

# THE MISSING LINK: **WHY COMMUNICATIONS IS POLICY WORK**

**20 recommendations** from journalists, creators, researchers, and communicators on making clean air and transport policy communication more effective and far-reaching.



**A ROUNDTABLE BY**

the International Council on Clean Transportation (**ICCT**)  
and Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (**EPIC India**)

**The India Clean Transportation Summit,  
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Communication is often treated as the final step in policy work. But **20 recommendations** from journalists, creators/influencers, researchers and civil society point to a different approach: communication needs to begin much earlier.



Effective communication is critical to turning research and policy into public understanding, support and, ultimately, action. Yet, despite growing evidence on the health, economic and social impacts of air pollution and transportation, important gaps remain in how this evidence reaches people. Technical findings can remain confined to policy briefs and specialised circles, while communication is often brought in only after the research and policy work is complete.

The gap is particularly important for clean air and transportation, where policies can directly shape people's health, mobility and everyday lives. If clean air and clean transportation are going to matter to people, they need to become part of everyday conversations, not just policy-brief footnotes.

It was against this backdrop that the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) and the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (EPIC India) convened a roundtable on September 1, 2026, at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, on the sidelines of the India Clean Transportation Summit 2026. Bringing together journalists, researchers, communicators, civil society campaigners, creators and storytellers, the discussion explored what it takes to close the gap between policy and public conversation, and how communication can become part of policy work from the outset.

Under the broader theme, "The Missing Link: Why Communications Is Policy Work," the discussion focused on how communication can move beyond dissemination to become an integral part of policy development and implementation. The discussion was moderated by Almas Naseem, Senior Communications Specialist at ICCT, and Ashirbad S. Raha, Regional Director – Communications at EPIC India.

**Participants explored how to translate complex research and technical policy into stories that resonate with people; how to use trusted messengers, creators, visuals and new formats; and how to reach audiences beyond traditional media and urban centres. A recurring theme was that the same evidence needs different entry points for different audiences and platforms.**

## **Some of the key insights for communicating transport and air pollution better include:**

- 1. Start early** - Communication is not the last mile of policy work. Build it in from the beginning by asking who needs to care, what they care about and how the evidence connects to their lives.
- 2. Make it simple. Make it local.** - Technical findings travel further when they are easy to understand, grounded in local realities and repeated through trusted voices.
- 3. Make numbers tangible** - Move beyond statistics and show what air pollution means in everyday life: missed school days, sick days, doctor visits, productivity losses and household costs.
- 4. Talk transport through quality of life** - Shift the focus from vehicles to mobility: Can a child safely walk or cycle to school? Can an elderly parent run everyday errands using public transport? Can someone get home on time? Does the city make everyday life easier?

**5. Put people at the centre** - Numbers show scale; people make the story meaningful. Use lived experiences and case studies to show how research and policy affect health, livelihoods, productivity and finances.

**6. Make evidence visible** - Making research accessible does not mean stripping away complexity. Use clear language, photographs, visual case studies and data to make research more engaging and impactful. Translate complex findings into clear, accessible visual narratives that help audiences understand the evidence without losing nuance.

**7. Move from warnings to solutions** - Audiences have heard many versions of the warning about air pollution. Communication can go further by showing what high pollution means, what people can do and what a better future could look like.

**8. Communicate one finding through many story angles** - The same research needs different framing, tone, headlines and formats across print, digital and electronic media. Researchers and communicators need to shape the same evidence differently for each platform and audience.

**9. Use unconventional formats to carry evidence** - Cartoons, poems, textiles, photography and creative videos, such as Get Ready with Me (GRWM), can move research into audiences that a policy brief may never reach. Creator collaborations and visual storytelling can make technical evidence feel more familiar, particularly to younger audiences.

**10. Watch where digital diverges from mainstream** - Topics that legacy media may treat as too niche can perform differently on digital platforms. Digital can therefore create another route for evidence to reach audiences and conversations that broadcast or print may not readily carry.

**11. Build the 3 Cs: Communities, Creators, Conversation** - Stories need an ecosystem to travel. Connect communities, creators and online platforms, and build pathways into larger cultural spaces such as cinema and studios.

**12. Design for the audience** - Policy stories can attract different levels of engagement from product, OEM or collaboration stories, while industry audiences may respond differently from general readers. Channels, formats and framing need to be designed around who is actually watching.

**13. Widen the ecosystem to include cinema and studios** - Alongside communities and creators, film and entertainment platforms can provide another route for stories about air pollution and transport to travel further than news or social media alone.

**14. Push research past the climate beat and beyond the usual audiences -**

Air quality is not only a climate story. Research needs to be communicated simply enough for general assignment reporters to understand and use, while reporting should extend beyond Delhi and other urban centres.

**15. Connect air pollution and transport to local experiences -**

Communication should reflect how pollution and transport are experienced in different places, including rural communities and people who may contribute least to the problem but may be affected more.

**16. Bring policymakers into the communication process -**

Communication should move alongside policy development, with government involved early so messages, visuals and narratives are ready when policies emerge.

**17. Repeat through trusted voices -** One message is rarely enough. Consistency, repetition and trusted messengers can help ideas gain traction and stay in public conversation. The discussion used “airsheds” as an example of how a shared frame can travel when it is repeated through multiple trusted voices.

**18. Anchor stories in a shared frame, not a single story -** A term like “airsheds” can give officials and journalists across states something bigger than one city to talk about. A narrative can gain traction when it is consistently communicated through multiple trusted voices.

**19. Measure whether the story is working -** Success goes beyond publication. Ask whether intended audiences are seeing it, whether policymakers are responding, whether the idea is entering everyday conversation, and what needs to change if it is not.

**20. Communicate differently, not just more -** The goal is to make evidence on air pollution and transport feel less like a policy brief and more like something happening to someone people know-connecting research to health, mobility, livelihoods, productivity and household costs. The challenge is not simply producing more content, but making evidence travel differently across audiences, platforms and trusted voices.

The discussion ultimately brought us back to a simple question: how do we make evidence travel? The answer is not necessarily to communicate more, but to communicate differently for every audience. That means simplifying without hollowing out the findings, using visuals and new formats to make evidence more immediate, and telling the story through people and experiences rather than percentages alone. It means connecting research to health, mobility, livelihoods and household costs; adapting tone, framing and format for different platforms; and building a narrative infrastructure of communities, creators, media and cultural platforms that can carry the same evidence into different spaces. The discussion also underscored that audiences are not necessarily uninterested in policy, they need clear questions, useful entry points and stories that connect policy choices to everyday life.

Most importantly, the roundtable reinforced that communication should not be treated as the final step after research and policy. For clean-air and transport policy, it is part of the work itself: helping evidence move from research and policy conversations into everyday experiences, public conversations and decisions. That requires communication to begin early, policymakers to be engaged while policies are being developed, trusted voices to reinforce shared frames, and organisations to measure whether their stories are actually reaching and engaging the people they intend to reach. The goal is not just to publish more, but to make air pollution and transport research part of everyday conversation rather than something that surfaces only during a particular season, crisis or region.

**To learn more about the roundtable,  
scan the QR code:**



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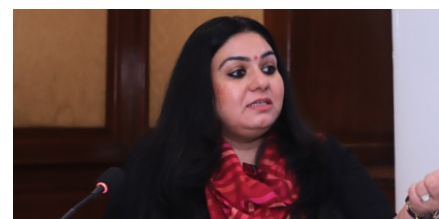
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# ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

## **ICCT**

The International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) is an independent, nonprofit research organization founded to provide exceptional, objective, timely research and technical and scientific analysis to environmental regulators. Our work empowers policymakers and others worldwide to improve the environmental performance of road, marine, and air transportation to benefit public health and mitigate climate change.

## **EPIC INDIA**

In 2014, the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (EPIC) launched EPIC India to help India tackle energy and environmental challenges head-on through cross-disciplinary, innovative research and partnerships with government, industry, research institutes, and other stakeholders.

EPIC India's work covers a broad range of areas, including electricity and energy markets, energy modelling, and the design of economically efficient regulatory mechanisms to reduce air and water pollution.

