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Communicating Information to Build Trust in Giga-Projects: Lessons from a Leading Tourism Project

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Note to the reader. This paper is one of three coordinated contributions from Red Sea Global to IAIA26, and the three are intended to be read as a set. This paper examines how communication design contributes to public trust (the goal); a companion paper by Shaabein (Abstract 1567) examines how focus group discussions, adapted to Saudi conditions, inform Community Development Plans (the method); and a companion paper by Alyousef (Abstract 1748) examines the multi-altitude governance arrangements that distribute participation obligations across the project ecosystem (the system). Together they describe one coordinated approach to credible social impact assessment under Vision 2030 conditions; individually, each stands on its own and is cross-referenced where the arguments connect.

Abstract

In giga-project settings, public trust is shaped substantially by the design of the information environment surrounding project decisions — its timeliness, accuracy, accessibility, evenhandedness, and the credibility of the channels through which it flows (Renn, 2008; Slovic, 1993). Drawing on Red Sea Global's experience on the western (Saudi) Red Sea coast (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016), this paper sets out six principles for trust-related communication and illustrates their application through specific Red Sea Global instruments and examples — from a women-artisans market-linkage case in Tabuk Province to a grievance that produced a standing operator guideline. It situates the practice in the social-licence literature (Boutillier & Thomson, 2011; Jijelava & Vanclay, 2017), shows how trust can be monitored through observable indicators rather than treated as an abstraction (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995), and closes with limitations and three lessons.

1. Information Vacuums and the Conditions for Trust

In giga-project communities, trust is often shaped as much by who fills the information environment around a decision as by the decision itself. This is not to say that substance matters less than presentation — anticipated outcomes, and the project's ability to deliver and explain them, remain decisive (Mayer et al., 1995). The point is narrower and is a typical condition of giga-projects: when timely, credible information is unavailable from the project itself, the vacuum is rarely empty for long. Speculation, rumour, and partial reporting occupy the space, and communities come to understand the project through these secondary sources. By the time the project's own narrative arrives, it tends to arrive as a correction rather than a primary message — a far harder position from which to build trust, however strong the underlying substance (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

This is why communication design matters more in giga-projects than in ordinary infrastructure delivery. It is not the only factor in trust — substantive performance, fair distribution of benefits, respect for cultural protocols, and the credibility of representatives all contribute (Mayer et al., 1995; Jijelava & Vanclay, 2017) — but it is the medium through which those factors are perceived and remembered. It is among the most consequential and most addressable variables in the trust equation, and deserves the same methodological attention as substantive delivery (Fischhoff, 1995).

2. Why Communication Carries Disproportionate Weight

Four structural conditions amplify the role of communication in giga-projects. First, the pace of decision-making outstrips the rate at which communities absorb information through informal channels, so even sound intentions can be experienced as opacity (Fischhoff, 1995). Second, the scale of impacts produces multiple constituencies — neighbours, youth, women, religious authorities, and government — each with legitimate but different informational expectations (André et al., 2006). Third, visibility attracts narratives the project does not control: a misleading claim propagates in hours while a correction takes weeks (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Fourth, communities arrive with accumulated experience of earlier developments, and a strategy that ignores this inherited scepticism compounds distrust (Slovic, 1993; Earle, 2010).

3. Six Principles of Trust-Related Communication

Six principles distinguish communication that builds trust from communication that does not. None is novel in isolation; each draws on established work in risk communication, public participation, and organisational trust (Fischhoff, 1995; O’Faircheallaigh, 2010; Mayer et al., 1995). The discipline lies in applying them together and over time.

Timeliness over completeness. Communities forgive provisional information more readily than silence, which reads as concealment; the discipline is to set cadences in advance and meet them.

Accuracy over reassurance. Hedging or omitting inconvenient truths erodes trust once the omission becomes visible, as in connected environments it usually does; stating facts plainly, including uncertainties, is more durable (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Two-way design over one-way broadcast. Trust is built when communities see their inputs change something concrete; the External Grievance Mechanism is treated not as complaint-handling alone but as a structured feedback channel that closes the loop (O’Faircheallaigh, 2010).

Cultural and linguistic calibration. Each principle is delivered through local language, idiom, and protocol — Arabic-language delivery, locally appropriate venues and timings, and respect for gender norms and family decision-making — applied across all six, not as a separate step. These are integrity requirements, not stylistic preferences.

Proportionate engagement across community tiers. Red Sea Global’s Impacted Community Identification Methodology — the internal classification mapping communities by exposure, dependence, and partnership potential, consistent with IFC Performance Standard 1 — calibrates engagement intensity to impact, which signals respect and helps prevent engagement fatigue (Earle, 2010; IFC, 2012).

Public disclosure of aggregated outcomes. Periodically publishing aggregated, non-identifiable grievance data converts an internal accountability tool into a public-facing trust mechanism and creates an external incentive to maintain internal performance (Moffat & Zhang, 2014; Boutillier & Thomson, 2011).

4. Worked Examples from Practice

Calibrated engagement surfaces a hidden constraint. Local women artisans in Umluj, Al Wajh, and Duba (Tabuk Province) had been surveyed repeatedly. The survey data showed strong craft skills and low income, and the conventional reading treated this as a skills gap to be closed through more training. Face-to-face discussions in culturally appropriate venues, in local Arabic, with female facilitators, produced a different finding: the binding constraint was market access, not skills. The artisans could produce more than they could sell. This is the contrast the example turns on — the survey-led reading pointed toward training, while the engagement-led reading pointed toward markets.

The response followed the engagement finding rather than the survey inference. Red Sea Global partnered with local NGOs supporting small enterprises and used the Jewar platform to widen the artisans' reach, while destination hotel operators provided retail space for their products. The value chain was supported directly through training and capacity-building to raise production quality, and with that momentum the artisans extended their reach to a wider customer base within their own communities. Following the survey inference alone would have added training the artisans did not principally need.

The grievance mechanism as a trust instrument. The External Grievance Mechanism is used in two trust-building ways. First, a few headline indicators — acknowledgment within a 24–48 hour standard, resolution within service levels, recurrence rate, and overdue share — are published periodically in aggregated, non-identifiable form, so the visibility of the system itself creates a self-correcting pressure that closed reporting cannot (Moffat & Zhang, 2014). Second, grievances feed design for other destinations, not only case closure. One began with concern over the erosion of local identity — including music played during prayer times at an operator venue. Rather than a one-off instruction, Red Sea Global developed a Social and Cultural Guideline for operators that sets prayer-time scheduling alongside broader cultural protocols, anticipating related issues, and shared it across destinations — so one community's grievance becomes every operator's standing practice.

Continuity that survives personnel change. Trust often attaches to specific individuals, and when personnel rotate it does not transfer automatically (Mayer et al., 1995). In practice, the same social specialist typically carries a destination through the ESIA, CESMP, and OESMP phases, preserving continuity by design. In the rare cases where a handover is unavoidable, external stakeholders are informed immediately, met in person, and briefed on what was last done, who the incoming representative is, and the upcoming plan — so the relationship, not only the file, is handed over.

5. From Communication to Empowerment

Trust deepens not only through what a project says but through what it does with the community (Jijelava & Vanclay, 2017; IFC, 2007). Red Sea Global's own Socio-Economic Baseline Study (SEBS) — the field study, conducted at the earliest planning stage, that it uses to understand host communities and build the Community Development Plan — doubles as a diagnostic for communication design: literacy levels indicate whether to lead with visual or plain-language material; gender norms signal when parallel sessions and female facilitators are needed; age distribution shows which channels reach which cohort; and livelihood patterns show how to make information meaningful locally.

Two further instruments extend communication into sustained practice. Jewar is the two-way digital platform Red Sea Global uses to communicate with local communities: it carries initiatives, job postings, workshops, and training opportunities outward, and receives community ideas and grievances inward, supplementing — but not replacing — face-to-face engagement. Empowerment initiatives then convert engagement into shared value, tied to the baseline findings above: where the baseline shows low income alongside craft capability, the

response is market linkage (the Umluj, Al Wajh, and Duba artisans); where it shows variable literacy, the response is plain-language communication. The English for Tourism programme equips residents with the language skills the hospitality sector requires, and Jewar links local artisans and productive families to destination operators and supply chains. These programmes form part of a broader social-investment architecture (Shaabein, 2025); the point is structural — trust deepens when communication design and operational practice point in the same direction, moving the community from being informed, to consulted, to enabled (Figure 1).



Trust deepens when communication design and operational practice point in the same direction.

Figure 1. From communication to empowerment: the inform → consult → enable progression.

6. Monitoring Trust Rather Than Inferring It

Trust is more useful when monitored through observable indicators than inferred in retrospect (Mayer et al., 1995; Earle, 2010). Four categories have proven useful at Red Sea Global, at least three in active use across our destinations: engagement participation (attendance and response rates, whose decline signals disengagement before grievances rise); grievance pattern data (recurrence and escalation rates); perception surveys (valuable when question design is consistent over time); and qualitative signals, including the language communities use about the project (Jijelava & Vanclay, 2017). Grievance data warrants its own caveat: it is a lagging signal, and over-reliance on it can mean the right questions were not asked early enough. We therefore treat it as a complement to proactive engagement — the focus group and baseline work in the companion paper by Shaabein (Abstract 1567) — not a substitute for it. Qualitative sentiment is the hardest to monitor consistently; none suffices alone, but in combination they make trust observable enough to manage.

7. Limitations

Five limitations should be flagged, framed against our own engagement practice rather than in the abstract. First, the work is project-led: conducted and funded by Red Sea Global and reported into processes it controls. This is a necessary condition of an operator running its own community engagement, not a flaw in itself; the real risk is that engagement becomes self-confirming — hearing what the project wants to hear. We mitigate this through aggregated public disclosure, alignment with external standards, and validation of findings with communities, and recognise that independent verification remains preferable where feasible (United Nations, 2011). Second, trust is multi-determined; communication is among the most addressable variables, not a sufficient one. Third, the indicators in Section 6 are responsive but imperfect, which is why all six instruments and four indicator categories are read in combination. Fourth, the empowerment programmes are reported as components of an integrated practice, so their individual effect sizes are not separately established. Fifth, generalisability beyond Saudi giga-project conditions is unestablished; the contribution is a transferable orientation, not a transferable protocol.

8. Lessons Learned

1. **Favour consistency over intensity.** A community that hears from the project reliably is more trusting than one that hears intensively but irregularly; rhythm is itself a signal (Renn, 2008).
2. **Trust is local before institutional.** Communities trust the project to the extent that they trust the people who represent it, which is why same-specialist continuity across ESIA, CESMP, and OESMP, and disciplined handovers, pay dividends (Mayer et al., 1995).
3. **Integrity failures are costly.** A single misleading message or broken commitment costs more trust than long periods of good practice produce; the asymmetry is severe (Slovic, 1993).

9. Conclusion

Trust in giga-projects is not built once but rebuilt continuously across the operational life of the destination (Jijelava & Vanclay, 2017). Communication design is therefore a permanent operational discipline, not a launch-phase concern, and it deserves the same methodological attention as substantive delivery (Fischhoff, 1995; Renn, 2008). The methodological foundations that produce credible community voice (Shaabein, 2025) and the governance arrangements that distribute participation obligations across the project ecosystem (Alyousef, 2026) are treated in the companion papers. Read together, the three describe one coordinated response to conducting credible social impact assessment under the conditions Vision 2030 has created; read on its own, this paper makes a self-contained argument — that communication design is a measurable determinant of public trust — supported by the specific Red Sea Global examples set out above.

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