

# 6th meeting of the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication

## A new paradigm to communicate on the green transition

Wednesday 14 June 2023  
Event Summary

### Overview

The 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication (EGPC) took place online on 14 June 2023. It served as the launch of a new collaboration with Ireland on communicating the green transition, aiming at creating a community of practice to share learnings, as well as identify and prioritise areas of challenge and opportunity for government communicators working on climate change and the green transition.

This new project is held in the context of the [OECD Action Plan on Governing Green](#) established as part of the Organisation's [Reinforcing Democracy Initiative](#). The plan indeed notes that governments can: *"Pursue holistic public communications efforts to support the timely and effective sharing of information and data around climate change and other environmental pressures and develop strategies for preparedness and prevention of mis- and dis-information on environmental threats and policy responses"*. Governing Green is also an integral part of the OECD's horizontal project "Net Zero+: Climate and Economic Resilience in a Changing World" and the work on public communication will play a key role in the project's ongoing second phase.

Around 80 participants joined the event, which included 15 speakers from governments, inter-governmental organisations, and NGOs presenting past and ongoing projects under the umbrella of communicating for the green transition, as well as insights for future work. The discussions revolved around the following pre-identified themes: audience segmentation, behavioural insights, storytelling approaches, monitoring, evaluation and learning and mitigating mis- and dis-information. The meeting highlighted the existence of a strong base of evidence and practice on the topic, appetite for exchange in this field, as well as eagerness to test and learn new approaches.

### Opening remarks

The event was opened first by **Janos Bertok, Deputy Director, OECD Public Governance Directorate**, who highlighted key findings from the OECD Trust Survey and their linkages with communication and the green agenda. For example, half of OECD countries surveyed wanted governments to do more in terms of climate change, and a third expressed confidence that governments will achieve targets set out by international agreements. It is clear that citizens want governments to do more, which is why communicating the green transition is a priority of the OECD Public Governance Directorate. Mr. Bertok emphasised the importance of having this group guide and set priorities in this field, by understanding current challenges and proposing solutions.

**Kumi Kitamori, Deputy Director, OECD Environment Directorate** stressed how action on climate has never been more urgent, with irreversible and catastrophic changes occurring. She underlined that green policies must be publicly supported and accepted, for which effective communication is key. Ms. Kitamori introduced the OECD NetZero+ project, a horizontal cross cutting OECD wide initiative collating multi-disciplinary evidence and practice across the OECD and providing guidance

to ensure climate policies are both successful and resilient. The first phase of the project had a clear recommendation that easily accessible, open and understandable communication on how climate policies work is an essential tenet of supported and accepted government action. She mentioned that communication has long focused on risks and cost of inaction, but we must move to what can be done to adapt and mitigate these risks as this is more successful in gaining support for government policies. Through clear communication we can leverage an immense amount of public support and speed up the green transition. Ms. Kitamori also mentioned how their most recent report underlines how government action on climate change can build trust in governments.

**Elizabeth Canavan, Assistant Secretary for Social Policy, Public Service Reform and Government Information Service, Department of the Taoiseach, Ireland**, chair of the meeting provided the final opening remarks. She stated that enhancing capacity in public communication is a priority for the Irish Government, and her hopes that this group will facilitate the development of useful guidelines and resources on how to accompany the green transition, including from a behaviour change, public engagement, and crisis perspective – issues all government communicators are grappling with. Ms. Canavan mentioned the reforms undertaken in the Irish Government since 2017, with an aim to build capacity and modernise the previously press office dominated government communication into one that is citizen focused. She underlined the challenge of reform in this field, where the lines between public and political communication can be seen as blurry. Covid-19 represented a turning point in this regard, highlighting the role of communication in the policy development process, and the importance of moving from data to insights. She underlined the similarities with the green transition, and the need to make use of insights to inform decisions. Finally, she emphasised the importance of communication in building trust in government and strengthening policy legitimacy, understood as when the public accept, engage and endorse government policy.

**Jim McNamara, Distinguished Professor, School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney, Australia** spoke next with a focus on learning and evaluation to help ensure communication activities for the green transition are working. He explained how theories of change and logic models would work in this field and underlined the importance of moving away from a common focus on activities and outputs (such as impressions or number of pieces published, which are not an indicator of the change governments are trying to achieve), to identifying outcomes and impact. The latter is about what *audiences* do, rather than what *communicators* do, and are things happening in the audience/business/industry, rather than in the media space. He also stressed that monitoring, evaluation and learning should be done from outset, not as an add on. This means that governments could utilize formative research to understand audiences, collect baseline data and conduct pre-testing to inform communication strategies. Finally, he stressed the importance of listening (which is different than simply hearing), as a process allowing to create insights on which action can be based on, and a process that is often overlooked by communication professionals.

**Heather Peacocke, Chief Advisor, Public Affairs, Climate Impacts and Linda Major, Customer Experience Lead, Ministry for the Environment, New Zealand**, presented on how the Government learned from Covid-19, and what they can apply to the climate crisis. They underlined the importance of clarity of purpose and a call to action (saving lives), which defined how they organised themselves, designed their communication response and measurement approach and framed public participation. They emphasized the commitment to maintaining empathy and placing the public at the heart of decision-making. This included asking several questions throughout the pandemic such as what it meant for the public, what are the most important actions for them to take, why they needed to act in a certain way and how this can be made easy for them. The “Unite against covid” platform created a centralised repository for all government information and took the burden off people to find information easily and act upon it. There was also an effort in anticipating and addressing public needs and fears and focusing on how to channel that rather than slip into panic or hopelessness. The importance of a clear internal governance structure was underlined and the need for an active dialogue between the public and government deemed essential. Social media channels were used to understand gaps arising in policy, respond quickly to public needs and meeting the public where they are. The speakers also noted the pivotal role of framing response based on cultural codes and values, by understanding New Zealanders’ relationship to rules for example, and connecting policy to outcomes people care about. Finally, the Treaty of Waitangi was used as a basis to encourage co-creation and the speakers underlined that we have a lot to learn from indigenous cultures on climate particularly.

**Florence Rosamel and Csenge Nagy, Project Managers, Networks and Partnerships Department, Government Information Service (GIS), France** presented two campaigns run by the French Government, one during Covid-19 and another on “energy sobriety”. Regarding the former, they underlined the importance of keeping a focus on inclusivity and accessibility, while noting that this meant the State was not always the best messenger to deliver information, and that it was

essential to have partnership strategies to maximise reach. They noted that the pandemic enabled the Government to partner for the first time with private businesses such as bakeries and pharmacies to share government information. With regards to the 2022 “Every Act Counts” campaign, the objective was to raise awareness on the importance of “energy sobriety” through a nation-wide activity involving a wide range of stakeholders mobilised around the State acting as an initiator and facilitator. Both short and long term actions were underlined, and the GIS worked with different partners including supermarkets to reach different segments of society.

**James Staff, Deputy Director of Communications, Department for Energy Security and NetZero, United Kingdom** presented a similar effort called the “It all adds up campaign”, run across a wide range of media and offline channels. It encourages people to take simple steps to reduce their energy use. The campaign cost £16m and saved UK households £120m, ultimately saving the treasury money. This was developed based on insights showing that the British public was aware of and supported the net zero transition but was unwilling to make major changes to their life. Many feel that such changes would make their lives worse, and so the campaign focused on encouraging small steps. Insights gathered also pointed to the fact that the public was unsure what it is they have to do and that they found the language used by government to be off-putting. The current motivation to reduce energy consumption was noted as driven by monetary concerns rather than climate ones. The speaker mentioned that they saw a statistically significant increase in the number of UK adults who had taken at least one of the actions spoken about in the campaign. He emphasized the need to start small and meet people where they are, make language simple and advice clear to build trust. He also underlined that people do not like to be told what to do but to be taken onboard a journey through strategic communications. Mr. Staff also underlined the important amount of misinformation about actions that do not help reduce energy consumption or that could be detrimental to people’s health.

**Dr. Chiara Varazzani, Lead Behaviour Scientist, Public Governance Directorate, OECD** stated the unrealistic expectation of human behaviour change when designing communication strategies, and how it is often wrongly assumed that raising awareness leads directly to people changing their behaviour. She explained the complexity of changing behaviours, with people often wanting to change but feel they cannot – which is referred to as the belief action gap. She underlined the need for the application of behavioural insights into communication campaigns to be based on evidence of what works and what can backfire. She presented the [OECD Network of Behavioural Insights Experts in Government](#) and the [OECD’s map of BI institutions around the world](#) to draw on. The last two meetings of this group focused on utilising behavioural insights for green reforms, with a focus on public understanding and support for green reforms, countering mis and disinformation and improving government decision making on the green agenda. She then presented insights from recent research, including how lack of understanding – rather than just acceptance of green reforms, is a major barrier facing behaviour change. She stressed the importance of explaining how a policy will work, what measures are in place to minimise negative consequences on those most in need, and how people will not lose out personally, to increase acceptance and support.

**Katherine Hassett, Environmental Economist, Environment and Economy Integration Division, OECD Environment Directorate**

Ms. Hassett presented the findings of the recently launched OECD EPIC Survey - “[How green is household behaviour? Sustainable choices in a time of interlocking crises](#)”. The survey covered 9 countries looking at household habits and consumption related to climate and the environment. Key findings include that economy and personal safety are among the biggest challenges/worries of almost all households. Most respondents are willing to make changes but also not looking for those to cost them. Availability, affordability and convenience of sustainable options are highly determinable of whether households take on these choices and are key to changing behaviours. An expected finding was that an individual’s support for environmental policies is closely correlated to levels of environmental concern generally. Raising taxes or other price related instruments were noticeably less well accepted, even amongst those with high levels of environmental concern. Food quality is prioritised over environmental attributes, in both those with low and high environmental concern, and those with high and low income. The survey findings reinforce the importance of price-based instruments and complementary policies e.g. revenue recycling to improve affordability of more sustainable choices and disincentivise non-sustainable choices.

**Lucas Francou Damesin, Co-founder, Parlons Climat (PC)** presented his organisation’s work on audience segmentation to inform climate campaigning. PC works to help NGOs engage and reach new audiences to support the green transition through understanding where the French public stands and better communicating on climate. They focus on different types of segmentations, including climate knowledge and awareness-based segmentation, consumption-based segmentation (e.g. how many flights people take), as well as values-based segmentation, each allowing a different type of impact. He focused on

recent work they have done to create 6 different personas of the French public based on a values-based segmentation and detailed the “left behind” persona. Values may be more influential than socio-economic markers he explained and are a key determinant of how individuals engage with climate policies and concepts. Once a values-based picture is paired with socio-economic markers and media consumption habits, this can help create a plan on how best to reach audiences with targeted messaging.

**Rafn Helgason, Communications Strategic Advisor, Iceland Environment Agency, Department of Climate and Circular Economy** presented his Government’s efforts to better communicate with and engage the public on Green House Gas emissions. Indeed, the reports they developed on the topic had a minimal emphasis on public outreach and accessibility. To address this, they worked on condensing around 500 page reports into 20 page summaries, launch these publications during a Climate Day open public event in the main concert hall of Iceland. They also worked with lecturers to present the work in a succinct, visual and attractive manner, making the research more accessible and storytelling focused. Another key effort included harmonising the terminology used across government on this topic.

**Zbigniew Gniatkowski, Information and Communication officer, Disinformation Response, DG COMM, European Commission** presented 2 European Commission (EC) campaigns on public engagement and climate campaigning (NextGenEU<sup>1</sup> and YouAreEU<sup>2</sup>), as well as the Commission’s work on tracking disinformation. On the latter, Mr. Gniatkowski underlined the EC’s commitment to address mis and disinformation on climate as part of their efforts to support democracy. He described 3 objectives for climate policy communications: raising awareness of climate change, fostering engagement among EU citizens, and communicating EU climate action. He presented the results of a survey showing how their campaigns helped raise awareness and nudge greener energy behaviours. Finally, he discussed the EC’s countering disinformation project, which includes a focus on tracking common narratives of misinformation and utilising these insights to shape campaigns and inform messaging.

Following these presentations, the floor was opened to remarks from participants. These included **Ms. Anna Sigríður Einarsdóttir, Head of Information, Department of Senior Management, Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Climate, Iceland**, who spoke about their efforts to engage with business actors. This included a consultation with 11 industry sectors, mostly made up of medium sized or small industries regarding emissions reduction objectives. Earlier this month these businesses shared over 230 ideas on how to reach the targets and presented them to the minister. These formed a living document including clear recommendations of what the government and businesses ought to do.

## Closing remarks

During the conclusion, **Alex Aiken, Executive Director of Communications, International Relations and Security, Government Communication Service, United Kingdom**, underlined the importance of storytelling, paired with behavioural insights to ensure successful communication activities for the green transition. He acknowledged the need to show tangible results and ensure communication is recognised as central and essential to government running. He called upon the OECD Secretariat to work towards an international legal standard to strengthen public communication, providing practical guidance for OECD members.

**Alessandro Bellantoni, Head of the Open Government, Civic Space and Public Communication Unit, OECD** underlined the role the OECD could play in creating such guidance and how a more citizen-centred public communication can help support and defend democracies. He thanked the government of Ireland for their support, and all those participating. He announced that a second more in-depth event will be held during the last quarter of the year, and a final event in 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2021 NextGenEU campaign reached 220 million people. Focused on encouraging the adoption of energy efficient lifestyles and raise awareness of the European New Green Deal.

<sup>2</sup> The YouAreEU campaign is the first to reach the majority of the EU population and aimed at creating a sense of unity and European identity with shared values in supporting the energy transition.