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Public Engagement Campaign to Support Economic Reforms

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The purpose of the outreach efforts of the Government should be to seek acceptance and support from the public and stakeholders for economic reforms that could be painful and politically difficult.

These outreach efforts **should not** be limited to information dissemination, public awareness or publicity campaigns. The lesson from experience is that these information efforts *per se* will have limited effect on gaining acceptance for reforms. Although necessary, they are not sufficient.

To achieve this goal of gaining broad reform acceptance and gaining momentum for reforms, experience in many countries indicates that the government should “**actively engage**” the main stakeholders of the reform in the entire reform process, including: (i) participating in decision-making, including the definition of the priorities for reform; (ii) contributing to implementation efforts, including by outside monitoring and transparency in reporting; (iii) checking and controlling the use of resources, and (iv) assessing the results of the reform efforts.

This engagement of the stakeholders will ensure that they will take “ownership” of the reforms, become committed to them, and push for their implementation (developing what is called a “*psychological commitment*” and loyalty for reforms). This engagement will also help in building coalitions for reforms among groups of stakeholders that may have special interests in furthering the reform agenda.

Public engagement could be achieved in three ways:

First, the government could organize bi-monthly or quarterly seminars, conferences, public hearings, press conferences, media campaigns, etc. The participation in seminars and similar gatherings should be wide, including representatives of NGOs, academia, leaders of public opinion, main stakeholders, etc. The seminars would not be limited just to pass on information to the participants. The first part of the seminars could indeed consist of clear presentations about aspects of the reform; but the second part should **engage** the participants by breaking down the group into smaller sub-groups that would address specific questions, such as definition of reforms, alternative solutions, implementation arrangements, etc.

Second, the government could also organize a number of activities to gather public and expert opinion and data, such as carrying out public surveys and questionnaires, discussions with focus groups of specialists, experts, academia, etc.

Third, strong dissemination efforts would also be critical to encourage greater public participation and inform the public about the benefits of reform. The government should

develop a good internet website. This website should include a web-log (“blog”) to permit easy and regular entry of commentaries, stakeholders’ concerns and opinions, description of events, and other material relevant to economic reforms. In addition, distribution of informative e-mails or periodic reports of reform matters should be considered.

The dissemination effort could also include the preparation of press announcements, articles in local papers, bulletin boards, broadcasts in local channels, etc. The literature on reforms suggests that reforms have more support if they are explained with simple messages and are well understood by the population. In addition, to be successful, the media reports should explain the benefits and costs of the reform versus the status quo, give actual figures to prove the point, present clear vision how the government is going to change the situation, present international practices, and speak people’s language.

Reforms Involving Increases in Tariffs (such as for Utility and Housing Services)

The international experience demonstrates that a major resistance to increases in tariffs for utilities and housing services is normally due to the perception that these services are of poor quality, that there is a lack of integrity, there are unfair preferential treatments, or just widespread corruption. The public may just not complain about poor quality service because they may believe that no action will be taken; but they will resist tariff increases.

Experience also shows that people are more likely to support initiatives such as tariff increases, when the increases are tied directly to particular purposes and leads to improved quality of services. Therefore, for gaining acceptance of tariff increases, in addition to public engagement, there will be a need to show that the authorities are indeed serious in addressing questions of quality, integrity or corruption. This should also include a transparent mechanism to improve communications, receive complains from the public, and act of these complains.

Many countries found useful to reorganize the financial aspects of utility and housing services to ensure that collection of tariffs and the use of these resources are handled properly and transparently. In some cases, this may imply that a separate center within or outside the concerned agency is established to deal with communal payments and utilities, subjecting this center to stronger controls by outside auditors and with transparent files that are open to the public as needed. These independent working units would develop and maintain a complete database on individual household to calculate and follow up on utility and housing tariffs. These working units with greater transparency may be critical to remove the suspicion that the collected utility and housing funds would be used for other “illegal” purposes.

Implementation of the Public Engagement campaign

The Public Engagement Campaign should be undertaken at the state level and at the regional level.

At the state level the Executive Secretary of the Economic Reform Committee could establish a Public Engagement Campaign Office to organize seminars, surveys, hearings, and the other activities described above. This office could coordinate with the Deputy Head of the Administration responsible for press and media for public speaking engagement of the ERC.

At the regional level, the Public Engagement Campaign Office should identify and seek the involvement of an appropriate local government agency and a local NGO that would implement the outreach activities at the local level. They should ensure that local stakeholders are involved in the process and that the voices of the Ukrainian regions are heard within the new Administration.

Note on the Political Economics of Reform:

The definition of the type of economic reforms that the country should implement has been clearly stated in many documents, in Ukraine and abroad. “**What**” the country needs to do is now well-known by most people and there is no need to re-state this agenda one more time.

The main issue has been the failures in implementation. These implementation failures are due to a combination of factors, such as “resistance” from vested interests, lack of reform priorities with an excessive number of reform proposals, lack of knowledge on “**how**” to proceed with implementation of key reforms based on best practices in successful countries, and last but not least, the lack of a **strong constituency** capable of advocating reforms.

Some of these “negative” factors for reform could be overcome with a strong Public Engagement effort: it would develop a strong constituency or “vested interests” in favor of reforms and would help in prioritizing reforms.

In fact, it is now well-recognized that the “failures” of the “Washington Consensus” in many countries were **not** due to its irrelevance. In fact, many of the measures thereby contained are now quite relevant. They failed because they were incomplete. In particular, the Washington Consensus gave little emphasis to the inter-phase between economic reforms and their political economic links with civil society and local governments. The Washington Consensus relied on the knowledge of experts and the mobilization of elites. But it failed to mobilize the main stakeholders and the population to take charge in shaping the country. Indeed, international experience shows that reforms are likely to fail in the countries where the majority of citizens do not feel their quality of life has been improving, nor do they have full faith in government institutions and their ability to lead the country towards a better future. Strong public engagement efforts should be critical in achieving the success in the implementation of reforms.

The annex at the end contains examples of Public Engagement Agencies in the US and Canada.

Annex

Public Engagement in the USA

The Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs is a unit of the White House Office within the Executive Office of the President of the United States. It was formerly known as the Office of Public Liaison and Intergovernmental Affairs. The Office of Public Liaison has been responsible for communicating and interacting with various interest groups. Under the Obama administration, the Office of Public Engagement has been referred to as "the front door to the White House, through which everyone can participate and inform the work of the President." In May 2009, Obama continued this theme and renamed the Office of Public Liaison the Office of Public Engagement.

Function

The Office of Public Engagement seeks to allow more readily the views of the ordinary American citizen to be heard within the administration. The Office also seeks to coordinate events that bring members of the administration in contact with members of the public. The "town-hall" style meetings held by President Barack Obama since being elected are an example of this policy at work. The Office also acts as a cheerleader for the administration and seeks to ensure, along with the Office of Communications the coordination of the administration message amongst different departments in order to ensure full and balanced exposure.

The Office of Intergovernmental Affairs works closely with state and local officials elected by the American people to ensure America's citizens and their elected officials have a government that works effectively for them and with them. Due to the importance of state and local governments are to the creation and implementation of national policy, it is especially important for the Office to provide a readily accessible method of direct communication for local officials to discuss and raise awareness of local concerns.

Public Engagement in Canada

The Canadian Institute for Public Engagement is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to building and improving best practices in public engagement. Located in Ottawa, with representation across Canada, and international connections, the Institute reports to an experienced Board of Directors and receives input from a dedicated and knowledgeable Advisory Committee.

Working with government, industry, and non-governmental sectors, the Institute helps to build collaborative and inclusive approaches to making decisions that affect people – in organizations and communities across the nation. The Institute's mission is to build public engagement capacity in Canada, through advocacy, awareness, knowledge and skill building, as well as by providing truly neutral spaces within which meaningful dialogues can take place.

The Institute fulfills its mandate through:

- Advocacy and institute-led public engagements
- Action research and Publications and awareness
- Training and events

Philippines : Building a Coalition for Procurement Reform

Source: The World Bank, Ed Campos, Caby Verzosa

Public procurement in the Philippines was perceived to be a major governance challenge. A process of procurement reform was triggered in 1998 by a detailed technical report commissioned by USAID. Initially, however, the report developed little traction and was shelved. However, a series of workshops involving government and nongovernment stakeholders revived demand for procurement reform. In early 2001, Procurement Watch (PWI) was established as an advocacy NGO, founded by academics, reputable retired government officials, lawyers, and concerned private sector executives. PWI was funded through an EC-WB grant/trust fund (TF). The grant covered most of the costs of organizing people and groups in order to advocate for the passage of a new procurement bill. PWI raised the awareness for this issue by mobilizing public support and implementing a broad media campaign.

In early 2003, a new Government Procurement Reform Act (GPRA) was adopted, a first major success of the campaign. The challenge since 2003 has been to ensure implementation. Initially, the focus was on capacity building for government officials at various layers of government. While this was important, after some years there was a sense that advocacy had to be revived in order to have greater impact. Since then, activities have focused successively on different sectors. The procurement of regular goods, for example, became fully transparent and monitorable online [Philippine Government Electronic Procurement System]. The Philippines Boy Scouts became involved in monitoring the procurement of school textbooks. Currently, there are plans for senior citizens associations to start monitoring drug procurement.

The overarching lessons of this project concerned the importance of getting the right people engaged and forming a broad and focused coalition of stakeholders. Proactive and professional civil society engagement, the formation of a tightly knit group of reform-minded government officials, the support of progressive legislators who knew how to traverse the complex legislative maze, the conduct of in-depth technical studies, and the implementation of a well-thought-out communication strategy all contributed to effectively mobilizing public action that led to the adoption of the new procurement legislation and supported its subsequent implementation. The biggest challenge remaining is in infrastructure procurement, where only limited but nonetheless noticeable progress has been made to date.