



Executive Report

Restoring Public Trust in Governance in The Bahamas

Executive Summary

This report builds on ORG's 2023 *Understanding Public Trust Public Consultation Report*, which brought together the voices of Bahamians across five islands to better understand the factors shaping trust in communities, institutions, businesses, and government. While the consultation identified widespread concerns about transparency, accountability, communication, and responsiveness, it also demonstrated that trust can be rebuilt through meaningful engagement, visible action, and stronger relationships between citizens and institutions.

Drawing on those findings, international research, and ORG's own programme experience, this report presents a practical framework for restoring public trust in The Bahamas. It argues that trust cannot be restored through communication campaigns or institutional reforms alone. Instead, rebuilding trust requires sustained investment in civic education, citizen participation, responsive governance, strong civil society organizations, and opportunities for people to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Companion Paper: *This report should be read alongside ORG's Understanding Public Trust: Public Consultation Report (2023). This paper translates those findings into a practical strategic framework for rebuilding public trust through civic engagement, collaborative governance, and democratic participation over the long term.*

1. Trust as the Foundation of Democracy

Public trust is one of the most valuable yet least visible assets of any democracy. It shapes whether citizens believe institutions are acting fairly, whether they choose to participate in public life, and whether governments can successfully respond to complex social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Across the world, governments are experiencing declining levels of public trust. Research by the OECD, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and World Bank consistently demonstrates that declining trust weakens democratic legitimacy, reduces civic participation, increases political polarization, and ultimately undermines economic growth and social cohesion.

These challenges are particularly significant for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where limited institutional capacity, economic vulnerability, climate change, and close personal



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relationships between citizens and government create unique governance dynamics. In these settings, trust is not simply an abstract concept, it directly affects national resilience, disaster response, investment, and sustainable development.

2. Understanding Public Trust in The Bahamas

ORG's 2023 public consultation initiative sought to better understand how Bahamians experience trust in their everyday lives.

Through twelve focus groups conducted across New Providence, Grand Bahama, Andros, Eleuthera, and Cat Island, participants consistently described trust as something earned through honesty, consistency, accountability, transparency, and visible action. Trust was strengthened when institutions listened, communicated openly, and demonstrated reliability over time. Conversely, trust deteriorated when people felt excluded from decision-making, believed promises were routinely broken, or perceived that institutions were unresponsive to community concerns.

Importantly, participants did not speak only about the government. They discussed trust in businesses, civil society organizations, neighbours, media, and community leaders, reinforcing that trust is relational and interconnected. The findings suggest that rebuilding trust cannot be achieved by government alone; it requires collaboration among public institutions, civil society, the private sector, and citizens themselves.

3. Why Trust Matters

Trust is often discussed as a democratic value, but it also has profound practical consequences.

Communities with higher levels of trust are generally more resilient, better able to collaborate during crises, and more willing to participate in collective action. Governments operating in high-trust environments are better positioned to implement policies, manage emergencies, and introduce reforms because citizens believe decisions are being made fairly and in the public interest.

Research reviewed by ORG demonstrates that trust contributes to stronger economic performance, lower transaction costs, higher civic participation, and greater institutional legitimacy. However, the same research also cautions that transparency alone is insufficient. Governments must combine transparency with meaningful participation, responsiveness, and accountability if they are to strengthen public confidence.

For The Bahamas, where declining voter turnout and growing public frustration highlight widening gaps between citizens and institutions, rebuilding trust represents both a democratic necessity and a national development priority.



4. ORG's Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Public Trust

The findings of ORG's 2023 *Understanding Public Trust Public Consultation Report* demonstrate that rebuilding trust requires more than increasing access to information or improving government communications. Trust develops through repeated experiences of transparency, participation, responsiveness, and accountability. It is built gradually through relationships between citizens, public institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Building on these findings, ORG has developed a **Five-Point Arc for Rebuilding Public Trust**. The framework recognizes that trust is not a single outcome but a continuous process that moves citizens from understanding, to participation, to collaboration, and ultimately to sustained democratic engagement. While informed by ORG's research in The Bahamas, the framework also reflects emerging international best practices on trust-building, participatory governance, and democratic resilience from the OECD, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and experiences across Latin America, Brazil, the Caribbean, and other Small Island Developing States.

Evidence-Based Understanding

The first stage focuses on understanding the current state of public trust. Effective trust-building begins by listening before acting. Through its Public Trust Consultation Report, literature review, community dialogues, and ongoing policy research, ORG seeks to identify citizens' experiences, perceptions, expectations, and barriers to participation. This evidence provides the foundation for designing practical interventions that respond to the realities of Bahamian communities rather than assumptions about them. It also establishes a baseline against which progress can be measured over time.

Civic Engagement and Skills Building

Understanding alone is insufficient unless citizens are equipped to participate confidently in public life. The second stage therefore focuses on strengthening civic knowledge and practical skills through public education initiatives such as **Be Clear Bahamas**, participatory budgeting workshops, digital literacy training, policy explainers, and accessible governance resources. These initiatives are designed to move beyond awareness by giving citizens practical tools to understand government decision-making, analyse public policy, monitor public spending, and engage constructively in democratic processes. By increasing citizens' confidence and capability, civic participation becomes more meaningful and inclusive.

Strengthening Civil Society Visibility

Strong democracies depend on strong intermediary institutions that connect citizens with decision-makers. ORG's **Map4Good** initiative forms the third stage of the framework by



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strengthening the visibility, credibility, and connectivity of civil society organizations throughout The Bahamas. By making organizations easier to find and encouraging collaboration across sectors, Map4Good helps citizens identify trusted community partners while strengthening the overall capacity of the nonprofit sector to contribute to national development. Increased visibility also supports transparency, encourages partnerships, and creates additional opportunities for citizens to become involved in community initiatives beyond electoral politics.

Collaborative Government-Citizen Action

Public trust grows when citizens see that their participation has tangible value. The fourth stage therefore focuses on creating structured opportunities for collaboration between government, civil society, communities, and other stakeholders. Through public consultations, policy dialogues, participatory budgeting processes, constituency engagement, and collaborative problem-solving, ORG seeks to promote governance that is more transparent, responsive, and inclusive. These mechanisms move beyond one-way communication by creating ongoing feedback loops where citizens can contribute ideas, understand decisions, and observe how their input influences policy and implementation.

One important expression of this stage is ORG's post-election democratic engagement strategy, **Beyond the Polls**. Developed following the 2026 General Election, Beyond the Polls recognizes that democratic participation should not be confined to election campaigns. Instead, it seeks to strengthen citizen engagement throughout the five-year electoral cycle by providing accessible policy analysis, accountability tools, constituency-level engagement opportunities, public education, and structured dialogue between citizens and elected representatives. In doing so, the initiative reinforces the principle that democracy is a continuous process of participation rather than a single act of voting.

Sustained Follow-Up and Iterative Improvement

The final stage recognizes that trust cannot be built through one-time interventions. Institutions must demonstrate consistency over time by listening, adapting, and responding to citizens' evolving needs. ORG therefore places significant emphasis on monitoring and evaluation, public reporting, continuous citizen education, and periodic assessments of public trust. By measuring outcomes, sharing lessons learned, and refining programmes based on community feedback, the framework creates an iterative cycle of learning and improvement that supports long-term democratic resilience.

5. Lessons for The Bahamas

The evidence presented throughout this report, combined with the findings of ORG's *Understanding Public Trust Public Consultation Report*, demonstrates that rebuilding public trust requires a long-term commitment rather than isolated initiatives. Trust is not restored through a single consultation, communications campaign, or legislative reform. Instead, it develops gradually through repeated experiences of transparency, participation, responsiveness, and



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accountability. The challenge for The Bahamas is therefore not simply to increase confidence in institutions but to create a governance culture in which citizens consistently feel informed, heard, respected, and able to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Several lessons emerge for The Bahamas. First, evidence must remain the foundation of trust-building efforts. Public trust should be measured, monitored, and revisited over time so that interventions respond to the evolving experiences and expectations of Bahamians. Listening must become an ongoing practice rather than an occasional exercise.

Second, civic participation should be treated as a skill that can be learned and strengthened. Citizens are more likely to participate meaningfully when they understand how the government works, how public resources are allocated, and where opportunities exist to contribute to decision-making. Investments in civic education, participatory budgeting, policy literacy, and digital engagement can therefore strengthen both democratic participation and public confidence.

Third, a healthy democracy depends on a vibrant and visible civil society. Community organizations serve as trusted intermediaries between citizens and institutions, helping to share information, convene dialogue, identify local priorities, and advocate for community needs. Strengthening the capacity, visibility, and connectivity of civil society organizations expands opportunities for participation while reinforcing accountability across all sectors.

Fourth, rebuilding trust requires governments and citizens to move beyond one-way communication toward genuine collaboration. Consultation processes, structured dialogue, participatory decision-making, and community partnerships help demonstrate that public input has value and that institutions are willing to listen, explain decisions, and respond to feedback. These collaborative approaches not only improve policy outcomes but also strengthen legitimacy and public confidence.

Finally, trust must be viewed as a continuous process rather than a destination. Institutions must be willing to monitor outcomes, evaluate progress, acknowledge shortcomings, and adapt their approaches over time. Consistent follow-up, public reporting, and ongoing civic education reinforce the behaviours that sustain trust and strengthen democratic resilience.

Taken together, these lessons form the foundation of ORG's Five-Point Arc for Rebuilding Public Trust. They recognize that trust is strengthened through a continuous cycle of understanding, engagement, collaboration, learning, and improvement. While rebuilding trust will require commitment from government, civil society, the private sector, and citizens alike, the process offers an opportunity to create stronger institutions, more empowered communities, and a more resilient democracy.

6. Conclusion



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The *Understanding Public Trust Public Consultation Report* provided an important opportunity to listen to Bahamians and better understand how trust is experienced across communities, institutions, and sectors. It confirmed that trust remains one of the country's most valuable democratic assets, while also highlighting the significant work required to strengthen confidence in governance and public institutions. This companion report moves the conversation from diagnosis to action by presenting a practical framework for rebuilding public trust over the long term.

ORG's Five-Point Arc for Rebuilding Public Trust recognizes that trust cannot be restored through transparency alone. It must be cultivated through evidence-based decision-making, meaningful civic engagement, strong and connected civil society organizations, collaborative governance, and a sustained commitment to learning and improvement. Each stage reinforces the next, creating a continuous cycle in which research informs action, action strengthens participation, participation builds collaboration, and collaboration generates new evidence to guide future progress.

Within this framework, initiatives such as **Be Clear Bahamas**, **Map4Good**, and **Beyond the Polls** represent practical applications of a broader strategy rather than isolated projects. Together, they seek to strengthen citizens' understanding of governance, expand opportunities for participation, increase the visibility and capacity of civil society, foster constructive dialogue between citizens and institutions, and promote accountability throughout the democratic cycle—not only during elections but every day between them.

As a Small Island Developing State, The Bahamas possesses unique strengths that can support this work. Strong communities, active civic organizations, close relationships between citizens and decision-makers, and a shared national identity provide an important foundation for rebuilding trust. At the same time, the country's size and interconnectedness make transparency, accountability, and meaningful public participation even more essential. When trust is strengthened, citizens are more willing to participate, institutions become more responsive, communities become more resilient, and public policy is better equipped to address complex national challenges.

Rebuilding public trust is therefore not simply a governance objective; it is an investment in democratic resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable national development. It requires collective leadership from government, civil society, the private sector, the media, and citizens themselves. By committing to a long-term process of listening, learning, collaborating, and improving, The Bahamas has an opportunity to demonstrate how a small island democracy can strengthen trust as the foundation for more effective governance and a more engaged and empowered society.



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