

HOW TO ENGAGE THE PUBLIC: LESSONS FROM THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

Diarmuid Torney, Laura Devaney, Pat Brereton, Martha Coleman
Environment Ireland conference, 2 October 2019

Importance of public engagement

- Climate Action Plan 2019 calls for a significant step-up in government engagement with citizens “to inform, engage, motivate, and empower people to take climate action” (p17)
- Citizens will be at the heart of the low-carbon transition and they must be engaged and supported towards more sustainable practices
- Use of deliberative forums, including but not limited to the approach of the Citizens’ Assembly, represents one possible mode of engagement and mobilisation
- **But a citizens’ assembly itself is not appropriate for every policy question**



The Citizens' Assembly

- Commitment in **Programme for Government** in May 2016; established by **resolution of the Oireachtas** in July 2016
- **Chairperson and 99 citizens**, randomly selected to be broadly representative of the Irish electorate in age, gender, social class, regional spread, etc.
- **Expert Advisory Group** formed for each topic



Working Method

- Weekend-long meetings in a Dublin hotel
- 12 weekends between October 2016 and April 2018

IRELAND'S CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

The Irish Citizens' Assembly comprised of four key elements:

Submissions

by the public and stakeholders

Presentation of evidence by the **expert witness**

Citizen deliberation, facilitated by trained facilitators

Voting on proposed recommendations



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Process, outputs, and impact

Topic	Weekends	Submissions	Output	Response & impact
The Eighth Amendment	5	12,200	1 key recommendation (with various parts) plus 5 ancillary	Considered by a special parliamentary committee. Government accepted proposal for a referendum. Referendum passed in May 2018.
Ageing population	2	122	15 recommendations plus 6 ancillary	No reaction to date
Climate change	2	1,185	13 recommendations plus 4 ancillary	Considered by a special parliamentary committee and their report published in March 2019.
Referenda	1	206	10 recommendations	No reaction to date
Fixed term parliaments	1	8	7 recommendations	No reaction to date



Increasing international attention.....

The Guardian

THE IRISH TIMES

8th August 2019

May 2019

UK citizens' assembly emergency announcement

Citizens' assembly on gender to be running by end of October

Tender process to commission polling company to select 99 voters on electoral register

draws on people
ance green

MPs launch assembly plan but environmental conclusions must be binding

Thu, Aug 8, 2019, 13:45 | Updated: Thu, Aug 8, 2019, 13:46

Marie O'Halloran



Madeleine Cuff

@Madeleine_BG

20 June 2019



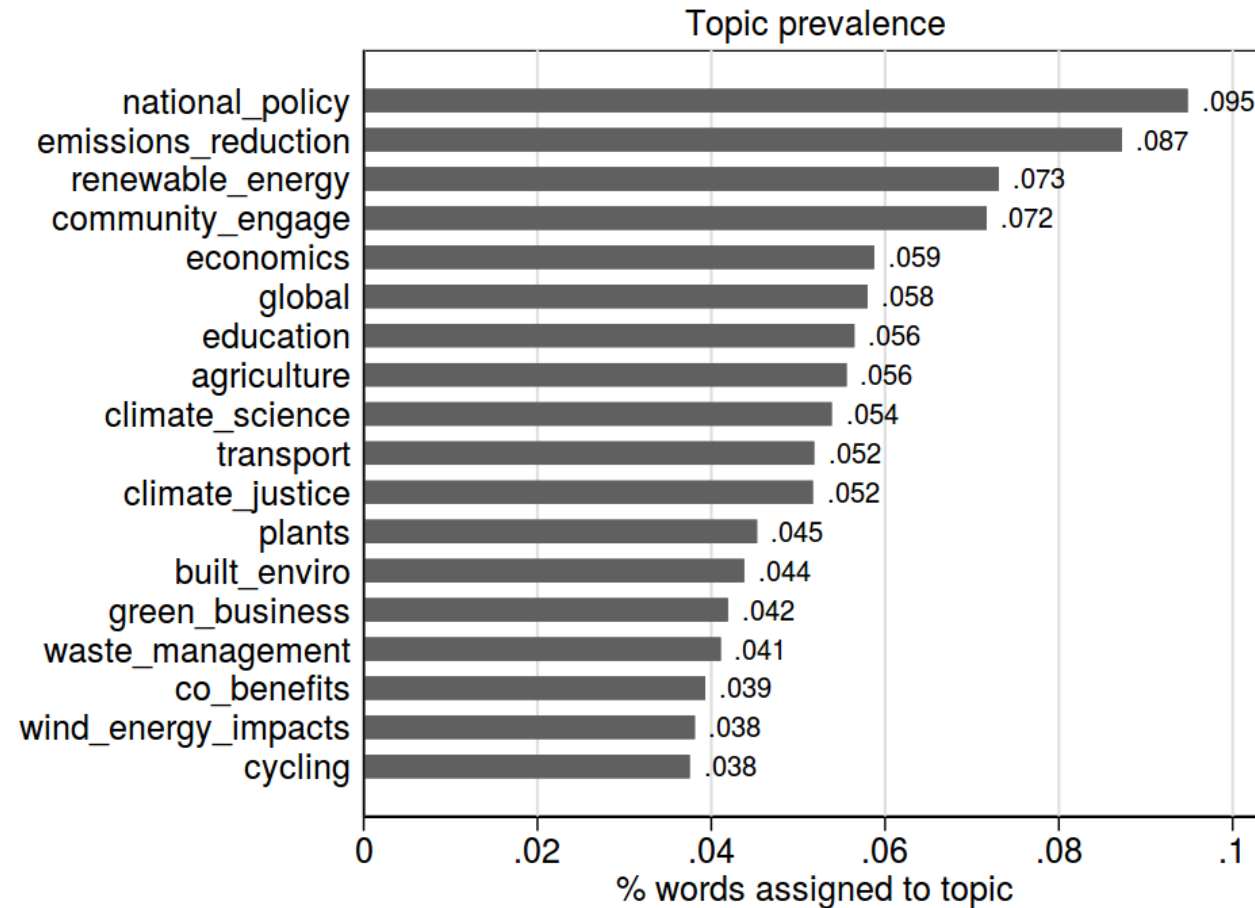
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Public Submissions

- 1,185 written submissions on climate change
- Identifying trends, preoccupations, and salience within the corpus is important to better understand citizen perceptions of climate change, their desired actions and help dialogue more effectively with them on the topic
- **NB:** not your typical “citizen” making a submission
- Quantitative topic modelling & qualitative analysis of a systematic sample (every 10th submission)

Headline Findings: topic prevalence



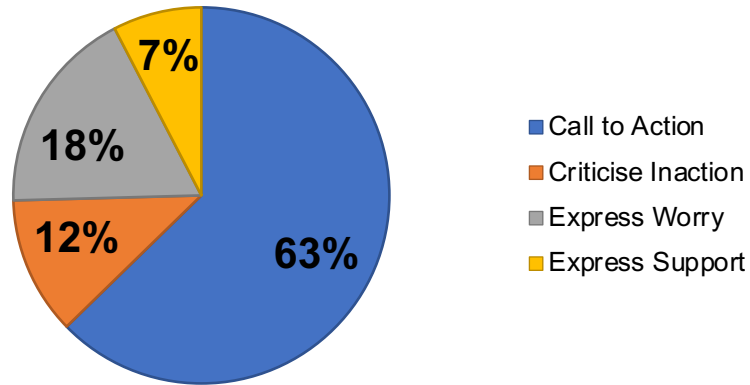
Acknowledgments:
Constantine Boussalis
& Travis Coan



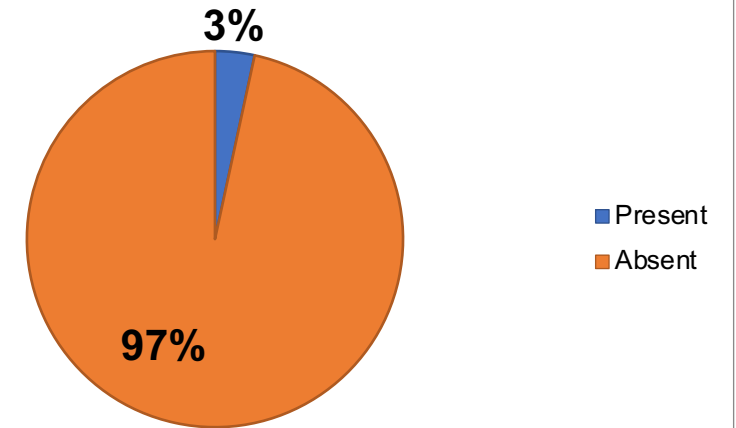
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Headline Findings: qualitative analysis

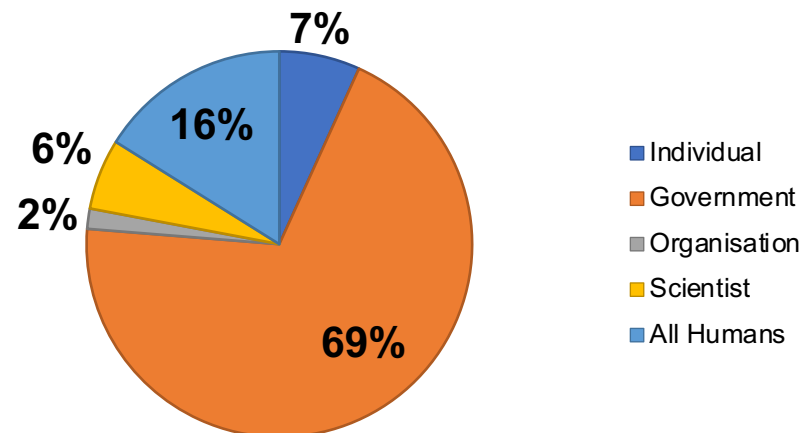
Purpose of Submission



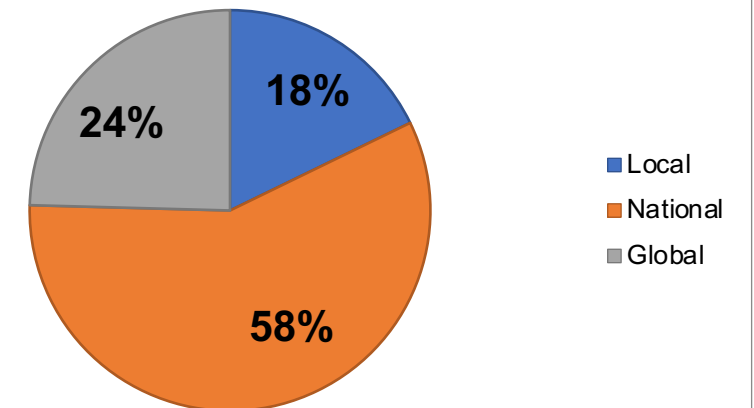
Climate Change Scepticism



Responsibility Attribution



Scalar Framing



Public Focus Groups

- 1) 10 members of the Citizens' Assembly on climate change, *15th June 2019*
- 2) 8 members of Rotary Club Ireland, *29th June 2019*

NB not representative, important snapshot



Focus group 1: Citizens' Assembly members

Lessons from the Irish Citizens' Assembly on climate change

Keep	Change
Four element format	Formalise the process & make it a regular feature of democracy with rotating citizens
Clear rules for maintaining civility	Use for more divisive & specific topics
Level of support to members	Time allocated to topics and between them
Non-payment of honorarium	Shorter assemblies with fewer topics
Communicative Secretariat and Chair	Feedback to citizens post-event
Transparency through website and live streaming	Standing orders of citizen steering group for more input to speaker selection and visibility
Appreciation of complex policy trade-offs when exposed to different angles	Formalise what happens recommendations
Education and learning element for citizens	Communicate recruitment methodology
Non-binding recommendations to allow for further expert input	Do not print all public submissions and present summary at event
	Potential for more informal discussions
	More international best practice & critique



Focus group 2: Rotary club members

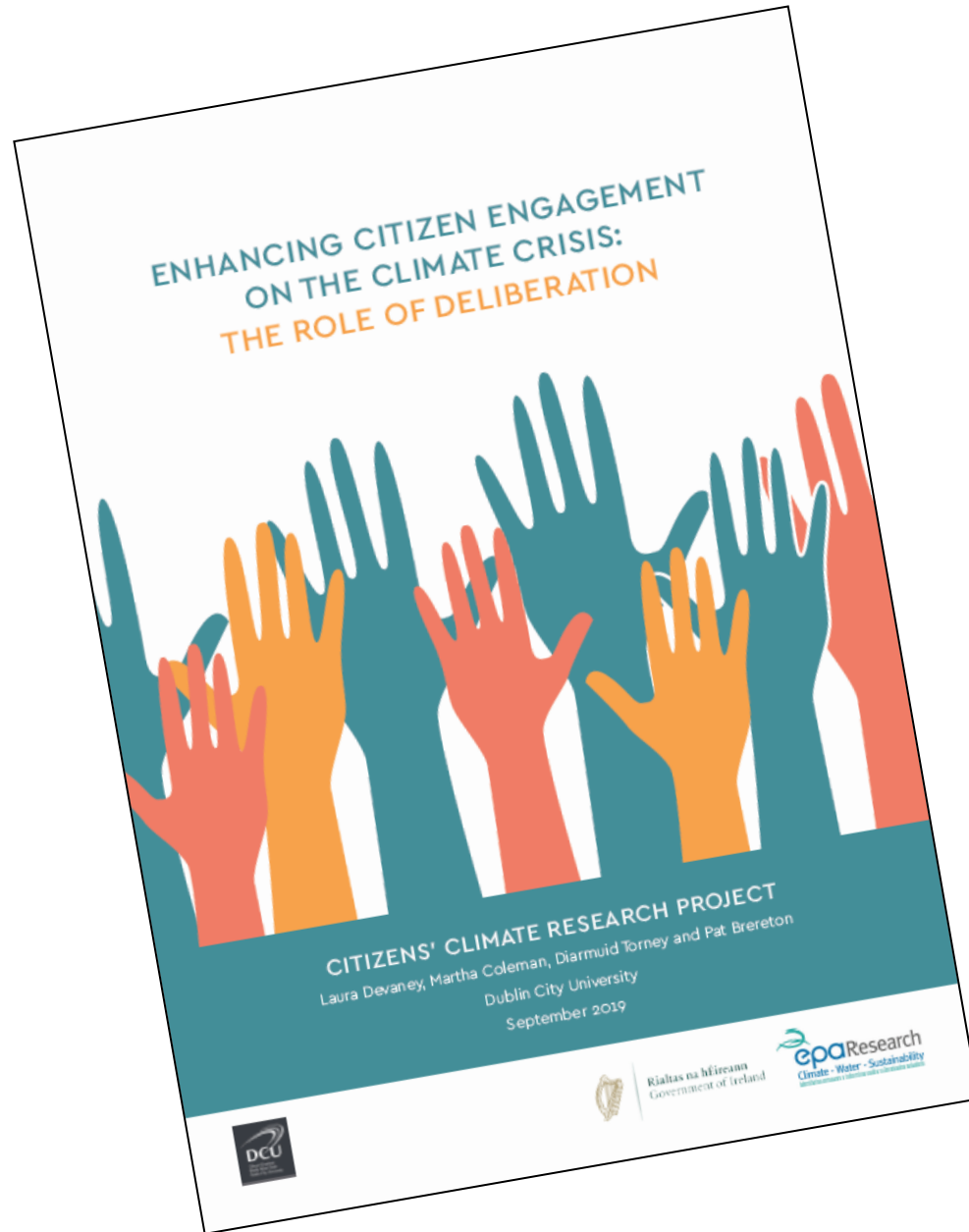
Desirable Communications

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Keep it simple | 6. Facts tell, stories sell |
| 2. Keep it local | 7. Structure around purpose |
| 3. Powerful imagery | 8. Passionate tone |
| 4. Non-human frames matter | 9. Watch your speed |
| 5. Provide solutions | |



Project output

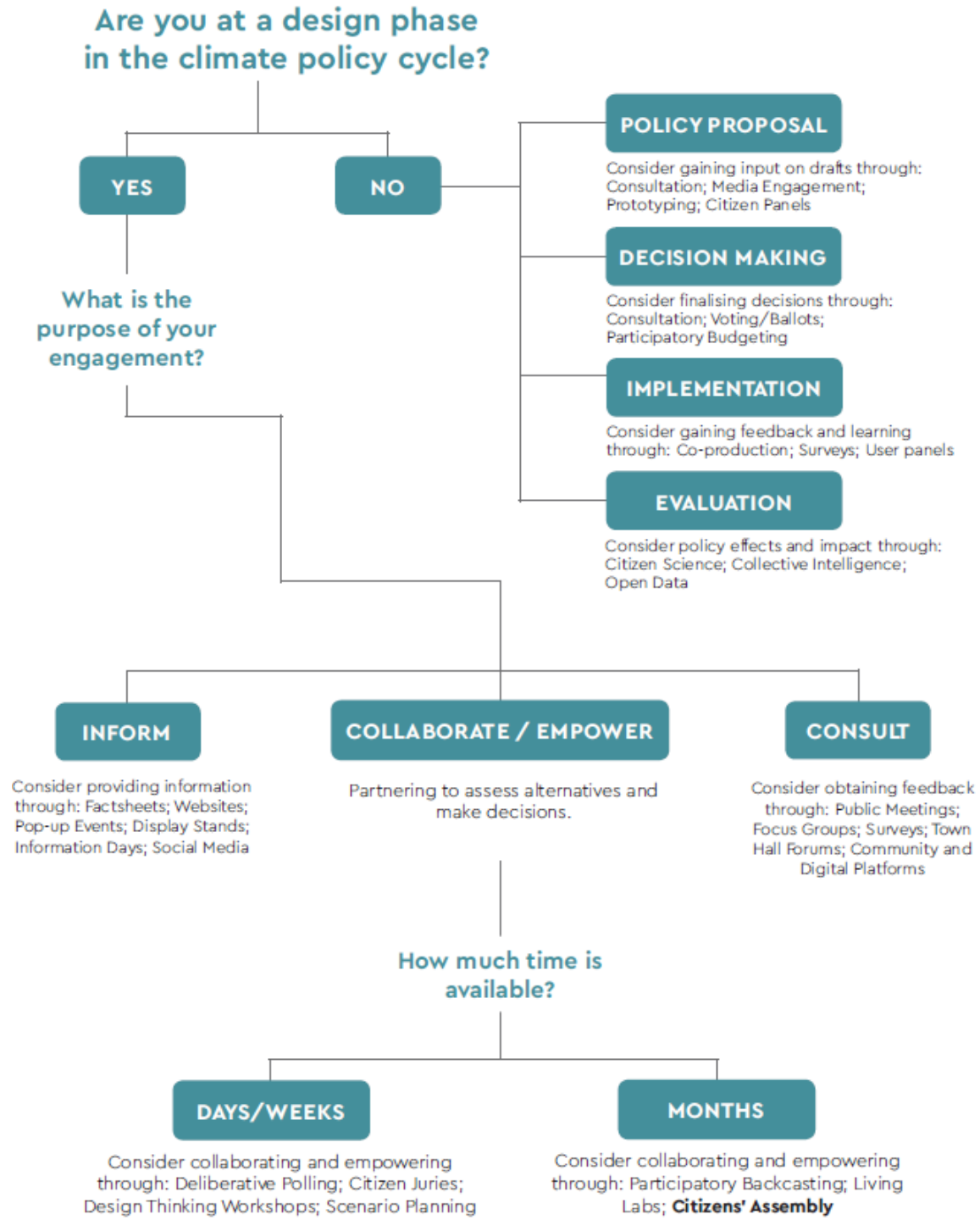
A resource for policymakers



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Part I

The Policy Cycle



Part II

Deliberation

D

DISTINCT QUESTION

Deliberation works best when there is a distinct policy question that needs to be answered. The question proposed needs to be specific enough to ensure a depth of conversation and tangible results. An overarching question can in turn be broken into sub-questions.

E

ENGAGE EARLY

Where possible, citizens should be engaged early in the policy cycle. This is important so that participants do not feel that they are being asked to endorse a decision that has already been made. Citizen views should be used to help shape future decisions. Early participation will also help to mitigate accusations of NIMBYism at later policy implementation stages.

L

LEVERAGE COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Community groups such as Tidy Towns, GAA clubs or Rotary organisations operate across the country with already significant community buy-in. Such groups can be incorporated into deliberative forums as speakers, or alternatively can be involved in the roll out and delivery of the actions agreed by a deliberative forum.

I

IMPACT OF DELIBERATION

A guaranteed response from government (local and/or national as appropriate) to the recommendations of a deliberative forum is needed. Procedures should be agreed in advance for taking forward citizen input. Generating legally binding decisions from the citizens' recommendations would take this further though this may not be appropriate, or indeed desired by citizens in all cases.

B

BOOST DIVERSITY

Inclusivity of deliberative forums should be promoted. This can be enhanced by providing supports for people who otherwise may be unable to participate, such as those with disabilities, parents with young children and those with financial limitations. Supports in terms of quality food, accommodation, travel, childcare and accompanying aides should be provided to participants where feasible.

E

ENGAGEMENT AS A PROCESS

Citizen engagement should be considered not as a one-off event but rather, where possible, a continuous learning and feedback process for both politicians and citizens. Effective follow-up communications are crucial to notify participants of the progress of their recommendations. This will help to ensure legitimacy for citizens and accountability for politicians to utilise results.

R

RESPONSIVE FORMAT

The specific format of a deliberative forum should take account of the stage in the policy cycle, the nature of the topic to be discussed, and the amount of time and resources available. The implementation of agreed rules is important in ensuring respectful debate and non-repetitive, inclusive discussions. Where resources permit, consideration should be given to involvement of professional facilitators.

A

ALLOW TIME

Participants in a deliberative forum must be allowed sufficient time to read and digest expert material in advance of the event. Agreed deadlines are essential amongst all those involved. The time allocated to topics must be sufficient, but account should also be taken of the limited time available to participating citizens.

T

TRUSTED SPEAKERS

The selection of expert speakers has a significant impact on the quality of debate, citizen learning and outcomes of deliberation. Ensuring a balanced and transparent selection is key. Personal testimonials should be included alongside scientific presentations and international best practice. Media presenters or celebrities engaged in environmental programming may boost impact.

E

ENSURE REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION

Reflective discussion is a core component of the deliberative process. Participating citizens need to not only receive information but be provided with the time and space to reflect on it and to discuss with their fellow citizens, including those holding differing opinions. Respectful engagement, dialogue and listening is crucial.

Part III

Communications

EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

Use simple, persuasive and accessible language. Avoid jargon and preaching. Use a limited number of relevant key factual statements. Home in on three key messages per communication to avoid getting lost in the detail. Do not talk about climate change only in the future as this can take from the urgency of the problem. Action is needed now and this conversation must be encouraged into everyday conversation.

GET CREATIVE

Be imaginative in the delivery of communications. Combine expert presentations with interactive videos, flipcharts, games, etc. Mix formal and informal approaches. Imagery can also be powerful in climate crisis communications, including showcasing real people, relatable contexts and emotionally powerful content. Protest imagery should be balanced with positive imagery. Consider using poetry, music and storytelling for impact, and humour when appropriate.

GOOD NEWS

Focus on solutions. Show people what they can do and empower communities to have a meaningful role. Balanced optimism is required that identifies the problem, illustrates ways to overcome them, and addresses any barriers to change that citizens face. Lead with the opportunity to create more vibrant and resilient climate positive communities. Next, clarify the climate challenge that the costs of inaction are adding up. Conclude with ideas that inspire citizens to create positive change.

SHARED VALUES

Listen and ensure two-way dialogue to explore your audiences' needs and values first. Find similarities between the diversity of citizens requiring engagement. Root explorations of the climate crisis in participants' common and personal values. Ask what people care about, what they dislike and what makes them proud. Find out what matters to your audience and resonate with them on that basis. Engage strategies of social norming and move away from shaming effective climate action.

ENGAGES

NOTEWORTHY IMPACTS

Communicate about locally relevant, tangible and observable climate impacts (e.g. local flooding, drought, fodder crisis, etc.). Enable people to identify with an often abstract concept through stories about real people. Adapt examples to the specific context: geography, sector or organisation. Global impacts, however, are just as crucial to connect with a sense of justice and moral duty. Where possible, avoid one-dimensional financial cost framings. Instead try to focus on human and non-human impacts of inaction.

ACTION

Communication and citizen engagement on the climate crisis should be action-oriented. There should be a clear vision of how the communication intends to empower citizens to make positive changes in their lives and communities. Meet people where they are rather than expecting them to come to you. Support systems should be made available including, where feasible, access to funding, mentoring, tools for establishing community actions, dialogue and educational resources.

EMOTIONAL STORIES

Tell emotional and personal stories. Tangible stories of real people affected by the climate crisis (e.g. physically, emotionally, financially, etc.) are encouraged, as are stories about how families and communities are benefiting from climate action. More engaged discussion is likely to occur when the conversation includes considerations of distributional, social and intergenerational justice (e.g. the impact on our children's futures) as well as the impact on the economy and environment.

Thank you

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