Community Engagement on Adaptation: Meeting a Growing Capacity Need

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1. A Great Unmet Need

Climate change adaptation – to be politically feasible and socially acceptable – will not happen without broad public support. To date, however, the public is barely engaged on finding such timely and effective solutions to the challenges posed by climate disruption in their communities. Municipal and other local-level government staff, as well as community organizations that have taken the lead with climate preparedness planning, refer to the challenge of building political and public support as one of the greatest barriers they face.[3] Of course, with climate adaptation being a cross-scale governance challenge, with federal agencies now mandated to plan for and take adaptation actions, and with close to 20 US states now actively involved in adaptation planning, such calls for greater engagement and communication skill and capacity are not constrained to the local level. As climate change impacts become increasingly manifest, however, and as adaptation measures move from the planning to the implementation stage, those affected by climate risks and adaptation strategies can't be ignored. In fact, for adaptation to be realized on the ground, those affected by it will need to be actively involved with relevant public, civic and private sector actors at different governance levels in the process of risk assessment and response.

For the purposes here, we distinguish engagement from communication, with engagement constituting the overarching process and communication one essential means. *Engagement* describes those purposeful deliberation processes of involving the public in matters of public concern and decision-making, in this case climate change, sometimes over an extended period of time. As a result of such processes, and when done effectively, individuals become cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, professionally, socially, spiritually, civically and/or politically involved and vested in the issues (Moser and Berzonsky, in press) such that adaptation actions can advance. *Communication,* by contrast, is one means of engagement, and aims – preferably in a two-way manner – at better access to, greater interest in, and improved exchange of information, knowledge, opinions and experiences.

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Given it is not immediately apparent how best to effectively communicate climate change risks and solutions and meaningfully engage relevant stakeholders, and that leaders at all levels of government, nonprofits, and the private sector (e.g., USGCRP 2013; ACCO 2011) typically lack training in both communication and engagement methods, it is not surprising that improving the capacity of leaders to develop effective climate outreach efforts is a need consistently expressed.

This was revealed in a number of recent US-focused studies where local-level government officials feel this growing need to build their capacity to communicate and engage their communities around climate change. Nordgren and Stults (2014), in a US national survey, found that a wide range of local (and tribal) government employees see effective engagement of various stakeholders as essential for progress on adaptation. Majorities of respondents identified "generating support among businesses" (81.7%), "engaging the public" (80%), "generating support among local residents" (70.1%), "generating support regionally" (66.5%), "generating support among political decision-makers" (65%), "generating support among staff" (59.6%), and "generating support among peer local governments" (55.9%) as leading barriers to local adaptation action. And more than 75% wished they had more information on how to communicate adaptation to these stakeholders.

Similarly, in a 2011 statewide survey, California coastal managers (from all levels of government) either specifically identified communication and engagement as a barrier to moving adaptation along or indicated that coastal management is already politically difficult, and climate change will not only make the management of coastal challenges more difficult, but also the communication about them (Finzi Hart et al. 2012). A more recent survey of local officials in the greater Los Angeles area specifically identified training in communication and public engagement approaches as a frequently mentioned capacity need. For instance, in open responses, one respondent stated: "[we need] an outreach program for how to get electeds [sic] and residents engaged in the discussion." This need was further called out during a training with these same local officials who indicated the need for help with engagement across the community to further climate adaptation planning.

The need for building communication and engagement capacity is also not unique to the US as studies from across the globe illustrate this trend (e.g., Australia [Measham et al. 2011; Mukheibir et al. 2013]; The Netherlands [Beisbroeck et al. 2011]; Canada [Burch 2010]; Sweden [Storbjörk and Hedrén 2011], among

others). The global review by Moser and Ekstrom (2010) identified communication-related barriers to adaptation among the leading challenges faced in contemporary adaptation efforts, whereas Klein et al. (2014) found that adaptation processes proceeded more readily if they made concerted efforts in communication, awareness raising and deliberative engagement with affected publics. In her review of the literature on communicating climate change adaptation – which often occurs under such labels as "resilience building", "preparedness", "readiness" and "climate-smart" planning or development – however, Moser (2014) found that "communicators involved in adaptation efforts are equipped with little guidance [on how to communicate] at present, making themselves vulnerable to lost opportunities at best, and, at worst, easily failed and socially costly attempts when time, money, and trust are scarce" (pp. 337–338).

Clearly, this lack of guidance stems from our inadequate evidence-based understanding of how best to communicate adaptation. More needs to be learned about audience's interpretation and the acceptability of the term 'adaptation'; about how the media represent and discuss adaptation; about the psychological effects and attribution of emerging climate change impacts; also about how these impacts threaten individuals and communities' identities, livelihoods, well-being and survival; how publics view the relationship between mitigation and adaptation; which kinds of adaptations are acceptable and how place attachment affect people's understanding and preferences for adaptation (Moser 2014; Whitmarsh, O'Neill and Lorenzoni 2013). Meanwhile this lack of understanding (and making this understanding accessible to practitioners) is mirrored in a lack of practical capacity to effectively engage the public in responding to climate impacts at the local level. Municipal and other local-level planners, managers, and officials are often at the forefront of adaptation planning and implementation, and thus it is their ability to effectively communicate and engage with the public that matters most. The community level is where climate change impacts manifest, where appropriate solutions need to be found, and where the actual synergies and trade-offs between mitigation and adaptation, and between climate and non-climate-policy choices play out. It is in specific locales where people must live with the consequences of adaptation choices and where people's sense of place can be a motivation or hindrance to action.

Of course, as a large body of literature on local adaptation efforts, and particularly on adaptation barriers (Eisenack et al. 2014; Klein et al. 2014; Biesbroek et al. 2010; Moser and Ekstrom 2010) makes clear, better communication and more effective engagement *alone* will not overcome other barriers communities face with adaptation planning and implementation (e.g., financing). Our claim is simply

that greater communication and engagement skill, capacity and effort can help overcome the many political, organizational, institutional, and social challenges that currently hinder or unnecessarily slow down adaptation.

Current (local) adaptation efforts are thus faced with (1) a growing and persistent need for effective communication and public engagement, (2) a pervasive lack of capacity to do so, and (3) limited opportunities to date for building that capacity. Our Commentary makes the case for building the communication and engagement capacity needed and suggests how to build it rapidly to scale.

2. Why the Lack of Communication and Engagement Capacity is a Problem

Lack of skillful communication and community engagement is not a new problem in local government, yet in the context of climate adaptation, it is a particularly problematic challenge.

One reason lies in the nature of the climate change issue itself. For more than a decade, a field of climate change communication science has been building alongside a community of practice attempting to bring home – to policy-makers and the public – the urgency, magnitude, complexity, and uncertainties of climate change. The issue is one of the most difficult global challenges to communicate and to motivate action on, due to the difficulty of seeing its causes; the spatial distance and temporal delay between cause and impact; the global, systemic nature of the problem; and the long time horizons (Moser 2014). Any community wishing to proactively plan for climate change impacts and implement adaptation strategies will need to confront these challenges.

The inherent difficulties are made even more difficult to communicate by concerted efforts at misinforming the public, growing political and cultural polarization around the issue, low levels of scientific literacy and education, inadequate media coverage, and lack of political leadership. Climate skepticism is particularly acute in the US, Canada and UK; yet it is a trend common in other countries as well (https://gloverparkgroup.app.box.com/s/gt7aupkd6xtd2grj5nbt). Particularly, anti-Agenda 21 activism has made local planning for climate change or broader sustainability efforts most difficult (Moser 2013).

At the same time, the on-the-ground realities of climate disruption are leading to increasing effects regardless of the political and communication challenges, and people increasingly have visceral experiences of changes in their local

environment – both from extreme climatic events and from gradual changes. While many remain skeptical about the attribution of these changes to human-made climate change, the lived experience of change is tangible (Moser 2014). In our own work, community leaders, outreach professionals, educators, NGO advocates, and climate change scientists increasingly speak to a newly emerging need, namely how to deal with the public's emotional responses to climate change. While for years, training needs focused on communicating climate change science, and then moved to effectively confronting climate change skepticism and disruptive contrarianism, more recently, local actors ask us about how to meet the growing emotional distress, hopelessness and despair in their communities. Few if any are prepared to guide their communities through such distressing times, or even effectively deal with the sense of climate fatalism within themselves.

If the nature of the problem, the political context and the psychological responses were not difficult enough, the lack of communication and engagement capacity is a classic problem. In many environmental, social, health, technology or other public policy arenas, communication, outreach and engagement is frequently considered only as an afterthought. While virtually every guidebook on adaptation urges the early and active involvement of the interested public to generate greater understanding, ownership and public support for emerging policies, resources are rarely made available for such active engagement, while technical aspects tend to dominate the adaptation planning process. By the time adaptation plans are put to the test of public support, there is often total disengagement from the process overall or active resistance to "top-down" initiatives, leaving many adaptation plans unimplemented on the shelf.

3. Valuable, but Insufficient Capacity Building Efforts

The current situation is one where the need for more effective communication and public engagement is increasingly recognized and where a few individuals and organizations have begun to try to build greater capacity for it. We are aware of several organizations within the United States that are offering resources and limited training opportunities to meet the growing need among adaptation professionals. Among these are the Institute for Sustainable Communities (www.iscvt.org), ecoAmerica (http://ecoamerica.org), ICLEI–Local Communities for Sustainability (www.iclei.org), the American Planning Association (www.planning.org), and the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (http://usdn.org). Climate Access (www.climateaccess.org), is most directly focused on serving the practitioner community through a broad suite of

communication resources, document libraries, engagement tips from experts and experienced communicators, and webinars. In only three years, the Climate Access Network membership has grown to more than 2,300 members from government, nonprofits and academia, indicating the demand for increasing public engagement expertise. Close to 25% of Climate Access members are from the government sector including federal, state, regional, county, and municipal leaders. The majority of these members are based in the United States, followed by Canada although Climate Access membership spans 50 countries.

In addition, both of us offer in-person and online communication and engagement trainings for a range of organizations. Over the past several years, we have reached more than 2,000 practitioners through these workshops yet given how far-reaching and multi-faceted climate disruption is we have only begun to meet the needs of the many practitioners that must now consider and communicate the role of climate impacts in decision-making.

While valuable, the available online resources, communication guides, and webinars are not yet at scale to meet the growing capacity needs. The efforts are simply not enough given the rapidly changing climate change risk and adaptation landscape, as well as communication technologies and practices. In our view, local leaders – and others – could benefit greatly from greater access to tools and training in engagement and communication methods that allow them to weather the emotional and political storms that come with a better understanding of climate disruption.

4. Meeting the Communication and Engagement Capacity Needs

What is needed then is a significantly scaled-up capacity building effort that is both grounded in state-of-the-art communication and engagement science and psychology as well as in the on-the-ground context-specific needs of local officials and adaptation leaders. How could this be done?

Key elements of such a national effort in building engagement capacity would include the following:

- **Identifying and engaging potential trainers to build a larger cohort of climate communication/engagement experts**: The number of individuals who are both academically and practically grounded, as well as able to translate scholarly insights into real-life communication practices is rather limited to date. Building capacity will thus first require identifying a broader

field of potential communication and engagement trainers, e.g., those already in communications, education, outreach, training positions, in many different sectors; as well as advocates and organizers.

- **Training the trainers:** Coming from different fields and sectors, those willing then need to be trained and enabled to teach others the relevant communication and engagement skills. Only with a greater number of trainers can we rapidly scale up and multiply our reach with skills and solid anchoring in the relevant communication/engagement expertise, climate change expertise, and training expertise.
- **Financially supporting communication/engagement efforts:** The trainings of trainers, the trainings of communicators and engagement specialists, as well as the communication aspect of local adaptation efforts need to be financially supported. Otherwise even a growing cohort of skilled communicators will make no difference – the new knowledge must be applied in practice.
- **Continuously building the community of practice:** Those involved in communicating climate change risks and solutions must be networked, continue to be supported by communication and engagement experts with the latest science, and thus maintain, update, and continue to build their practical expertise and grounding in communication and adaptation science.
- **Evaluating communication and engagement efforts:** On a periodic basis then, the communication efforts must be assessed, and the lessons learned must be reported back into the growing community of practice to accelerate the learning and improve communication practice.

Investment in building capacity to effectively engage communities in climate change solutions clearly is not cost-free. The good news, however, is that investing in increased climate communication capacity can pay off in more than monetary terms. In addition to avoiding or minimizing public opposition, often resulting in costly delays in climate preparedness, effective engagement around climate solutions can lead to support for additional action as residents see and experience the tangible benefits of climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, such as improved transit systems, expansion of green space and community gardens, reduction in air pollution, etc. Most importantly, however, is the reengagement of often disenfranchised publics in matters of direct local relevance, such as personal and community safety and well-being, sustaining local assets, natural environments, local economies, and people's sense of connection to their community. *Not* investing in engagement capacity and thus *not* being able to engage the public or doing it *badly* seem like the most costly options of all.

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