being felt, and adaptation is necessary to deal with the impacts of climate change that are now unavoidable. Adaptation aims to reduce climate change risk resulting from how three factors interact: **hazards** (i.e., potentially damaging physical events or trends that may cause the loss or harm); **exposure** (i.e., presence of people and their physical assets in places that could be adversely affected by an event); and **vulnerability** (i.e., a predisposition to be adversely affected). As hazards increase in frequency and intensity, adaptation efforts aim to reduce exposure (for example, through land-use planning, early warning systems that enable evacuation, or the managed retreat of communities from exposed areas) and reduce vulnerability (for example, by diversifying livelihoods, building climate-resilient infrastructure, or introducing social protection systems). Adaptation requires integrated solutions—there is rarely a "silver bullet" or single intervention that will build climate resilience. Achieving lasting adaptation outcomes will often require changing practices and addressing structural causes of vulnerability, such as poverty and inequality.

Adaptation policies and plans will need a social mandate to be implemented at scale. Efforts to adapt to climate change impacts will not succeed unless they are based on an understanding of public attitudes around climate risks and strategies for reducing the vulnerability of communities and ecosystems to these risks. Building public support and obtaining a social mandate will be crucial for the adaptation actions prioritized through the NAP process to be implemented.

A social mandate on adaptation is achievable: growing evidence suggests that public concern about climate impacts is increasing and that adaptation policies are less politically divisive than mitigation policies. Climate Outreach's work on climate change impacts and adaptation has shown that

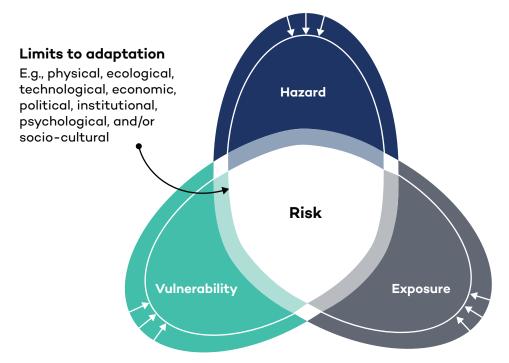
climate change concern is surging as climate impacts become more salient and visible. This opens up important new fronts for engaging the public, but efforts must be done sensitively and with empathy and compassion ... There is growing evidence [based so far on research undertaken in the United Kingdom] that adaptation policies are supported across the political spectrum—practical steps to build resilience are not polarising or controversial in the way that some mitigation policies are. (Climate Outreach, n.d.)

Figure 2. Options for risk reduction through adaptation

#### **Actions to reduce hazards**

#### **Examples include:**

- Ecosystem-based measures to reduce coastal flooding
- Mangroves to alleviate coastal storm energy
- Water reservoirs to buffer low flows and water scarcity



#### Actions to reduce vulnerability

#### Examples include:

- Social protection
- · Livelihood diversification
- · Insurance solutions
- Hazard-proof housing and infrastructure

Source: Adapted from IPCC, 2019.

#### Actions to reduce exposure

#### Examples include:

- Coastal retreat and resettlement
- · Risk-sensitive land-use planning
- Early warning systems and evacuations

Public engagement on adaptation can complement and reinforce public engagement on mitigation. Climate change communicators should not avoid adaptation messaging out of concern that it will undermine mitigation messaging; there is no evidence that this happens. Instead, public engagement can highlight how mitigation and adaptation are two sides of the same coin (de Laigue, 2021).

## The Role of the NAP Process in Scaling Up Public Engagement on Adaptation

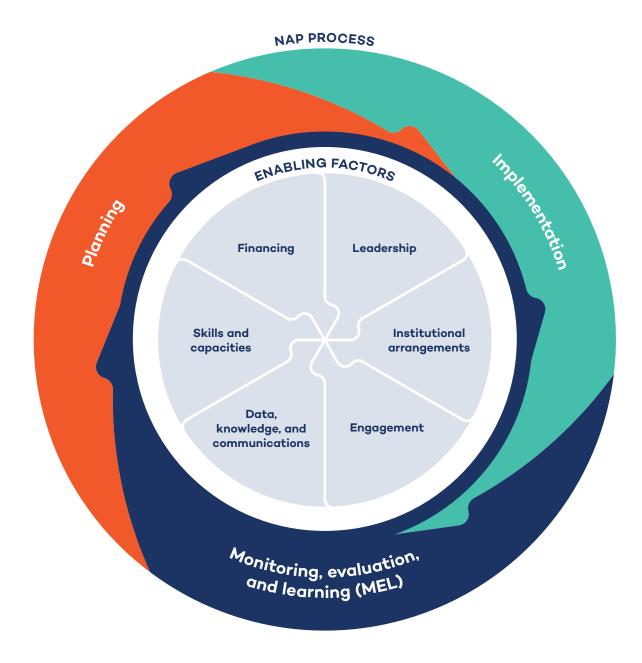
The NAP process aims to put adaptation at the heart of decision making. Established in 2010 by the Cancun Adaptation Framework under the UNFCCC, the NAP process is designed for countries to identify and address medium- and long-term priorities for adapting to climate change. The official definition, objectives, and guidelines of the NAP process are available from the UNFCCC (Least Developed Countries Expert Group, 2012), but in simple terms, NAP processes seek to help countries scale up adaptation by assessing risk; identifying, prioritizing, and implementing adaptation actions; and tracking, measuring, and learning from progress. NAP processes also aim to put in place the systems and capacities to make this a part of regular development planning and budgeting (Hammill et al., 2020).

Almost all developing countries have NAP processes underway, and many are already committing to public engagement as part of the NAP process. To date, 139 of the 154 countries that are classified as "developing countries" under the UNFCCC have NAP processes underway (UNFCCC, 2022). Among the countries that have submitted a NAP document to the UNFCCC, all acknowledge the importance of "communication and information sharing," and almost half have explicitly recognized the need for public engagement (NAP Global Network, 2023a).

Public engagement can help achieve effective, inclusive NAP processes. Public engagement can and should happen throughout the NAP process, which can be thought of as being composed of the three overlapping, broad phases shown in Figure 3: (i) planning, (ii) implementation, and (iii) monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL). Public engagement is especially important for two enabling factors of the NAP process:

- engagement of actors at all levels—including civil society organizations, the private sector, communities, the media, and academia—to enable their participation in and influence on decision making about adaptation.
- data, information, and communications to enable actors at all levels to access evidence relevant to adaptation and create two-way communication between audiences and decision-makers to advance the NAP process (NAP Global Network, 2023b).

Figure 3. Simplified figure of the NAP process



Source: NAP Global Network, 2023b.