



## Human Dimensions Impacts of Oil Spills

# Loss of trust in governance and political institutions

### What is political trust?

Political trust is the “judgment of the citizenry that the system and the political incumbents are responsive, and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny” [5, 358]. Timely, accurate and open communication of information is an important factor in gaining political trust [6]. In the simplest terms, political trust refers to the attitudes of the public or stakeholder groups toward government. However, this simple understanding is not always sufficient. Political trust is a complex opinion of:

- government in general,
- tribal, local, state, or federal governmental agencies,
- the process of law and rulemaking and enforcement,
- individual governmental employees, and
- elected and appointed governmental officials [1, 2].

Opinions of trust develop by comparing perceptions of the honesty, benevolence, and competence of government institutions and staff with expectations [3]. Social and political values shape these expectations [4]. Perceptions rely on information received through information channels, which can distort information in various ways. Consequently, political trust is not always tightly linked to the performance of government.

Mismanagement of relief efforts following hurricane Katrina (2005) brought trust in government to its lowest level since October 1988. In a New York Times poll, more than 70% of respondents said they distrusted the government in handling the emergency response [7]. It may seem counter-intuitive, but contingency plans may increase the risk of loss of political trust because they heighten public expectations.

### Lack of communication: *M/V Braer*

The *M/V Braer* went aground on January 5th, 1993 on the tip of the Shetland Islands. The tanker broke into several sections during a hurricane and spilled 26 million of gallons of oil into the North Sea. Within 48 hours, 120 tons of chemical dispersant were sprayed on the



**Spraying of dispersant, January 8, 1993**  
[http://shetlopedia.com/The\\_Braer\\_Disaster\\_\(Oil\\_Spill\)](http://shetlopedia.com/The_Braer_Disaster_(Oil_Spill))

rocky shoreline, despite the bad weather. The effort to dissolve the oil failed and the dispersant contaminated nearby agricultural land, sheep, cattle, and inhabitants [9]. Information on the chemical composition of dispersants was not disclosed to the public. The 3000 residents were not advised of the times of the spraying nor to stay indoors. They were not evacuated because public health officials feared creating an air of uncertainty or arousing public concern [9]. In a press release, the Environmental Health Unit at the Scottish Office stated that the tests showed no health risk from the odors of the oil spill.

### Impacts associated with loss of political trust

- Suspicion & Cynicism
- Resentment and anger toward agencies, agency staff, and elected officials
- Loss of morale by government staff
- Decreased levels of civic involvement
- Disinterest in politics
- Declining voter turnout
- Mobilization of community opposition
- Political action
- Advocating for community oversight and monitoring and participation



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However, the harmful effects of dispersants were not tested [9,10]. Hundreds of residents complained of eye and skin irritation, headaches, and diarrhea soon after the spraying. Blood and urine samples were collected from local residents. Livestock that had died during the disaster was autopsied. The results from these tests were not released to physicians and veterinarians until 2 hours before the press conference at which the results were announced, which preventing people from asking meaningful questions [9].



**Ruined crops in an sprayed field**

<http://shetlopedia.com/Image:PicOilcrop1.jpg>

Public officials justified their reluctance to release all the information for fear of public panic and hysteria. Concern grew among residents as Greenpeace informed local communities about the chemical composition and their potential health effects. It was found that the types of dispersants used were not approved for use around humans or rocky shorelines. Shetlanders responded by signing a petition demanding an open investigation of the disaster and disclosure of all data regarding the use of chemical

dispersants. The controversy came to a head when residents threatened to obstruct the runways grounding the planes used for the spraying.

These conditions increased public suspicion and cynicism and contributed to increased feelings of disregard and disrespect. The archipelago counts around 22,000 inhabitants living off agriculture, aquaculture, fishing and the petroleum industry. Shetlanders have a deep attachment to their crofts (enclosed area of land) and heritage, in part because many generations may have resided in a particular croft. Crofts are inherent to Shetlanders' social identity. Seen from this perspective, the contamination of dwellings, land, and animals befouled Shetlanders economic livelihood and "desecrated, in a demonstrative way, the cultural heritage of the islands" [9: 252]. The handling of the spill response, the spraying and the refusal of officials to inform them of environmental risks exacerbated their distrust in government.

In this case, the authorities were more concerned with managing people's responses than the actual risks. As mentioned by Button, "the notion of a "right-to-know" resonates with cultural values to valorize the individual, his culture and his right to make informed decisions about health matters" [9, 243]. The public discovered that information was being withheld and misleading reassurance being offered by the Scottish officials and Shetland Islands Council. Residents also felt they were needlessly exposed to harmful chemicals. As a result, not only did the authority's image suffer, but community residents, concerned about their health and distrustful of public officials, became resentful of the agencies.

### References

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