





# Introduction: A life-or-death topic

In Brazil, government performance has become a matter of life or death consequence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, if it wasn't already.

Can leaders—at local, state or local levels—take the right steps to address the crisis and reduce the loss of life? Are institutions and systems up to the challenges of offering protection to people and communities? Are democratic processes capable of creating the best, least catastrophic outcomes?

In some ways these questions are unrelated to the perennial topic of corruption in government: If lives are saved, what does it matter what rules might be broken or shortcuts taken? But in other ways, of course, the topics are intimately connected. Can the public sector be expected to operate effectively and in the public interest if it is driven by motives like profit- and power-seeking?

Given the very high stakes of the issue, how can anti-corruption communicators have a positive impact in Brazil—helping promote more public-focused performance with respect to COVID but also many other pressing issues? And how can communications avoid exacerbating problems such as toxic politicization of the topic of corruption, the tendency to elect authoritarian leaders (to singlehandedly “clean up” the government), and the fatalistic assumption that those in power will never put the people’s interests first? How should communicators approach the topic of corruption when trying to engage broad audiences to support change? Is it best to emphasize the damages from corruption? Successes in prosecuting some public officials? Daily, petty corruption and alternatives to these practices? Or is it best to never mention corruption at all, but to focus on other angles instead?

This brief document summarizes results of research undertaken by Topos for the Open Society Foundations among the general public of Brazil—during the pandemic—to address these important questions. The research explored how Brazilians currently think about topics related to public corruption, and which communications approaches encourage citizens to engage in constructive ways with topics related to government and its performance.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In March through October of 2020, a team of six Brazilian interviewers conducted in-depth interviews—in person, by phone or internet—with 114 individuals from São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul. Subjects were diverse in terms of gender, age, political leaning, economic status, race, and other factors—and came from both urban and more rural areas. An additional 83 individuals then participated in interviews focused more on evaluating the impacts of various messaging approaches. Finally, we interviewed a set of 11 communicators in the field to get their responses to findings and recommendations from the research, in order to refine strategy and language based on their perspectives. Note that parallel projects were simultaneously conducted in North Macedonia and the United States.



# Dynamics to overcome (“Corrupt by nature”)

As mentioned earlier, and confirming prior social science research,<sup>2</sup> communications designed to promote anti-corruption efforts can often fail to engage public audiences, or can even have negative impacts—deepening pessimism about ever “fixing” government, and reinforcing the idea that the problem is rampant and even inevitable.

The deepest challenge in Brazil, as it is in other countries, is a fundamental sense that government is *corrupt as a whole, and by its nature*—not as a matter of particular actions, but rather of essential, defining facts: Government is a set of leaders concerned about themselves (their own power and money) rather than the public.

This deep pattern creates many of the problematic dynamics that researchers observe: If government is inherently corrupt, then catching and punishing a few merely demonstrates that the problem is real. If people have no faith in solutions from within the system, the only possible solution may be an authoritarian “strongman” to take on the problem personally. If corruption isn’t a matter

of particular, well-defined violations, then we simply judge leaders by whether we like them, for whatever reason—so that it is easy for accusations to stick when they’re about the “other” party, for instance, and to act as an easy and effective political weapon.

Making matters worse, Brazilians often see their own country as a particularly hopeless case when it comes to creating “clean,” honest government—both because of a cultural disregard for formal rules and processes, and because of a perceived lack of understanding or awareness on the part of the public, that would allow them to take effective action.

In short, Brazilians agree that honest governance focused on the public good would be wonderful in principle, but they don’t see this as a realistic possibility for their country. It is hard to even imagine government that is different or better, or to envision any way of improving things meaningfully. (Even electing “our” candidate is no guarantee things will change dramatically.)

<sup>2</sup> See Combating Corruption Through Strategic Communications: A Review of Relevant Social Science and Public Opinion Literature



# Recommended Approach

So how do communicators engage Brazilians constructively in a discussion about how to make government more responsive and less corrupt?

The research shows that, as in other countries, it is helpful to shift from what we call “Crime and Punishment mode”—with an emphasis on particular actors and actions, and holding them accountable—to what we call “Rails and Guardrails mode,” with an emphasis on concrete mechanisms that can keep and have successfully kept public institutions on track serving the public interest.<sup>3</sup>

In Brazil, this strategy means communications that include the following three elements:

**1. Important institution:** Reminder of at least one concrete familiar example of a public institution that does something easily recognized as important to people

**2. Success story:** One or more real-world success stories where a particular rule, process, mechanism, etc. (a “rail/guardrail”) has put or kept a public institution on track serving the public

interest, especially by letting the public say and have a say in what is happening

**3. Broader significance:** A call to apply the same approach to other/bigger aspects of government performance

*Point 1* is important for reminding Brazilians of the basic idea that there are public institutions whose work is critical to people’s well-being. Examples should be concrete and perhaps local—SUS, bus systems, etc. (“In Brazil, we know people can only get by if public institutions such as X do their jobs well ...”)

*Point 2* is essential because it shows that improvement is possible, and guides people towards thinking about rules and structures rather than “better politicians.”

*Point 3* is about bridging to the other, bigger points communicators want to get across. (“In the same way Institution X has been improved through Rail/Guardrail Y, we must make sure we take Step Z ...”)

While this kind of communication doesn’t explicitly focus on “corruption,” it engages interest and optimism, allowing

<sup>3</sup> See Anti-Corruption Messaging: Parallel Dynamics Across Three Countries

a constructive conversation about government’s role, and how to work towards better, more honest performance. It puts audiences in a more constructive, engaged and hopeful frame of mind about making government accountable and beneficial, and sets up conversations that can include explicit good governance ideas.

Importantly, this approach *does not imply a favorable view of current government practices*—instead it is built on the premise that there are significant problems with government, but that these can be successfully addressed.

### Sample language

The following example is based closely on language that was effective in testing.

*If we want strong communities and healthy people in Brazil, we need our public institutions to work well. We need bus systems that take us where we need to go, public schools that do a good job teaching, and we need the SUS to provide good health service to help end the pandemic. How do we make sure these public institutions are doing their jobs in the right way? We have some good examples here in Brazil: Prefeitura de Manduri in SP, for example, made all the expenses of their projects visible on their web page, down to how many sacks of cement were used. It may seem small, but it’s the most important step towards working in our interest, and against corruption. We can think the same way about SUS, our voting systems, and everything else public that we all need. What are the “rails” that can keep things on track like they are in Manduri?*

Language like this takes the emphasis off of politicians and officials (a focus that leads to many problems) and puts it on systems that can be worked on and

improved. (Politicians are part of the story, but mainly in relation to whether they strengthen and support the guardrails, or ignore and undermine them). The sample language offers a clear, real-world example of an improvement that worked, and that is easy to understand. It also offers at least a hypothetical role for members of the public. Anyone can look at the web page. It reminds people about basic public institutions that are important for everyone’s well-being. It clarifies one example of how these institutions can be made more accountable (without using abstractions like “accountable”).



## Bridging to the biggest issues

Communicators in Brazil need effective ways of addressing some of the major challenges facing the country—communications approaches that create urgency and also optimism that change is possible.

The recommended approach offers an engaging way to bridge to these pressing issues, by first reminding audiences of the important role of public systems for everyone’s well-being, and of the possibility of pushing for critical improvements.

Communicators can create their own transitions based on their audiences and contexts, but sample language for this bridging might include:

- How do we address our country’s biggest challenges and threats? The same way we keep our public institutions in line at every level: We push for the laws or systems that let us, the people, see and have a say in how things are run.
- The same things that keep our bus systems or local health clinics working well are the things that can get our national health or justice systems back on track—strong, clear laws that every leader must respect.
- When we think about who we want as leaders in Brazil, it is important to remember that the best leaders are the ones who strengthen and uphold the laws and systems that keep public institutions working for the public.

## Less effective approaches

It is important to keep a number of points in mind regarding how communications can go wrong.

Note that none of these ideas should be off the table—they are simply less effective when treated as the initial/central focus of communications.

*A focus on individuals* makes it hard to imagine the possibility of reform, and can lead to unproductive thinking about particular people’s character.

*A focus on the harms of corruption* tends to reinforce default negativity, pessimism, passivity.

*An emphasis on politics*, especially particular parties or politicians, encourages people to think about whatever benefits “their side” rather than focusing on the sorts of non-corrupt governance that both sides should adhere to.

*Putting too much focus on educating the public* can backfire. An emphasis on helping people understand government better, for instance, translates to blaming of the population for its civic shortcomings. For some people, the focus on education harkens back to the political indoctrination efforts of military governments.

*“Success stories” focusing on people being punished* tend to confirm people’s cynicism about widespread abuse. Even if one or two individuals get caught, the problem remains pervasive and seemingly unsolvable.

A focus on Brazilian culture—e.g., in order to suggest (positively) that Brazilians can figure out creative solutions, or to point out (negatively) a tendency toward rule-breaking—leads back to judgements of the people’s “failings” or simply doesn’t help people focus on structural reform.

**Remaining Challenges**

These recommendations are designed to help change the present discourse about corruption. Regular Brazilians are not used to thinking about institutions—how they are created, maintained and reformed—and it will be a challenge to bring this idea into constructive focus. Superficially, stories about misbehavior and corruption are more interesting and easier to tell than stories of sound governance. However, this research shows that when compelling, believable, accessible stories are told about people coming together to ensure that public institutions deliver real benefits to them and to people like them, they are excited, engaged and educated in ways that make support for reform seem real and practical. Reformers, journalists, public officials and so on will have a good deal of work to do to figure out the best practices for developing such stories and such a view, and delivering on the promise shown in these recommendations.



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