



## Asia Leadership Program

on Sustainable Development  
and Climate Change



KNOWLEDGE SHARING  
SERIES

### Climate Change Communication and Leadership after COP 21\*

Matthias Gelber, Environmentalist

#### SUMMARY

It is important for leaders involved in climate change initiatives to start communicating with stakeholders regarding the project to increase awareness, get buy in and help build a common ground to facilitate project implementation, says Environmentalist Matthias Gelber.

#### CONTEXT

During the 2016 Asia Leadership Program in Seoul on 23-27 May 2016, effective communication among different stakeholders on climate change, environmental impact and mitigation issues was highlighted as one of the biggest leadership challenges in the successful execution of projects. The fourth Knowledge Sharing Series (KSS4) was organized to discuss this issue, with Gelber as one of the web conference's speakers.

#### KEY POINTS

In stakeholder engagement, it is often not about who is right or wrong, but more on finding a common ground within a particular issue. In doing so, leaders need to humanize their communication styles, listen more and talk less, build stakeholders' trust, and find long-term solutions to potential and current conflicts.

For projects related to climate change, it is imperative to communicate how such initiatives link to the country's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) of limiting temperature increases by only up to 1.5°C. The challenge, then, is for stakeholders to understand this linkage and leaders to acknowledge stakeholders' sentiments for the project to move forward.

Gelber cites two cases in the Philippines and Malaysia.

- In the Philippines, right after the COP21 agreement there were sudden protests regarding the already approved plans to construct coal-fired power plants. These mass actions, which caused further delay and even cancellation of the plants, could have been avoided with more stakeholder consultations that may have improved buy in, efficiency and appropriateness of the policy.
- Meanwhile in Malaysia, project implementers were able to avoid the community's negative reaction on the temporary foul smell from the waste-to-fuel project because of proactive and house-to-house communication that increased stakeholders' confidence and tolerance.

\* Presentation during the 4th Knowledge Sharing Webinar Series on 21 June 2016 with the theme "Leadership and Communication Challenges for Climate Change Aspects of Development Projects."

While each project and setup is different, the following communication styles may come across as effective:

- Move away from the traditional top-down approach;
- Visit stakeholders (door-to-door if possible) and show humility;
- Conduct early, open and targeted consultations;
- Find common grounds and built strategy around them;
- If needed, hire environmental communication experts with possible NGO experience; and
- Be always friendly and approachable, to give the impression that the stakeholders are partners with the project implementers.

The following creative options can also be conducted as possible outreach activities:

- Traditional submission of comments and meeting;
- More modern roadshows;
- Social media or web based communication;
- Stakeholder consultation party; and
- Third-party outsourcing of communication.

## **CONCLUSION**

Gelber summarizes his discussion with the following takeaways:

- Start leadership through communication early;
- Identify appropriate communicators based on skills rather than just hierarchy;
- List and identify stakeholders;
- Communicate rather than just tell;
- Reach out to stakeholders; and
- Capitalize on the creative potential of web or social media for consultation.

## **REFERENCE**

Future 500. 2014. "What is Stakeholder Engagement?" (YouTube video). Future 500. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHGTSewbOJY>.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Matthias Gelber is an environmentalist dubbed as the "Green Man" for his commitment to sustainable practices and being a model of green living. After graduating with a Masters in Environmental Science from Brunel University in the UK, he went on to start a successful environmental consulting company in 1999. He also co-founded Maleki GmbH, a German company specializing in high performance, low carbon footprint construction materials. In 2008, he was voted "Greenest Person on the Planet" in an online competition by 3rdWhale in Canada.

## **KEYWORDS**

Climate change; Climate change adaptation; Climate change mitigation; COP21; Development communication; Stakeholder engagement.