

P-E Analysis to action: political communication approaches and techniques¹

Introduction

There are three levels of political economy analysis: macro or country level, meso or thematic/sector level, and micro or with regard to specific operations or policies. There are political communication approaches relevant to the macro level. These would involve the relevance of political communication structures to the attainment of good governance objectives. One example would be the state of the public sphere in each country and the fundamental importance of working towards a national system of open, diverse and inclusive dialogue via an independent media system and a regime of open and transparent governance. But this note is not about the macro level. The political communication approaches discussed below are particularly applicable to thematic and sector level work as well as work on specific projects or policies.

There is a second preliminary issue to clarify. The main note on P-E Analysis sets up a distinction between two situations you face when deciding how to proceed to make reforms happen. In the first situation, you select operations given the existing reform space; in the second you seek to pro-actively expand the reform space. This distinction is important but it can easily be overdrawn. The point to note is that whichever option you choose, the political communication approaches discussed below are relevant. A range of challenging, people related issues will still crop up. Above all, the political environment is always dynamic. You might start the reform thinking you will not need a huge coalition building effort to succeed only to find out midstream that you literally have a fight on your hands because counter-reform has mobilized.

Foundations

Why are political communication approaches pivotal to efforts to reform governance systems? There are two broad reasons to bear in mind. The first is that if you want something to change about how a society is governed. You can use command or force or you can manipulate incentives. Failing that you have to persuade. In fact, it is doubtful the extent to which command works, given the complex, increasingly de-centered nature of all political communities. As the editors of the *Oxford Handbook of*

¹ This note was produced by the World Bank's Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)

Public Policy rightly point out: “To make policy in a way that makes it stick, policy makers cannot merely issue edicts. They need to persuade the people who must follow their edicts if those are to become general public practice. In part, that involves persuasion of the public at large...”² As a result, reform managers have to understand that whatever other business they think they are in they are also in the persuasion business.

The second broad reason to bear in mind is that there is a difference between technical challenges and adaptive challenges. According to Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, there are problems that we face where we already have the necessary knowhow and procedures. This is true of many areas of governance reform. The technical expertise is abundant in, for instance, financial management. But as the authors point out, many of the challenges imperiling change are not amenable to technical solutions only. “We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries...Without learning new ways – changing attitudes, values, behaviors – people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself”.³ In other words, the business of change is also the business of persuasion.

Recurring challenges

While preparing for a global lesson-learning event around the people-related challenges that governance reform efforts confront, the Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP) conducted a learning needs assessment. We asked reform managers around the world to describe these challenges to us. What we found is that there is actually a recurring set. These challenges do not occur in the same order or with the same intensity in each fact situation but they tend to be there or thereabouts. They are as follows:

1. Lack of political will: Political will means ‘broad leadership support for change’ (Post, Salmon, & Raile, 2008, p. 114)⁴. In many situations this is lacking and managers rely on a lone(ly) champion. The champion might not survive or, as is often the case, does not have enough political support to actually see the reforms through.

² Moran, M., Rein, M., & Goodin, R. E. (2006, p. 5). *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.

³ Heifetz, R. A. & Linsky, M. (2002, p. 13). *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

⁴ Post, L. A., Salmon, C. T., & Raile, A. N. W. (2008), Using public will to secure political will. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 113-124). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

2. Resistance from middle managers or the professional bureaucracy. The resistance can be passive or aggressive but if they are not won over the lessons suggest that these middle-managers are the 'layer of clay' through which nothing passes.
3. Vested interests: These are, as is well-known, special interest groups opposed to reform. The key point is how motivated they are, and how quickly they mobilize to oppose reform.
4. Hostile public opinion: Many reforms are opposed by public opinion even if they are in the broader national interest. And there are difficult publics who oppose a reform that benefits everyone else. An example is what is known as NIMBY: 'Not in My Backyard'.
5. The Collective Action Problem: This is a problem that Machiavelli noted in *The Prince*. Unorganized majorities have no voice. Thus, in many situations, the millions of potential beneficiaries from a reform don't know that they stand to gain and are not organized. Sadly, the vested interests, who are usually a minority, are usually sharply engaged.
6. Citizen demand for accountability: Social accountability is part of reform design. As is well known the idea is to engage citizen action to monitor official performance and sanction bad governance. The task also includes vigilance against counter-reform and counter-mobilization. Actually getting this to happen is a tough row to hoe. The challenges include: lack of awareness, lack of engagement, lack of citizen competence and inertia.

In several leading American universities, there are professors who hold joint appointments in both political science and communication. The reason for this is obvious. A great deal of what you actually do in politics, either to win or keep power or to bring about social and political change of one kind or the other, involves communication influence. Political leaders as well as social movements have to understand the conditions under which political attitudes and behaviors change, they have to understand what shapes public opinion, public opinion being a critical force in any community of human beings. Above all, both political leaders and social movements have to understand which planned and deliberate political communication interventions will help further their objectives, including managing aspects of political risk. If you review the recurring challenges listed above, you will find that they are all about human beings and their attitudes, opinions and behaviors. To the extent that this is the case, political communication approaches can be useful. But communication is not a magic bullet; far from it. The idea is to be aware of the menu of options available.

From the Get-Go

Perhaps the most important lesson of experiences gathered to date is the need to have a plan for dealing with the challenges listed above from the get-go. Very often, reform managers wake up to these challenges only when counter-reform has mobilized or public opinion is already hostile, then there is a fire-fighting response. The only problem is by this time it is probably too late. The World Bank's efforts to reform the water sector in New Delhi, India are a case in point (see Singh, 2008)⁵. What follows are some initial issues to think through.

1. Who does what?

Political communication in support of reform efforts involves all manner of political sensitivities. In one of the famous transformative examples that we have, the World Bank expert had to leave the Bank to work for the government of the Philippines (see Campos & Syquia, 2006)⁶.]. The following division of labor would appear to make sense. *Task Team Leaders*: They need to plan for these interventions, make sure a strategy is produced, costed and budgeted for, and that relevant local or international communication experts are hired. They need to persuade partners that this component is needed. This might involve organizing training for the officials involved (see, for instance, CommGAP's *People, Politics, and Change* workshop for reform managers⁷) *Senior Government Officials leading the reform effort*: They need to lead the political communication effort, with expert support. They are the ones best placed to persuade political leaders and middle managers. *Credible civil society partners*: Public engagement is often best done by credible civil society partners. It is an excellent way to solve the collective action problem, overcome citizen inertia, and strengthen social accountability.

- *Georgia Judicial Reform*⁸: Due to low level of trust in judiciary, messages in support of judicial reform would be much more successful if they were to be communicated by a

⁵ Singh, A. (2008). Political economy reforms: Learning from the Delhi water experience. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 419-430). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

⁶ Campos, J. E. & Syquia, J. L. (2006). Managing the politics of reform: Overhauling the legal infrastructure of public procurement in the Philippines. *World Bank Working Paper # 70*. Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

⁷ <http://go.worldbank.org/PR8UOL91G0>

⁸ Bassat, J. M. (2008). Building support for the rule of law in Georgia. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 397-412). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

neutral third party. The Association for Legal Public Education (ALPE)—tasked to implement the communication program—was set up by four NGOs, a state body, and the Council of Justice. The new organization was given the responsibility of walking a very thin line: while remaining an NGO with a strong, independent voice, it had to engage the judiciary to become more open and transparent while at the same time helping the judiciary to reach out to the public.

- *Philippines Procurement Reform*⁹: Reformers set-up Procurement Watch, Inc., a CSO that advocated for the passage of the procurement reform legislation.

2. Reform by stealth or early public engagement?

Many technical experts prefer what has been called ‘reform by stealth’ (see Jenkins, 1999¹⁰; Lal, 2008¹¹). The idea is that technocrats within the World Bank and similar agencies sit down with fellow technocrats working in partner governments and they agree a reform program; then they execute and everyone is happy. Bringing in the public is seen as messy, difficult and, therefore, best avoided. But what happens if the efforts leak and a campaign of misinformation is waged in the public sphere by the opponents of reform? This is why this matter needs careful consideration. What might make sense—as the case studies from the Indian states of Orissa and West Bengal testify—is an effort to build political will before embarking on skilled, deliberate public engagement. Whichever approach is chosen, care is required.

- *India Public Enterprise Reform*¹²: The state governments of West Bengal and Orissa could scarcely have used more different communication strategies, yet both were highly competent and effective. The former started with building support among elites before engaging the wider public; the latter started with public consultation while policy options were being formulated. The two different strategies were each selected to

⁹ Campos, J. E. & Syquia, J. L. (2006). Managing the politics of reform: Overhauling the legal infrastructure of public procurement in the Philippines. *World Bank Working Paper # 70*. Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

¹⁰ Jenkins, R. (1999). *Democratic Politics and Economic Reform in India*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Lal, S. (2008). The political economy of reform: Role of the internal “journalist”. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 75-92). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

¹² Mastey, S. J. (2008). Communication, coalition building, and development: Public enterprise reform in West Bengal and Orissa States, India. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 355-390). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

address different political circumstances, but both shared the same profound understanding of the relationship that must exist between politics and stakeholder-driven communication to build the consensus.

3. Connect with the national mood: take public opinion seriously

The state of public opinion with regard to your reform objectives can create a policy window to exploit; but it can also be a constraint unless you can transform public opinion. It is important to take a measure of public opinion and take the results seriously. The results can help to frame the reform in strategically beneficial ways. They can also help to craft messages that resonate with public opinion.

- *Slovakia Pension Reform*¹³: Happy talk about how well things are going will not be effective in a country where the majority of the public believe that the country is headed in the wrong direction. Instead, leaders need to connect with public sentiment through research on how people feel. If the public sees the country to be going in the wrong direction, there is a need to take that direction seriously and to engage with a frame of communication that acknowledges that things are not going as they should. If the reforms are already in place and things are not going well, explain why that is the case or how the reforms will deal with it.
- *Georgia Judicial Reform*¹⁴: A lesson can be drawn from an impact evaluation of a communication program using opinion research studies. The surveys have to be designed to capture very subtle nuances, not only in the perceptions, but also in the expectations, of the respondents. Otherwise, there is a risk of falling into a paradoxical situation—as probably happened here—whereby a communication effort that may succeed in increasing the public’s understanding of the role of the judiciary will probably lead to a constituency that expects more of the system.

4. Work to secure genuine political will

¹³ Rosner, J. (2008). Communicating difficult reforms: Eight lessons from Slovakia. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 395-396). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

¹⁴ Bassat, J. M. (2008). Building support for the rule of law in Georgia. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 397-412). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

If political will means ‘broad leadership support for change’, then it means a lot more than the support of one reform champion, even if that person is the head of government. In the language of John Kingdon (1995)¹⁵, to move an issue up the public agenda and move it into the decision agenda...and to make it stick... requires building enough support within the political leadership. The first problem to tackle is *problem recognition*. Who says there is a problem to fix? Do the leaders of the country/ the local government think so? One reason this is such a problem is that much of governance reform is an attempt to embed international norms of ‘good governance’ in local contexts. National ownership means problem recognition by those whose problem we are supposedly fixing as well as agreement on what needs to be done. It is important to think about the role of opposition parties and their policy thinkers as well as the role of parliament when thinking about how to secure genuine political will (Masty, 2008¹⁶).

Driving change

1. Engage multiple stakeholders and the public

The goal is to build public support for the reform effort while managing public expectations. Citizens live in a message-rich environment and there are other players in the public space. If you don’t act proactively to engage the stakeholders you need, opponents have a good chance of turning them away from you. Reformer managers must ensure that problems are defined in terms friendly to the reform and that a core set of stakeholders is solidly behind the effort. Expanding the base of support should be carried out in a purposive and sustainable manner. Throughout these processes, it is important to note the role of deliberation: it not only builds support for reform but can help to improve public policy.

- *China Infrastructure Reform*¹⁷: Deliberative Polling employs random samples of the public, and provides good conditions to motivate ordinary citizens to become informed. Party secretary Jiang Zhaohua expressed great enthusiasm for the process and the

¹⁵ Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd Ed. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.

¹⁶ Masty, S. J. (2008). Communication, coalition building, and development: Public enterprise reform in West Bengal and Orissa States, India. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 355-390). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

¹⁷ Fishkin, J. S., He, B., & Siu, A. (2008). Public consultation through deliberation in China: The first Chinese Deliberative Poll. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 461-475). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

results of the Deliberative Poll in Zeguo Township, China, as compared with all previous deliberative meetings. The methods are sophisticated and dealt with the most difficult issue of all, budgeting. He also admitted that “although I gave up some final decision-making power, we gain more power back because the process has increased the legitimacy for the choice of priority projects and has created public transparency in the public policy decision-making process. Public policy is, therefore, more easily implemented”

2. Adopt a clear unifying message

A clear, unifying message that has been pre-tested with stakeholders is crucial. It helps to build support. In the modern information age saying different things to different stakeholders will not work. People will find out and trust will vanish, and that is not a good place to be.

- *Slovakia Pension Reform*¹⁸: The Dzurinda government was seeking to build support for at least seven different major reforms. The ministers and civil servants working on these reforms had strong explanations about why each of these reforms was important, but the cumulative impact of all the information on the public often was more akin to white noise. However, the research suggested that if the government were to use a central set of ideas and messages that explained what the reforms were about—that, taken together, they were aimed at attracting new investors and new jobs for Slovakia—it was possible for the government to increase support for their reforms. With a unifying message, the reforms suddenly became—for many people—intuitive, memorable, and attractive.

3. Seek to frame the debate strategically

There are many ways to frame a public issue. Two will illustrate the point. A public issue, say the mortgage crisis, can be framed in a way that the focus is on individual stories. This is called episodic framing (Iyengar, 1996¹⁹). Researchers have found out that when you do that

¹⁸ Rosner, J. (2008). Communicating difficult reforms: Eight lessons from Slovakia. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 395-396). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

¹⁹ Iyengar, S. (1996). Framing Responsibility for Political Issues. In *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (546, pp. 59-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

public opinion focuses on blaming the individual. “Why did he borrow too much money?” But the same mortgage crisis can be framed as a systemic crisis. This is called thematic framing (ibid.). Researchers have found that when you do that public opinion attaches blame to the system, the government, society and so on. All this is why it is important to frame the debate around your reform initiative in a way that serves your strategic objectives.

- *India Water Sector Reform*²⁰: Instead of an exclusive focus on economic benefits of the project, focus could have been on values that stakeholders hold dear. Also, options could have been provided in lieu of a recipe for reform.
- *India Public Enterprise Reform*²¹: Test each communication to determine whether the message reaches the target audience, and, where possible, establish benchmarks of stakeholder attitude through which you can later attempt to measure communication impact.

4. Act macro all right but please talk micro

Experts like to think and talk macro. Aggregate figures for economic growth, employment and so on dominate expert discourse. But citizens don't think like that. Citizens think micro. ‘What has this issue got to do with me? How does this affect me? Will my life improve or my prospects or those of my children because of these efforts?’ Communication around a reform must have a disciplined micro focus or public support will not be won.

- *Slovakia Pension Reform*²²: In Slovakia the dominant goal of the health care reforms was to reduce the debts imposed by the health care systems. This message did not resonate with the public because it just did not relate to people's lives. Most citizens do not come in contact with the debts of the health care system, but, rather, with doctors and hospital beds and pharmacies. Naturally, quite a different set of

²⁰ Singh, A. (2008). Political economy reforms: Learning from the Delhi water experience. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 419-430). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

²¹ Mastey, S. J. (2008). Communication, coalition building, and development: Public enterprise reform in West Bengal and Orissa States, India. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 355-390). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

²² Rosner, J. (2008). Communicating difficult reforms: Eight lessons from Slovakia. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 395-396). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

concerns with the health care system surfaced during focus group discussions, but the government had not sufficiently addressed these concerns in its communications. By listening to the public through opinion research, and by doing more to look at the problem through the eyes of the citizens who are the consumers of the health care system, the government found the door opened to new lines of communication that could explain the micro-benefits of the health reforms. All this action requires looking through the other end of the telescope, to go from a “macro” lexicon to a “micro” lexicon.

5. Address the biggest fears and concerns of the public

Don't just focus on the positive aspects of a reform. The idea is not to do a 'selling job' but to treat citizens as adults. You win more trust and credibility that way. If problems will be created for some citizens because of the reforms address these concerns and worries. Say what will be done to help these citizens. Organize frank and open debates designed to reveal the trade-offs involved.

- *Slovakia Pension Reform*²³: Reforms almost always entail costs that are usually unevenly shared, generating fears and resentments. Instead of confronting those fears and resentments, many reformers try to avoid the subject and to keep things focused on the positive aspects of the reforms. This approach can leave the public feeling that the government is out of touch. One of the most powerful things that a government can do is to admit and give voice to the public's biggest concerns. It takes enormous political courage to deal with them head on, but this act buys the government credibility and opens it up to hearing about other difficult issues.

6. Talk about the issues, not politics

Political leaders leading reform efforts often get side-tracked into talking about the game of politics they are engaged in. They especially like to attack their opponents. This puts the public off. The issue is what counts; for the best pitch to make for a reform is that it is demonstrably in the overall public interest. That is above petty partisan politics; and that ought to be the focus of communication efforts designed to build public support for the reform.

²³ Ibid.

- *Nicaragua Public Sector Reform*²⁴: The lesson from this experience is that communication strategies to support public sector reforms, regardless of the context, should focus more on the *res publica*. This approach would foster a broader definition of the concept of the state and of public administration beyond the concept of government, which is close to and often confused with the idea of the executive branch.

Build permanent capacity

Seek to build the capacity of governments to engage in two-way dialogue with their citizens, whatever the level of government or the sector. In many developing countries, government communication systems are dreary backwaters of low skill, low morale and hardly any equipment to speak of. As the discussion so far ought to show, the ability of a government to communicate with its citizens has important implications. Well organized, the government communication apparatus and skilled staff will play the following roles, all of which are central to the evolution of effective, responsive and accountable governance:

- Explain the working policies and actions of the government/department/agency;
- Create awareness of the rights, benefits and obligations of individual citizens and groups of citizens;
- Persuade groups of citizens to act in accordance with agreed policies in defined circumstances; and
- Advise the government /department/agency of the public's and the news media's reactions to its policies and actions (UK Government Communication Network, as cited in Odugbemi & Mozammel, 2005, p. 21²⁵).

All this is why reform managers need to make strenuous efforts to improve the capacity of governments to engage in two-way communication with their citizens.

²⁴ Bruni, M. (2008). Participation, transparency, and consensus building in support of public sector reform: The case of Nicaragua. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance Reform Under Real-World Conditions: Citizens, Stakeholder, and Voice* (pp. 333-354). Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

²⁵ Mozammel, M. & Odugbemi, S. (2005). *With the Support of Multitudes: Using Strategic Communication to Fight Poverty through PRSPs*. London: The Department for International Development (DfID), United Kingdom.